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Kanyane, Reginald Mathule

2020
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Young men's personal accounts of experiencing and dealing with involuntary loss of a romantic relationship

A research report submitted to the University of Witwatersrand for the degree of Masters of Arts in Psychology

2020

Research report submitted by **Reginald Mathule Kanyane**

Supervisor: **Professor Gillian Eagle**

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Declaration

I, Reginald Mathule Kanyane, declare that this research report is my unaided work and that no section of this research report has been submitted before for any other degree or examination at this or any other university or learning institute.

Acknowledgement

I would firstly like to thank the research participants for their interest in the study and allowing me to invade their challenging lived world of experience. Without their participation and the desire to share their lived experience, this piece of work would not have been possible. Their courage to be vulnerable and sharing was an intriguing source of inspiration, and I believe that the findings from this research will accurately reflect the lived experience of young men dealing with involuntary loss of a romantic relationship.

Also, I would like to pass my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Professor Gillian Eagle for her excellent and caring feedback and assistance in this research endeavour.

Special thanks to, my wonderful supervisor, sister and friends for trusting in me and the words of courage they gave in our continuous discussion.

Lastly, I would like to thank the University of Witwatersrand and NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development for sponsoring my studies.

Abstract

Aim and Rationale: Romantic relationships play an essential role in the lives of many young adults and strongly influence a sense of identity and self-worth. Given young

adults' need to form stable romantic bonds, any form of loss that may occur may result in detrimental psychological effects. While relational dynamics have often been understood as particularly significant to young women, it is evident that men also place personal weight on romantic partner relationships. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an in-depth understanding on how young men (aged 22to 35) deal with the loss of a romantic relationship, given that sexual stereotypes may make it particularly difficult for men to give expression to the implications of such. This study focused on the experiences of heterosexual young men, aiming to explore and understand how they experience themselves as men dealing with relational loss, and how their experiences may be informed by and relate to dominant notions of masculinity.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight heterosexual young men (ages between 22 and 35 years old) who reported that they had experienced the loss of a significant romantic relationship in an involuntary manner or in a way that they found to be difficult to process or manage. Individual interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit information on the topic of interest. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Findings: The analysis produced six superordinate themes: construction of romantic relationships; construction of the breakup; the impact of the breakup; ways of coping; reflections on lessons learned (insight derived); and reflection on being male and masculinity. These superordinate themes are described with their subordinate themes, supported by discussion and illustrative verbatim extracts. It was evident that the participants had experienced considerable psychological distress in the aftermath of their break-ups and that their awareness of prescriptions for behaviour related to masculine stereotypes compounded their difficulties in processing their responses**.**

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

The introductory chapter provides some background about young adult romantic relationships and their psychological significance and also covers some key constructs to give some context to the study. The opening section also highlights the aims and rationale of the study, as well as the research questions. The motivation for the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) in exploring young men's accounts of experiencing and dealing with the loss of a romantic relationship is provided.

1.2 Background

Debates and movements centred on gender role identity and contestation of gender stereotypes and positioning, including both women's increased sexual freedom and agency and recognition of violence against women within intimate partner and romantic relationships, provide a platform for conversations and reflections on difficulties young people may have in their romantic partner relationships. While there are changes on women rights and male privilege in South African social and legal environments, there are still entrenched societal assumptions about gendered roles and experiences in romantic relationships for young adults (Harrison, 2008). For example, men and women in romantic relationships negotiate patriarchy in the sexual division of labour and patterns of behavioural practice, such as who initiates sexual contact and how courtship is conducted. Dominant notions of masculinity concerning femininity sustain stereotypic views on young women and men's behaviour in romantic relationships, with a restricted discussion of the possible variety of romantic relational dynamics that might be present or emergent amongst young people.

A patriarchal society is a society that is characterised by unequal relations of power between men and women whereby women are institutionally and systemically disadvantaged and are under-represented in participation within the formal labour force, leadership positions, and political spaces, according to Connell (2005). Patriarchal society accords young men and women different status and instantiates norms to identify with in relation with one another, which influence the relational

dynamics experienced within the private sphere of romantic relationships (Carter, 2014; Wood, 2011). With South Africa's multi-cultural and racially diverse landscape, young women and men's views on sexuality and romance differ in terms of geographical location, class position, religion, ethnicity and culture (Harrison, 2008), amongst other aspects. Romantic relationships among young people are constructed within an evaluative "moral" framework, where young people negotiate their construction of romantic relationships as good or bad and normal or abnormal by drawing from social, cultural and traditional norms (Delius & Glaser, 2002; Harrison, 2008). Although sexual and intimate romantic relationships are often hidden in the sense of being considered private, they form an essential part of young men and women's passage to maturity and construction of self-concept and social identity (Harrison, 2008).

According to research on rural South African adolescents' sexual and relationship ideals (Harrison, 2008), young men and women's initiation of an ideal romantic relationship is generally negotiated within socially accepted guidelines where young men take responsibility to 'propose love' (*ukushela*), by expressing romantic interest and engaging in courtship to communicate interest in a young woman. These guidelines follow heterosexual norms where the man usually approaches the woman he holds a sexual and romantic attraction for rather than vice versa (Harrison, 2008). Guided by a moral framework of honouring tradition, cultural norms dictate attitudes towards sexuality and romantic partnership that are shaped by aspects such as the accepted characteristics for a right partner. However, traditionally, formal partnering is negotiated in consultation with brothers and sisters or elders (Delius & Glaser, 2002; Harrison, 2008). Harrison (2008) argues that sexual activity both outside of and within intimate partner relationships is highly stigmatised amongst young women when compared to similar behaviour amongst their male counterparts due to the perception that women should be submissive and men remain more assertive in negotiating relationship dynamics and sexual activity in particular. Thus, young women engage in discreet kinds of romantic relationships with an expectation put on young men to assume the responsibility for the courting process and initiation of sexual intercourse (Harrison, 2008). This sense of responsibility and hope on young men creates a sense of control and entitlement over young women in romantic relationships as a consequence of universal subscription to traditional gender roles. However, the holding of such power places particular kinds of pressures on young men to perform

such functions adequately and does not render them immune to the effects of failure in romantic relationships. While such patterns may be shifting to some extent with greater emancipation of women, the expectation that men take a more active role in initiating dating and sexual activity appears to be relatively entrenched, even in less deeply traditional environments, such as university campuses.

In South Africa, it can be argued that social norms and stereotypes about young people's romantic relationships, including gender role identity prescriptions and hegemonic masculine behavioural practices (as will be further elaborated), remain one of the underlying causes of gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, HIV/AIDS infection and femicide (Africa check, 2018; WHO, 2014). With that said, to understand gender and sexuality-related issues, one has to explore the social environments and gender-related norms within which young people become socialised and those that may negatively affect young men as well as those that damage young women.

The negotiation of romantic relationships amongst young people as gendered beings is complex and can produce substantive identifications and feeling states. Personal attachment and individual needs for recognition and intimacy by a significant other are intertwined with aspects of social identity and reputation. The loss of a meaningful relationship can produce both personal distress and a sense of social failure, including a sense of failure in living up to gendered expectations. These may make the negotiations of the breakdown of a relationship challenging to integrate and manage. In the case of young men, a hope to exercise agency and to take greater control in heterosexual relationships, as well as issues associated with masculinity and managing states of distress, may render them vulnerable in managing unwanted 'break-ups.' It is this aspect of romantic relationships that the study aims to explore taking account of how gender, in this case, related to masculine identifications, appears to shape such negotiation.

1.3 Clarification and definition of concepts employed in the research study

1.3.1 Hegemonic Masculinity

The concept of masculinity refers to a collective identity that is constructed socially and is ascribed to men (primarily) based on their gender (Morrell, 2007). Masculinity is structured hierarchically with dominant or hegemonic masculinity assuming the top position in the hierarchy to enforce patriarchal systems and norms (Connell, 2005). According to Connell (2005) hegemonic masculinity, the ideal form within a particular society, not only exercises power by subordinating women, but it also subjugates other sub-groups of men, especially men considered to be weak or unmanly. Thus, for one to ascribe to notions of masculinity considered dominant concerning other masculinities, one has to conform to hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity tends to be heterosexual, middle-class, and Eurocentric or 'white' within many contexts and encapsulates particular kinds of behaviours, such as celebrating competitiveness, success, and sexual conquest. Although dominant forms or expressions of masculinity gain some men authority and prestigious positions within patriarchal societies, these expressions of masculinity are also used to silence and subjugate alternative types of masculinity (Kahn, 2009).Men have to achieve hegemonic status by actively conforming to hegemonic norms, constraining their behaviour in many respects. It is therefore important to note that patriarchy and male power can only be achieved through conformity to hegemonic standards of masculinity and that this can entail both mental effort and cost for individual men.

In making sense of the multiplicity of masculinities and notions considered to be hegemonic concerning other masculinities within the South African context, Morrell (1998, 2001a) argues masculinities to differ in terms of race, class, and ethnicity, among different dimensions. This awareness of intersection aspects of identity then suggests the necessity of contextualisation of hegemonic status amongst masculinities (for example, locally, regionally, nationally and globally) in terms of its scope of the specification, more especially in a multicultural, multiracial country like South Africa. These scopes of specification of hegemonic masculinity provide men with contextual templates that may render some notions of masculinity more in demand than others, enabling men who embody these qualities to assume social and political power. Morrell (1998) argues that there are White, African, and Urban masculinities that are variously dominant in respective areas. Morrell's arguments maintain the existence of fluidities around hegemonic notions of masculinity in the South African context, in part, because of intersections with other aspects of identity

such as race and class. However, what is apparent is that there are various ways in which individual men can fall short of occupying hegemonic masculine positions in society, and such awareness may produce feelings of inferiority and frustration. Although such arguments about subordinated status have generally been applied to groups defined by identity characteristics, such as to homosexual or disabled men, it is possible that being viewed or viewing oneself as unsuccessful or as having failed to sustain the interest of a desired romantic partner may also be linked to a sense of subordinate status. One's responses about this kind of loss may also leave a man feeling that he has not lived up to hegemonic ideals of masculinity.

1.3.2 Involuntary loss of a romantic relationship

Unintended loss of a romantic relationship is referred to as “involuntary loss”. This term is used within the research report to describe the ending of a relationship in an unchosen manner or out of the subject's control. In colloquial terms, an unintentional loss is often referred to as having been “dumped” and entails a negative social status. International literature on this topic focuses on both men and women, and addresses coping with such breakup from a gender socialisation perspective (for example, Shimek & Bello, 2014). There is a lack of literature on dealing with relationship loss that has been conducted in South Africa. Most of the research within the South African context on men’s romantic relationships with women have explored issues related to gender-based violence (GBV), HIV/AIDS contraction and management, fertility control and teenage pregnancy, and socioeconomic or transactional aspects of relationships. Confronted by the lack of literature on the subject matter, I used keywords like: ‘*romantic relationship’, ‘men’s relationships in South Africa’, ‘men’s social support system’, ‘breakup and men’, ‘masculinity and romantic relationships’, ‘love styles and adult attachment in romantic relationship’* to conduct a literature search for material that might relate to this study. The keywords used were motivated by the literature found and my interest in the subject matter. I learned that romantic relationships are conceptualised in various ways and contexts. Given the limited South African research on this topic in an attempt to integrate and contextualise this study, I drew primarily from the limited international literature that was available and attempted to apply this to the South African context where appropriate. For the purpose of the study, it is worth noting that while all of the participants identified with the notion that the ending of their significant romantic partner relationship had been involuntary, in some instances technically they had broken up with their women partners on the basis that they had

been driven to this by disengagement, dishonesty, infidelity, disinterest and a feeling of having been treated as without value by their partners. Thus, as will become apparent in later discussion, they felt compelled to end the relationship despite remaining attached to their partners and experienced themselves as having little or no choice in the termination of the relationship.

1.4 Rationale

Interpersonal relationships are an essential part of human life and are a site where many significant psychological developments take place (Reis, Collins & Berscheid, 2000). According to Kelley (1983, as cited in Reis et al., 2000), any human developmental and behavioural science that neglects human interpersonal relations in its studies condemns itself to inaccuracy and irrelevancy. Individuals' experiences of interpersonal relationships, either bad or good, influence and affect their behaviour throughout their stages of life development (Reis et al., 2000). In this instance, it is the experience of negative interpersonal interaction, loss of a significant romantic relationship amongst young men, which this study seeks to focus on to explore and understand how this experience has influenced their lives. The study's interest was generated out of both personal observation and reading of the literature on maleness and masculinity. Firstly, my own experience of involuntary loss of a romantic relationship and the effect of gender norms on how I dealt with my relational loss stimulated my interest in this study. Also, I have observed that several men in my close social circle have been severely affected by the break-up of romantic or couple relationships and have struggled to name, express, and process their experiences. The literature on maleness and masculinity, as will be elaborated further below, suggests that the stereotypes associated with masculinity may well shape and impede the processing of relational loss amongst men in particular ways that deserve more in-depth exploration.

It is suggested that it is essential to understand how individual relationships are culturally and socially or contextually embedded when attempting to explore and appreciate an individual's relational loss experiences. Maddux and Brewer (2005) argue that men and women tend to be different in their relational orientation, and maintain that this informs their relationship management and enactments. This study is focused on young men's involuntary romantic relational loss, in the form of a break-up, as the contextually specific aspect of exploration.

In romantic relationships, partners often become devastated at times of relational termination and loss, not knowing how to deal with the negative emotions they are faced with while tending to resort to automatic emotional and behavioural responses to attempt to cope with the impact (Shimek & Bello, 2014). Men and women may use different kinds of common coping styles that may reflect sex and gender differences in expression of affect, meaning-making, support seeking, and coping style. Shimek and Bello (2014) have conducted research on relational break-up among both men and women with a focus on coping with a break-up from a gender socialisation perspective. Furthermore, Perilloux and Buss (2008) conducted a study entitled "Breaking up romantic relationships: Costs experienced and coping strategies," examining different ways that men and women experience rejection and the typical kinds of coping styles employed by each gender. In both instances, the researchers point to the need for further exploration of this topic in general and in different geographical and cultural contexts.

It is well known that when faced with relationship dissolution men tend to resort to learned and hegemonic masculine norms as a form of support to deal with any negative emotions (Shimek & Bello, 2014).It is argued that men may tend to establish a ‘rebound’ relationship or focus more on sport and work as displacement activities to deal with negative emotions resulting from breakups (Shimek & Bello, 2014).Shimek and Bello (2014) argue that men tend to be orientated to be emotionally cold, to rely on themselves and be extremely autonomous, leaving them without person skills in interpersonal relationship negotiation and management, and at a disadvantage in seeking support. The findings of the comparative gender studies suggest the need for continuing studies (Shimek & Bello, 2014), and studies that mainly focus on young men's accounts of experiencing and dealing with the loss of a romantic relationship as this is a population group whose distress is often minimised even though they may be at risk for mental health-related difficulties. It appears that there is still useful psychological research to do in exploring and understanding the experiences of young men in dealing with involuntary romantic relationship loss and how their experiences appear to be shaped by and relate to dominant masculine norms.

Existing research on masculinity in the context of intimate relationships indicates that expression of emotions during times of distress is highly discouraged and looked down upon amongst men (Reilly, Rochlen & Awad, 2013). It is hegemonic norms of masculinity and the extent of individual conformity that, to a considerable extent,

determines men's psychological wellbeing in times of psychological distress (Mahalik et al., 2003). It is in the hope of this study to explore the extent to which young men's reported experiences of dealing with and experiencing a relational loss is influenced by their need to conform to hegemonic norms of masculinity so that psychological states and responses can be better understood, including the risk of mental health issues. It is also hoped that this understanding will inform how men in similar situations can be offered better support.

RESEARCH AIM

This study intends to explore the experiential accounts of men who have found themselves to be strongly affected by the involuntary dissolution of a significant romantic relationship and their reflections upon how their gender identifications may have informed how they processed and attempted to deal with this loss.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do young men make sense of the involuntary dissolution of a significant intimate relationship and associated loss?
2. How do young men experience being *affected* by the impact of such relational loss?
3. How do young men experience *dealing* with the impact of such relational loss?
4. What forms of social support and help-seeking (if at all) do young men in such situations experience utilising?
5. How do young men's experience and understanding of the impact of relational loss and subsequent adjustment and coping appear to relate to their masculine gender identity/ies?

The subsequent chapter introduces a selective review of literature related to the topic of interest. After that, the following chapters describe the methods adopted to undertake the study, the key findings, and a discussion of key findings and a brief evaluation of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In an attempt to understand ways in which young men experience and deal with intimate relationship break-up and loss, this study will briefly cover selected aspects of literature on gender construction, masculinity, intimate relationships and styles of engagement (love styles), attachment, depression, men's coping methods, help-seeking and accessing social support, all topics that have some relevance for the research study. These bodies of literature will hopefully provide an understanding of men's socialisation and gender characteristic enactments that inform their relational experience and management. Given the phenomenon under study, this study is not located under a single theoretical framework; it has integrated different theoretical perspectives in its approach.

2.2 Gender construction and masculinity

Carter (2014) argues gender to be constructed (based on one's biological sex) for individuals through instilling of cultural, psychological and social norms of masculinity or femininity by families and other agents of socialisation. There are differences in how femininity and masculinity are constructed and experienced amongst individuals from various cultural groups that inform their gender-related beliefs, thoughts and behaviour (Shimek & Bello, 2014). Gender role is one of the aspects of subjectivity that is ascribed by agents of society based on biological sex characteristics. The socialisation into gender identity begins right after birth, whereby new-born babies would be dressed in clothes and colours that symbolise their gender, based on their biological sex makeup (Carter, 2014). Such markers contribute to a form of gender essentialisation and infants are attached to such markers until they are at an age to be more formally ascribed gender roles and to properly comprehend this. Throughout their development, children are introduced to characters, language and symbols that reinforce normative constructions of masculinity and femininity and are perpetuated through 'homophily' (Carter, 2014). Carter (2014) postulates that young men are ascribed strength and agility, associated with roles such as cow herding and hunting in traditional African societies, and with being active in the world of work in most communities, while women are ascribed affection oriented and expressive roles such as domestic chores and child-rearing. These distinctions are created between boys and girls and men and women as an attempt to create boundaries and model

behaviours. It is through ‘homophily’ that an individual learns subcultures that form part of their gender identity (Carter, 2014).

Wood (2011) amongst others, argues that being masculine, amongst men, entails demonstrating a sense of control over emotions, extreme independence and autonomy. In contrast, being feminine, amongst women, involves responsiveness and cooperation with others, being in touch with feelings and prioritising family care. Individuals identify with these kinds of gender roles and attach to the meanings around them, which then makes it challenging to act outside of these parameters, for example, during times of need (Carter, 2014). These observed differences in gender characteristics provide the basis for the argument that conducting oneself within intimate relationships may differ amongst men and women and that women, in general, are likely to be better orientated to dealing with relational matters than men, which might also inform their access to and use of support systems when it comes to dealing with relational issues, including the break-up of intimate partnerships. It is therefore arguable that men are less likely to seek and receive support following a relationship break-up and may struggle to process relational loss in particular ways due to their gender characteristics, in part because they are more oriented to being emotionally stoic and self-sufficient.

Masculinity is centrally implicated in gender identity, and in many respects, defines (young) men's behaviour, treatment, attire, appearance, attitude and personality attributes or qualities (Kahn, 2009). Masculinity differs across various social groups; however, just like hierarchies prevailing concerning gender relations across sexual categories, masculinity is hierarchically structured with what has been termed ‘hegemonic masculinity' being at the top of the hierarchy as discussed in the introductory chapter (Kahn, 2009). It is to comply with hegemonic masculinity that individuals behave in ways that reinforce male privilege, by encouraging "conformity to an idealised version of masculinity, even when it may not be in their best interest, to maintain the system of patriarchy" (Kahn, 2009, p.279). Hegemonic norms of masculinity are mostly found in social environments, such as families, in gender-specific schools, in the workplace and formal organisations, and in interpersonal relationships, including romantic relationships, and come to define and influence social interactions between individuals (Connell, 2005). It is often men's attempts to construct and assume allegiance to hegemonic masculine norms that lead to problematic consequences for others and themselves (Connell, 2005).

In the event of loss of a romantic partner, different grief expression behaviours amongst individuals, such as crying, loss of self-esteem and feeling of emptiness, tend to occur as a signal of pain and need for help (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). However, expression of these kinds of emotions during times of distress is highly discouraged amongst men, resulting in shame related mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and even suicide across their lifetime (Reilly et al., 2013). Due to the kinds of restrictive norms associated with masculinity, most men are unsure as to how to deal with any incurred negative emotion, sometimes forcing them to seek solace in hegemonic masculine behaviours because of concerns that any distress related emotion expressed might be condemned as weakness or as feminine (Shimek & Bello, 2014). According to Reilly et al. (2013), displaying emotional distress is considered to be unmanly, causing shame. However, such difficulty may be the precursor to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and even suicidality (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Shimek & Bello, 2014). Researchers further argue that gender role conflict and shame in these kinds of circumstances may perpetuate feelings of anger and hostility amongst men; emotions that are thought to define a ‘real' man (Mahalik, Locke, Ludlow, Diemer, Scott, Gottfried & Freitas, 2003).

In romantic relationships, showing of emotions, like being affectionate towards women, is often discouraged amongst men as they are taught to perceive woman only sexually; therefore they should not get overly emotionally involved with them, and instead, they should have sex with as many women as possible, as this is a sign of dominance and potency (Connell, 2005). Amongst men who are in allegiance with hegemonic norms of masculinity, their romantic relational affairs will be, in no small extent, informed and influenced by hegemonic norms of masculinity.

2.3 Intimate relationships and styles of engagement (love styles)

Lee (1973) argued that men seem to be utilising a ‘Ludic style’ or a game playing approach to love and romantic relationships amongst the six styles of love that he identified, which suggests that they may perceive love as somewhat trivial and engage in relationships as if this is a game that one plays without caring, with many partners, participating at a surface and commitment-free level. This nonchalant approach to romantic relationships and love may lead to detrimental consequences in some instances, subjecting men to greater vulnerability concerning relational losses and emotional hurt because of their casual style of engaging in relational affairs (Shimek

& Bello, 2014). That is if men think of themselves as able to have relationships in a rather light and non-threatening way they may feel considerable shock and discomfort if they find that a breakup produces feelings in them that suggest something different to this. Men are faced with many influences, including perhaps their ludic love style and approach to romantic and intimate relationships and subscription to hegemonic masculine norms, which may put them at a disadvantage in dealing with emotional states associated with their romantic relational affairs. Even if a young man may prefer a different love style from the casual, conquest-associated Ludic love style to approach romantic relationships, he may still feel that he needs to adopt this kind of non-intimate approach to relationships that is perceived to be appropriate for ‘real' men, to be recognised as acceptably masculine and because of fear of shame and discrimination if he displays different kinds of tendencies. As already indicated, this may leave men who are psychologically attached to the women they are involved with particularly vulnerable when they experience the loss of the relationship as having affected them significantly. Under these circumstances, they cannot continue to live out the stereotype of engaging in relationships in a casual or control-based manner. Although Lee's theory of romantic relationship ‘styles' may be somewhat dated the "Ludic" love-style may still be relevant in describing some features of how men are expected to behave in intimate relationships in terms of masculine stereotypes.

Sternberg (1986), in his Triangular Theory of Love, argues love to be formed by three inter-related elements, which are intimacy, passion and commitment. In the Triangular Theory of Love, the availability of one or more of these elements in a relationship determines one’s love type and success of the relationship (Sternberg, 1986). Sternberg (1986) argues that an individual's romantic relationship that consists of a single element has less chance of succeeding than one that has two or more elements; this includes an individual's love type before getting involved in any romantic relationship. How these elements are balanced may create patterns of relational engagement that are comparable to Lee's theory of love styles. For example, it appears that in the ‘Ludic love style' commitment and intimacy would be under-valued and sexual passion perhaps over-valued.

People learn from society and culture about aspects and structures of relationships to understand what to expect from one another, and when specific rules are broken, or certain elements are violated, individuals may feel betrayed or let down in a relationship (Leary, 2001). Leary (2001) argues that implications of betrayal are bound

to be very distressing for individuals in relationships that are considered to be romantically committed, because both parties are vulnerable with one another, and their expectations are of care and support of one another's welfare. For example, in a romantic relationship individuals expect their partners to be trustworthy, intimate, loving, supportive, loyal and caring, and if these aspects are not forthcoming, or broken, partners may feel betrayed and let down. Gender orientations and characteristics inform relational perspectives and expectations in a largely complementary manner between men and women. Thus, for example, men are expected to be protective and gallant in romantic relationships and women are generally expected to be nurturing and supportive. While these stereotypic roles may not be absolutely or categorically divided across male and female partners, the absence of certain behaviours and stances from each partner may be more harshly judged based on gender expectations. Gender-related relational aspects and hope can be used as measures of the extent to which relationship transgression may be classified as betrayal, which may lead to conflict or relationship dissolution between parties (Leary, 2001).Leary (2001) argues that infidelity and deception represent common forms of relationship transgressions that are regarded as explicit betrayals that may lead to break-up and termination of relationships.

2.4 Depression and Rejection

Helgeson (1994) argues that the people who initiate breakups with their romantic relationship partners have a better chance of adjusting to the associated negative emotions than those who are at the receiving end of a breakup since issues of control and interdependence differ for each party. People who have experienced the loss of a romantic relationship through rejection experience feelings of depression and loss of self-esteem commonly, often with associated worries about whether they will find a new partner once they adjust to the injury (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). Perilloux and Buss (2008) found that individuals who have lost a romantic relationship through rejection or breakup experience negative emotions such as vengefulness, regret, sadness, and fear. Because men are socialised to be generally self-sufficient when they become immersed in negative experiences, they may experience increased loneliness and despair, which are affects associated with depression. According to Perilloux and Buss (2008), during the first stages of losing significant romantic relationship individuals engage in behaviours such as pleading with ex-partners, avoiding ex-partners, and even threatening ex-partners with references to or even attempts at suicide. However,

amongst those who find a new romantic partner during the time of breakup through reviving a previous relationship or creating an established rebound relationship less harmful emotions, such as indifference and even compensatory satisfaction, may be evident. Such relationships may nevertheless fail to replace that which was lost and the associated feelings of self-doubt and missing of a particular attachment.

Men's gender characteristics, love style and subscription to masculine norms affect not only their behaviour when conducting or engaging in a relationship, but also how they feel, act and think during times of relationship loss. Although depression is one of the most common mental health problems that affects people who have experienced the involuntary end of a relationship (Shimek & Bello, 2014),in response to relational losses, men often tend to hide their feelings of sadness and despair because of their fear of revealing vulnerability and emotional dependency. Depression, due to relational loss, may be similarly present in men and women but may be expressed differently based on men's typical gender role enactment patterns (Branney & White, 2008). For example, it has been observed that men often resort to defensive strategies such as alcohol abuse and aggressive behaviours (Zartaloudi, 2011).It is an individual's degree of allegiance with their gender role enactment that to a large extent determines the expression of their depression. Branney and White (2008) argue that men are problem-focused in their manner of expressing and attempting to deal with depression. Thus, emotion-focused support systems, like seeking social support or more formal support such as psychotherapy, are often not seen as desirable and are generally under-utilized among men when dealing with depression.

Wilkins(2014) argues that practitioners tend to be better at detecting depressive symptomatology that is more female associated in expression, such as low mood, sleeplessness, loss of energy, withdrawal and loss of appetite, neglecting more male-related symptomatology (such as substance abuse) and making their services more quickly attuned to the needs of female rather than male patients. This implies that many therapeutic approaches may also be more attuned to addressing the expression of depression more closely associated with femininity (Wilkins, 2014). The appearance of depression amongst men may be intertwined with a subscription to and attempts to enact some of the hegemonic masculine norms associated with dealing with feelings of sadness and depletion. Instead of internalising distress, men may more typically externally express their mental health related distress, engaging in behaviours such as physical aggression, alcohol abuse, sexual acting out and even violence (Wilkins,

2014).Thus violence in romantic relationships and towards others, and substance and alcohol abuse, may well be signs of depression, and feelings of rejection amongst men (Branney &White, 2008). Although depression may be a typical response to the involuntary loss of a significant relationship, it is also possible that individuals may present with other types of mental health difficulties, including somatisation and anxiety.

2.5 Men's coping styles, help-seeking and accessing social support

Social support can be understood to be an active exchange of positive thoughts and advice between individuals or groups that can assist in alleviating an individual's adverse reaction to a badly experienced phenomenon (Shumaker & Hill, 1991). Social support helps individuals navigate their way through times of distress, and helps by providing some relief from any negative thoughts that may be present. When examining the social support systems men have and use, Shimek and Bello (2014) argue that men tend to have small social support systems, which they often fail to utilize or utilize minimally during times of need, because of being socialised to strive to be independent, resourceful and self-reliant, as mentioned previously. Men tend to have difficulty in seeking help from families, friends and professionals when they are faced with problems (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). This shared stereotype about men is supported by empirical research that the frequency with which men seek help for both physical and mental health difficulties indicates that they very often fail to use the professional and social services that are at their disposal (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

It is not only men's socialisation that discourages their use of social support systems, but it has been suggested that the professional style of support and the delivery of it is more highly attuned to 'feminine symptomatology' or enactments of distress, which further discourages men from coming forward to seek the support that may be available, as was discussed concerning depression more specifically (Wilkins, 2014).For men, looking for help during emotional hardships is a difficult initiation that is often experienced as shameful (Reilly et al., 2014). It is essential to acknowledge these kinds of feelings and pressures faced by men when offering them support, aiming to address their needs without imposing expectations of more feminine-typed expressions of distress and symptomatology.

As already noted, men in many societies are socialised to be self-contained and self-sufficient, leaving them with limited forms of psychological protection, and vulnerable

to mental health distress (Shumaker& Hill, 1991), such as that brought on by an involuntary loss of a romantic relationship. The relationship norms and love styles that are viewed as consistent with a male or masculine identity not only puts men at a disadvantage in establishing close relational connections but also condemns them in terms of the establishment and use of support systems during times of need, leaving them to deal with any incurred distress on their own (Shimek & Bello, 2014). In contrast to most women, men are unlikely to seek help, be it professional or informal, for problems that may range from emotional to vocational (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Subscription to gender-role norms has been determined to be one of the key underlying factors in predicting their readiness to seek support when they face a stressful life event.

Within cultural and psychosocial value systems, men go through implicit shaping of gender identity, roles, attitudes and behaviour acquisition, which will later be used in their life as a personal frame of reference (Addis, 2008; Mahalik et al., 2003). These gender-role attitudes and behaviours inform men's coping styles and the likelihood of seeking support, providing their frame of reference during the time of need (Addis, 2008). Men are argued to use avoidance or distraction for coping with relational loss, and this may include, for example, the establishment of a 'rebound' relationship (as previously mentioned) or an increased focus on sport and work (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Shimek & Bello, 2014). Any behaviour or attitude that requires introspection and dependency tends to conflict with men's gender-role prescriptions, and their sense of self, consistent with their gender identity (Addis, 2008). It seems that in times of experienced distress, such as that brought on by an involuntary loss of a romantic relationship, it is a man's extent of conformity to masculine and hegemonic gender norms that may determine his psychological wellbeing and attempts to deal with and manage his difficulties (Mahalik et al., 2003).Given that men often use coping mechanisms aside from seeking social support it may well be that they are unable to receive the kind of relational validation viewed as necessary to recover self-esteem (Shimek & Bello, 2014). Because of the stigma associated with seeking help prevention and treatment of mental health problems among men is difficult (WHO, 2014).

When coping with depression, people tend to seek excessive reassurance from their social support systems that they are loved, unique, meaningful and valued, which helps in mediating and maintaining positive mental health (Starr& Davila, 2008). It

should be noted that while some men may conform to norms of masculinity, men's coping styles during depression might differ based on their distinct personal history and cultural environment, including their learned masculine enactments and the degree to which they conform to or challenge their socialisation into stereotypic ways of being. Some men may cope with their depression by tuning into, acknowledging and dealing with the emotions associated with this kind of state, which has been termed as the more 'feminine style', while others may cope with depression by attempting to deal more directly with its causes, which is the masculine style (Branney & White, 2008). In the main, however, men will be drawn to using a more masculine form to cope with loss and depression, because they do not want to compromise their gender identity and to be seen as less masculine .Zartaloudi (2011) argues that men often lose their psychological well-being in trying to adhere to prescribed gender role enactments and attempting to achieve the expected masculine goals when these are discrepant with their lived experience. It is also evident that trying to adopt a problem-solving style in a situation in which the solution may be beyond one's control, as when a partner decides to end a relationship or places one in a position of little choice, may be counterproductive and that masculine-identified individuals may thus find such situations particularly stressful or baffling to deal with.

Having looked at men's vulnerability to depression and potential problems in help-seeking related to their likelihood of identification with masculine prescriptions and norms a more internally related framing of issues related to the significance of being in relationship with others may be useful and may offer a further complementary theoretical perspective. In thinking about the importance that people attach to relationships and why their ending can be emotionally distressing, it is helpful to think about some of the insights of attachment theory.

2.6 Attachment theory

According to attachment theory, an individual's distinctive attachment pattern with their caregivers during childhood serves as a strong determinant of later patterns of successful or unsuccessful interpersonal relationships (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1970, 1979). According to Bowlby (1970), children learn specific interpersonal skills and patterns during their interaction with their caregivers, which then develop into 'internal working models' to use in their adult interpersonal relationships. To support this argument, Hazan and Shaver (1990, as cited in Fraley & Shaver, 2000) argue that

adult relationships share similar characteristics to those of an infant and their caregiver, where, for example in a good romantic relationship, a person feels safe and secure when their romantic relational partner responds to their needs. In adults' romantic relationships one's partner serves as a 'secure base' to return to for comfort during times of any incurred distress during environmental exploration and leisure endeavours (Fraley & Shaver, 2000), as might be the case with a mother-and-child relationship(Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1970, 1979).

Attachment theory is not an all-encompassing description of human interpersonal relationships, but it provides an evolutionary or developmental framework for understanding the ramifications of an individual's childhood experience for later intimate or close relationships. For example, Gentzler and Kerns (2004) found that both men and women with avoidant attachment styles seem to be less accepting of intimate relationship expectations and often engage in less intimate relational behaviours like engaging in casual sex and superficial exchanges, for example restricting interactions to online communications and hook-ups. Though an individual's interpersonal relationship partner may be representative of the individual's early attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1970, 1979), it is the type of relationship and the environmental conditions that ultimately shape and kindle an individual's distinct expectations, behaviours and emotions (Lehnart & Neyer 2006). The social factors and conditions that an individual is exposed to shape the expression of their childhood attachment styles (Mikulincer & Goodman, 2006). These would include gender socialisation and societal norms in this regard. For example, in the absence of good childhood maternal care and bonding an individual may develop an avoidant or insecure attachment style that later becomes normalised, by the society, as part of their gender relational enactments (Land et al., 2011).

Commonly, an individual's attachment style affects their manner of coping during times of relationship dissolution (Davis, Shaver &Vernon, 2003). During times of distress from the ending of a relationship, avoidant attachment style individuals tend to use suppression (such as increased focus on work and partaking in gym or sporting activities, and avoidance of engaging in new relationships) and self-medicating methods(i.e. drug and alcohol use) as their coping styles (Davis et al., 2003). These attachment-informed coping styles are consistent with hegemonic norms of masculinity, like discouragement of emotional expression (Reilly et al., 2013), suggesting that even men who are securely attached may experience conflicts in how

to express and manage their feeling states after a distressing break-up (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

Land, Rochlen and Vaughn (2011) argue that men may struggle with intimate relationships due to their inability to regulate emotions and affects, in some instances, because of their previous experience of difficulties with identification and separation from a maternal figure. As Chodorow (1991) has suggested, mothers may have particularly complicated relationships with boy children as they are differently gendered from them and encourage them to separate more strongly from them than girl children to achieve a sound gender identity.

In relation to attachment, gender seems to be an influential construct that informs expectations, behaviours, and emotions (Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). Wood and Eagly (2002) argue that gender roles and socialization may be more significant informants of or influences on men's interpersonal relational enactments than prior attachment style, although both inter-relate within an individual. Although early studies (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987) argued that there are no consistent gender differences in romantic attachment styles, recent studies propose that such gender differences are evident (Schmitt et al., 2003). According to Schmitt et al. (2004), compared to women, men, in general, have more insecure styles of romantic attachment. Men with dismissive romantic attachment patterns tend to engage in short-term mating, and random sexual intercourse with more than one woman, which may also be context-dependent as men with limited resources may feel unable to sustain long term connections with heterosexual partners (Schmitt et al., 2003).

Through well-developed, constructive internal working models, individuals may be able to respond appropriately and consistently and create the conditions for successful emotional bonding (Vivona, 2000). However, this will not guarantee that they can manage the dissolution of a relationship adaptively. It is important to reiterate that an individual's developed childhood attachment style can influence their emotional responses in romantic relationships in conjunction with environmental and social factors, such as gender socialization and performance. Recent research suggests that cultures vary in terms of the psychological structure of romantic attachment styles and that universal patterns cannot, therefore, be assumed (Schmitt et al., 2003). For example, in societies in which there are high levels of stress and low resources,

individuals may be more prone to developing insecure attachment patterns (Schmitt et al., 2003).

2.7 Adult romantic attachments and self-concept

Intimate relationships are pivotal in human development and play an essential role in promoting good psychological and physical well-being (Hetherington, 2003). Hetherington (2003) argues that people's view of themselves, their abilities, worth and security is often guided by and dependent upon intimate relationships. Arnett (2004) explains that an individual's emotional connection with their romantic partner is contributory to their positive self-concept and self-perception. Amplifying this understanding is Agnew's (2000; 2006) formulation of cognitive interdependence, asserting that individuals perceive themselves as part of a unit in a romantic relationship, due to the shared self-concept experience. Moreover, in Aron& Aron's (1997) self-expansion theory, it is understood that each partner's sense of self in a romantic relationship goes through expansion to integrate characteristics of the other. Both these relational theories assert that there is integration or fusing of aspects of self-concept between partners in romantic relationships, which may result in heightened difficulties during loss as a result of alterations to this mutually invested self-concept.

Feeney and Collins (2004) state that through demonstration of attachment cues partners assimilate the caregiving functions needed in a romantic relationship to exercise them. Partners aim to provide reassurance and comfort and to offer support concerning the other's endeavours (Pistole, 2010). The often assumed caregiving functions associated with adult romantic relationships are accompanied by intense emotion that is often associated with childhood history (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).Thus it seems that strong adult romantic partnerships carry some of the same intensity of relational connection as seen in good caregiver to child bonding.

According to Chen and Anderson's (2002) interpersonal social cognitive theory, an individual's self-concept becomes activated into a relational self through mental representation, where an individual's self-concept is partly formed in response to the internalized image of the significant other, providing the trigger for a relational-self. An individual's personality and relational-self is connected to the significant other (e.g. family, friends, lovers, boss and colleagues etc.), and influences his/her life emotionally and motivationally (Chen & Anderson, 2002). An individual's sense of

themselves is formed and consolidates in interaction with significant others, and it is through shared relational experiences with significant others that one's personality formation, self-evaluation and self-definition become regulated (Chen& Anderson, 2002). One can see here resonances with Bowlby's notion of "internal working models" and also with the idea of lifelong attachment styles remaining consistent with early attachment experiences. Chen and Anderson's model's emphasis is on how such experiences shape the self-concept and their theory also allows for the influence of contemporary relationships on a sense of self. An individual's sense of who they are is formed in relation to their significant other, thereby creating a new identity of their working self-concept (Chen& Anderson, 2002). Although people may have many notable others, these others may differ in terms of their degree of significance to and intimacy with the individual (Chen& Anderson, 2002). It is important to note that individuals can form multiple significant relationships and experience relationships as variably significant.

According to Chen and Anderson (2002), during a relational experience with a significant other mental representation are formed and stored in one's memory, which then gets activated when one meets a new person. Activation of significant other images in a newly met person results in relational transference, which enables a different form of self-experience (Chen& Anderson, 2002). Among the chosen significant others, transference plays a role in the initial recognition, attraction towards, and selection of a partner (Anderson et al., 2002). An individual's sense of motivation and their emotional range and expression is formed through a relational experience with significant others because of the regulatory function they perform for the self (Chen& Anderson, 2002). These relational patterns then become a frame of reference for consciousness about self and significant others. An individual's working self-concept expands and becomes more complex as they act to deepen and maintain their relationship experience with the significant other (Andersen, Chen, &Miranda, 2002).Threats to the newly formed relationship and experience of negative emotions bring about activation of self-regulatory processes (Anderson et al., 2002). Thus within this model, it is evident that while people bring specific established ways of being and relating to relationships, new formations also become possible in new relational configurations. It is also apparent that with the ending of significant relationships, there is not only the loss of the other person but also the loss of aspects of the self and self-

concept. In losing a meaningful romantic relationship one loses a part of one's self, the self one came to know concerning this particular other.

Davis, Shaver and Vernon (2003) argue that the loss of a romantic relationship is one of the most distressing, negative experiences that occur in adult life and that such loss may result in acute mental health problems such as Major Depressive Disorder, reinforcing some of the earlier discussion about the psychological risks of this kind of life stressor. Although there is some research on mental health problems resulting from the loss of a romantic relationship, there is little research on the impact of unwanted break-ups and associated distress on self-concept. Lewandowski, Bassis and Kunak (2006) argue that during relationship dissolution elements of the self change or get lost. Individuals whose concept of themselves is fundamentally formed and defined by the lost romantic relationship experience elevated distress and other negative emotions (Lewandowski et al., 2006).

Loss of a romantic relationship may result in people losing essential aspects of their identity and a contraction of the self (Lewandowski et al., 2006). Lewandowski et al. (2006) point out that relationship dissolution can result in destabilization of an individual’s active and working self-concept, and may reduce the diversity and complexity of their sense of self. In the face of relational loss, one’s distress is highly influenced by changes in the person (Slotter, Gardner & Finkel, 2009). It is therefore essential to take into consideration the impact on the self when exploring the loss of a significant romantic relationship. As with some of the other features discussed in this review of relevant literature, it is also evident that how self-concept becomes altered will be influenced by one's sense of gender identity, and for men will be inflected by their understanding of their masculinity.

Summary

Research on understanding young men’s masculinity and how it may affect their psychological life has increased considerably over the past three decades; however, there appears to be little research on young men's experience of loss of a romantic relationship and how they may understand and deal with such experiences. It is evident that a combination of early life experiences, such as one's experiences of attachment figures, and subsequent life experiences, including gender socialization, shape how one may deal with the involuntary ending of a significant romantic relationship in early adulthood. It is suggested that individuals who experience this

kind of loss may experience changes to sense of self and self-concept and may become vulnerable to mental health difficulties, such a depression. Men and women may deal differently with such problems in general, both about experiencing distressing emotions and concerning help-seeking. Masculine stereotyping may create particular kinds of problems for men in this regard, mainly because it is conventional to see masculine men as less invested in and dependent upon their female partners. The current study aimed to explore the experience of loss of a partner relationship amongst a group of young South African men who were willing to reflect upon their experiences in this regard.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

In this section, I explain the rationale for the chosen research method employed and provide an outline of how the initial research guidelines or plan for execution was met by describing the process followed in recruiting participants, and collecting and analysing data.

3.1 Research approach/design

This was a qualitative research study, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the primary framework for the analysis. It is in keeping with the study's research aims that a qualitative research design was utilised. The research aimed to explore a primarily "what?" oriented set of questions through a contextual conceptualization of how things happen and are experienced from a subjective perspective (Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, Anderson & McSpadden, 2011). The primary focus of this study was to provide an in-depth exploration and analysis of young men's accounts of dealing with the involuntary loss of a romantic relationship. Moreover, the study explored how the participants were affected by the experienced relationship loss, how they have made sense of it, what forms of coping mechanisms they adopted, and whether and how they attempted to seek support for the challenges associated with the experience. Thus, the emphasis was on experiential or phenomenological accounts of this experience in the participants' lives. Also, the study aimed to explore how the participants' sense of their masculinity and apparent engagement with masculine norms and hegemonic masculine prescriptions shaped their experience of this life event.

3.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA aims to understand and explore in detail how participants make sense of their lived personal and social world, with a focus on the meaning that particular experiences hold for people (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA is concerned with individual's cognitions and how they make sense of their experience as conveyed through their verbal utterances engaged with by the researcher during the analysis to make sense and meaning of their lived experiential accounts (Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 1997; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

IPA's concern is with the participants' meaning-making concerning a particular experience rather than aiming to establish causal relationships (Larkin& Thompson, 2012). This approach is consistent with the focus of this study, which was to explore the meanings young men attached to the experience of involuntary romantic relationship loss, and the significance this had for them. The approach also allowed for the possibility of exploring how these meanings appeared to be inflected by aspects of their gender identifications. The idiographic method of this study meant that the focus was on the participants' unique lived experiences, although the aim was also to understand similarities and differences in responses across the participant interviews. Through its theoretical underpinnings in phenomenology, IPA attempts to understand individuals' lived experiences and the meaning constructed from them (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2008) argue that IPA supports social constructionist understandings of lived experience in emphasizing an individual's construction of their history and life narratives as they give an account of such to an interviewer, and in recognizing the subjective construction of meaning and knowledge.

IPA's emphasis is on thorough interpretative data analysis that takes into consideration the participant's diverse and distinct lived experiences (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). As a researcher, I attempted to provide a clear, robust and rigorous data analysis, taking account of the meaning attached to the break-up experience from each young man's perspective as articulated to me.

3. 3 Participants

3.3.1 Recruitment

The participants were recruited using purposive sampling since they needed to meet specific criteria for inclusion in the study, as outlined in the subsequent sub-section. Participants were asked to volunteer on the basis that they had been in a significant

romantic relationship where the relationship came to an end based on the woman's decision or choice. They also had to have identified as having had difficulty in dealing with the loss of this romantic relationship. To reiterate, the participants were recruited on the basis that they explicitly identified themselves as having struggled to process and deal with the involuntary dissolution of a significant romantic relationship.

Eight participants were purposefully recruited to take part in the study as is considered appropriate for generating sufficient qualitative data for an IPA method of analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Participants were recruited through social media networks and word-of-mouth. In my informal engagement with young men I encountered within my social networks, I gave some potential participants a summary of what my research intended to address. Participant information sheets were then distributed to those who showed interest in possibly participating in the study. Several individuals identified strongly with the topic of the research and volunteered to take part in the study. Most of the participants were drawn from the student population of the University of the Witwatersrand; others were acquaintances from other universities or young working people. All participants signed an informed consent form (Appendix 4) that gave detailed information about the research and the participant's role in the study, including any anticipated risks and benefits entailed in taking part.

3.3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The participants in this research needed to meet the following inclusion criteria: being male, self-identified as heterosexual, aged between 20 and 35 years old, and never married. The participants had to have self-identified as having had difficulty dealing with the loss of a significant romantic relationship that ended against their will.

Young men from different demographics and cultural backgrounds were invited to participate in the study. Although this was not an explicit aim of the research, encouraging young men from diverse groups was thought to be useful in perhaps allowing for exploration of relational loss from different cultural standpoints. However, it was in the interest of the study's homogeneity to focus on one gender and sexual orientation. A participant group of *young adult* men was selected as this is often the life stage during which people become more seriously invested in partner relationships. It was also thought that given their age and exposure to perhaps more liberal gender and sexual norms, they might be freer to open up about such information than an older group of men might be. It was also thought that the ending of a formal

marriage would have different dimensions, such as financial concerns, to those of interest in this particular study, hence the exclusion of those who had been married.

3.3.3 Participant group

A summary picture of some of the salient descriptive aspects relating to the group who took part in the study is provided in Table 1 below. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality purposes. Each participant provided an estimation of the length of his lost romantic relationship, as also indicated below.

Table 3.3.3.1

Participants pseudonyms	**Age**	**Occupation**	**Approximate length of the romantic relationship**	**Ethnic group**
George	26	Student	1 year 6 month	White
Thomas	23	Student	3 years	Black
Peter	23	Student	5 years	White
Solly	28	Student	4 years	Black
Patrick	21	Student	1 year	White
Matome	28	Debt collector	5 years	Black
Charlie	33	Counsellor	3 years	Black
Skhumbuzo	24	Educator	2 years	Black

3.4 Data collection

Although there are several ways in which one can collect data that is suitable for an IPA analysis, in this study, semi-structured interviews were used. Semi-structured interviews allow the participants to reflect in detail about their lived experience (Whiting, 2008). Semi-structured interviewing provides in-depth information about the particular topic through the open-ended nature of the questioning (Stanford 2007, as cited in Tuner, 2010; Whiting, 2008).

In an attempt to elicit detailed information, the semi-structured interviews followed an interview guide with topics of interest for the research (Whiting, 2008). Informed by the literature reviewed, aims of the study and input from supervision, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed (see Appendix 1). Moreover, Smith and Osborn's (2003) guidelines for developing an interview schedule were followed. The developed

interview schedule was used to guide the interview process, but it was flexible and open-ended in that it allowed for probing questions for the participants to share further and explore their experiences. Prompting and clarity seeking items helped guide the interviews and ensured that issues of concern were addressed (Whiting, 2008).

Participants had a choice as to the places they would like to be interviewed, either at offices on the university premises or at their homes. The interviews lasted for a minimum of 45 minutes to a maximum of 90 minutes. The conversation between each interviewer and interviewee was recorded using a digital recorder, for which additional consent was obtained (Appendix 5), and I subsequently transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. All personally identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts to protect confidentiality.

3.5 Data analysis

Data collected were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) as discussed previously. The analysis was conducted with guidance and supervision from my supervisor, who has experience with mental health issues and masculinity studies and who has supervised qualitative research at the graduate level.

3.5.1 Individual case analysis

Taking into consideration the idiographic commitment of IPA, each participant's interview was analyzed in-depth (Smith et al., 2009). Each audio-recorded interview was carefully listened to up to three times, and each transcript was also read several times. Upon reading the transcripts, annotations and descriptive comments were made to match better and describe thoughts about the content, including the language used and differential concepts formed (Smith et al., 2009). Two sets of columns were drawn up. In the first column, the initial annotations from the careful reading of the transcripts were recorded, and in the second column, overarching themes that emerged were generated and noted. Each interview transcript was analysed through the same procedure until all the interview content had been processed.

3.5.2 Emergent themes

The emergent themes were put together chronologically and then clustered into subordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009). The first themes were put together under

superordinate themes that captured the content of the set of themes in a manner that appeared to fit the data. Identification of superordinate themes was made through *abstraction* in that related themes were grouped into one theme. Secondly, *subsuming* was followed where it was checked that emergent themes were adequately characterised as superordinate because of their particular relatedness to others. Thirdly, *polarizing* was observed where transcripts were examined based on their distinctive nature, and any extraordinary or outlying information was distinguished. Fourthly, *contextualization* followed where the contextual issues surrounding the narratives were identified. Next, *numeration,* where how many times a theme was represented, was noted. Lastly, *the function* was entertained in that there was some attention to the role that themes might perform. All of these steps form part of the components of an IPA.

Several processes were undertaken to attempt to ensure that the qualitative analysis was executed following the best research practices. The quality of qualitative research can be assessed through specific guidelines, such as those outlined by Yardly (2000). In this study, Yardly's (2000) four principles were followed to attempt to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, importance and impact.

3.6 Sensitivity to context

As a researcher, one has to demonstrate sensitivity to the existing literature and theory, to take into account the socio-political/cultural nature of the environment within which the study takes place (Yardly, 2000). I have taken this recommendation into account in my attempt to contextualize aspects of the data analysis as will be evident in the discussion chapter. For example, while the study was not centrally focused on South African men's experiences of dealing with a break-up, where this is evident their location within this country and how this may have affected their contributions is alluded to. I was also aware of my personal experience as I undertook the data analysis and collection.

3.7 Commitment and rigour

This study aimed to understand and represent young men's experience of dealing with a loss of romantic relationship thoroughly and carefully. According to Smith et al. (2009) during data collection and analysis, one is required to pay attention and care to both the data and participants. As a rigorous and ethical qualitative researcher, I

took care to be respectful and mindful of the personal nature of the data collected and the feeling states of participants as they reflected upon their experiences.

Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls and Ormston (2014) further argue for the importance of having a well-designed study with methods and sample that will produce rigorous findings to assure a good representation of the participants' shared experiences. Although rigour in this study might have been affected by the sensitivity of the topic for the participants and my investment in the problem, I attempted to remain open-minded and systematic in how I conducted the research and used available supervision during data collection and analysis.

3.8 Transparency and coherence

According to Smith et al. (2009), transparency entails offering a clear description of the research approach, stages and steps followed during the research process. These include the link between the actual research undertaken and the theoretical underpinnings. I have attempted to be as transparent as possible about how the study was conducted and have written it up in a manner consistent with trying to integrate data and theory. I have also been transparent in the reflexivity section bellow.

3.9 Importance and impact

The importance and implications of this study are outlined in the discussion chapter and were included in the rationale of the study.

3.10 Ethical considerations

The study was granted ethical approval by the University of the Witwatersrand's Research Ethic's Committee. Please see the supporting document in Appendix 6. Ethical issues are always an integral part of qualitative research and primarily aim to ensure the safety of the participants (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). The following describes some of the key ethical considerations observed when conducting the study:

3.10.1 Informed consent

This study's focus was on the participants' lived experiences, which means aspects of participants' private lives were explored and will be in some respects be shared in public space as the research report will be accessible as a library resource. The

Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 3) set out information about the study and was provided for scrutiny prior to the actual interview. Information about the purpose of the study, details about participation, persons who would have access to the data and its storage was set out in the Participant Information Sheet.

Upon meeting, the participants were given an Informed Consent form to read and then asked to sign the document to indicate their consent to take part based on the outline of the purpose, procedure and processes intended (see Appendix 2). Participants were briefed on every section of the informed consent to make sure they understood the content set out in the information sheet. Participants were allowed to ask questions for clarity in a preferred language of their choice. Informed consent was sought to ensure the participants' voluntary participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw, and the risks and benefits of this study. The participants were aware that they could be given feedback in a summary form. If asked. The participants were informed that a copy of the finished report would be kept in the library as part of the University of the Witwatersrand's library wired space.

3.10.2 Confidentiality

In affirmation of the wellbeing of participants' private information, issues of confidentiality were thoroughly discussed and addressed, for example, the study used pseudonyms and less identifying information. It was made clear that my supervisor and I would be the only people who would have access to the participants' interview transcripts. The participants were made aware that there was a likelihood of using direct quotes from their interview transcripts in the write-up, and it was made clear that any data that might identify the participants would not be included/or reported in data write-up and any possible publications.

3.10.3 Potential distress

Although it was not envisaged that the study would expose the participants to severe discomfort, it was recognised that there was a potential risk of distress amongst participants arising from revisiting their difficult lived experienced. The participants were made aware of the topics that this study would cover beforehand and chose to participate with knowledge of the interview focus. Information about possible accessible counselling services was made available in case they experienced difficulties after having participated (Appendix 3). Upon checking-in on how the

participants found the interviews in every case, participants indicated that they had found the interviews helpful and felt unburdened after the discussion.

3.11 Reflexivity

In general, the position of the qualitative researcher should be to exercise empathetic neutrality in their research endeavours (Ritchie et al., 2014); however, it is also recognized that absolute objectivity is impossible in the research process. For this reason, it is essential to engage reflexively concerning thinking about the perspectives one brings and how data collection and analysis can be shaped by the researcher's identity and personal experience. I took such concerns to mind during data collection and analysis and kept a journal where I made notes of my own responses to aspects of the research process.

3.11.1 Self-reflexivity

The following aspects of my identity were borne in mind when I considered how my particular background and orientation might have influenced how I approached and conducted the research project. I am a 27 years old Black man and have lived most of my life in the rural areas of Ga-MothapoTjatjaneng, Limpopo, South Africa. I am from a lower-class background, but as things progressed as a family, we moved to a mixed lower and working-class area. I have managed to obtain a tertiary level university qualification, and I have worked and volunteered in the field of education, research and mental health for the past five years.

I identify as a heterosexual male and am currently single. I have been in multiple romantic relationships, but have not been married and have no children. I have personally suffered from the involuntary loss of a romantic relationship that I consider to have been significant to me. Many of my research interests, like this one, have been influenced by my personal experiences in the world. I believe that research can find and create knowledge that might be of benefit to those facing psychological difficulties. Concerning epistemology, I am strongly constructionist in my approach to knowledge generation, with an integrative orientation in terms of theoretical underpinnings. A more elaborate discussion of what role my identity and identifications may have played in the execution of the study is offered at the end of the discussion chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the salient features of the participants' accounts of experiencing and dealing with the loss of a romantic relationship and how participants made sense of these experiences. Each of the core themes that arose from the analysis of the data is presented and discussed in some detail. The themes emerged from the analysis of participants' transcripts and based on the interview schedule focused not unexpectedly upon constructions of romantic relationships, and accounts of the

circumstances, nature and impact of the breakup, including the influence of the breakup on belief systems and life going forward. As is common in much qualitative research the findings and discussion are combined into one chapter as it did not seem useful to separate a purely descriptive account of the themes that emerged from elaboration and interpretation of the theme content.

4.1 Overview

Both super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes are presented as the main features that describe participants' experiences of their loss of a romantic relationship. It was evident that how the participants made sense of their experience of this life event was influenced by factors such as their family and cultural values and their social location, including their sense of their masculinity. It was also recognised that the group who was interviewed consisted of well-educated, young adult men who perhaps held somewhat more liberal rather than traditional views about gender roles and relations as will be further addressed in the evaluation of the research project.

The participants' accounts are categorised around six superordinate themes: *construction of romantic relationship; construction of the breakup; the impact of the breakup; ways of coping; reflections on lessons learned (insight derived); and reflections on being male and masculinity*. These themes are recognised as reflecting the participants' reported accounts of dealing with and experiencing a significant breakup. They also, to some extent, reflect how the interview schedule was constructed to probe aspects of the topic of interest. Under each of these over-arching themes, several subordinate themes are identified and have been labelled to reflect the content that emerged as crucial across the transcripts.

Super-ordinate themes are listed on the left-hand-side and sub-ordinate themes on the right-hand side of the table below (i.e. Table 4.1.1). Each theme was identified and elaborated interpretatively through looking at points of convergence and divergence across accounts. This process of interpretation enabled me to attempt to draw out accurate observations that were data-led (Smith et al., 2009). The interpretation and discussion that emerged from the themes are elaborated in part by providing links to the existing literature on the topic.

While some of the themes resonated with the theoretical literature covered, others did not. Examples of where the material produced new findings are the themes labelled *construction of romantic relationships,* and *reflection on lesson learned and insight*

derived. This chapter describes how the themes are interrelated and include illustrative extracts that are based on participants own words in order to substantiate the findings (Smith et al., 2009). The verbatim extracts are presented in a slightly changed manner to improve their readability. For example, repeated words and words that are used to express hesitation are omitted in most instances where they were not deemed essential to understanding the thematic content. The use of ellipsis at the beginning or the end of the extracts shows an omission of certain parts of the extracts without losing the intended meaning. It should also be noted that in some instances the same quotation is used to illustrate more than one theme or sub-theme as it was possible to read different interpretations into the same piece of text, in part because in the real world people do not compartmentalise how they speak about their experiences and may cover several topics in one exchange. To protect the anonymity of the participants, possible identifying information has been removed, and pseudonyms have been used to denote each of the eight participants and their responses.

Table 4.1.1

Super-ordinate themes	**Sub-ordinate themes**
4.2 Construction of romantic relationship	4.2.1Commitment 4.2.2 Trust 2.2.3 Being a good boyfriend
4.3 Construction of the breakup	4.3.1 Deterioration and dissolution of a relationship 4.3.2 Culpability and attribution of responsibility
4.4 Impact of the breakup	4.4.1 Affective 4.4.2 Mental health 4.4.3 Future relationships

4.5 Ways of coping	4.5.1 Social withdrawal 4.5.2 Seeking social support 4.5.3 Distraction and avoidance
4.6 Reflections on lessons learned (insight derived)	4.6.1 More self-invested 4.6.2 Doing relationships differently 4.6.3 Advice to others
4.7 Reflection on being male and masculinity	4.7.1 Displays of emotion 4.7.2 Accessing and receiving help 4.7.3 Masculine role identity and the need to be chivalrous

4.2 Construction of a romantic relationship

The participants' responses concerning how they experienced and dealt with the loss of a romantic relationship seemed to be related to their construction of what constituted a significant romantic relationship in the first instance. Harrison (2008) and Delius & Glaser (2002) argued that constructions of romantic relationships amongst young men and women in South Africa are influenced by the individual's culture, religion and norms of the social group s/he comes from. According to Harrison (2008), romantic relationships among young women and men in South African are negotiated within normative social guidelines that may differ along cultural lines. Masculine norms accord young men the responsibility to propose love to young women (Harrison, 2008).

Although there are various ways of constructing romantic relationships, the participants seemed to construct their relationships in a particular way that felt significant to them before the breakup. Participants' accounts suggested that they could see themselves being with their girlfriends in a long-term way with an anticipated future together. All of the men interviewed had invested in their relationships and had seen them as "serious", counter to the stereotype that young men may engage more casually in romantic relationships or in a more game-playing way. It is recognised that having selected participants on the basis that they had struggled to deal with a breakup the sub-group may have been somewhat atypical, but it was interesting to hear how committed they had felt to these relationships. Most of the participant's responses suggested a strong sense of commitment, trust and an attempt to be a 'good boyfriend'. Participant's experience of being committed to their significant other counters the stereotypes on men's casual engagement relationally, indicating that the participant's experiences differed from those associated stereotypically with being a 'real man' Shimek & Bello, 2014).

The following themes - *commitment, trust, and being a good boyfriend* - illustrate how participants made sense of the significance of their partner relationships before their dissolution.

4.2.1Commitment

In the construction of their romantic relationships, participants had projections and fantasies about their future together with their partners, which reflected the significance of the relationship. Through these projections and fantasies, participants demonstrated some sense of commitment to their girlfriends. The participant's investment made it particularly challenging to experience and deal with the loss. In almost all cases the men assumed or had reason to believe that their partners had similar kinds of expectations of the relationship. In his response to being asked "how the break up was", **George**'s account emphasized the intense feeling of dedication he felt towards his girlfriend, which was associated with his definition of a significant romantic relationship and underpinned his future intentions and expectations.

> **George***: We were saying that, yah, when we grow older we can, you know, we will have a house in Stellenbosch. This was, we could see into the future. You know. So I mean I was even asking her dad for business advice and that kind of stuff. It was, it was proper. I mean I could definitely see myself staying with*

her forever. Uhm like she got along with my grandmother although she never really got along with my parents.

Like **George**, **Leshata** ‘s account captures his projection of a long term future with the woman he loved and his seeing himself as getting married to his girlfriend in the future.

> **Leshata***: We were dating for long, and I was seeing myself married to her. I had leased her a car, which I stopped paying when she asked that we slow down when I talked to her about marriage…*
>
> And
>
> **Leshata:** *So before we broke up, I had leased her a car and was talking about paying Lobola, but things revealed themselves when I talk about paying her Lobola.*

The commitment evidenced among these young men runs counter to Lee’s (1973) argument about common styles of engagement in partner relationships. In counteracting the stereotypes about men’s style of engagement and hegemonic norms of masculinity in romantic relationship, **George** made sense of what he saw as a mutual commitment in referring to plans to live in a particular place together and in acknowledging other network relationships that were formed by their relationship, such as that with his grandmother. He refers to the relationship as *proper* suggesting that it was validated and recognised as serious by not only the two of them but also by significant others and he says *we could see into the future*. **Leshata** makes sense of his commitment by indicating that he took on payment for his partner’s car as *he was seeing himself married to her* and *was talking about paying Lobola* (a form of marriage down payment standard in traditional African culture). Illustrative of similar feelings among other participants, both young men suggested that if anything they were perhaps more committed than their partners and had demonstrated this in behavioural terms. The findings in this study tend to refute the stereotypes about styles of engagement amongst young men in romantic relationship, including references to promiscuity and game playing (Shimek & Bello, 2014; Lee, 1973; Connell, 2005) and indicate that men may approach love and romantic relationships in a manner that suggests enduring investment.

Although norms and stereotypes concerning men’s approach to love and romantic relationships prevail in the media and society, participant’s accounts gave a sense that

these young men were deeply committed to their partners and with hindsight question whether their sense of the relationship as being seriously committed represented a misjudgement on their part. It was almost as if they were providing the interviewer with the evidence for why they felt that their investment had been legitimate. Although studies argue men to be conquest-associated and nonchalant in their romantic relational engagement (Connell, 2006; Lee, 1973), the participants seem to have rejected such notions so that they could achieve meaningful relationship goals. **George**'s accounts emphasised his commitment to their romantic relationship, and he recalled saying to his girlfriend that she was worth making sacrifices and exceptions for:

> **George**: *…she asked me, George why are still with me? And I said well the negatives haven't outweighed the positives. And you're worth, you're worth every, every little bad thing that happens, you're worth it.*

Reaffirming Sternberg (1986)'s Triangular Theory Of Love, **George**'s account signifies a commitment to working on his relationship even after there had been complicated interchanges. He showed a need to make their relationship work and to view his girlfriend in a positive light, as the negatives were outweighed by the positives', and he wished his girlfriend to be aware of this. His account emphasised that commitment is constructed around being willing to accommodate, to forgive and to take a balanced perspective. He was willing to accept his girlfriend's flaws as part of his commitment to her, even if she could not understand his attitude.

Although these young men appeared to have affirmed the three inter-related elements that determine the success of a romantic relationship according to Sternberg, their significant others also had an impact on determining the success of the relationship in this regard even though as men they were accorded the responsibility to propose love and supposedly to determine what happened in their romantic relationships (Delius & Glaser, 2002; Harrison, 2008).From their accounts, it did not appear that they felt they could determine that their degree of investment was reciprocated by the women they loved.

Peter elaborated on the nature and qualities of his relationship that led him to believe that they were seriously involved as a couple:

> **Peter:** *Yah, uhm, so yah, weekends we were inseparable, uhm, but we spent all of our time again with our friends, whatever. Uhm, and I suppose that is what*

made the break up…, that was the most difficult part for me when we did end up breaking up. Is like our friends, we didn't have separate friends or all of our friends were our friends.

Contrary to Lee's (1973) assertions on the Ludic love style approach among men, in keeping with other participants **Peter**'s account indicates that companionship played a big part concerning the construction of his relationship with his girlfriend. In saying they shared friends and spent most of their time together with these mutual friends, **Peter**'s account emphasised that their relationship entailed shared interests and social relationships. He suggests that this level of commitment made their breakup particularly difficult for him. Peter uses the terms *we* and *our* to emphasize his sense that he was joined in something mutual with his girlfriend resonating with some of the arguments that couples form a kind of collective identity that becomes part of each individual's sense of self Agnew(2000; 2006). Peter seems to feel this loss of mutual identity and companionship quite acutely.

In their construction of a romantic relationship, **Peter** and **George** felt a sense of enjoyment in being connected to someone else, which made it difficult to deal with the breakup. However, **Matome**'s and **Leshata** accounts reflected the pressure they felt concerning commitment where emotional blackmail would be used to elicit particular behaviours.

Matome*: And when I didn't want to see her she would start making it seem like I am cheating on her and that I don't want her anymore, blah, blah. So she started blackmailing me … Yeah, she was turning things, making it seem like I am the one at fault. But, because when you love a person you end up humbling yourself for them, agreeing to what they say and seeing them.*

Leshata*: I remember when we were still together, she once said that she wished she had a man who could bring her to work with a car or buy her one. I ended leasing her one because it stressed me when she told me that.*

In both cases, one gets a sense that the young men felt almost misled or betrayed by their partners who had acted as if they could lay claim to their time and their resources as would be the case in a committed relationship. The criticisms from their partners (both direct and implied) gave them disturbing feelings about their self-regard in the relationship. **Matome**'s account emphasised the distress he felt as he struggled to manage and assimilate his commitment to his relationship and the sense that he was

being criticised somewhat unfairly, while **Leshata**'s struggled to provide for his girlfriend and made sacrifices in this regard. **Matome** even refers to his behaviour of being humble as being linked to the extent of his commitment. This elicited sense of commitment seems to have taken place at an early stage of **Matome**'s and **Leshata**'s romantic relationships after they had displayed their love and continued until the later stage of dissolution. At a later stage, this sense of devotion to their significant other was experienced as disturbing and distressing to their self-regard.

Thus it was evident that the interviewees perceived themselves to have been in mutually committed relationships, basing this perception on a variety of factors including duration, future planning, the creation of a shared familial and friendship network, offers of financial support and displaying forbearance and compromising in the face of painful encounters with aspects of their partners. Linked to their sense of commitment was their sense of trust in their partners and the relationship before the breakup.

4.2.2 Trust

The negotiation of trust understood here as a characteristic of a significant romantic relationship that allows partners to be vulnerable with one another, also appeared to be a significant feature of the interviewees' relationships before the breakup. Breaking of trust such as through transgression (i.e. deception and infidelity) can be classified as betrayal, which may result in conflict and later relational dissolution (Leary, 2001). The participants noted their difficult responses and difficulties in maintaining and having trust in their romantic relationship, which in many instances, is what led to the dissolution of the partnership. **Matome**'s account emphasized the distress he felt as he struggled to maintain trust in his relationship. He referred to behaviours of his girlfriend, for example lying, as disturbing to how he viewed her.

> **Matome***: Let me put it this way, in 2011, no in 2010 she cheated on me and denied that she cheated on me…*
>
> Interviewer*: Oh, ok.*
>
> **Matome***: She showed that she cheated on me; she said they did not do anything but she was about to. The way I saw it she cheated on me. We talked about it but because I loved her we just went on.*
>
> and

> **Matome***: … that's when an impression of her as a lying person started being in my mind…*
> Interviewer*: Did she have lies at the time you met or you did not see that part of her?*
>
> **Matome***: Maybe that time I could not see, but what I know is that I had my doubts without proof…*

Matome was disturbed about the thoughts he had about his girlfriend's behaviour and showed that they were threatening to his trust. However, he reflects that *because I loved her, we just went on.***Matome** felt deceived and cheated on. However, he experienced his love as what kept him in the relationship despite feeling mistrustful of his significant other.

In contrast to the popular notion of men transgressing and having multiple sex partners as a sign of dominance (Connell, 2005), **Matome** was not the one transgressing in his romantic relationship. Instead, his female significant other was the one breaking bonds of trust, indicating that having multiple sexual partners and transgressing may not be limited to men. **Matome** showed a need to maintain positive thoughts about his girlfriend, as he felt his love meant he should aim to be forbearing, but he struggled to maintain his trust. This was reflected in the impression he had about his girlfriend and his attempt to find proof in order to separate undesirable thinking from the impression he had about his girlfriend's behaviour.

Although he did not doubt his girlfriend in quite the same way as **Matome**, **Leshata**'s account seemed also to show how he was trusting of his girlfriend but was left distressed.

> **Leshata***: …when I talk about paying her Lobola She said she thinks we were moving too fast and that she wants space. However, I ended up agreeing to it, not knowing that she is going to leave me for some guy...*

Leshata suggests that his girlfriend allowed him to believe that his courtship was being entertained by accepting the car payments but with hindsight thinks he was foolish not to have seen that she was thinking of taking up with another partner. Leshata thought that experiencing a paced cultural courtship and providing for his female significant other was a way of earning her trust and proving trustworthy himself. **Leshata**'s talk about lobola supports Harrison's (2008) and Delius & Glaser's (2002) assertions about

young men and women drawing from social, cultural and traditional norms in their construction of a romantic relationship. Talking Lobola with his partner suggested that **Leshata** was courting his girlfriend following cultural expectations and assumed a mutual level of trust in the process of moving towards marriage.

From the quoted material above it is evident that **Matome** appeared to be engaged in an ongoing process of defending his girlfriend's behaviour from his negative thoughts in order to retain a sense of trust, but he could not completely reject the doubtful feelings evoked in him. Just like **Matome**, **Leshata** appeared to be trying to defend his girlfriend from his painful feelings, although he was doubtful about her need for space when he proposed to pay her Lobola. The participants did not use a nonchalant engagement and did not appear to conform to hegemonic norms of masculinity and control in their style of engagement, but instead, they felt to some extent at the mercy of their partners and their feeling states in attempting to maintain positive views of their partners to retain their relationships. The participant's experiences did not match the stereotypic notions about men being in charge as they felt a need to conform to their partners' versions of the relationship because of the personal meaning they held in their construction of a romantic relationship.

Thabo 's account reflected much of his despair in the face of deterioration in his self-regard and in his struggle to assimilate aspects of himself in response to what happened in his romantic relationship. The battle to retain trust in the face of what looked like an innocent gesture, for example, hugging a classmate, is what was difficult for **Thabo**:

> **Thabo***: Yeah so I hugged a classmate of mine. But then I realised something like a facial expression, you can't like fake it. I became aware that she didn't like it. I went to her and I tried talking to her and apologised. But for that week she blocked me.*
>
> Interviewer*: You apologised for?*
>
> **Thabo***: Hugging my class mate, yah, because she took it personally as if like I was cheating on her. Then fine for that week. That week she like blocked me. I couldn't even call her and text her, nothing.*
>
> *I: Because of?*

Thabo*: Because of a hug. Then fine I admitted for that for that week. And I felt bad, I felt like I was lost.*

In adult romantic relationships, an individual's emotional connection with their significant other contributes to a definite conception and perception of themselves Arnett (2004). **Thabo** attempted to defend his action to retain his girlfriend's trust, but she would not allow him to explain that his action was innocent, which left in him feeling *lost*. He showed the need to be seen as a trustworthy person (Arnett, 2004), but was not given a space to do so. This left him with feelings of guilt and a sense of being cast out as his girlfriend punished him by cutting off any contact. Her jealousy suggested to him that she perceived him as "belonging" to her and in this sense was confusing as she appeared both to be laying claim to him and rejecting him for his actions. As with the other two interviewees, **Leshata** and **Matome**, one sees **Thabo** doing emotional work to understand the implications of this interaction for his romantic relationship and his willingness to backdown, accommodate and make amends in order to rebuild or sustain trust. As with other features, this kind of attitude runs counter to the gender stereotype that it is women who put more emotional work into relationships and who are more willing to compromise to sustain attachments. It seems that men may be equally capable of such behaviours. The idea that men may also place demands on themselves to make relationships work is further expanded upon in the next sub-theme.

2.2.3 Being a good boyfriend

When in a romantic relationship most people care about the well-being of their significant others and hope to work through difficulties and meet the needs of the other as best they can, especially if they have more positive internal working models of relationships as mutually beneficial (Bowlby, 1970,1979).

Participants narrated how they attempted to be a 'good boyfriend' in their romantic relationships and engaged in efforts to manage this despite negative experiences. *Being a good boyfriend* can be interpreted as demonstrating good traits or offering the kinds of gestures that appeared expected in romantic relationships in order to be perceived as ideal boyfriend material by one's girlfriend or their social groups (Arnette, 2004). Because of being emotionally invested in their relationships, participants appeared to have attempted to expand their sense of self in order to integrate the characteristics expected of them by their significant other (Aron & Aron, 1997).

George's account captured some of the kinds of deeds that constituted 'being a good boyfriend'. The reported lack of acknowledgement from his girlfriend is associated with significant distress and brought about feelings of doubt and rejection. He was trying to play his part, but she was non-reciprocal.

> ***George****: I mean even Valentine's Day, I made a big effort and like she didn't seem to appreciate it at all. Yah, like that day she actually organised a big braai at her house. And I was like, but why can't we spend Valentine's Day together? And, uhm, yah, so then.*
>
> Interviewer*: So she invited you to the braai?*
>
> ***George****: Yah, yah, yah, so I was there and then I did something at her house in the evening. Like I had a little picnic in the garden. Like a surprise picnic but like even then, I put a lot of effort into it she barely acknowledged it…*

George's account emphasized the distress he felt as he struggled to comprehend his girlfriend's lack of acknowledgement and appreciation of his romantic gestures and her apparent lack of recognition of the exclusivity of their bond. **Matome**'s accounts of being a good boyfriend emphasized being faithful and the sacrifices he made for his girlfriend:

> **Matome***: At that time, I was faithful to her, and I understood that I have to date one girl. That thing affected me because I remember when she started working sometime you hear from people that she was with another person.*
>
> Interviewer:*Mmmm*
> **Matome***: You understand, sometimes when you try to go see her, because you are a student using small amount of money you have, she would tell you that she can't see you. The time she would want to see you, you would have to agree to see her.*

Although **Matome** was not explicit about the times he was not being a good boyfriend, his use of the words *at that time* implies that he was not always solely committed to this partner His account emphasized, however, that having made a commitment to monogamy he stuck to that and attempted to remain respectful of his partner's needs. He felt upset that he was not reciprocated for his efforts and that sometimes his efforts were met with rejection from his girlfriend.

Sello and **Leshata**'s accounts also emphasised their attempts to be good boyfriends even though their efforts translated into negative experiences. **Leshata** reported being understanding and giving his girlfriend the space she requested as demonstrating his good intentions. However, he was not positively reciprocated for his efforts. His girlfriend appears to have drifted apart from him. In fact, he seems to feel that his efforts to live up to the expectations of accommodating to her needs led to being exploited. In relation to their significant other, they experienced lack of appreciation and acknowledgement of their caregiving functions. Elements of their self-esteem seemed to be negatively affected (Lewandowski et al., 2009).

> **Leshata*:*** *I understood that maybe me paying her lobola was a bit too much, and believed that she might need space to understand that. It came to a point where we spend days and weeks without talking. I would meet her driving past with a guy in the car I was leasing for her.*

Similar to **Leshata**, agreeing that his girlfriend goes on trips with friends is what **Sello** emphasized as part of his being a good boyfriend although his account shows disappointment in his girlfriend's subsequent behaviour.

> **Sello***: You know, I felt a need to actually understand her always going out with her friends, and I even supported her when she went for a trip with them. I was being nice in agreeing to this, only to find that she was doing things in the background...*

Agnew's (2000; 2006) cognitive interdependent and Aron & Aron's (1997) self-expansion theory seem to help explain the fused aspects of self-concept of the participants and their significant others and how this resulted in negative experiences when not acknowledged in their attempts to meet the needs of their partners as part of their investment in this mutual self-concept. Their assumptions about a joint appreciation of what was going on are violated, impacting their transformed self-identity and self-definition as boyfriends (Chen & Anderson, 2002). It was evident that the interviewees viewed themselves as having attempted to live up to stereotypes of what a good boyfriend might look like, not only at the level of making romantic gestures and material provision, but also by attempting to accommodate their partners' needs for some autonomy and control in the relationship. In this respect, they seem to have seen themselves as 'modern', non-sexist men.

What was striking throughout the discussions of the construction of the relationship was a sense of having been misled or having made assumptions about mutuality that had proven false. This left all of the participants disillusioned and questioning aspects of themselves, the other and committed partner relationships in general. Far from appearing cavalier about what had happened these men had felt that their commitment, trust, hope and forbearance had not paid off and had left them feeling unstable. It was also evident that in many respects, their beliefs and reported behaviour had departed from those conventionally associated with a masculine way of being.

The discussion now moves on to elaborate the second superordinate theme.

4.3 Construction of the breakup

As indicated previously, according to Agnew's (2004) formulation of cognitive interdependence, individuals perceive themselves as part of a unit in a romantic relationship due to mutually invested shared self-concepts. Because of the shared self-concepts experience, changes and destabilization in the self after a relationship ends may result in heightened emotions and distress (Slotter et al., 2009; Lewandowski et al., 2006). Making sense of the construction of the breakup, participants experienced the kind of destabilization described in the literature and associated levels of distress. The theme *construction of the breakup* describes how the participants made sense of what contributed to the breakup in their romantic relationships. This feature related to interpretations from participants about what had caused the break-up, including accounts of acts of the participants' girlfriends that created a sense of alarmed awareness of a potential breakup. The behaviour changes from the participants' girlfriends were reported to have produced disturbing and anxious feelings, and most of the interviewees described a period in which romantic relationships unexpectedly deteriorated, and the enjoyment of the shared self-concepts experience with their partner was jeopardized. The participants' accounts were clustered around two subordinate themes: firstly, deterioration and dissolution of the relationship, and secondly, attribution of culpability.

4.3.1 Deterioration and dissolution of a relationship (for example shock, warning signs "seeing it coming", holding on)

The theme *deterioration and dissolution of relationship* illustrates how participants constructed the loss of their romantic relationship just before the inevitable ending.

The participants related how they had experienced the deterioration of the relationship before the breakup and were engaged in the struggle to manage and make sense of themselves and their significant other and what was happening between them (Andersen et al., 2002; Lewandowski et al., 2006). **Sipho**'s account captured much of what all of the participants' struggled to manage and make sense of concerning feeling something change in a negative way in his romantic relationship. Here, he struggled to make sense of the newly developed interests and expectations from his girlfriend. The changes **Sipho** reported were associated with significant distress resulting from the demands made by his girlfriend, and left him with feelings of inadequacy:

> **Sipho*: ...*** *Ohm the first couple of years we were fine, ohm then she moved to varsity as well. So, it was a distance relationship. Ohm up until she then found different interest. I supposed as people we grow in life. I like to believe humans are not stagnant; they develop themselves; their interest may change over time. So, her interest also changed, and compared to a person I was used from the beginning; that person became a person who is more materialistic and started demanding lot of my input from my end with regard to materialist endeavours in a relationship.*

Contrary to Aron & Aron's (1997) self-expansion theory, **Sipho** experienced his partner's self-expansion in the form of making new demands as challenging to integrate. He talks of his partner becoming a more materialistic person and of the loss of the sense of security (*we were fine*) associated with the first several years of the relationship. Not only does he feel she became a person who was less familiar to him but also that what he had to offer her was no longer deemed sufficient. He reflected on this change as signalling some deterioration in their relationship.

Leshata's account reflected the distress he felt concerning the communication breakdown as a result of the "space" he gave his girlfriend. Although giving his girlfriend more independence seemed like what he felt their relationship needed, his account reflected significant distress associated with that:

> **Leshata***: I understood that maybe me paying her lobola was a bit too much, and believed that she might need space to understand that. It came to a point where we could spend days and weeks without talking. I would meet her driving past with a guy in the car I was leasing for her.*

His distress results from the experienced destabilization and alteration of the shared self-concept experience. He perhaps wished their relationship to develop further in attempting to meet her perceived needs, but instead, deterioration was the result. He then became disheartened and alienated.

> **Sipho***: So I think we had gone in to a state where we thought that if we get involved in an argument it is just about bashing the other opposite, the other corner, rather than try to convince, I mean winning them over to your side. So due to that I had changed, I became quite negative, quite aggressive verbally***.**

Sipho's account emphasized many of the negative feelings he experienced as he struggled to manage or understand the deterioration of his relationship and the distress he felt concerning the style of conflict resolution, of '*bashing*', that he found himself participating in and aggravating. These encounters left him with a negative and aggressive experience of himself.

It was evident that in talking about their experiences of dealing with a hurtful break-up both **Sipho** and **Leshata** found themselves going over what had preceded the ending as if they needed to account to both themselves and the researcher and as if they could not help revisiting the sense of impending rupture. It was evident that most of the interviewees remained preoccupied with the circumstances of the ending.

Although **George**'s account indicates that while he was ultimately the one who broke up with his girlfriend, he felt he could no longer hold on to the relationship in its deteriorating state.

> **George***: So then she went away to Thailand in January and when she came back, I mean that first year we always used to go out every single Friday…*
>
> Interviewer*: yeah, the first part of the relationship?*
>
> **George***: Yeah, yeah, and then after that when she came back from Thailand. She started…, I said "I said yeah [name] do you wanna go on a date, what are you doing on Friday?" She said, "Can I let you know? "It was always "Can I let you know?" It was always, I don't know… she was always looking for the next best thing and I wasn't that best thing … So in the beginning she treated me like a prince and after years she kind of, I was just like an accessory, you know.*

His account shows his awareness of the signs concerning the deterioration of his relationships, such as changes in regular patterns and a lack of interest in spending time with him. He showed a need to be still seen in the same light as he was in the beginning, being treated *like a prince.* His nostalgia for this earlier period resonates with Arnett's (2004) argument on the formation of a positive self-concept and self-perception as a result of emotional connection with a romantic significant other. One picks up on his sense of loss and disillusionment in being subsequently treated as incidental, *just like an accessory* and feeling that it was impossible to be the *next best thing* for her. Similar to the other participants he feels a withdrawal of affection and interest in him from his partner and while he persists for a period to attempt to sustain or rebuild what was there he realizes at some point that the investment is not mutual. For all of the participants, this awareness of partner disinvestment produced painful feelings of impotence and disillusionment.

Participant's responses indicated how this problematic relational experience seemed to have destabilized their active and positive self-concepts (Lewandowski et al., 2009; Anderson et al., 2002). Experiences of being treated as incidental, becoming verbally aggressive and of feeling neglected were typical in accounts around how they constructed the breakup. All of these suggesting negative shifts in self-concept as a consequence of being no longer loved by the other and no longer able to trust in the mutuality of the partnership

Dependent on gender, social norms and culture, transgressions related to sexual and other forms of betrayal can leave individuals in significant romantic relationships highly distressed, because of their intimacy and vulnerability with one another (Leary, 2001). According to Leary (2001), deception and infidelity are forms of transgression that are deemed to be explicit betrayal that may result in the termination of a romantic relationship. Although **Matome** was not clear about his girlfriend's transgression, he had an impression of her as a lying person which was threatening to their mutually invested self-concept. His account captures his struggle to understand his girlfriend's actions and his fear that his suspicions might be misplaced. **Matome**'s account emphasized the distasteful feelings he felt during his struggle to understand his situation:

Matome*: That's when an impression of her as a lying person started …*
Interviewer*: Did she have lies the time you met or you did not see that part of her?*

Matome*: Maybe that time I could not see, but what I know is that I had my doubts without a proof…*

Interviewer*: Oh*
Matome*: …because at times I was unable to judge a person without a proof, but the way I see it when I met her at the gate; it was the time I said here is the proof...So, the 2011 year has not been nice, because firstly; she saw me only when she wanted to.*

Interviewer*: Oh*

Matome*: And when I didn't want to see her she would start making it seem like I am cheating on her and that I don't want her anymore blah, blah.*

Matome appeared to be engaged in an ongoing process of defending his girlfriend against his negative feelings towards her, but he could not do away entirely with his feelings about the implications of her behaviour. He suspected that his girlfriend might have cheated on him, but could not do anything about it as she said she did not. However, his suspicion persisted and he suggests that there were other signs of disinvestment - *she saw me only when she wanted to.* As with the others, he feels an increasing loss of control in his relationship and an inability to predict or secure his partner's affections. While he downplays his reference to the relationship moving to an end in referring to the year not being *nice*, it is evident that he still ruminates over what happened and questions both his own and her actions.

Matome's emotional connection with his significant other and shared self-concept experience seems to have been what motivated him to hold on to the relationship in its deteriorating state, and maybe what made it difficult for him to leave the relationship (Chen& Anderson, 2002). However, his battle to hold on to the relationship, in its deteriorating state, in the face of suspected infidelity was agonising for **Matome**:

Matome*: In 2011.*

Interviewer*: Oh, ok.*

Matome*: She showed that she cheated on me; she said they did not do anything but she was about to. The way I saw it she cheated on me. We talked about it but because I loved her we just went on.*

Interviewer*: Yeah*

Matome*: Ohm, on me things were not changed but the only that had changed was that I was in agony.*

Interviewer*: Yeah*

Ultimately the relationship could not sustain his girlfriend's apparent declining interest in him and his conviction that she had probably been unfaithful. He describes his distress at the alteration to their relationship and the recognition that it was beyond repair as extreme, *I was in agony.* In talking about the period leading up to breakup it was also the case that most of the participants attempted to apportion responsibility for this state of affairs.

4.3.2 Culpability and attribution of responsibility

In the face of deterioration and loss of a romantic relationship young men can experience their sense of adequacy and masculinity being called into question as the involuntary loss threatens their sense of control over the other (Delius& Glaser, 2002; Harrison, 2008; Woody & Eagly, 2002). Participants held attributions of culpability concerning themselves for contributing to the breakup and understood that their girlfriends held the same attribution about them because of perceived inadequacies in their behaviour. However, they vacillated between holding themselves and their girlfriends more responsible. The interviewer did not ask about attribution of responsibility or culpability, however, the participants engaged with this issue as crucial as they expressed their experience of the breakup.

The theme discussed here illustrates how the participants made sense of the cause of their relational loss and how they were preoccupied with who was mostly responsible for the ending. Participants made sense of what went wrong both concerning inadequacy and deliberate commission of actions either concerning themselves or their girlfriends.

Matome's account captured something of how the participants struggled to comprehend their culpability in the construction of the breakup. **Matome**'s reported

that the change of his girlfriend's employment status brought about feelings of inadequacy in him as she began to dictate the terms of their relationship:

> **Matome*:*** *At that time I was faithful to her, and I understood that I have to date one girl. That thing affected me because I remember when she started working sometime you hear from people that she was with another person. You understand, sometimes when you try to go see her, because you are a student using small amount of money you have, she would tell you that she can't see you. The time she would want to see you; you would have to agree to see her.*

Sello also describes beginning to feel incidental to his girlfriend and a sense that he was failing to live up to her expectations, in his case concerning sociability.

> **Sello*:*** *…you know I always tried to ask why she was always out; she had a busy social life. Because I suspected that it was no longer about spending time with long, lost friends. She blamed on me not being outgoing. Since then she hardly slept with me, until the breakup. I felt like I should have had a busy social life like her, and meet other people.*

According to attachment theory in adult romantic relationships (Fraley& Shaver, 2000), partners serve as a 'secure base' to return to for comfort and support for life endeavours. With that said, it can be challenging for one partner to meet the primary needs of their significant other contributing to anxiety about losing them. **Sello**'s account reflects an attribution that the breakup was due to his inactive social life and his failure to match his partner's needs in this regard (Feeney& Collins, 2004), **Sello** reported having questioned his girlfriend's social life, which resulted in tension in his relationship and finally later to a breakup as a result. **Sello**'s account shows that in part, he blames his girlfriend and in parts himself for their breakup. One can hear that he both became suspicious of her loyalty but also questioned his way of functioning as evident in the phrase *I felt like I should have had a busy social life like her.* The word "*should*" especially suggests that he wondered if he was deficient in some way.**Matome**'s account highlighted the distress he felt as he struggled to prove his adequacy by making sacrifices to see his girlfriend, even though he was told that she was seeing other people (Delius& Glaser, 2002; Harrison, 2008; Woody & Eagly, 2002). Although things were not explicit for **Matome** about his girlfriend's infidelity, his girlfriend's colleague said something that insinuated her infidelity. These

communications were disturbing and alarming for **Matome**. Supporting Leary's (2001) assertion on transgression and betrayal, **Matome** referred to alleged transgression by his girlfriend as '*turning him off*', and contributing to the negative feelings towards her that ultimately meant the relationship could not be sustained:

> **Matome*:*** *I forgot something. In 2012, August, when I went to see her there is a line that turned me off. When I was with her on Saturday or Sunday morning her colleague knocked on the door, the door was open and she sees me, then she talks to [name] outside. They talked and she said to Bridget "you are changing them". When she came back, she doesn't say that that statement was meant for her, because I heard it. She said her friend was talking about a certain Doctor here when she said, "you are changing them". I said that statement was meant for you, but I didn't argue with her. That was the breaking point, but I kept on thinking I can get back with her.*

While the sense of what transpired is not entirely clear, it seemed that **Matome** felt the reference to "*changing them*" was a reference to his girlfriend having been with someone else and then him. **Matome** appears to be engaged in the process of defending his girlfriend from the feelings that were evoked by the surmised infidelity but could not ignore the information he got from her colleague. The fight to manage his emotions in the face of suspected infidelity made it difficult for **Matome** to attempt to improve the relationship from its deteriorating state – "*the breaking point"*. Despite all the contributing factors and **Matome'**s attempt to separate the undesirable feeling from positive ones, he still wished he could have saved their relationship – "*I kept on thinking I can get back with her"*.

With his girlfriend's fluctuating feelings towards him, **Peter**'s account showed his need to see his girlfriend in a positive light even though he struggled to maintain this position**.** This brought about a feeling of confusion about responsibility for the breakup**.**

> **Peter***: I mean, uhm, because she was so dependent on me, that she was so, uhm, she was so scared of being so dependant as well. So it turned into this like, you know, we would call it borderline behaviour, but just pushing and pulling. So there'd be times where she was, she would completely idolise me and I'd be like the best thing that's ever happened to her.*
>
> Interviewer*: Mmm*

Peter: *I love you. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you. You're amazing you can't do anything wrong*

I: Mmm

Peter: *And then within like a day it switches, you know. Why do you always talk down to me? Why do you always, uhm, you know, why are you so condescending? It would come out of nowhere almost. And so this was like really tiring, I didn't know where I stood with her ever. And this kind of happened all the way through the relationship. But I think I had that love gush at the first two years and I kind overlooked it and didn't really think much of it.*

Peter's account highlighted the distress he felt as he struggled to understand and deal with his girlfriend's fluctuating feelings. He referred to his girlfriend's behaviour as *tiring* and reported that he felt he did not know where he stood with her from day to day. The behaviour **Peter** reported happened throughout the relationship, but his love outweighed the cost of dealing with this behaviour, and for a long while he overlooked the severity of the impact of her changeability. **Peter** indicated that the draining experience of dealing with his girlfriend's different constructions of him was sufficient to evoke disturbing feelings and there is a sense that he feels that anyone would have found it challenging to endure the kind of tension his girlfriend's behaviour evoked, implying that she was to be blamed for the break-up.

The examples provided are just three of those relating to parts of the interviews that suggested that many of the participants needed to find an explanation for what had happened, in many instances because the relationship changes felt unexpected and ran counter to their expectations as discussed in the first theme. It was evident that in some instances deliberate actions, such as being unfaithful or treating the partner as unimportant or incidental had contributed to endings, but that in other instances it was behaviour that either one or other felt unable to change, such as lack of sociability, lack of financial resources or ambivalence in relating, that led to a kind of wearing down of the relationship. In almost all instances, even if the interviewees did feel that their girlfriends were to blame, they were left with doubts about their own behaviour and in some instances about whether they should have persevered. This was in part because of the severity of the pain they suffered after the break-up, as will be elaborated in the next section.

4.4 Impact of the breakup

Loss of a significant romantic relationship can affect an individual's mental health, self-identity and concept of themselves (Davis, Shaver& Vernon, 2003; Lewandowski et al., 2006). How such loss is processed will be influenced by various aspects of identity, including one's gender. Young men's post break-up adjustment is shaped by the norms of masculinity they subscribe to, determining to a large extent how they deal with the psychological and emotional impact brought about by this kind of loss (Mahalik et al., 2003). The participants related how, as a result of the loss of a romantic relationship, they experienced themselves and their lives. *The impact of the breakup describes* how participants attempted to make sense of the impact breakup had on them, including its psychological, physical and social wellbeing consequences. The four sub-themes under impact were identified as: *affective, mental health, social withdrawal, and future relationships*

4.4.1 Affective

The theme- *affective* - describes the participants' moods, feeling states and emotions aroused by the impact of the breakup and what it was like to experience these affects. **Peter**'s account reflected the distress the impact of the breakup brought about, and how disturbing and painful he found it to deal with the emotions evoked in him. **Peter** appeared to have engaged in an affective process where he would find himself angry and crying whenever he was alone, but would not show these feelings when he was around people because of concerns about being condemned and shamed as weak (Shimek & Bello, 2014; Reilly et al., 2013)

> **Peter***: So I was very emotional at home and by myself and I would often get quite angry, like if I was in the car by myself I would find myself talking to myself and being quite angry. But then the moment I was around other people I was fine*
>
> Interviewer*: Mmm*
>
> **Peter***: The moment if I was at home by myself I'd be talking to myself, quite angry, quite emotional, maybe crying sometimes…*

In his heightened affective states, **Peter** would find himself talking to himself. His use of the phrase *by myself* implied that he felt he could only be in touch with the depth and reality of his emotions when unseen by others. It is possible that part of this

discrepancy in presentation related to a need to be in control when around others in keeping with Wood's (2011) assertion about being masculine. He seemed to have attempted to separate environments where he would be in touch with his emotions from those in which he could switch these states off and feel *fine*.

Peter was not entirely clear about the affective impact felt beyond anger when he was by himself using the phrase *quite emotional*, but his reference to tears suggested that his emotional state was sufficiently puzzling or shameful to require concealment. His inclination to be in touch with the affective impact of the breakup when he was by himself implied feelings of hurt and shame, and also perhaps the need to appear unaffected in the eyes of others (Addis& Mahalik, 2003). It was evident that Peter's self-dialogue was evoked by a very intense sense of disturbance and that he found himself vacillating between anger and other more wounded kinds of feelings.

Sipho's reported account of the impact of the breakup also indicated that it was associated with a significant feeling of anger in keeping with the fact that aggression is an accepted hegemonic masculine behavioural expression (Connell, 2005; Kahn, 2009). **Sipho's** feeling of anger was brought about by his ex-girlfriend's lack of awareness of his agony and the sense of lost time because of the energy he had invested in their relationship.

Sipho*:* *Ohm [pause], as I have mentioned that we were dating for like four years. I was destroyed, I mean you have invested almost half a decade on a relationship with someone and the next thing you wake up, then it's over…*

Sipho showed a need to protect himself from the effects brought about by the breakup (being *destroyed* as he says) and attempted to do so by cutting communication with his girlfriend who seemed unaware of his feelings of distress.

> **Sipho*:*** *And anger, of course anger. Ohm course I remember during that space she tried to make some small talk and I couldn't understand why? Like I think the following day she just randomly asked some things about friends of mine, like I just didn't understand why was she like doing this, she is trying to torment me or what? And so I requested that we stop chatting I blocked her off on WhatsApp and ohm, [pause] so I deleted her on Facebook as well…*

His account emphasized the powerful feelings he felt as he was struggling to manage and understand his relational loss and his sense that he felt *tormented* by his girlfriend.

As with some of the other interviewees, **Sipho** was almost taken by surprise at the intensity of the feelings he found himself experiencing concerning the breakup. He felt a sense of being out of control such that he had to eradicate contact with the source of his distress, fearing that if he interacted with his girlfriend, his distress would worsen.

Other interviewees also spoke about their strong feelings of frustration, sadness and vulnerability following their breakups and their discomfort with experiencing such feeling states that were mostly unfamiliar to them.

> **Thabo***: For that three months right, after the break up*
>
> Interviewer*: Mmm*
>
> **Thabo***: It was a difficult month, more especially because it was examination time. Every time when I saw her passing by. It really hurt me, I would rather like change the road. Once I see that we're going to cross each other then I change the road…*

4.4.2 Mental health

Several problematic mental health effects were described by the participants in addition to the strong distressing emotional states they experienced. According to Shimek and Bello (2014), depression is a common mental health problem that affects people who experience loss of a significant romantic relationship. Several participants' responses to their experience of the loss highlighted symptoms of depression as well as other forms of mental health problems. Fear, hopelessness, worry and lost self-esteem are universal negative emotions experienced by people who have experienced a loss of a romantic relationship (Perilloux & Buss, 2008).

Foregrounding the impact of the breakup, **Thabo's** account about the distress he felt as he struggled to cope suggested the social isolation associated with depression as well as some suicidal ideation.

> **Thabo***: Like I had no one to talk to. I'm not the type of person that like opens up very easily. It takes me time. You know what I did. Like I got this courage, because I wanted to commit suicide at first….*
>
> Interviewer*: Mmm mmm*

> **Thabo***: But when I looked at my background I realised that I have little sisters who needs me. So instead of ending my life over a girlfriend I'd rather try to endure the pain and push through…*

In keeping with Perilloux & Buss' (2008) observations, Thabo felt isolated after being broken up with and spoke openly about even entertaining thoughts of committing suicide (*ending my life*) as he felt weighed down by the difficulty of dealing with the breakup. In addition to the suggestion of symptoms associated with depression, in the previous sub-section Thabo's comment about avoiding his girlfriend and the emotional arousal associated with seeing her also suggested a sense of feeling traumatized.

Matome's account also captured a sense of being traumatized concerning the breakup such that he initially became triggered by exposure to his partner and anyone associated with her, struggling to comprehend how he could live with the pain and reality of the loss.

> **Matome***: But saying I don't care anymore I encountered problem when I meet her around people who knew us. You find that I wouldn't know how to react, but now I meet with her when I am seeing my child. So, it's no longer stressful for me, because it was stressful during the time I was still accepting that we broke-up.*

While over time he became desensitised to her presence **Matome**'s account emphasized the initial stress he experienced. He also referred to behaviours and feelings he had about himself that might be understood as hyper-arousal symptoms and/or depressive features. His concentration became impaired and his future orientation became less hopeful such that his lack of motivation resulted in his withdrawal from his studies.

> Interviewer*: Because you mentioned that your parents noticed changes in your health during those times, what was happening physically and mentally?*
>
> **Matome***: Yeah I couldn't study. When I was studying, I would read the first sentence and attempt to capture it but when I go to the second sentence I had already forgotten the first one I read… so in 2012 I would zone out when I was in lectures, not hearing and seeing anything. And then, let me just say 2011,*

because I didn't write all my second semester exams of that year. I went to my lectures only twice. In 2012 I left everything.

Matome's reported experiences of himself in the face of the impact of the breakup, while at school, are associated with symptoms that might be viewed an aligned with Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) as he reports serious concentration difficulties and "zoning out". His lack of motivation and disengagement could also be seen as consistent with depressive features. In addition to the kinds of mental health impacts described, participants' reports of confused reactions around people seemed to signify a lost relational self and a compromised working self-concept (Chen and Anderson, 2002). It should be emphasized that the study was not designed to make any conclusive diagnoses about participants and that it would be inappropriate to suggest such based on the data obtained. However, it was evident from the interviews that participants described specific experiences and behavioural patterns that were consistent with the kinds of characteristic features one might observe in clinical depression and traumatic stress-related responses. Several interviewees ventured that they found these post-break-up responses personally unsettling. They also described concerns about their mental health from family and friends, suggesting that some of these effects were evident to others and viewed as out of character.

4.4.3 Future relationships

One of the behaviours that some individuals engage in during the first stages of losing a significant romantic relationship is establishing a new rebound romantic relationship, as opposed to pleading with the ex-partner to re-unite or retreating and avoiding the ex-partner. From the interviews, it appeared that one of the notable effects of the break-up was an inability to form or to be in new romantic relationships. The participants reflected on the struggle they faced in subsequent romantic relationships or recounted that it would be challenging to take the risk to create a romantic relationship at all, given how scarred they felt by the breakup. **Matome**'s account highlighted how he struggles to understand and be present when in a romantic relationship:

Interviewer*: …Yeah, But how did this break-up impact you and what are the things you noticed about yourself?*

> **Matome*:*** *Now to tell the truth, there is no girl that I would say I understand like my ex-girlfriend. I am unable to be in a relationship and be there for the person I am in a relationship with.*

Matome's account suggests that he struggles to be present to any new partner, seemingly because he remains uniquely attached to his ex-partner as evidenced in his comment about understanding her better than anyone else. It could be argued that **Matome**'s working self-concept and relational self-identify (Chen & Anderson, 2002; Lewandowski et al., 2006) seem to have been destabilized by the loss to the extent that it feels too challenging to attempt to understand the complexities and diversity of a new person. He seems to feel he can only fully understand his ex-girlfriend mainly because of his experienced sense of who he is/was concerning her and he cannot imagine engaging a new part of himself to relate intimately to a new partner. In this respect, he appears to experience himself as rather stuck.

Sipho's experienced emotional damage concerning his breakup meant that he struggled to connect with women on an emotional level but could only be physical. **Sipho** was not overly explicit about what he meant by being 'physical' with women, but he suggests this translated into purely sexual engagement in keeping with Wilkins' (2014) argument that many men express psychological distress in an externalizing manner such as in sexual acting out.

> **Sipho*: ….*** *and then I was bit disinterested in like connecting with people of the opposite gender; like emotionally. Physically I didn't mind being sexually involved with them, I just I didn't wanna emotionally be invested. So that's one thing that I would say had changed with regard to the phase after the breakup. [Pause]*

During this section of the interview, Sipho seemed somewhat guilty about having had this attitude towards women as if he felt almost ashamed of having limited his engagement with potential partners to the purely 'physical' during this period.

Sipho went on to talk about his need to be present and connected with his current girlfriend whom he had become involved with more recently. He was aware that he found it difficult to express his emotions openly in the way she needed him to and was struggling to do so. His accounts highlighted the fear that is associated with the impact of the previous breakup, and also worry that he would be hurt if he made himself vulnerable again (Perilloux & Buss, 2008).

> **Sipho***: …I have actually had a conversation over this weekend with my girlfriend. She was like 'no at times like you would be all out to emotionally express yourself and what not, and then there will be times where you will be a bit tense, ohm uptight'. I suppose that's the extra-cautiousness that came as a result of being hurt. I remember she was like, it was Saturday evening, like "You know I love you man, you don't have to be awake and calculating; like trying to predict the next move and what not. Just relax and enjoy the relationship." So yeah, to some degree, yeah it has affected my interactions with women. I would not say I am paranoid, no I am not paranoid. I just am just a bit cautious, a bit woke. Ohm, sometimes too cautious for my liking or the progress of the relationship, yeah…*

Sipho was aware of having become more guarded in his close relationship and linked this directly to the *hurt* he had experienced concerning the break-up. This anxiety was reflected in his need to be cautious despite having being reassured by his girlfriend confessing her love. **Sipho**'s account signifies the concern he feels about his lack of trust and that he finds his behaviour somewhat disturbing and worrying. He seems to need to reassure himself that he is not *paranoid* or that his behaviour is not extreme. Despite his awareness that his girlfriend finds his retreats difficult, he reiterates that it seems better to be careful or *a bit woke* and that this is something that he has legitimately learned from his previous experience.

George also appeared to be concerned about his readiness for a new relationship, although he did not reject the idea of a new romantic relationship altogether. While not explicit, it is possible that his doubt regarding his readiness had to do with a lost part of himself that might be in a kind of recuperating process (Chen & Anderson, 2002; Lewandowski et al., 2006), as evidenced in his reference to not being ready.

> ***George****: And I said to her, I was like, listen, I'm really not, I'm not ready for a relationship right now. I just can't do this. Uhm and then she said I don't think you're not ready for a relationship I think you're still scared*
>
> Interviewer*: Ya*
>
> ***George****: I'm a little bit more cautious about committing totally*

George seemed to be engaged in an ongoing process of defending himself from fully committing to a new relationship. Although he was not forthcoming about the reason for not being ready for a relationship, as alluded by his girlfriend (*I think you're still scared*), there is a suggestion that his lack of readiness stems from his underlying fear of being hurt (Perilloux & Buss, 2008) rather than his capability to demonstrate love. Like Sipho, he confirms that he is much more wary of *committing totally* or giving the relationship the same kind of investment he made previously. The caution evidenced in the aftermath of the break-up is in strong contrast to the kind of statements reported in the earlier section on "Being a good boyfriend" in which it was evident that the interviewees had a sense of having thrown themselves entirely into their previous relationships. It is interesting how in both **Sipho** and **George's** cases, their new partners are aware of some barrier to intimacy and trust and that this may impede the healthy development of current relationships. While both women seem sympathetic to their partners' anxiety, it is also evident that despite this, both men feel warranted in continuing to be cautious.

It is thus evident that the break-up had both short and longer-term impacts for participants. Not only did they experience great confusion and distress in the immediate aftermath of the significant breakup, but for some of them, their distress was sufficiently extreme to produce mental health effects, including suicidal ideation, and to compromise aspects of their functioning with long term outcomes, such as non-completion of degrees. Some of their descriptions of events surrounding the breakup suggest that the parting had a traumatic quality producing high arousal and anxiety when exposed to reminders of the person and the relationship and also producing avoidance. While several of the young men had re-engaged in new romantic relationships, it was evident that their previous experience compromised their capacity for trust and investment and that they were aware of attempting to avoid being hurt or betrayed in the same way again at all costs.

4.5 Ways of coping

Having discussed the impact of the break-ups for the men in the study, the manner in which they attempted to cope with this impact was explored. It was evident that the participants adopted a range of coping styles and behaviours, some of these more adaptive than others. To capture the descriptions of the participants, the theme *ways*

of coping describes and discusses the various ways participants used to deal with their loss and related responses. The coping mechanisms deployed amongst these young men were not limited to those informed by their masculine ideals, although it was evident that some of their accounts dovetailed with the literature on masculinity and coping. The participants' responses were identified as comprising the three themes labelled as *social withdrawal, seeking social support, and destruction and avoidance*.

The literature suggests that there are various grief expression behaviours that individuals portray when dealing with the loss of a romantic relationship (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). These behavioural expressions are shaped by a range of factors including the degree to which men conform to norms of masculinity, personal history, cultural environment and socialisation. Men tend to adopt masculine aligned coping styles to express how they have been affected negatively by a particular experience (Branney & White, 2008; Shimek & Bello, 2014). Amongst other behaviours, men demonstrate behavioural expressions that are within masculine parameters such as attempting to assume complete control over their emotions, and being independent and autonomous (Wood, 2011). These practices allow them to be perceived as 'real' men in the eyes of others while dealing with an experience that may have either shaken their identification with masculine ideals or left them feeling less masculine. When coping with the loss of a significant romantic relationship, men are argued to use avoidance or distraction as primary ways of coping (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Shimek & Bello, 2014). Even though there is no universally prescribed masculine coping mechanism, most men seem to rely on norms of masculinity to seek direction in coping during times of distress, such as loss of a romantic relationship in which they have invested. Discussion of the three themes that emerged from the data follows below.

4.5.1 Social withdrawal

A few participants withdrew themselves from their social groups in an attempt to deal and cope with the negative impact of the loss of their relationship. Their accounts emphasised behaviours that implied *social withdrawal*. In several instances, the interviewees' social contact seems to have been kept to a minimum as they attempted to deal with their distress. This social withdrawal was in keeping with a masculine aligned behavioural expression of being self-sufficient and retaining independence. An aspect of this behaviour seemed to be related to keeping control of emotions, at least

in public spaces and of attempting not to become too vulnerable in front of other people. **Patrick** and **Sipho**'s accounts both signified recognition of the need to withdraw socially.

In an attempt to deal with his loss, Patrick avoided social contact and pushed those who tried to help him away.

> **Patrick***: So I noticed as soon as we broke up, I became very distant to everything. Distant to my friends. Distant to the people that tried to help a lot, just told everyone to go away.*

In keeping with Wood's (2011) observations about normative masculine prescriptions, Patrick was aware of becoming *distant,* as he puts it, and of almost aggressively retaining his autonomy. It was as if he could not bear to receive others' help or concern.

In addition to withdrawing from their social networks more generally, both **Patrick** and **Sipho** were aware of withdrawing themselves from interacting in any way with their ex-girlfriends. Their responses seemed to indicate vulnerability to the impact of their experience of loss and the manner in which this was particularly raw when they encountered the women they had been involved with. They appeared to need to protect themselves from further negative emotions that might arise from interacting with their ex-girlfriends. While this may be a typical response in most people who feel jilted or rejected, the men in the study seemed to be particularly anxious about breaking down or being needy.

> **Patrick***: So I became very withdrawn as such with that kinda thing… What I did and what I did, is, I kind of responded to this pushing and pulling by withdrawing myself from her*

> **Sipho***: So I requested that we stop chatting. I blocked her off on WhatsApp and ohm [pause], so I deleted her on Facebook as well. I think she removed me on Instagram. So went on without talking, ohm, yeah, for over five months.*

Peter' also expressed worry about how he would be received by his partner and how this led to uncertainty on his part.

> **Peter***: In like, just not, uhm, I just withdrew. I stopped doing some things I used to do in the past cause I didn't know how it would be received. I didn't know if it*

would be a good thing or a bad thing …and so I just kind of withdrew from the relationship…

Although he was not explicit about the things he used to do in the past, it is evident that Peter found this experience confusing and disturbing and he felt out of kilter with his 'normal self'. This unsettled feeling in **Peter** seemed to have generalised to other relationships where he expressed being inclined to withdraw and having to counter this tendency quite deliberately.

In contrast to the need to distance and retain self-sufficiency, some participants described that they were able to make use of social support and actively sought certain kinds of contact.

4.5.2 Seeking social support

Shimek & Bello (2014) suggest that when men do seek the support they tend to use a small-sized form of a social support system. The theme *seeking social support* describes how participants sought to alleviate negative and disturbing experiences brought about by the loss of a romantic relationship by engaging with other people. The participants' sought support from their friends and family in some instances, in contradiction to stereotypic masculine norms.

In Peter's case, he sought professional help from a psychologist after perceiving the impact the loss had on him, which he found to have helped him to some extent. In his response, it is evident that Peter seems to have initially thought himself not to be impacted by the loss but to have later realised that he needed help:

> **Peter:** *I'm always pretending like everything is chilled. I, I don't care about any of it. But, ja, I wasn't so okay with that. And then I started going to, uhm, a psychologist to kind of help me through it a bit***.**

It is evident that in respect of his previous self-image Peter saw himself as slightly typically masculine as inferred by the term *chilled* – implying that he aimed to remain somewhat unemotional and easy-going, or at least to appear so. It therefore suggests that his anxiety about his state was rather extreme for him to have sought professional counselling.

Unlike **Peter, Sipho** seems to have sought support from people in his social groups. **Sipho**'s account highlighted the support he received from both his female and male

friends in dealing with the breakup and that it was readily available when he asked. His friend's support felt reassuring and useful during his stressful experience, and in fact, he describes it as *invaluable*.

> **Sipho***: Ohm, [pause] I didn't go for professional counselling, however, my friends gave invaluable support during that period, both guy friends and, ohm, chicks friends. They were very supportive over that period. I mean they kept on reassuring me: 'There is nothing wrong with you, you have put in all you can…"*

Although this is not explicit **Sipho** seems to have found fault in himself for losing his romantic relationship. Hisfriends seem to have consoled him in his struggle to comprehend and deal with the breakup and helped to restore his self-esteem.

The accessing of support by **Peter** and **Sipho** tends to run counter to the assertion by Addis and Mahalik (2003) concerning resistance to the utilisation of support systems amongst men when encountering difficulties and suggests that men may not be entirely stereotypic in their behaviour. Even though the support **Sipho** sought included input from female friends, a practice that might not align with stereotypic masculine ideals; he found it helpful and reassuring.

Some participants' sought social support, in the face of what appeared to be a problematic experience, not only from friends but also from people in their extended social groups.

> **Matome***: So, the support that I found was even through the church that I attend. Although I won't go in detail, I really found a lot of support from my church. Because I do not have a brother, for advice I could only rely on the brothers that I meet from school and others.*
>
> ***George****: So I was speaking to people about the whole break up stuff*
>
> ***George****: Ya so at the end of the sermon there's always people who stand in the front and say if you wanna talk to anyone or pray for anyone, or whatever, just come you know to come to join us. So I went to them and, uhm, ya, so that that kind of helped me through it.*

Contrary to the literature on men's social support system size by Shimek and Bello (2014), **Matome** and **George** seem to have had big-sized social support from church and peers. For **Matome** and **George,** the church appears to have allowed them to be vulnerable while seeking support. Their religious identity and its belief system seem to have allowed them comfort to seek support. In church and with acquaintances, they seem to have had significant social support to help them navigate their way through the breakup in part because this was normalised, reducing shame about appearing non-masculine. These are interesting observations suggesting how one identity marker, in this instance, being a church member may transcend another aspect of identity, in this instance being conventionally masculine, allowing for a degree of flexibility in behaviour.

Thabo seems to have been candid in telling his friends what happened to the extent that they intervened on his behalf with his ex-girlfriend, even though this was unsuccessful.

> **Thabo***: I engaged with friends and told them what happened*
>
> Interviewer*: Mmm*
>
> ***Thabo****: They even tried to fix my relationship, but nothing happened.*

Thabo's also recounted having spoken to his father and being open to his support:

> **Thabo***: I started telling my father. He told me that he sees that I have changed and no longer care about myself. I said it was because my girlfriend broke up with me because of a small thing - that I hugged someone. Then it caused chaos in my relationship in the end. He tried to advise me not to give up and to push, these things happen….*
>
> Interviewer*: Mmm*
>
> **Thabo***: So I ended up accepting that it happened.*
>
> Interviewer*: Did that help you?*
>
> **Thabo***: It gave me a boost - it encouraged me. I can't even fall anymore. …*

Thabo'sresponse was not explicit about what his father meant when he advised him 'not give up and to push', but he seemed to have benefitted from his advice. The

support from his father seemed to have given him the courage to assimilate and accept his loss. One could perhaps argue that Thabo's experienced encouragement from his father due to the resonance of his advice with masculine ideals (Wood, 2011). However, what seems most helpful is that his father helped him to take perspective on his break-up and also helped reduce his self-blame. It was evident that similar to some of the other men, counter to what might be expected, Thabo was able to open up to both friends and family members reasonably readily.

George's account highlighted the difference in the support he received from his female and male friends. His statement implies that the support he received from his male friends seemed to encourage conformity to masculine ideals, while female friends seemed to encourage emotional expressiveness:

> ***George****: Yeah, yeah. So from a girl point of view, they kind of understood the way I was thinking. Then from a guy point of view they were like, "Listen, I know you're thinking like this, but it's done I mean there's nothing that you can do about it…Like if you feel like shit let's go for a beer and let's talk about other crap…" So when it comes to relationships, my guy mate he was like "Listen you're, if you overthink this, come find me, I'll klap you and then you'll stop overthinking and being stupid."*
>
> ***George****: With girls, they're, ok, well let's talk about this and, uh, let's talk about how you're feeling now… But, uhm, ya, they, they were less, they were less in depth than girls, but I think I needed both sides*

On the support sought from friends, Georges' account highlighted a surface engagement with his male friend and more in-depth engagement with his female counterparts. From his men friends, it was suggested that distraction, drinking and resisting emotional expression and rumination was advised. It is apparent in his account that these responses were wholly within the parameters of masculine ideals, **George**'s account signified some dissatisfaction with these strategies as forms of support from his male friends. His report highlighted the difference in forms of support male and female friends offered, which seemed to be informed by their socialised masculine and feminine ideals. **George** suggested he needed *both sides* but seemed relieved that his women friends validated some of his more sad and vulnerable feeling states.

4.5.3 Distraction and avoidance

The theme *distraction and avoidance* highlights a further coping mechanism that was used by participants to cope with the breakup. Often when dealing with relational loss, men are argued to use mechanisms such as avoidance, and distraction (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Shimek & Bello, 2014). Supporting this is ***George***'s account, introduced previously, of the way his male friends attempted to offer him support:

> ***George****: Then from a guy point of view they were like, "Listen, I know you're thinking like this, but it's done. I mean there's nothing that you can do about it…Like if you feel like shit let's go for a beer and let's talk about other crap."*

George's male friends encouraged avoidance, *let us talk about other crap,* and distraction*, if you feel like shit let us go for a beer*, coping mechanisms associated with their masculine ideals, supporting Shimek and Bello (2014)observations about men's coping mechanisms. It would seem going for a beer and to talk about something else, as ***George***'s male friends encouraged, is something that may feel less shameful and more masculine to do as it is experienced as still within the parameters of masculine identity. There is a recognition of distress (*feeling like shit*), but a sense that the best way to deal with that would be to engage with something else.

Attempting to deal with his experienced distress over the breakup, **Thabo** avoided feeling states in alcohol consumption and distracted himself by dancing, what might be construed as a displacement activity and a means of discharging his anxiety.

> Interviewer*: Uhm but how did you try to deal or cope with this experience?*
>
> **Thabo***: I started drinking alcohol. I realised that I drank because I was hurt. It's not like I'm interested in drinking, so I tried to do something different.*
>
> Interviewer*: Mmm*
>
> **Thabo***: Then I started dancing.*
>
> Interviewer*: Mmm*
>
> **Thabo***: Like I tried to make myself forget of her.*

In accordance withShimek and Bello's (2014) observations on coping mechanisms amongst men, **Thabo**referred to his drinking behaviour as designed to avoid feelings

of hurt, *I realised that I drank because I was hurt*. Alcohol consumption can be seen as a desirable coping mechanism amongst men as it is within parameters of their masculine ideals, but in his response, Thabo indicates not having an interest in drinking alcohol. He seemed to catch himself behaving uncharacteristically and then invested instead in dancing as a means of forgetting.

Concerned about his thoughts being preoccupied with the impact of his experienced loss, **Patrick**'s account signified going to the gym and enhancing his focus on his school activities as his coping mechanisms. His style of coping seemed to be consistent with hegemonic norms of masculinity in relation to emotional expression (Reilly et al., 2013). **Patrick** seemed to have found it challenging to cope and deal with his preoccupation with his circumstances by keeping himself busy in a very purposeful way:

> **Patrick***: Your thoughts would run away with you. So like often I would wake up in the morning and go to the gym, go straight to class be busy at class for the day, to get back, go to work, and go to the library, do something. I'd get back here literally just before I was gonna go to bed, have a shower and go to bed. Uhm, and that's how I kinda like kept my days going for a lot of the time just to make sure I was…*

Patrick could not afford to leave any unoccupied time in his life that might usher in distressing thoughts and feeling states. He threw himself into exercise and hard work for a period, and he suggests that he attempted to exhaust himself to a point where there was minimal time to reflect before going to sleep. He is aware of a need for distraction as he felt too overwhelmed to deal with his negative experience. His account reinforces the fact that for many of the interviewees, their emotional distress was intense and highly disturbing as discussed previously.

Thus it was evident that the participants reported engaging in several coping strategies that were consistent with what has generally been viewed as a masculine-identified style of coping, including withdrawing, avoidance, alcohol consumption, and engaging in displacement activities (such as going to gym, dancing and working). However, they also engaged in less masculinised coping practices such as help-seeking, displays of vulnerability and receptivity to assistance and reassurance. Interestingly such help was sought and received from both male and female friends as well as from family members, and in one instance, from a professional therapist. The data thus revealed

a more extensive repertoire of coping behaviours than would be associated with adherence to conventional masculine norms or hegemonic masculinity.

4.6 Reflections on lessons learned (insight derived)

During the interviews, the participants reflected on some ways in which they felt they had changed or developed in their experience of dealing and coping with the loss, citing both positive and negative features, often intertwined. Although the experience of dealing with the break-up was painful to all the young men, there appeared to be lessons that participants felt they learned from the experience. Taken from their accounts, the lessons learned by the participants captured themes that were labelled as *being more self-invested, doing relationships differently,* and *advice to others.*

4.6.1 More self-invested

Being more *self-invested* can be described as encompassing the idea that the participants engaged in activities that significantly concerned their benefits and interest. Participants related how, as a consequence of the experience of a breakup, they had a developed more reflective or inward-looking approaches in their relational interactions and life endeavours. Following Lewandowski et al.'s (2006) observation on relationships and self-concept, when asked *'how they thought the experience had influenced them as people and in going forward in your life'*, the participants' accounts indicated what might be viewed as adopting a more selfish or self-invested approach in their lives. They indicated that they had become less concerned about other people's interests and more inclined to be attuned to their own needs and desires. **Patrick** and ***George*'s** statements captured some of this sense of self-investment.

> **Patrick***: It's very much about me. I still like to help people but I think twice before I say, when someone says "Hey come through and drink", whatever. And if I don't feel like it I'm going to say, so I'll be like, No. Ya, I've definitely become less caring...*
>
> **George***:…so I used to be like I'll give everything to you, but now I'm more like, No, that's for myself…*
>
> **George***: But right now I won't, I won't go out of my way to sort of help somebody now because I know that I first need to help myself first*

Patrick's account suggests that he became more discriminating in responding to invitations to participate in social events; and he refers to his newly developed way of living as having *become less caring*. He seems to have become less obliging, and while he seems to see this as less caring, he seems to be talking about setting better limits for himself. **George**'s account signifies the self-invested approach he developed as a result of having experienced and dealt with the loss of his romantic relationship. Without appearing greedy, his self-interested approach is based on helping himself first before helping others. Contrary to **George**, **Patrick**'s experience seems to have somewhat negatively impacted his relational self and working self-concept (Chen & Anderson, 2002; Lewandowski et al., 2006), although both seem to refer to taking better care of themselves and to not overstretching themselves to pay attention to other people's needs at the expense of their own.

Characteristic of being masculine amongst men (Wood, 2011), participant's adoption of self-investment behaviour might be viewed as an attempt to reclaim their lost sense of self-sufficiency. ***George***'s account emphasized his career orientation as his self-investment. It looks as though his experience prompted him to choose his career and prioritise his interest and benefit in this area over trying to make a partner relationship at this time in his life

> ***George****: Ya, because I feel like the way I'm going right now, uhm, because I'm very, now, career orientated. So if I had to choose a career over a relationship I'd go for the career… It's changed my mind set about absolutely everything, so. Uh, it's kind of made me a little bit of a selfish person. But, uhm, but, it's more like I'll still help people. And, uhm, I'm still, I'm still a nice guy, but I'm a lot more cautious before I do that kind of stuff…*

While both Patrick and George use rather self-critical terms to describe their current way of being (*less caring*, *selfish*), they both seem to feel that this is generally a better self-protective approach to take. Being accustomed to seeing themselves as generous or selfless people, it is difficult for them to fully come to terms with defining themselves differently. Interestingly, from a psychological point of view they sound more centred rather than necessarily overly self-centred, and while they feel the need to defend this new way of being they also seem to feel a sense of greater agency and authenticity. There is a suggestion that while there are both costs and benefits to this changed way of being the benefits tend to outweigh the costs.

4.6.2 Doing relationships differently

According to Chen and Anderson's (2002) interpersonal social cognitive theory, individuals form mental representations during relationships with significant others that get stored and activated when one meets a new person. Participants' experiences of dealing with the ending of their romantic relationships brought about a meaningful reflection regarding engaging in relationships differently. Some of the participants' newly developed attitudes to relationships resemble trauma-related symptoms, while others are more about being reflective on the courting process, masculine norms and reciprocity in relationships. **Patrick** and **Sipho**'s accounts emphasised vigilance and a revised, more careful manner of approaching new relationships, indicative of the changes in themselves:

> **Sipho;** *I would not say I am paranoid, no I am not paranoid. I just am, just a bit cautious, a bit woke. Ohm, sometimes too cautious for my liking or the progress of the relationship, yeah…*
>
> **Patrick***: I think, ja, I'm a lot more vigilant with it. I think, uhm. I don't put in as much effort so quickly. I put it in when effort it's necessary. So like, for instance like she's been studying for tests this weekend. So I won't demand her attention ….*

Their approach to *doing relationships differently* captures both negative and positive impacts. **Sipho**'s account signified a more careful and calculating approach in conducting relationships. Moreover, **Patrick**'s reported vigilance and a less wholehearted attempt to meet the needs of his partner. He emphasised alertness as a result of the negative experience of a breakup and underlying fear of being hurt, using terms like *paranoid* and *vigilant*. In this respect, the participants' accounts suggest a degree of hyper vigilance or anxiety about potential future loss of control. However, both Sipho and Patrick seem more comfortable with their present '*woke*' stance even when they are aware of the barriers it might introduce. They prefer to be more in control even if this implies a greater distance between them and their partners.

Peter referenced his behaviour in his last relationship as a fatherly or *paternal* performance that was intended to demonstrate protectiveness of his girlfriend but which he subsequently recognised might be associated with his own need to be in

control. **Peter**'s account highlighted a feeling of guilt related to his previous relationship.

> **Peter***: So I'm in a relationship now and I try not to be so, even though I feel protective over her, …I try not to perform it as much, because then that limits the control that I try and exert over her. And that's something I didn't do in my last relationship. So if I felt she was going somewhere that I didn't think it would be good for her, I'd be like "I don't want you to go", which I intended it to be quite paternal and caring. But actually, it came out as controlling and it was controlling. Whereas now I've learnt to state the demand for encouragement if you can say. I encourage her to be safe if I feel like she's going somewhere I'm worried about. So I'll say I'm concerned about your safety in this area but at the same time if you feel you want to go then that's cool.*

Following Chen and Anderson (2002) on relational transference, Peter's capacity to reflect on his previous style of relating prompted him to do relationships differently by allowing his new partner greater autonomy. Peter seems to be able to recognise that his motives for treating his girlfriend as he did may have been more complicated than he consciously appreciated and can entertain that he was perhaps over-controlling or patronising. Based on this insight, he can modify his interactions with his current partner. **Peter**'s account signified a different form of self-experience, allowing him to exercise his masculine role differently in a romantic relationship (Chen& Anderson, 2002). This approach made him feel that he was improving from his previous style of relating, retaining his need to be protective but doing this more appropriately and reciprocally.

Thus it was evident that while some participants were wary of beginning new relationships at all, of those participants who had met new partners many had shifted their way of being in relationships and felt comfortable with this even if this entailed being more cautious and taking things slower. It was evident that there were changes both to their sense of self as individuals and to their sense of themselves as partners or potential partners.

4.6.3 Advice to others

From the experience of being in a romantic relationship, experiencing loss and dealing with the loss, participants had various pieces of advice to share with young men in a similar situation. A question was put to each interviewee to this effect in an attempt to get them to reflect in a somewhat more 'distanced' manner on their experience. **Sipho**'s account captured much of the participants' self-regard as men after they experienced dealing with a breakup:

> Interviewer*: Ohm, ok if you were to attempt to advise another young man in a similar situation, what would you say to him?*
>
> **Sipho***: [Long pause] I would definitely tell him that [long pause] it's ok to feel hurt, it's ok to be vulnerable, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. Yeah, I would definitely tell them to be acquainted with those feelings, with going through such deep hurt. Yeah.*
>
> **Peter*:*** *… And so, ja, my advice would be to be honest about your feelings and express them openly and honestly for your good, but also for the person you're breaking up with.*

In counteracting the difficulties brought about via allegiance with norms of masculinity, **Sipho's** account emphasised display and expression of emotions and encouraged vulnerability and 'acquaintance' with one's feelings. Just like **Sipho**, **Peter**'s statement emphasised emotional expression and honesty about one's feelings. Both young men seem to appreciate that men experience shame associated with expression of affect but that attempting to inhibit feelings is counterproductive. It is interesting that this was one of the first pieces of advice they would give other men, suggesting that they felt a need to be accepted in their feeling states and also to be self-accepting of their emotions. Their advice suggests some shifts in masculine stereotypes in this regard, although it is perhaps easier to give advice to others than to entertain this kind of vulnerability in oneself.

Also opposing the stereotypic and prescribed masculine ideals identified by Wood (2011), **Leshata's** account reflects the importance of caring for oneself when dealing with a breakup and also of seeking support.

Leshata*:* *I would advise to just be kind with themselves, by choosing people who care about them and who is willing to love them back. They should heal first and seek advice when they are broken before getting into a new relationship.*

In his statement, **Leshata** advised a need for one to seek support and heal before getting into a new relationship. He also suggests the need to choose a reciprocating partner when courting someone new to be in a romantic relationship with.

George's account emphasised being proactive when dealing with the experience of a breakup as it may lead to mental health problems. He also recognised the harm that self-blame, rumination and repression can do and emphasised the need for reassurance and validation.

> Interviewer*: How can you advise another young man in the same situation as you?*
>
> ***George****: You need to be honest with yourself. In fact, if a guy was gonna go through what I went through I'd be brutally honest with him and say It's not your fault, but it happened and, uh, you need to find ways to deal with it because if you just carry on sitting here doing nothing you're gonna drive yourself crazy".*

In all the interviewees' accounts, it was apparent that they could in a sense empathise with themselves through the identification with a hypothetical other. A number of them spoke about the need to be 'honest', the need to express emotion unashamedly, the need for self-care and the need for acceptance and validation by others. They all seemed very aware of the potentially harmful implications of attempting to subscribe to more traditional masculine oriented norms at a time such as they had experienced.

4.7 Reflection on being male and masculinity

Maleness and masculinity are argued to define and restrict (young) men's behaviour and emotions in many respects. During times of distress, such as those investigated in this study, negative emotions like crying, depression and sadness, tend to be condemned as weakness or associated with femininity (Kahn, 2009; Reilly et al., 2013). Furthermore, an expression of affection and having women take control in romantic relationships is often discouraged amongst men. Instead, men are encouraged to be in control, nonchalant, and potentially promiscuous in romantic relationships as a sign of power and dominance (Connell, 2005; Shimek & Bello, 2014). It is due to these conventional hegemonic norms of masculinity that many men

find it hard to display their emotions and to receive and access help (Zartaloudi, 2011). Although this has been attended to throughout the discussion of themes, in this final thematic section there is a focused discussion on the manner in which being male and awareness of and adherence to masculine norms and ideals seemed to have shaped the young men's experience of dealing with the loss of a significant romantic relationship.

Participants were asked to talk broadly about various ways in which they perceived that being a man and masculinity had influenced how they experienced and dealt with the breakup. This theme features three subordinate themes; *displays of emotions, receiving and accessing help, and masculine role identity*, that illustrate the dominant aspects that emerged in the participants' accounts of this aspect of their experience.

4.7.1 Displays of emotion

As discussed previously, a display of certain kinds of emotions is highly discouraged and regarded as shameful in masculine-typed men (Reilly et al., 2013; Shimek & Bello, 2014). Although the idea of *displaying emotions* was not explicitly referred to in the interviews, the participants' response emphasised their struggles concerning the presentation of feeling in the face of experiencing and dealing with the breakup. These struggles with unfamiliar feelings included their difficulties in understanding themselves as men dealing with a breakup.**Sipho**'s account captured the sense of having to incorporate unfamiliar states into his self-understanding and some of the distress associated with the recognition and display of emotions:

> Interviewer*: Ohm, just maybe, perhaps how have you understood yourself differently as man through dealing with that experience?*
>
> **Sipho***: [Pause] Yeah, I have come to realise and accept that, ohm, [pause] I am prone to being fragile and should accept being fragile like anyone else…. I mean its part of life and we go through stuff, and I am no super-being. [Pause]. I am going to be disappointed, be hurt yeah…*
>
> **Sipho***: … in a sense that I mean I am expected to be all Macho but yeah I am. But I was at a very fragile point in my life and I am tired of being Macho on the outside but the inside is all shattered. It took [pause] a lot of time for me to critically reflect on the extent of which I was hurt, which it was delaying healing process up until I had to pretty much overlook it and see me as my own being*

and not just a statistic in a society. So with regard to that, I would say trying to hold on to societal masculinity values wasn't helpful… it was that façade, a must kind of thing. Maybe on the outside I could look like I am fine, maybe other people would see me as fine. But when I go back into my room, I would be haunted with a fragile broken person that I would be seeing in the mirror.

Sipho's account explicitly emphasised his fragility as a man dealing with a breakup, and he uses this term repeatedly to describe how he felt. **Sipho** experienced himself as *shattered* and as a *fragile broken* person in dealing with his loss of a relationship and his description of how awful he felt at the time was compelling. He experienced putting on a façade of being okay and holding on to societal masculinity as not helpful. He found his self-regard as a masculine man challenging to manage in the face of dealing with the breakup as he could not maintain the masculine image he had previously portrayed. **Sipho**'s account emphasised the distress and difficulty that came with being aware of masculinity related prescriptions and the fact that this delayed his healing process. In counteracting the straightjacket of masculine expectations, he showed a need to see himself as his *own being* as he puts it, suggesting that in order to restore his wellbeing he had to come to terms with the reality of his fragility and to deal with this. **Sipho** was not the only participant to suggest that awareness of masculine prescripts was constraining at the time of the breakup and to demonstrate the capacity to move beyond conventional expectations of behaviour to find their own way through. On occasion, external pressure made it difficult to experience emotions, however authentically. Although **Thabo** attempted to retain his masculine togetherness around his friends, he admitted to being tearful when on his own.

> **Thabo***:* Even if I had to man up when I was around people, I had moments where I cried alone. I would come out and join my boys for advice once cleaned-up. But I realised that I was living two lives, and this made things to take long to get better.

Thabo's account emphasised the difficulty in expressing his emotion, more especially with friends, and the fact that he could only safely cry when he was alone because of the shame and discouragement of expression of emotions amongst men. Although **Thabo**'s friends were helping with advice when needed, his account shows that he

was not comfortable displaying his emotions in their presence. Surrounded by people who are in allegiance with hegemonic norms of masculinity, **Matome** also found it challenging to experience and deal with his negative emotions because these norms did not allow him to cry and instead he was expected to demonstrate complete control of his emotions. He found it challenging to act outside the parameters of these masculine identity expectations and could only cry when he was alone.

> **Matome:** *….I benefited a lot from crying by not denying my tears to come out, because in 2012 I used to be amongst people which didn't allow me to cry and I took time to get out of there.*
>
> Interviewer*: Ohm*
>
> **Matome***: In 2013, the more I cried, the more I felt my pain getting less and less. Crying helps especially with something you cannot control, to cry is to surrender and to help yourself. I know from my own experience that crying helped me.*

Matome's account emphasised how his expressions and display of emotions was helpful. The battle to restrict his emotion in the presence of people was as difficult to bear as sensations of difficulty of dealing with the breakup. Like **Sipho**, **Matome** suggests that relinquishing control and recognising the reality of distress is more healing than attempting to put on a brave face either to oneself or others. Contrary to the stereotypic beliefs about men, **Matome**'s referred to his expression and display of emotion as helpful in lessening the pain experienced. Surrendering to expressing emotion seemed to be understood as helpful by all three participants, and in the interviews, they seemed willing to challenge dominant narratives about gender and emotional expression.

In his criticism of maleness and masculine norms, ***Georg***e's account captures the participant's self-regard in the face of experiencing a breakup. He never felt trapped in the ideals of maleness and masculinity experienced in his social relations and environment. He showed a need to see himself in a different light, contrary to stereotypical views, as capable of having a tender and emotional moment. ***George***'s coding of scenes in the movie 'Me and Marley', that 'you can cry when Marley dies', emphasised his need to be able to be a man capable of expressing and displaying emotions:

***George**: Uhm, and it's, it's kind of taken that to say "Listen (name of friend) guys aren't really superior at all, and you can have your feminine moments and your like emotional moments…. and you can cry when Marley dies…"*

4.7.2 Accessing and receiving help

According to Shumaker and Hill (1991) on social support, exchanging of thoughts and advice can assist individuals in navigating their way through negative experiences. With their restrictive and prescribed norms, men struggle to seek and access help from their social support systems (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Participants were asked about the kind of support they received from other people. **Matome**'s account reflected the support received from those close to him, although he felt they knew about his relationship situation but had been afraid to tell him about their observations until he reached out. His account reflected the distress he felt and fears of sharing the state of relationship despite the clues about its deterioration that people around him were aware of.

Interviewer*: What kind of support did you get from people? Did you get any?*

Matome*:* *You know I got a lot of support from people who were close to me, I used to tell them. Even you were close to me, and I tried to talk to you about it. Guys who were close to me at school they knew about this situation, and others knew about it before I knew about it because when you are in a relationship many things happen and people know about them before you, and they are afraid to tell you. There will always be that fear of not telling one about what is going on, and it takes time to figure out things that are going on in a relationship.*

Matome was not explicit about what was going in his relationship that he feared to tell people about; however, it seemed sufficiently shameful to be concealed from people around him. It seemed he needed to feel he had a grasp on things himself (*to figure things out*) before he could allow others to engage him fully. Supporting Reilly et al's (2013) observations **Patrick**'s account emphasised shame in accessing help concerning the impact of the loss of his romantic relationship. His behaviour represented a form of denial associated with a need to be seen in a positive light.

Patrick*: …For the first two months. No one. I just pretended to carry on and when I was around people everything was fine, nothing was wrong, but when I was like by myself that's when like I would deal with it myself…*

In relation to help-seeking and sharing of his distress, Patrick showed more typically masculine typed behaviour in 'putting on a brave face' and hiding his misery from others. Also, in keeping with masculine ideals associated with demonstrating independence, autonomy and control over emotions (Wood, 2011)**, Leshata**'s account suggested that he too chose to hide his feeling state from others. He left his work and apartment as a consequence of his distress and seems to have felt this was the best solution to deal with his complicated feelings associated with a breakup**.**

> **Leshata***: I left my work without resignation after our breakup. I just left my laptop and staff card on the desk in my office. When I arrived at my apartment, I packed my stuff and left without leaving a notice. I was very hurt and broken. I could not stand seeing her at work every day. I could not tell anyone what was going on.*

His account reflects significant distress, his avoidance of engagement with others and his need to retreat to deal with his hurt on his own in keeping with masculine styles of coping (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Reilly et al., 2014). His account reflects painful feelings related to accessing and receiving help and his fairly automatic move into an independent state. With hindsight, he can see how impulsive he was, but at the time it seems that retreat was his automatic response.

Thus in respect of help-seeking, although a lot of the participants were appreciative of the help and support they had received from others (as discussed in the previous section on coping) it seemed that masculine stereotypes still seemed to shape much of their behaviour in relation to complicated feelings around help-seeking. They seemed to feel ashamed to be seen by others as having been rejected or poorly treated, and they attempted to retain their self-esteem by coming across as managing and as more self-sufficient than they actually felt. This aspect of their masculinised' response set seemed hard to shift or change.

4.7.3 Masculine role identity and the need to be chivalrous

A further area in which masculine stereotypes appeared to have shaped the participants' experience of dealing with rejection and break-up of relationships emerged in relation to how they positioned themselves in relation to their ex-partners. Even when they had felt that their partners had made it untenable to continue in their

relationship, they still felt responsible for their welfare. As indicated previously, according to Agnew (2000; 2006) on cognitive interdependence and Aron and Aron (1997) on self-expansion, individual's emotional connections with their significant others contribute to their positive self-concept and self-perception. This is in part through allowing people to exercise and demonstrate care giving functions needed in a romantic relationship (Feeney & Collins, 2004), even if these take different forms depending upon the person's gender identifications. In this instance, it was interesting to observe how participants showed chivalry towards their ex-partners despite the negative emotions they experienced, including feelings of betrayal, hurt and disappointment. This sub-theme describes how being chivalrous, as a part of being a male and aspiring to an ideal form of masculinity influenced how they dealt with the breakup. **George**'s account reflected the feelings of guilt that he carried despite himself having felt hurt by his girlfriend:

> **George***: Because I've actually hurt someone. I don't, I don't hurt people. Uhm, I'm literally the last person who would get into a fight with someone or I really don't like that at all. So I actually felt horrible that I actually kind of, uh, hurt her*

Although the loss of a romantic relationship was a challenging experience to deal with, because of his chivalry, **George**'s response highlighted the sense of responsibility he felt for causing another person distress and how this ran counter to his self-image. Different from **George**, **Sipho**'s account also reflected guilt about being a lesser man but in a different sense. **Sipho**'s behaviour of being physical with girls after the break up brought about feelings of remorse as he says he has *left a trail of broken hearts*.

> **Sipho***: ….I mean after the breakup as I have mentioned, I was just detached from emotions,* ***just physical in my interactions****. I mean due to that I have left a trail of broken hearts so that's the negative polarity… I wish maybe I could have gone through the experience, however, after going through the experience, making better choices and getting it to define me for that period where I was hurting people, yeah.*

With hindsight, **Sipho** suggests he wishes he could have been a 'better man' and have remained more respectful of women in his interactions with them despite the negative impact of the breakup. **Sipho** seemed to show the need to be seen in a different light, as more thoughtful and less sexist, and as not having his painful experiences define him as someone who hurt other women.

Although promiscuity is in no small extent viewed as normative or even seen as desirable as part of being a man, **Sipho's** account signified a feeling of guilt and discomfort of having been purely *physical* with women. He seemed to be engaged in an ongoing process of questioning what kind of masculinity he had demonstrated in the period following the breakup and did not want his behaviour at this time to ultimately define the kind of person he is.

It was evident that most participants retained a sense of needing to be fair, reasonable and non-harmful to women. Aspects of this self-presentation seemed to be associated with a need to see themselves as chivalrous and thoughtful as opposed to aggressive and impulsive. They wanted to maintain a positive self-concept despite having parts of their relational-self and shared invested self-concept destabilised by the experienced loss. Some part of these seemed to involve retaining a sense of themselves as 'good men'.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a summary of some of the key research findings as well as a brief comment on the strengths, limitations and implications of this study for future research. Critical reflections and reflexive observations are also included in this chapter using notes kept in the journal during the process of data collection and analysis. Most themes and issues discussed in this chapter are closely linked with each other, and all pertain to the participants' experience of involuntary loss of a romantic relationship. It was evident that the experiences amongst these young men were unique and subjective but also that there were points of commonality and resonance across participants' accounts.

5.1 Key Findings

Research on the experience of involuntary loss of a romantic relationship amongst young heterosexual men in general and in South Africa in particular has received minimal interest. This study drew primarily on the apparently limited international literature concerning young men's experience of loss of significant partner relationships and indications that men can suffer deeply in such situations, in part

because of being subject to gender stereotyping. The study thus focused on the experiences of young heterosexual men and their references to how norms of masculinity seemed to shape how they dealt with the experience. Involuntary loss of a significant romantic relationship was experienced negatively with a noticeable impact on their daily life and future relationship endeavours.

The young men recognised that in the main awareness of norms of masculinity/maleness had been unhelpful to them. For example, they experienced these norms to be prescriptive in terms of displays of emotion, acknowledgement of distress, and of help-seeking. Conditions such as anxiety and mood difficulties were present in most of these young men as they were distressed and destabilized by such loss. It was evident that in some instances the break-up had contributed to severe mental health problems, including depressed mood, social withdrawal, concentration difficulties, loss of investment in self and future and even suicidality amongst these young heterosexual men. They seemed to recognize and identify with being impacted considerably by the breakup. Because of fear of being shamed and perceived as weak, there is the possibility that young men compromise their mental health while upholding dominant notions of masculinity.

In the literature, it was suggested that men under-utilise support systems, use and abuse substances, including alcohol, and establish multiple meaningless sexual relationships as an attempt to experience and deal with the negative impact of involuntary loss of a significant relationship. Young men engage in these stereotypically masculine behaviours with the hope of remaining within the parameters of masculine ideals even though they may feel helpless about dealing with negative emotions evoked by the breakup. Within the current study, what was refreshing to see, however, is that while there was some reference to these types of behaviours such as drinking, engagement in casual sex and putting on a brave face, many of the men interviewed were able to challenge traditional masculine ideals.

Several of the interviewees asserted that it was both acceptable and essential to acknowledge, display and feel distressed. In a number of cases, they also referred to others around them being sympathetic to their pain and to being appreciative of and receptive to support that was forthcoming from friends and family. For example, they were willing to accept advice and support from female friends and experienced such support as aligned with their emotional needs. They acknowledged that their male

friends also offered support. Even if this was sometimes in the form of “cheering them up”. Thus there appear to be essential shifts in relation to the manner in which some men may resist performing the kind of masculinity that is expected of someone whose relationship with a woman has failed. In certain respects, the participants displayed an expanded repertoire of behaviour – retaining some masculine associated coping styles (exercising, striving to remain self-sufficient, for example) and yet making room for displays of emotion, acknowledgement of hurt, feelings of loss and compromised self-esteem, and seeking social support. This more flexible style of coping seemed to be more helpful to them, although most of them still spoke of the breakup with considerable sadness and frustration. This is perhaps not unexpected given that recruitment into the study was based on self-acknowledgement of struggling with a breakup. Nevertheless, it was evident that these men’s responses did not conform with conventional constructions of men as being less personally invested in romantic relationships and as more cavalier about the ending of relationships.

Informed by the degree of conformity to masculine ideals, personal history, cultural environment and socialization, young men have different ways of constructing and maintaining their romantic relationships and ways of experiencing and dealing with negative experiences brought about by such involvement, including loss. It was evident that the men who were interviewed had been highly invested in their relationships, in many instances projecting themselves into a future with their partner and demonstrating commitment through both material and psychological provision of support. They demonstrated that men might be as much, if not more invested in the relationship than their female partners in some instances. It was also evident that while they had attempted to move on, and several of them had become involved in subsequent relationships, they remained affected by the prior breakup, and it continued to influence their behaviour. The study thus suggested that in the case of these men they were capable of making secure attachments, of seeing themselves as responsible, romantic partners, and of acknowledging vulnerability and lack of power or agency in the face of unwanted rejection or betrayal.

The ideals of masculinity/maleness can be both unhelpful to the person in need of support and those wishing to offer them support, particularly male friends if they conform to norms of masculinity and use this as a frame of reference. However, in the case of the participants in this study there appeared to be some awareness of how constraining masculine norms could be, both at the level of self-expectations and at

the level of self-image management. Conscious engagement with aspects of masculine stereotyping seemed to allow them some room to manage in ways that ran counter to hegemonic versions of masculinity. However, this awareness did not relieve them of the joint burden of their felt distress and the challenges to their sense of masculinity that the break-up experience introduced for them.

5.2 Strengths and Limitation

As the researcher, I was very aware that having dealt with and experienced an involuntary loss of a romantic relationship myself previously may have affected how I conducted the interviews and may have influenced the interpretation of the interview material. I understand that I may have over-identified and had preconceptions about the participants' experiences and that this may, for example, have led to a choice of questions and a manner of questioning resulting in particular kinds of responses from the participants. I dealt with the awareness of this issue through journaling and supervision notes and consultation. The co-analysis of interview material by my supervisor was also crucial in this regard. However, my experience also helped me in being empathetic and understanding with the participants during the processes of data collection and analysis and seemed to enable me to obtain rich data as the men felt trusting of my interest and acknowledgement.

One of the limitations of the study is the small sample size and the fact that interviewees shared particular characteristics, such as generally having been involved in tertiary education. The study used IPA as a method of analysis, which uses relatively small participant groups and purposive sampling. IPA requires a small sample to get in-depth information about the participants' lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). It should be noted that the findings do not represent the feelings and opinions of the general population of young South African men but can be viewed as representative of some men and in this respect offer some insight into the fact that men may be very negatively affected by rejection and loss of the kind investigated here.

The data analysis process in qualitative research is always necessarily subjective, and it is possible that different interpreters would place different kinds of emphases in identifying themes and writing up the material. As far as possible, I have attempted to provide substantiating information to make the themes that are presented sufficiently compelling as research outcomes.

5.3 Implication for future research

This study raised a few critical points that I would wish light might be shed on in future research. One of these points is the importance of the relationship between femininity and masculinity in a romantic partner relationship; in both the construction and maintenance of such relationships. For example, it seemed that in some instances participants' experience of distress at experiencing involuntary loss had to do with being broken up with due to the inability to live up to their dominant masculine ideals, i.e. being a provider, which in turn resulted in their partners losing interest in them. Thus gender expectations from both women and men may play a role in destabilizing relationships. It is therefore essential to examine the influence of feminine-identified expectations on masculine ideals among both men and women, and how this determines and define meanings in partner relationships. A research study that investigated the gender roles, expectations and performances of both parties in a relationship that ends unhappily would be useful in order to understand interactive processes.

Norms of what it means to be real men were seen as unhelpful when dealing with negative emotions amongst most of the participants. Most participants found it challenging to express emotions and to seek help, due to conformity to dominant ideals of masculinity. Research should continue to focus on masculinity amongst young men in terms of expressing emotions and seeking help to broaden understanding of the impact of these mental health-related dimensions in their lives in order to provide adequate and appropriate support.

Young men's experience of loss of a romantic relationship needs additional research on a broader scale since the present research used a small and specific sample. Furthermore, research should be done on the construction of romantic relationship in the social media and information age to gain a better understanding of partners' perceptions and expectations from one another, with a focus on partner choice and preference. The current environment of social media may provide both opportunities for support and for challenging of stereotypes as well as fears of greater scrutiny and judgement and greater 'policing' of gender-related roles and behaviours. This would be interesting to investigate further.

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APPENDICES

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Psychology

School of Human and Community Development

Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa

Tel: (011) 717-4500 Fax: (011) 717-4559

Email: 018lucy@muse.wits.ac.za

Appendix 1

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Introduction

I will like to thank you for being willing to participate in this study on “young men’s personal accounts of experiencing and dealing with the end of an intimate relationship”. I am interested to know you better and to get to learn about the experience you have had, as many men choose not to think and talk about these kinds of experiences and how they have affected them.

Before we can start, can we go through the informed consent form to give you further clarity about this study? You can sign it when you are done to indicate that you agree (the participant goes through the form while ticking), and bear in mind that you are welcome to ask any question you have.

I am keen to discuss with you your experiences of dealing with the ending of a romantic relationship that was important to you. I am interested to hear what you remember of this time, what stood out for you, how it affected you, how you tried to process what happened and how you attempted to deal with the experience. I am also particularly interested in how this affected you as a young man and how, from your perspective, being a man may have influenced how you dealt with the experience.

With your permission I am going to record this conversation so that I will be able to listen to it and write it up after the interview and so that I have time to really understand and appreciate what you have told me. I would like this to be a reasonably open conversation so I may introduce new questions as we go along and you are welcome to bring in anything that seems important to you. Towards the end of our time I will check whether there is anything that we have not touched on that I had originally intended to ask you about or anything that you would like to raise that we have not discussed.

The following questions reflect the topics to be discussed in the interview.

Potential Questions/Topics:

- Can you please tell me a bit more about yourself? (Discuss and clarify the demographic information the participant provided).
- What led you to be interested in participating in this study?
- Can you tell me as much as you can recall about a time when you had to deal with the break-up of a romantic relationship that was important to you?
- How did the break up impact on you? What did you notice in yourself? (probe for feelings, thoughts, behaviors, physical or somatic indicators, depression and anxiety, withdrawal etc.)
- How did you try to deal or cope with the experience? (probe for substance use, avoidance behaviours, help-seeking etc.)
- What kind of support if any did you receives from other people at the time? (probe for who help was sought from, what form support took, etc.)
- What are your thoughts about how your being a man influenced how you experienced and dealt with the break-up? (Explore role models, peer engagement, self-image etc.)
- How have you perhaps come to understand yourself differently as a man through dealing with that experience?
- Looking back on that time is there anything you wish you had done differently?
- If you were to attempt to give advice to another young man in a similar situation what would you say to him?
- How do you think the experience has influenced you as a person and in going forward in your life?
- Are there any other comments you would like to make or any other points you would like to add to what we have discussed?

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Psychology

School of Human and Community Development

Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa

Tel: (011) 717-4500 Fax: (011) 717-4559

Email: 018lucy@muse.wits.ac.za

Appendix 2

AGREEMENT BETWEEN STUDENT RESEARCHER AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I _____ agree to participate in the research project of

Reginald Mathule Kanyane on ''young men's personal accounts of experiencing and dealing with intimate relationship dissolution and loss''.

I understand that:

1. The researcher is a student conducting the research as part of the requirements for Masters degree at University of the Witwatersrand. The researcher may be contacted on 0814715857 (cell phone) or reginaldmahlangu@gmail.com (email). The research project has been approved by the relevant ethics committee(s), and is under the supervision of Professor Gillian Eagle in the Psychology Department at University of the Witwatersrand, who may be contacted on 011 717 4528 (office) or gillian.eagle@wits.ac.za (email).

2. The researcher is interested in understanding 'how men deal with involuntary romantic relational loss, and how they perceive themselves as men dealing with involuntary romantic relational losses.

3. My participation will involve male student, heterosexual, and over 18 years old from different cultural dynamic. The interview will take only 1 hour.

4. I may be asked to answer questions of a personal nature, but I can choose not to answer any questions about aspects of my life which I am not willing to disclose.

5. I am invited to voice to the researcher any concerns I have about my participation in the study, or consequences I may experience as a result of my participation, and to have these addressed to my satisfaction. A counselling centre may be contacted for further support on 011 717 9140 (telephone)

6. I am free to withdraw from the study at any time – however I commit myself to full participation unless some unusual circumstances occur, or I have concerns about my participation which I did not originally anticipate.

7. The report on the project may contain information about my personal experiences, attitudes and behaviours, but that the report will be designed in such a way that it will not be possible to be identified by the general reader.

Signed on (Date):

Participant: _____

Researcher: _____

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Appendix 3

Participant Information Sheet

Good day.

My name is Reginald Mathule Kanyane, and I am studying a Masters degree in Clinical Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. I am conducting research as part of my Masters degree requirements, and am inviting you to take part in this research. I am doing research on young men's personal accounts of experiencing and dealing with the loss of a romantic relationship . Research is a study that is conducted to gather information about the question. In this study, I would like to find out about your experience of being a young man dealing with involuntary romantic relational loss.

I am inviting you to take part in this research study. The interview will take between 45 minutes and 1 hour 30minutes. You are free to not answer questions that you don't feel comfortable answering, and there is no judgement on the answers you provide. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time without negative consequences. Participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no benefits or money for participating in the study, and there is no consequences if you choose not to participate.

Any shared personal information will shared will be kept confidential, and will not be included in any published part of the research, only on the interview tape accessible only to the researcher; however, personal information may be disclosed if required by law. It is important that I record our interview session so that I can remember as much detail as possible. Your recorded interview will not accessed and heard by anyone but me, the researcher. I am going to transcribe your recorded interview and any identifying information to you will not be included (the transcript will be used with all the other interview transcripts to help me write my report). The audio recorded interviews and transcripts will be kept in a password-protected computer which only I will have access to. The interview transcripts print out will only be accessed by my research supervisor and me and, will be kept safely in a locked cupboard. My supervisor will only access interview transcripts without your personal information on them, and she will only be accessing them to help me write my report. There is a possibility of using direct quotes from your interview; however, no identifying information will be included. After the report is finished your interview recording and transcript (both digital and printed out) will be kept in their secure places for further

research endeavours. The finished report will be seen by the people who mark my report and a copy will be kept in the library at the University if the Witwatersrand. Feedback can also be given to you in the form in a brief summary form, and if you would like more feedback I will give it to you with pleasure. My contact details and those of my supervisors are attached to this form.

If you do choose to participate please can you fill out the two consent forms attached and give them back to me; the one is consent to participate and the other is consent for the audio recording.

Please feel free to contact either me or my supervisor if you would like any further information, have any further questions, or would like to report any negative affects the study has had on you.

Kind regards

Reginald Mathule Kanyane
(Clinical Psychology Student)
0814715857 (cell phone)
Email: reginaldmahlangu@gmail.com

Prof Gillian Eagle
(Research Supervisor)
011 717 4528 (office)
Email:Gillian.eagle@wits.ac.za

If you would like to report any problems or complaints that you have with regard to any part of the research process you can contact the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) Saintha Maistry**,** on 011 717 4613 or at saintha.maistry@wits.ac.za.

Counselling services

We do not expect that the interview will harm you in any way but if you feel that you are having difficulties after having participated you may access one of the following free therapy services.

Emthomjeni Community Psychology Clinic 011 717 4513
Counselling and Careers Development Unit (CCDU) 011 717 9140 / 32

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Appendix 4

Consent Form (Interview)

I _____ consent to being interviewed by Reginald Mathule Kanyane for his study on young men's personal accounts of experiencing and dealing with the loss of a romantic relationship . I understand that:

- Participation in this interview is voluntary.
- I have the choice to not answer any questions I do not want to answer.
- I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.
- Direct quotes will be used in the report, however, no personal information that may identify me will be included in the research report, and my responses will remain confidential.
- After the report is finished a copy will be kept in the library at the University of the Witwatersrand and will be available to people who have access to the library.
- If a journal article is published the interview recording (or notes taken) as well the transcript will be kept in password-protected files as well as in a locked cupboard for further research endeavours.
- There are no direct benefits for me in participating in this study.

- There are no anticipated risks for me participating in this study.

Signed _____

Date _____

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Appendix 5

Consent Form (Audio Recording)

I _____ consent to my interview with Reginald Mathule Kanyane on young men's personal accounts of experiencing and dealing with the loss of a romantic relationship being tape-recorded. I understand that:

- The tape will be heard by the researcher.
- When the tape is used to write up the transcript, only the researcher will listen to it. Everything will be kept in a secure place, which only he will be able to access, while the study is ongoing.
- No personal information, such as names or places (where I live, where I am from etc.), will be included in the transcripts.
- Only the researcher and his supervisor will have access to my transcript, however, the supervisor will not know any of my identifying information.
- After the report is finished my interview recording and transcript will be kept in a safe place for further research endeavours.

Signed _____

Date _____

Appendix 6: Ethics Clearance Certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (SCHOOL OF HUMAN & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MCLIN/17/008 IH**
PROJECT TITLE:	"I got dumped": young men's personal accounts of experiencing and dealing with the loss of a romantic relationship
INVESTIGATORS	Kanyane Reginald
DEPARTMENT	Psychology
DATE CONSIDERED	06/06/17
DECISION OF COMMITTEE*	Approved

This ethical clearance is valid for 2 years and may be renewed upon application

DATE: 06 June 2017

CHAIRPERSON _____
(Prof. Carol Long)

cc Supervisor:

Prof. Gillian Eagle
Psychology

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR (S)

To be completed in duplicate and **one copy** returned to the Secretary, Room 100015, 10th floor, Senate House, University.

I/we fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure, as approved, I/we undertake to submit a revised protocol to the Committee.

This ethical clearance will expire on 31 December 2019

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER IN ALL ENQUIRIES