

LESSON 1 INTRODUCTION: THE DIVERSITY OF RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships may be simple or complex, intimate or social, open or private, at work, home or elsewhere. Relationships are very much a reflection of the age. In the recent past, normal relationships would have constituted the nuclear family. Prior to that, it was the extended family. Nowadays, relationships have morphed into many different forms.



THE EVOLUTION OF RELATIONSHIPS

Interpersonal relationships have evolved compared to what they used to be like even just 100 years ago. The rules and

etiquette of relationships have also changed. In 2019, in the UK, 42% of marriages ended in divorce. Research in 2013 found that social media was being cited in more and more divorce cases. Because of social media, how we conduct our relationships has also

Suggested Tasks: ▼

Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.

changed. Most people now have a wider range of relationships. Traditional relationships include:

- Parent/children
- Siblings
- Grandparents/grandchildren
- Aunts and uncles/nieces and nephews
- Other extended family relationships, such as stepbrothers/sisters/step-parents,
- Boyfriend/girlfriend
- Husband/wife
- Friends
- Colleagues
- Acquaintances

In Western society, as attitudes towards relationships and social norms have changed, other forms of intimate relationship have become more acceptable:

- Cohabiting couples
- Homosexual couples
- Gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships
- Transgender and gender diverse relationships
- Multiple partner relationships (polyamory)
- Open relationships

Other forms such as polygamy (having more than one marriage partner at the same time - typically, one man with several wives) may not be legally acceptable, but is often tolerated as societies become more multicultural.

We often do not have just one role within our relationships, but many. Fulfilling roles and juggling relationships can be very time-consuming and exhausting. If you also add to the mix “friends” on social media, keeping on top of our relationships becomes more complicated still.

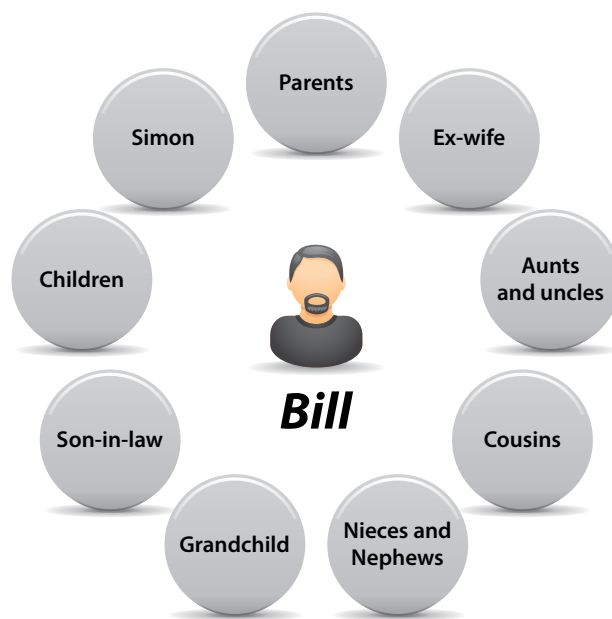
Case Study

Bill is in a relationship with Simon. His mother and father are still alive. He has one sister, who also has two children, so Bill is an uncle and brother-in-law to his sister’s husband. Bill has several aunts and uncles, who also have children – Bill’s cousins. When Bill was younger, he married Jane. Jane and Bill had three children together before Bill realised that he was homosexual and started a relationship with Simon. Jane remarried Niall, who also had two children. So Bill’s children have step-siblings. One of Bill’s children has just married and had their first child. So Bill is also a father-in-law and a grandfather. Simon and Bill also have a number of friends together. They also work together in their own business and have numerous employees and work colleagues. Both Simon and Bill are also heavily involved in social media and have a number of friends via social media.

This is a “simple” outline of Bill’s relationships. If we start to move out from relationships with his family and friends, we can start to examine

relationships with his work colleagues, business acquaintances, his doctor, dentist, the person who services and valets his car, the person who cuts his hair, his cleaner, his milkman, the person from the local shop, and so forth. Like Bill, we each have an intricate web of relationships.

If you were to draw a diagram of all the people that Bill knows, it would be extremely complex. The diagram below is just a simple diagram of some of the people who are involved with Bill. Imagine if you started to add everyone he knows.



TYPES OF RELATIONSHIP

Whilst it is possible to have relationships with a range of different people, it is also possible to have different types of relationships in terms of how they are organised. Attempts have been made to classify relationship types. Clark &

Mills (1979) identified exchange and communal relationships:

Exchange Relationships

We will look at exchange theory in more detail in later lessons but for now it is suffice to say that exchange relationships work on a cost to benefit ratio. People form and keep relationships so long as they get some reward from them. It could be an exchange of money for a service or an exchange of friendship. These are usually not as loving or deep as communal relationships.

Communal Relationships

These are less focused on personal rewards. Communal relationships are those where people tend to be more concerned with giving than receiving. For instance, they may do something for someone else without expecting to receive something back. A friend may choose to spend the evening with a sick friend in hospital because they care deeply about them.

Hind (1979) described reciprocal and complementary relationships:

Reciprocal Relationships

Also known as horizontal relationships, these are bonds formed between people which involve exchanges both ways. For example, in a typical friendship there is a sharing of care, support and disclosure. In reciprocal relationships both parties do the same thing, either together or alternately. There has to be some similarity of the attributes of each person in the relationship.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Why is it important to understand relationships and relationship dynamics? Perhaps the answer lies in the words of the late John Donne:

“No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.”

What Donne was suggesting is that everyone is connected to other people, that we cannot live our lives independently of all others. Indeed, we make conclusions about what other people are like through observing their actions. Our lives are defined by our relationships with others. The way we conform to the values and beliefs of others or comply with them dictates how we go about our lives. The way we act towards others - either in a positive fashion through good deeds and acts of empathy, or negatively through hostile interactions or hurtful acts - moulds our social existence.

If we are able to manage our relationships better in our personal, work and social lives we can live more enjoyable and less stressful lives overall. Helping people to find ways to nurture and improve their relationships is an integral part of therapeutic work in counselling, psychology, other therapeutic fields, pastoral care, and so on. Even those working in these fields must seek to form trusting, caring and confidential relationships with their clients in order for therapy to work.

Complementary Relationships

Also known as vertical relationships, these are not equal relationships. They operate in a hierarchical fashion. Dominant-subordinate interactions, for instance between a doctor and patient are an example. Nurture-succour between a mother and infant and tutor-learner between a teacher and child are others. In each of these cases the former is the provider of care or knowledge and the latter the receiver. In complementary relationships, both parties do different things but in a complementary way.



LEARN MORE >>>

Suggested Tasks

Take some time to write down the relationships in your own life. What type of relationship are they?

Spend 10mins doing this, then put the list away so you can revisit and reflect on it again later in the course.