In contemporary Britain, high rates of marital dissolution mean that many individuals spend one or more periods of their lives as separated or divorced people. Furthermore, the rising incidence of cohabitation means that at any given time, in addition to formerly married people, there is a substantial number of former cohabitees in the population. Until now, research has tended to focus on the formerly married rather than on formerly partnered people more generally, and has also concentrated on formerly married parents. Our book, however, is oriented towards formerly partnered people in general. Our main aim is to examine the experiences, identities, attitudes to repartnering and repartnering behaviour of formerly partnered people in a society in which profound changes have been, and are, taking place (or, at least, are argued to have been taking place) in relation to intimate couple relationships. Of course, continuities in ideals relating to ‘marriage’ also form part of the context in which formerly partnered people’s identities and orientations towards relationships are, or are not, revised after separation, as do their own relationship histories.

In our research we have addressed the topics of identity and repartnering among the formerly partnered in an appropriately wide-ranging way, drawing on existing substantive and theoretical literature, and carrying out our own qualitative and quantitative analyses. This is reflected in the structure of this book, the content of which is outlined in this introductory chapter. A short description of the research project which ultimately led to this book is given in Chapter 2. We explain why we think it is important to study formerly partnered people and repartnering using both qualitative and quantitative methods, and outline the characteristics of the sample of formerly married people and former cohabitees who took part in in-depth, qualitative interviews. (The data used for quantitative analyses of repartnering behaviour and orientations are described in Chapter 4.) Chapter 2 continues by discussing how our interviewees were recruited, and by providing more detail of the content and nature of the interviews. We then reflect on the interview process, on the implications of the nature of
interview data for what we can learn from it about our research topic, and on issues arising from the ‘therapeutic’ role that some interviewees ascribed to the interviews. The chapter concludes by commenting on the ways in which we approached the qualitative analyses of our interview data.

In Chapter 3 we set out a historical and theoretical context for the analysis of our data by highlighting significant changes relating to intimacy and couple relationships in the late twentieth century and by examining the theoretical literature on changing couple relationships. Unsurprisingly, given the decline in marriage and marital stability and a greater diversity among contemporary relationships, theoretical accounts emphasize change. In ‘high modernity’, societies such as Britain are said to be characterized by a greater level of individualism, which has contributed to a detraditionalization of intimacy. A key feature of contemporary relationships is said to be choice, more specifically the freedom to leave an unsatisfactory relationship. In Chapter 3 we discuss the work of Giddens, Bauman, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Gross (among others), highlighting the relevance of concepts such as love, self-identity, commitment and insecurity. The views of such authors on the origins, extent and universality of the changes vary, and some regard the changes less positively than others do, but there appears to be a consensus within their work that contemporary couple relationships are less permanent and less clearly (or narrowly) defined; hence formerly partnered people are repartnering in a rather unpredictable (and hence perhaps ‘risky’) context.

The substantive focus of Chapter 4 is more limited, as we concentrate on the formerly partnered and repartnering, documenting in the first section of the chapter what is known about these topics from earlier research. For the most part we restrict our attention to Britain, but we also draw on key North American studies that contain important findings and valuable conceptual material. The studies examined exhibit some recurring (and overlapping) themes: the heterogeneity of formerly partnered people and their lives, ambiguity within the lives of particular individuals, various forms of marginality that are common but not universal, changes relating to identity and the self, issues of independence and control, and experiences of constraints. Often linked to these themes and of significance in its own right is the impact of past relationships. The first section of the chapter concludes with a summary of existing knowledge about repartnering orientations and behaviour. The second section consists of new quantitative analyses of social survey data that update or extend beyond earlier research on the formerly partnered and repartnering; the analyses pay greater attention to former cohabitees, and cohabitation in general, than most other studies, and include an examination of non-resident couple or sexual relationships and an examination of repartnering orientations.

We then move on to analyses based on our interviews with formerly partnered people. Chapter 5 provides an overview of the repartnering orientations of our interviewees and includes material relating to aspects of their