The Nature of Modern Intimacy

At this point it is appropriate to return to the issue of the nature of modern intimacy by comparing the account developed in Chapters 2–10 with that of the ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). On the basis of evidence presented in Chapter 2 modern couple intimacy is not uniform and unitary and thus the pure relationship overlooks its finer gradations and complexities. The typology of couple intimacy in Chapter 2 depicts it as plural, nuanced and empirically variable. This chapter pursues some further implications of this view of intimacy and focuses on issues central to an evaluation of the explanatory relevance and adequacy of the concept of the pure relationship. These issues include interpersonal power and control, self-disclosure, trust, commitment, sexual and emotional satisfaction, and the question of the ‘fragility’ of modern intimacy. First, let me briefly recap on the overall account of couple intimacy developed thus far.

Interpersonal control

Perhaps the major difference between the account of couple intimacy presented here and that associated with the pure relationship centres on the role played by interpersonal power, control and influence. Neither Giddens (1992) nor Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) assign any importance to the influence of the interpersonal domain on intimacy, whereas it is central to the present account. ‘Dynamic’ (‘mutually satisfying’) intimacy depends, in the main, on benign control and influence although elements of soft manipulation and self-interest also play a role. However, partner’s power and control positions remain flexible, never becoming fixed or frozen so that one partner is dominant. There are labile (and sometimes potentially volatile) alternations of power,
influence and control within such relationships. However, in order for the relationship to remain stable, partners must retain a felt sense of control and influence over the relationship.

Mutual satisfaction is thwarted to the extent that benign control becomes displaced by 'harder' manipulation and exploitation – and this tends to go hand in hand with the emergence of relatively fixed power positions. Thus 'dynamic' (mutually satisfying) intimacy deteriorates in direct proportion to the loss of mutual benign control, as one or both partners begin to realise that they no longer have a felt sense of control and influence in the relationship. In this sense interpersonal control contributes to the confluent influences of other social domains (see Chapters 5 and 12). In direct contrast to the pure relationship, this account suggests that the combined influence of these domains generates different types of intimacy – dynamic, episodic, semi-detached, manipulative, pretence and oppressive intimacy.

**Variation in couple intimacy**

Modern couple intimacy is plural, complex and multidimensional and, thus, different types of intimacy are linked with variable forms of disclosure, commitment, satisfaction, trust and so on. In turn, these are associated with differences in personal strategies and styles of intimacy, conflict and communication styles and types of intimacy games. Couple intimacy is habitual, rule-guided behaviour founded on interpersonal control and influence. Mutual benign control is essential for the satisfaction of psycho-emotional needs – although discord and disharmony are never completely eliminated from even the best relationships. Relationships that rely on manipulation, dominance or exploitation repress or deny partners’ rights, interests, needs or desires. Discrete clusters of relationship habits – rules, styles, skills and strategies and ploys – give rise either to energising intimacy games with their positive emotions and mutual satisfaction, or to energy-draining games, with negative emotions and damaged intimacy.

‘Dynamic’ intimacy contains elements from each of five energising games (whereas in semi-detached intimacy energising games are fast unravelling, while the episodic type alternates between mutual benign and ‘harder’ manipulative control). In dynamic intimacy energising games help satisfy psycho-emotional needs – although the partners themselves must have the requisite intimacy skills (such as empathy, emotional rapport, ability to decipher meta-messages and so on). ‘Constructive conflict’, in which arguments are used to solve problems, is