In OECD countries unprecedented numbers of adults are remaining single and childfree during their prime decades of fertility. In order to explicate this phenomenon interview-transcripts from thirteen single women and men, plus texts from Internet dating and information sites, were analyzed for the discursive resources being deployed by this second generation of the post-1960s relationship revolution. The efficacy of romantic love assumptions and practices to produce stable enough relationships is questioned. Discourse analysis revealed new discourses of compatibility, soulmates and intimacy are being constructed in the hope of achieving more fulfilling and stable relationships. An historical survey of paradigm shifts over centuries shows the discourse of romantic love is embedded in the individualistic assumptions of capitalism. The newer discourses of relationship deploy holistic assumptions of connectedness, communication, mutuality, cooperation and responsibility which, we theorize, complement a politico-socioeconomic paradigm shift from capitalist discourse to environmental discourse.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
Sheldon, 2002; Giddens, 1992; Hacker, 2003; Jones, 2005; Sternberg, 1988). The typical indicators of this pervasive social change are: falling marriage and birth rates; an escalation in rates of divorce and cohabitation; a rise in the age of first marriage and growing numbers of childfree singles in their prime years of fertility (Statistics NZ, 2003). Women’s increasing access to education, sexual choices and financial independence are identified as significant contributing factors as the trend spreads through Asia and other developing countries (Jones, 2005).

Writing from an historical perspective, other researchers (Israel, 2002; Maley, 2003) describe the 1960s spurt in divorce rates as an extension of a continuum of increasing divorce rates which began to emerge in Eurocentric countries in the late 19th Century. The possibilities for leaving unhappy marriages increased for women as their access to education, political power and financial independence increased during the 19th and 20th Centuries. More controversially other researchers have highlighted the growing dominance of the discourse of romantic love during the 19th and 20th Centuries. During this historical time the assumption that one should marry for love, and love alone, rather than for money and security became socially institutionalized (Coontz, 2004, 2005).

However through two centuries of saturation in romantic assumptions, the discourse and its practices have proved to be capricious in producing the ‘happy-ever-after’ marriages promised to those who ‘fall in love’ (Willi, 1997). Consequently connections between romantic love assumptions and marriage breakdown are being suggested (Lewis, 2003). After explicating the complexity of contributing factors, historian Stephanie Coontz (2004, 2005) concludes that the cumulative effect of the romantic love era has been to destabilize the institutions of marriage and family. Therefore the power of those institutions to perform their fundamental tasks of nurturing the physical and psychological wellbeing of the next generation is questioned (Poole & Sceats, 2003; Wallerstein, 2000).

This paper posits that out of the widespread and intense social pain produced from decades of instability in relationships, contemporary women and men are striving through talk and text to reconceptualize their needs, rights and obligations as wives, husbands or partners. In their intentional, goal-directed, inventive efforts to solve their relationship difficulties, new discourses of intimacy, compatibility and soulmates are being constructed. Extreme times produce extreme efforts, therefore we find that the concepts and ideas for the construction of these new discourses are being gathered from a wide range of discursive fields, such as feminism, psychotherapy and Quantum-New Age spirituality.

This paper also acknowledges the Foucauldian idea that discourses of relationship are embedded in and complement the politico-socioeconomic discourses and institutions of their era (Foucault, 1982; Shumway, 2003). Therefore we inquire into what change is occurring politically and socio-economically that complements of the new discourses and institutions of marriage and relationship.

In order to make our case we pursue the following line of argument. First we present a summary of discursive theory as a basis for the later explication of historical and contemporary discourses of relationship. This is followed by a justification of the inclusive approach we employ to incorporating knowledge from both quantitative and qualitative research. Then we describe the methodology of our own qualitative research project. As our findings build on the compelling historical analysis of relationship discourses offered by Shumway (2003), a summary and discussion is provided of the three discourses he identifies: security, romantic love and intimacy. We then describe and discuss our analysis of two newer discourses: compatibility and soulmates. We emphasize the unexpected findings in our research which challenged us to extend our field of inquiry and theorize new discursive explanations.

2. Discursive theory

Foucault defined a discourse as a set of statements or ideas that construct an object, such as ‘the self’, ‘masculinity’, ‘love’ or ‘marriage’. The discourse or set of ideas then becomes the framework within which to explain and justify future action (Ramazanoglu, 1993). The cluster of ideas which form a discourse, are coherent and governed by implicit sets of rules for framing knowledge and what is accepted and spoken of as ‘truth’. These rules and frames are variable according to the particular historical time and social context (Foucault, 1982).

Discursive or social constructionist theory posits that in historical periods of turbulent social change (such as the post-1960 decades) an active, intentional, process of struggle is occurring in talk and text,
between discoursing men and women. Some may be proponents of the most accepted, and therefore
the dominant discourse, while others, or the same persons at other times, may be critically analyzing
and resisting the dominant discourse. They do so by employing counter, marginalized or emerging sets
of ideas, assumptions and arguments, which as they become more coherently constructed, become
identifiable discourses. Out of the intra and inter-personal striving to express and formulate their new
ideas in written and spoken language, new ‘truths’ or assumptions are constructed and made accessible
to others and new social practices and institutions and patterns of social relationships evolve (Burr,
1995; Foucault, 1982; Weedon, 1999).

Foucault maintained that power, rather than being situated in the tangible instruments and institu-
tions of power, such as police, parliament, hospitals and universities, is situated in the discourse
which justifies their form and performance. The politico-socioeconomic power of such institutions and
the persons occupying positions of power within them, is constructed, explained and supported by
discourse. The power inherent in a discourse is deployed through power-relations where the participat-
ing persons, groups or populations have a capacity for critically analyzing, claiming or resisting
dominant, counter or marginalized discourses. As power is inherent in a discoursing relationship, there
is inevitably struggle between the ‘truths’ of a dominant discourse and the assumptions of counter or
emerging discourses. Historically the effects of discursive power-struggles are more productive than
restrictive, as discoursing is an intentional process with active, agentic participants striving to achieve
the series of aims, objectives and solutions set out in the discourse (Foucault, 1982; Weedon, 1999).

As counter discourses achieve acceptance and validity new patterns of social relationships, systems
and institutions are constructed. The emergence of a new dominant discourse produces a paradigm
shift into the next episteme: a complex, long-lasting era such as the Romantic, Modern, or Postmodern
(Foucault, 1982; Weedon, 1999).

3. Both qualitative and quantitative

Our specific research project, which was productive of the new theorizing in this paper, was
primarily qualitative and social constructionist in its epistemology. However we employed knowledge
gained from quantitative research with large populations to establish the significance of the rela-
tionship revolution in its various local and global manifestations. The need for in-depth qualitative
research such as ours, with a small number of participants is thereby justified in order to explicate the
struggles of the participants in such a widespread social revolution. By building-on and com-
plementing the body of knowledge accumulated from both qualitative and quantitative research we
consider our research findings contribute to the collaborative construction of knowledge about
contemporary heterosexual relationships.

The case against a simplistic quantity-quality divide and in favor of a complementary relationship
between the quantitative and qualitative research has been argued by others. While being an
advocate for the importance of qualitative research in social constructionism, Potter (1996) also
maintains quantification may be appropriate in certain situations. However as different consider-
ations are involved in the two approaches he advocated clear argument to justify the deployment of
either. Yanchar (2006) is another who argues for the matching of methodology with the research
question or problem and the deployment of critical reflection and sound rationale to justify the
choice.

Numerous empirical researchers analyzing the statistics for large populations have described an
unprecedented increase in the mature-singles demographic group in developed and developing
countries (Birrell & Rapson, 1998; Jones, 2005). Their work establishes a clear trend over the past
twenty to thirty years towards levels where up to 30% of 30–40 year old women and men are now
single, whereas historically, as the decades of prime fertility, these have been the most married and
family-making decades. Consequently in most OECD countries the birthrates have fallen below
replacement levels (Poole & Sceats, 2003). We selected discourse analysis as an appropriate meth-
odology for inquiring into and explicating the discourses being deployed by mature singles as they
strive to form fulfilling relationships in these contemporary conditions of dramatic social change
(Burr, 1995).
4. Research procedures

Thirteen research participants, eight women and five men, were interviewed after they responded to a request for volunteers in a local newspaper. They all met the selection criteria by being heterosexual, single, childfree, aged between 30 and 43 and resident in New Zealand. As participants in the second generation of rapid social change which began in the 1960s, it could be assumed they had been constructed by, and were in turn constructive of the ongoing relationship revolution. Therefore we expected these mature singles would have engaged with, and have insight into, the discursive turbulence in which they have been immersed all their lives (Wallerstein, 2000). Our criterion for selecting so few participants is based on the notion of saturation, which refers to the point at which collecting new data does not add new information for the analysis. While ideally saturation should be determined by purposefully sampling, research by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) has demonstrated that with relatively homogeneous samples, a clearly focused set of research questions, and rich data such as results from carefully conducted interviews, data from sample sizes as small as twelve will reach saturation.

There were four research questions: (1) What are the relationship goals for men and women in this demographic group in terms of their construction and function? (2) What are the dominant and counter discourses available to men and women in this demographic group as they strive to achieve their relationship goals? (3) Which interpretative repertoires enable modification and variation of the more stable discourses? (4) Are these discourses and interpretative modifications functional in enabling participants to achieve their relationship goals?

While a conversational style was adopted in the interviews, participants were guided to address eight open-ended interview questions: What do you want for yourself in the area of relationships? What do you mean by ‘love’? Have you ever thought you were in love, only to be disappointed later? Has that experience affected the way you’ve approached men/women and relationships since then? Have there been any other experiences or factors in your life which you think have made it difficult for you in forming relationships? Have there been any other experiences or factors in your life which you think have made it easy and natural for you in forming relationships? I’m interested in your perceptions of men and women these days? Do you feel any pressures to be in a committed relationship?

Texts were generated from audio-taping and transcribing their hour-long individual interviews. The transcripts of their interviews were coded F [Female] and M [Male] and were sequentially numbered, F1-8 and M1-5. The transcripts were thoroughly read and analyzed and the discursive themes and repertoires were categorized. Categories were matched against the three discourses explicated by Shumway (2003): security, romantic love and intimacy.

Our analysis revealed a dilemma that all our mature singles were struggling with. Although each participant spoke of a preference for being in a rewarding relationship in which they were treated well, none were willing to settle for a relationship at any cost:

F5: At the moment actually I would prefer to be on my own rather than just fall into any relationship where I am not a hundred percent happy. I wouldn’t have said that a couple of years ago, but I suppose as you get older you get wiser ...

All our participants had constructed, and at times in the interview occupied an individualistic position in which they would ‘rather-be-single-than-in-a-bad-relationship’. However a decision has been made to focus this paper on explicating the discourses our participants deployed in their efforts to achieve their preferred goal of a fulfilling relationship.

Our analysis showed that while the relationship repertoires of most of our subjects conformed to Shumway’s structure, some of participants’ were incorporating resources from discourses which we identified as compatibility and soulmates. Rather than view these findings as contradictory, we suggest Shumway’s thesis of discursive evolution through epistemic change is confirmed and extended by our findings.

1 The research procedures were approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (PN Protocol 02/119).
Discourse theory requires researchers to expect the unexpected and remain open to creative constructions of new resources by intentional discoursing subjects striving to improve their situations (Burr, 1995). At first we interpreted use of the signifier soulmates as merely a re-labeling of romantic love assumptions in New Age terminology. However after further analysis we identified soulmates as a new discourse with some distinct assumptions. After finding limited academic research into soulmates (Bloomstein, 2001; Boyce, 2002; Franiuk, Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Franiuk, Pomerantz, & Cohen, 2004; Houran & Lange, 2004), supplementary texts were sought from the Internet.

In contrast to the minimal academic analysis, Internet searches produced such challenging evidence of active construction of a new discourse that some immediate explication was demanded and a need for further research is indicated. Searches using the term ‘soulmates’ produced 4,340,000 results on Google and 4964 book titles on www.Amazon.com, while a search using ‘soulmate dating sites’ on Google produced 1,140,000 results. Faced with such daunting numbers of sites to investigate, an arbitrary selection was made of information, dating and bookshop sites. These sites and some popular books were browsed for examples of the construction and function of soulmates (Braden, 1996; Collins, 2001; Hoffman & Weiner, 2003; Moore, 1994; Warren, 2002).

5. Shumway’s discourses of love and marriage

All discourses of love and marriage perform the function of establishing the rules, rights and obligations for accomplishing the essential tasks of relationship: partner selection; managing infatuated attraction and sexuality; income generation and the provision of home, food and clothing; producing and nurturing the next generation; defining the value of gendered-persons and their positions in gendered-power-relations.

From his historical survey of texts (films, novels, columns and self-help books) Shumway (2003) identified three discourses of love and marriage: security, romantic love and intimacy which have been constructed and modified over the centuries to serve the intentional striving of men and women for enhanced freedoms, rights and wellbeing. The extent to which the premises and logic of a particular relationship discourse are assumed or marginalized in each historical period varies according to the function of the discourse within the politico-socioeconomic values, purposes and problems of the era (Foucault, 1982; Giddens, 1992; Shumway, 2003).

5.1. Security

As the oldest discourse of relationship, security has also been the most ubiquitous because of its function in historical Feudal and contemporary collective cultures. In Europe prior to the eighteenth century the kinship group was the social institution which held property and provided a form of collective insurance against the harshness of life. Currently in many countries these functions continue to be performed by the extended family (Shumway, 2003).

Wherever the primary function of marriage is to strengthen the resources of the kin group, marriages are likely to be arranged by parents who are often assisted by chaperones or matchmakers in order to secure the most advantageous match. In return for rights of access to the kin-group’s collective resources, obligations of loyalty and duty to the family have priority over the personal rights and desires of individuals. In European historical contexts, hierarchical conceptualizations of class and gender ensured that a strict adherence to traditional gendered divisions of labor and socioeconomic power was rigidly maintained. One assumption of security is that women’s place is in the home and their access to power-resources of education, income and property ownership should be constrained (Giddens, 1992; Maley, 2003; Shumway, 2003).

While not dominant in the traditional form described above, a layer of security discoursing was employed by the women in our study who hoped to have children in the future. They acknowledged that the early years with young children would be problematic without financial support from a partner:

F5. It’s like a business relationship really. In any relationship you have to make a business plan and set goals and one of the goals would be about how we raise our children together.
F.7 I believe that mothers should be at home to look after their children. I know if I end up getting married in my child-bearing years and if I have children I would actually be stopping any career I was in. Whether that meant continuing some of it part-time I am not totally sure but ... while I want to fulfill my career, it would be more important to be at home with my children.

When marriage and the kin-group form the cornerstone of the social edifice, divorce threatens security by confusing family lineage and rights of access to the collective resources, therefore strong prohibitions are applied. However as infertility, infidelity, or failure to consummate marriage also threatened the kin-group, they justified occasional annulments (Maley, 2003). Similarly attraction and infatuation have the potential to threaten favorable alliances, therefore whenever security is the dominant discourse, love stories such as Romeo and Juliet, are likely to end tragically, thereby marginalizing infatuated attraction as dangerous (Shumway, 2003).

5.2. Romantic love

The empowerment of romantic lovers was enabled by the emergence of capitalism and complementary changes in politics, economics, Darwinian science and Christian-Protestantism, all of which functioned to construct a bounded, competitive, mobile, individual (Maley, 2003; Tawney, 1938). By promoting the right-to-personal-happiness over kinship obligations, romantic love endorsed the new individualism and undermined the power of the extended family. It is an assumption of the discourse of romantic love that lovers are obligated to ‘be true to love’, to marry only for love, and to reject marriage for security. Rights and responsibilities for partner selection are transferred from parents to lovers who may marry across social barriers of class and race (Shumway, 2003). In romantic love infatuated attraction is constructed as ‘true love’ which leads to happiness-ever-after in marriage. Although true love is expected to conquer all or turn ‘Beasts’ into Princes (Jackson, 2001; Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Towns & Adams, 2000) the majority of our participating men and women had had disillusioning experiences:

F7: It took me six months to get the ‘rose-coloured glasses’ off and to stop living the dream of being a couple. A lot of people I knew, who also knew him, said, Don’t get involved, but I did ... he’d been married in the past and had been so hurt... everybody looking at this person saw that he was just flitting... I got so caught up in the dream of being a couple I thought... it will be different for me...I thought that being consistent and loyal with my love would make the difference... and he would change ... he might have flitted with other people but not with me... ... it caused the greatest pain, but it caused the greatest learning as well...

M4: It was: see each other, want each other ... like in Romeo and Juliet ...there was some sort of ... beams of love in the Shakespearean sense... Cupid’s arrow ...intense... ....she was what I was looking for when I left my ex... a party girl... but it was hard work... she was a party girl some days and the other days manic depressive...

While the ‘essential’ qualities of prospective partners are portrayed as the reason for romantic attraction (Shumway, 2003), contemporary empirical evidence that well-resourced men are more likely to be married and to re-partner faster after break-ups than low-income men, implies that assumptions of security have not been entirely rejected (Birrell & Rapson, 1998). Instead gains in status and wealth through marriage are reconstructed in romantic love, so that beautiful women with pure motives and loving hearts, like Cinderella and Beauty, may attract a Prince with a castle, while ‘gold-digging’ Ugly Sisters may not, and humble ‘seventh-sons’ may win the Princess through their personal qualities of daring, courage and enterprise.

Similarly power and agency are complex and multi-layered in romantic love. When ‘love happens’ and lovers ‘fall in love’, lovers are constructed as helpless, passive and vulnerable to the unpredictability of ‘Cupid’s arrow’. Conversely, when ‘the right one’ appears lovers are empowered to actively ‘follow one’s heart’ even if that requires crossing social boundaries, or moving on to the [next] ‘one true
love’ (Lewis, 2003). Participant F2 justified leaving a stable marriage because she had fallen in love with a married man:

F2: I fell in love with someone else who is not available... we are perfect in every way... it's physical, it's chemical, it's intellectual... on every level it's a perfect fit... I just ache to see him... any tiniest little bit of contact ... which is making me go crazy because I love him ...

Historically the positions offered to women within romantic love contrast strongly with the positions available to women when the discourse of security was dominant. The rationale of marriage for happiness, complemented by their progress in gaining financial independence, enabled some women to select their own partners, construct marriage as a choice and reject abuse as too high a price for security (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

From the late 19th Century divorce rates increased exponentially up to the outbreak of WWII (Maley, 2003). The post-war 1950s was an aberrant decade within this trend towards more prevalent divorce. Not only were men in the minority but resettlement-programs for returned servicemen included marriage-incentives. Although there were many unmarried and widowed women, over 90% of men were married in the 1950s. Following the traumatic war-years, Hollywood churned out simplistic narratives which implied that romantic love would lead to the security of marriage and happiness-ever-after. Exactly how the allied assumptions of security and romantic love would produce happiness was not portrayed (Shumway, 2003).

By the 1960s the assumptions of both security and romantic love were attracting vigorous feminist critique about the circumscribed positions offered to women (Schneir, 1995). The privileging of individualistic assumptions in new feminism, post-pill permissiveness and romantic love conflicted with marriage enabled by security with its corollaries of ‘a woman’s place...’ and ‘duty to family...’. After two centuries of dominance capitalism had undermined the assumptions and institutions of security (Foucault, 1982; Shumway, 2003). The 1950s quest for safety and happiness in marriage proved illusory for many and in the discursive turbulence of the 1960s, the pre-war divorce rates began to recur (Maley, 2003; Shumway, 2003; Willi, 1997).

Paradoxically the ubiquity of romantic fiction in all its genres raised Modern women's expectations of marriage (Shumway, 2003). In the Foucauldian sense, that within dominant discourses are the seeds of counter-discourses, alienated suburban women were enabled to re-imagine their lives as narratives in which they played central public roles alongside husbands who fulfilled their needs for intimacy (Weatherall, 2002). Yet there was no discourse, precedent or institution to support marriage being practiced in this way (Shumway, 2003). Therefore new discursive resources were required to enable relationships capable of meeting these new expectations (Steil, 1997).

5.3. Intimacy

Discursive theory understands persons to be constituted through discourse while using it for their own ends (Burr, 1995). Resources constructing a discourse of intimacy were drawn from two areas of experience with talk in which women were influential. Firstly, out of the practice of using talk to exchange mutual support (Coates, 1996). Secondly, out of the ‘talking therapies’ derived from Freudian psychoanalysis and Rogerian client-centered therapy (Giddens, 1992; Shumway, 2003). It was familiar for women talked about their relationship difficulties to best friends, women's groups and the growing numbers of ‘talking therapists’ (Coates, 1996, 2003; Steil, 1997). As client/consumers and as theorists and practitioners, women have been prominent in the construction of psychotherapy, critiquing entrenched mother-blaming, patriarchal assumptions and the abuse of gendered-power through family violence, incest and rape (Goldner, 1992; Herman, 1992).

The primary assumption of intimacy is that fulfilling relationships can be sustained through reciprocal self and partner disclosure. It is assumed that in-depth communication of personal thoughts and feelings will generate mutual understanding and feelings of warmth and closeness. The experience of intimacy is enhanced when partner-responsiveness is perceived as validating and caring
Participant M3 prioritized caring equality and mutuality in his construction of a loving relationship:

M3: Love is *caring for somebody else* ... perhaps not putting them first but *putting them equal* with you rather than taking and not giving to the other person... they would be *doing* their best to try and make me happy and hopefully I would *do* the same back to them, so we’re sort of giving to each other.

A crucial assumption of intimacy is commitment. While romantic love constructs passion in the attraction phase as the sign of ‘true love’, intimacy assumes that excitement will inevitably fade. Instead an alterative construction is offered, of sustained, mature ‘companionate’ or ‘consummate’ love achieved through commitment to stay and engage in the ‘emotional work’ of skilful communication (Sternberg, 1988). After several painful romantic experiences F7 privileged the work-it-out assumptions of intimacy:

F7: Love to me is more of a *decision* than an emotion, in terms of it’s more of a long term commitment. While you need the emotions ... there is a lot that can be hidden by emotions, by infatuation, by that rose-tinted glasses type of thing. I believe it’s more of a decision that you are going to live with someone and *work things through* ... that’s what long term will keep a marriage together. In one sense none of us are compatible. We are all so different from each other, so it’s a case of *working through things* ...

The discourse of intimacy has attained considerable clarity in its assumptions and general acceptance in academic, feminist, psychotherapeutic and self-help literatures (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Sternberg, 1988). Yet dominance for intimacy has been inhibited by the ubiquity of romantic love (Sharp & Ganong, 2000). Early proponents of intimacy advocated a discursive alliance between romantic love and intimacy, with romantic love performing the function of attraction and mate-selection and intimacy performing the function of relationship maintenance (Shumway, 2003; Willi, 1997). However this has proved to be a flawed proposition in that intimacy requires commitment, communication and mutuality, but abundant evidence demonstrates that romantic love frequently occurs for persons who resist those very practices (Jackson, 2001; Towns & Adams, 2000; Weingarten, 1991).

For instance in promoting intimacy most self-help writers assume gendered equality in intentions and practices (Crawford, 2004a; Gray, 1992). Yet massive evidence regarding domestic violence (Anderson et al., 2003; WHO, 2002), the unequal distribution of unpaid housework (Dempsey, 1997) and the financial imbalance between men and women (Burgoyne, 2004) demonstrates an assumption of equality is far from being a lived reality. Participant F3 spoke of such an experience:

F3: Well I let myself be a *door mat* and...he was a very strong sort of person, therefore he was treading me down and I was losing self-esteem...

6. New discourses of relationship

In order to remedy the frequency with which romantic love produces mismatches with persons who resist the assumptions and practices of intimacy, a discourse of compatibility is being constructed, largely from psychological and psychotherapeutic resources (Zentner, 2005).

6.1. Compatibility: psychologists at work

The primary assumption of compatibility is that marriage is likely to be more successful with a partner who is a good psycho-social match. The discourse incorporates psychological knowledge garnered from seventy years research into ‘assortative mating’: systematic patterns in human mate selection. A considerable body of knowledge has accumulated since Bernard, Terman and others first researched relationship-satisfaction in the 1930s (Cooper & Sheldon, 2002).

Problematically research findings are still inconsistent in the two main areas of conceptualization: ‘similarity’ between partners (positive assortment) or ‘difference’ (negative assortment). For ‘difference’ it is assumed that ‘opposites attract’ in order to incorporate complementary resources into the
relationship. To date there has been more favorable evidence for ‘similarity’ than for ‘difference’. The most reliable predictors of benefit are similarities in age and in political and religious attitudes; moderate similarities in education, general intelligence and values; and little similarity in personality characteristics (Luo & Klohnen, 2005). Through her experience participant F1 had identified the importance of similarity:

F1: Their interests were just so below average...they might play tennis but there was nothing intellectual about them... they had no understanding of anything really deep and...I found out in the end... I would rather have someone who can communicate and talk about things at your level than someone who just has a superficial interest in everything around them.

Since 2000, a number of dating websites have emerged which incorporate technological expertise with psychological expertise in order to offer matching for compatibility. For example, Wilson (Wilson & Cousins, 2003), teamed with IT expertise, has produced CyberSuitors [www.cybersuitors.com], Warren (2002) has produced eharmony® [www.eharmony.com], Houran (Houran & Lange, 2004) has produced True [www.true.com] and sociologist Schwartz (2006) informs Perfect Match [www.perfectmatch.com]. These new social structures offer to replace the ‘chance’ assumption of romantic love with technical searching of their databases to find the most compatible matches (Carter, Snow, & eHarmony.com., 2004):

At eHarmony our patented Compatibility Matching SystemTM narrows the field from millions of candidates to a highly select group of singles with whom you share deep levels of compatibility. Where other sites match on a picture and a paragraph, eHarmony matches you based on compatibility in the most important areas of life – like values, character, intellect, sense of humor, spiritual beliefs, passion, and up to 24 other dimensions.

www.eharmony.com (January 12th 2006)

These sites support a ‘safe’ period of emailing with technical strategies for blocking unsuitable or offensive participants. In his efforts to increase the safety and professionalism of Internet matching, Houran has instigated police checks on all participants at true.com and is active in promoting a code of ethical practice for providers of IT matching for compatibility:

Although promising greater protection in partner-selection than is enabled by romantic love, the assumptions and practices of compatibility may be interpreted and resisted as too ‘clinical’. One of our interviewees demonstrated such resistance in her preference for the ‘by chance...by fate’ assumptions of romantic love while constructing the practices of compatibility as ‘sad and clinical’:

F4: I will just meet somebody... by chance... by fate... that's the way it's portrayed on television and in literature. I guess there is something a bit sad and clinical in approaching it like a career, through agencies ...

In the contemporary field of relationships an X-factor is expected, but how the X-factor is constructed varies within each discourse. Whereas the sexual passion of being ‘in love’ is the primary partner-selection-indicator in romantic love, sexual attraction or ‘chemistry’ is only one of a number of selection-factors in compatibility. Therefore while these new social institutions offer computer assisted matching, they return the final assessment of the X-factor back to potential partners after matching and a monitored process of emailing.

Meanwhile ongoing assortative mating research since the 1990s has identified ‘ideals’ as significant psychological factors for mutually evaluating performance in relationships. Advancing this line of research Zentner (2005) found that congruence between individuals’ Ideal Mate Personality Concepts (IMPCs) and their partner’s personality as perceived by both partners is a more reliable predictor of relationship outcomes than similarity. Partner characteristics which are admired, whether similar or different, are likely to strengthen a relationship and vice versa.

This finding is endorsed by research into the deployment of the soulmates discourse. Franiuk et al. (2002, 2004) found those with an idealized conceptualization of their partner as their soulmate were likely to put more effort into overcoming difficulties than those with the ‘work-it-out’ view offered by intimacy. Conversely those who subscribed to soulmate assumptions, but who did not consider their partner met their ideal, were likely to invest less effort than those with a work-it-out view.
6.2. Soulmates: under construction

The discourse of soulmates has been emerging since the 1930s and is still in a fluid state of construction. Although the term has become widely used, soulmates did not attract academic research until the first decade of the 21st Century (Bloomstein, 2001; Boyce, 2002; Franiuk et al., 2002, 2004; Houran & Lange, 2004). Boyce (2002) found in addition to high scores on variables such as intimacy, commitment, passion, value similarity and need-fulfillment, those who considered themselves to be in soulmate relationships identified an intuitive component. In a study analyzing the soulmate experience of five adults aged 47–82, Bloomstein (2001) identified four assumptions: predeterminedness; mystical identification; paranormal communication and complete self-enclosedness.

The first constructions of the soulmate discourse appeared in the extreme social margins of American New Age spirituality about the 1930s. Since the 1960s American New Age assumptions have moved from the margins towards the mainstream as concepts from Eastern spirituality such as ‘karma’ and practices such as meditation have infiltrated Eurocentric cultures. In this context it is assumed that soulmates from past lives will karmically and synchronously reappear in order to progress personal growth (Collins, 2001). The function of soulmate relationships is not simply to achieve happiness-ever-after. Rather a mystical attraction is assumed which compels soulmates to accept and commit to the challenges of learning to love and live authentically (Braden, 1996; Moore, 1994).

In our contemporary historical time, when there are more single men and women over thirty than ever before, the assumption that one has a pre-destined soulmate enables hope and patience. One of our interviewees deployed that assumption to resist desperation and maintain confidence:

F5: I believe that no matter where you are in the world if your path is to meet this person you will meet them, so … if that man of mine is here … the person I am meant to get into a relationship with … that gives me a little more confidence about being on my own …
R: Where does your belief come from?
F5: … my years of being into spirituality… I’ve had too many coincidences in my life which I know aren’t coincidences really. I believe you are sent people to help you along and life is a shared journey… I like to keep myself open to the fact that there has been somebody pre-ordained for me and I’ve also been pre-ordained for them. I’m just going on instances in the past where something’s happened and I’ve banged into somebody and they have managed to help me along my way… I’m a firm believer in that. Everyone that comes into your life is there for a reason … that philosophy really does help me in being on my own …

In addition to the resources of women’s spirituality, as distinct from androcentrically organized religions (Coombes & Morgan, 2001) the 20th Century paradigm shift in physics produced controversial discoursing by some quantum physicists. Quantum conceptualizations about the connectedness and non-locality of consciousness produced a reconsideration of traditional Eurocentric dualistic perspectives of a mind/body, spirit/matter duality, in favor of monistic perspectives of consciousness as connected and immanent in all matter, which are fundamental to most Eastern and indigenous belief systems (Goswami, 1993; Wolf, 1999). Quantum conceptualizations began to infiltrate the alternative, New Age domain from the 1970s on (Capra, 1975[1st Ed.], 1991[2nd Ed.]; Zohar, 1990; Zukav, 1979). Since then the phenomenon of authors such as Deepak Chopra reaching ‘best-seller’ audiences has ensured Quantum-New Age themes of holistic relationships and wellbeing are now institutionalized within popular discourse (Hogan, 2005).

Our interviewee M2 incorporated quantum assumptions of connectedness and the non-locality of consciousness in his deployment of soulmates:

M2: I do believe outside of the living body there’s a spiritual kind of connection that binds … the universe together and I think when you find that right person it is part of that connecting up. You could call it soulmate … but I do believe there is a connection there beyond what we understand of the human mind and the materialistic human way of living. When you find the right person it’s a connection outside of what we know at this point in time.
6.3. Mystical-soulmates, clinical-compatibility and communicative-intimacy: psychologists construct a discursive alliance

From about 2000, a new construction of soulmates began to emerge incorporating the psychological resources of compatibility (Hoffman & Weiner, 2003; Warren, 2002). In this New Millennium modification of the discourse, soulmates are constructed as two persons whose profound connection may be recognized by significant measures of compatibility on established psychological dimensions. The Love Compatibility Book: The 12 Personality Traits That Can Lead You to Your Soulmate (Hoffman & Weiner, 2003) offers a method for assessing significant factors in relationship compatibility. Similarly in Date… or Soul Mate? Warren (2002) discusses 29 psychological dimensions to consider in matching soulmates. After finding significant efficacy in Internet matching (Houran & Lange, 2004) Houran has incorporated soulmates with compatibility in the True website. In this discursive alliance soulmates supplies the X-factor of mystical connectedness which the clinical resources of compatibility lack.

These psychological presentations of soulmates do not explicate the meanings of ‘soul’ and they ignore, rather than confirm or deny the reincarnation assumptions of the discourse. Instead they offer reassurance via strategies for identifying exceptionally compatible partners. Soulmate seekers are enabled to participate in interactive psychological profiling and matching on Internet sites; to construct lists of qualities preferred in a partner which may include profound connection and communication; and to expect mutual-learning and relational-work rather than happy-ever-after outcomes. On one website, BillC prioritized communication in his quest for his soulmate:

BillC: What is a soulmate? The best description I have heard is from a guy who had been married 60 years to the same lady. He said they met at a dance hall and started a conversation that was still going on! nzdating.com (2005)

The resources of intimacy, compatibility and soulmates are complementary when they privilege active, discriminative, multi-dimensional mate-selection over the one-dimensional sexual-passion offered by romantic love. In the three discourses, sexual attraction is viewed as ‘chemistry’, one of numerous significant criteria for partner-selection (True & Jerabek, 2004).

The three newer discourses of compatibility, intimacy and soulmates privilege communication, negotiation, mutual support and cooperative learning over euphoric feelings of being ‘in love’ and the individualistic pursuit of pleasure, in order to achieve profound life, or ‘soul’ tasks. While Modern-era romantic love stories end when marriage begins (Shumway, 2003) the interweaving repertoires of the three new discourses, enable fascinating accounts of deepening mutuality through long-lasting-marriage to be told (Gergen & Gergen, 2003; Hollway, 2004). Examples of two 21st Century films that demonstrate this possibility are: Iris (2001) which tells the story of the marriage of author, Iris Murdoch and John Bayley, and The Gathering Storm (2002) an account of the stressful pre-war period in the marriage of Clementine and Winston Churchill. While the Murdoch-Bayley’s significant life task could be viewed as their innovative literary contribution, and the Churchill’s of ‘saving the western world’, for many the significant ‘soul’ task might be the more modest goal of raising children in nurturing and stable families.

Significantly the allied resources of compatibility, intimacy and soulmates incorporate the potential to challenge the dominance of romantic love in future decades, which raises the question: If romantic love is embedded in the politico-socioeconomic discourses of individualistic, deregulated capitalism, in what politico-socioeconomic discourse are the discourses of compatibility, intimacy and soulmates embedded?

7. A discursive shift from deregulated capitalism to regulated environmentalism?

We posit that a politico-socioeconomic discursive shift began in the discursive margins in the 1960s and 1970s with concerns about the holistic health of living forms and eco-systems on our planet (Carson, 1962). The discoursing gained in vigor through the ensuing decades (Sahtouris, 2006). By 2008 daily analysis in the media of the unfolding economic crisis revealed profound negative consequences from unmonitored capitalist enterprise. Concomitantly daily analysis in the media through 2008
revealed a planetary crisis as a consequence of climate change. A vigorous global demand for environmentally sustainable political, scientific and socioeconomic solutions is producing conceptualizations of environmentalism (Gore, 2006). Environmentalism is characterized by holistic assumptions of connectedness and a consequential ethical responsibility for groups and systems which have been or may be adversely affected by unregulated capitalist enterprise.

In capitalist discoursing an individual is constructed with privileged rights to freedoms, whereas in environmental discourse rights and freedoms are constrained by responsibilities to modify activities and negotiate relationships in order to contribute benefit rather than harm into the sequences of systems to which we are all connected. Therefore while greed may be considered good in unregulated capitalism, in environmentalism constraint is justified for profit-making enterprises which harm the environment or the health and wellbeing of others.

We consider the emerging politico-socioeconomic environmental assumptions can be viewed as complementary to and supportive of the assumptions of connectedness in soulmates and the assumptions and practices of mutuality, work-it-out communication and negotiation, and informed choice in the three most recently constructed relationship discourses: intimacy, compatibility and soulmates.

8. Summary

The destabilizing of relationships since the 1960s has produced a perception of such a high risk of emotional pain that new discursive resources are being constituted in the hope of reducing that risk. The assumptions of compatibility, intimacy and soulmates privilege mutuality and skilful communication for ‘working through’ difficulties in order to achieve personal and extra-personal goals. Early research indications are that positioning in soulmates may strengthen commitment and willingness to ‘work-it-out’ (Franiuk et al., 2002, 2004). The privileging of relational and communicative assumptions may be understood to be embedded in discourses of environmentalism. Environmentalism incorporates assumptions that individual rights are valued, but also constrained by obligations to be negotiable in consideration of the rights and wellbeing of other interested ‘systems’. In addition environmental assumptions support communicative ‘team-work’ for achieving fulfilling extra-personal goals, such as creating a profoundly satisfying relationship and stable family in which to nurture the next generation. Further research is needed to explicate in greater detail the complexity, multi-layering and discursive slippage which occurs as discoursing individuals deploy the diverse resources available to them in their decisions to form partnerships, or not, in these turbulent times.

Acknowledgements

Our grateful thanks go to the women and men who generously participated in interviews for this project the New Zealand Association of Counsellors for contributing a research grant, and the helpful comments of two blind reviewers for improving the quality of our arguments.

References


**Films**

