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THE LIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF LESBIANS OVER 60 IN THE UK

JANE TRAIES

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

January 2014

I hereby declare that this thesis, **The Lives and Experiences of Lesbians over 60 in the UK**, has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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SUMMARY

This thesis offers an insight into a section of the lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender community that has been consistently under-represented in research. Based on data gathered from some 400 lesbians over 60, this study presents the findings of the first comprehensive survey of older lesbian life to be undertaken in the UK. It complements existing LGBT ageing research (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003; Cronin and King, 2010; Archibald, 2010; Stonewall, 2011), which has focussed more on men than women; and provides substantial data about a population which has frequently been referred to as ‘invisible’ and ‘hard to reach’ (Berger, 1982; Kehoe, 1986; Deevey, 1990; Heaphy et al., 2003. etc.).

As well as providing a detailed picture of older lesbian life in the UK at the beginning of the 21st century, the thesis specifically addresses the following questions:

- just how ‘invisible’ are older lesbians? To what extent do they feel able to respond to the more liberal legal and social climate of the early 21st century by ‘coming out of the closet,’ even if they have not done so before? What might be their reasons for staying hidden?
- do older lesbians conform to the ‘old, sad and alone’ stereotype of the ageing homosexual (Dorfman et al., 1995), or to the contrasting view that older non-heterosexuals have built strong support networks (Kehoe, 1988) and offer positive alternative models for ageing (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001)?

- considering that most LGBT ageing research is based on samples containing more men than women, are there aspects of personal history and ontology specific to older lesbians, which have been obscured by research with a more general 'LGBT' focus?
- given the wide social, political and economic diversity of the research sample and the variety of their life experiences as revealed by the data, do older lesbians really have anything in common other than their sexual orientation? How useful is the term 'older lesbian' as an identity category?

Dedicated, with love, to the memory of

Hilda May Kent

(1917-2012)

The best of role-models for ageing differently.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hundreds of older lesbians, most of whom I have never met, made this research possible. I am grateful to all who participated in the focus groups, completed the questionnaire or shared their stories and to those who, while not participating themselves, rolled the snowball on.

I thank my supervisor, Sally Munt, for taking on this project in the first place and for helping me to turn an undisciplined enthusiasm for storytelling into something resembling a proper academic enquiry; and my second supervisor, Alison Phipps, who inducted me into handling quantitative data and made invaluable criticisms of my first draft. My special thanks go to Daniel Burdsey of the University of Brighton, for his unflagging moral support throughout the project, and for reading and commenting on an early draft of this thesis.

The School of Music, Film and Media at Sussex funded my attendance at a number of academic conferences where, as well as being able to present and refine several parts of this thesis, I became acquainted with the growing network of UK and international academics studying non-heterosexual ageing. It has been a privilege to have the advice and comradeship of scholars such as Kathy Almack, Doreen Fumia, Brian Heaphy, Andrew King, Richard Ward, Sue Westwood and Jill Wilkens.

I owe as many debts of gratitude outside the academy. Val Bond and Betty Saunders, Tim Burdsey, Catherine Jackson, Kate Watters and Barbara Young all read and commented helpfully on early chapter drafts. The organisers of L-Fest and the arts programming company Springout provided opportunities to share the research with, and gain feedback from, lesbian audiences. Rose Bunker accurately transcribed thousands of

words, as well as providing insightful comments, tea and cake; and Catherine Jackson most generously proof-read the final typescript.

Like many gay people of my generation, I have always thought of my lesbian and gay friends as a second family. Many of them have made invaluable contributions to this work, either directly by participating in it or indirectly through discussion, suggestions and ideas. Some friends, having lived so long in hiding, felt unable to take part, and in that way made their own contribution to my understanding of our past and present lives. Love and thanks to them all.

Unlike many gay people of my generation, however, I am also blessed with a family of origin that is an unfailing source of love and acceptance. I'd like to thank all of them for keeping me sane and safe over the last four years, but I'm especially grateful to my sister, Margaret Burdsey, for practical and emotional support at every turn, including giving me a home for one long, cold winter.

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SECTION I
PRELIMINARIES

INTRODUCTION

0.1 ‘We have become invisible’

During the period when I was gathering data for this study, I attended an old friend’s funeral in a country church. This woman had lived into her late 80s; she had never married and had no surviving family except a distant cousin, so her funeral had been arranged by her two closest friends. One of them gave the eulogy; she had known the dead woman well for many years, and painted a loving picture of a busy, generous, creative life. Other local people sang and read poems. Afterwards there was tea in the church hall.

Although the fact was not at any point openly acknowledged, this was a lesbian funeral, organised by a ‘gay family’. Our old friend had been a life-long lesbian, though she was always careful never to reveal the fact to anyone outside the lesbian and gay community. The friend who gave the eulogy was in fact an ex-lover; she and her current partner had been this woman’s family and carers for many years. They had brought her with them when they retired to the country, helping her to find a cottage and looking after her through her last illness. Unlike our dead friend, this couple are ‘out’ in that community and most of their neighbours are aware of their status as civil partners. So it is probable that at least some of the congregation made the connection; but, if so, it remained unspoken. Everyone who took part in the service was a member of our old friend’s lesbian and gay ‘family of choice’; even the undertaker was a lesbian. Most of them are open about their sexuality in other contexts, and certainly none of them are as completely closeted as was the woman whose life we were celebrating; but on this occasion everyone practised a careful reticence, out of respect for her and on the understanding that you do not ‘out’ someone in death who was not out in life. And so, like the majority of lesbians in her generation, our old friend died as she had lived: with her lesbian life carefully concealed, her most important relationships unacknowledged, and half her life story untold, except among her close friends.

The last half century, from the decriminalisation of sex between consenting males¹ to the creation of civil partnerships,² has seen an extraordinary shift in attitudes to sexual diversity in Britain. While I was working on this thesis, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 passed through Parliament with a majority in support at all its stages. Such seismic social changes have in many ways ‘transfigured the lives of Britain’s four million gay people’ (Summerskill, 2006). And yet, in spite of increased legal and social acceptance, old lesbians like the friend described above remain hidden, their sexual identities and intimate relationships either unnoticed or unacknowledged. Lesbians and gay men in the UK may have become culturally visible in an historically unprecedented way, but some are still less visible than others. Media representations of lesbians and gay men remain stereotyped and selective (Cowan and Valentine, 2006); in particular the existence of older non-heterosexuals, especially lesbians, is rarely acknowledged. Representations of older women are also limited. In Arnold Grossman’s (1997) words, ‘Society is aging.’³ The old are diverse. But society tends to promote images of some aging individuals, while others remain invisible.’

Why are older lesbians culturally un-seeable? Monika Kehoe (1986) described them as a ‘triple invisible’ minority, hidden from view by a particular conjunction of sexism, ageism and heterosexism that renders them culturally un-representable. If the popular image of ‘lesbian’ is a deviant and/or sexualised one, and our picture of the old is asexual; if, as Neild and Pearson (1992) have suggested, every old woman automatically becomes a ‘granny’, and therefore heterosexual by default – then old lesbians cannot exist in the cultural imaginary. In a society that operates on (largely unexamined) heterosexist assumptions, an old woman who has been married or is a mother will usually be assumed to have led an unrelievedly heterosexual life; a woman who has been neither is likely to invoke negative cultural stereotypes of the single, unmarried woman – the ‘old maid’ – even though she might during a long life have had important intimate relationships with women (Traies, 2012). Healey (1994:112) has

¹ Sexual Offences Act, 1967

² Civil Partnership Act, 2004

³ I have used the British spelling ‘ageing’ throughout this thesis, except when quoting (as here) from a writer who uses the American form.

described her personal experience of the invisibility brought about by the ‘lethal synergy’ of ageism and heterosexism:

Now that we are sixty years old and beyond, [...] my lover and I can walk down the street holding hands and affectionately kissing – without an eyebrow being raised because *no-one notices us – we have become invisible!* Actions which previously would cause reprisals are now ignored. If by chance we are noticed, it would not matter anyway because old women are presumed to be asexual! We certainly do not regret the lack of reprisals. What is devastating is that with age we have become non-persons.

How large is this ‘hidden’ or ‘invisible’ minority? There are no reliable statistics for the number of lesbians, gay men or bisexuals in the UK. The first official attempt to quantify this demographic, the UK Integrated Household Survey (Office for National Statistics, 2011), identified 1.5 per cent of the population as lesbian, gay or bisexual. This figure was obtained from face-to-face research that asked people to self-identify, a method that is problematic given the reluctance of many lesbian, gay and bisexual people to disclose their sexual orientation to complete strangers, and that has been shown substantially to under-estimate the size of the LGBT population (Coffman, Coffman and Ericson, 2013). While 1.5 per cent were prepared to identify as lesbian or gay under these circumstances, nearly twice as many refused to answer the question. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the actual number of lesbians and gay men is considerably higher than this survey suggests.

There are 7.5 million women over sixty in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2013). Even using the Integrated Household Survey’s conservative estimate of 1.5 per cent, well over 100,000 of them can be assumed to identify as lesbian or bisexual (although the true number is probably much higher, for the reason given above). However Knocker (2012) and the UK parliamentary LGBTQ lobbying group Stonewall (2011) have both estimated that there are in the region of one million lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Britain over the age of 55. At least half of those – probably more, since women live longer than men – will be lesbians or bisexual women.

Using these estimates, then, there could be as many as half a million older lesbians in the UK; but no-one reading a British newspaper (or, indeed, an academic journal) or watching cinema or television is likely to be aware of the fact. It is important to understand and to challenge the internalised cultural assumptions which render such a significant portion of the population invisible because if, as Dyer (2002) maintains, how we are seen determines how we are treated, then those who are not culturally 'seen' will be treated as if they do not exist.

The situation is complicated further if the people we are trying to see are not only hidden but hiding. The fact that so many older lesbians are still wholly or partially closeted is often given as the reason why so little research into this group exists and why gay men are still more likely to be the subject of such work than lesbians (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003). In their study of LGBT people over 50 in the UK, Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003) hoped for an equal gender balance in their sample, but recruited only half as many women as men. One reason for this, they suggest, is that

...older lesbians may have particular concerns about "going public" about their sexuality, and experience greater pressures to conceal their sexual identities (2003:6).

They imply here that older lesbians are not only made invisible by cultural discourses, but also hide themselves as a protection against social oppression. They conclude that further research on experiences of old age by lesbians, and the development of research strategies to access this particularly hard to reach population, are urgent priorities.

My research takes up their challenge, demonstrating that, in spite of previous researchers' claims, older lesbians can be found; and that, in the appropriate context, they are more than willing to tell their stories. This thesis presents the findings of the first comprehensive survey of older lesbian life to be undertaken in the UK. It is based on both qualitative and quantitative data gathered from some 400 self-defined lesbians over 60, and offers new insights into a section of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community that is under-represented in both popular culture and academic research.

0.2 Theoretical approach and methodology

This is an interdisciplinary study, making use of methodologies associated with the disciplines of social science, life history and ethnography, and comprising three elements:

- two initial focus groups of lesbians over 60 (most participants were in their 70s), to identify key issues and generate topics for the questionnaire;
- a questionnaire survey, to gather quantitative data on older lesbian life in the UK and to enable comparison with existing research on non-heterosexual ageing;
- qualitative life history research to contextualise and illuminate the quantitative data from the survey.

My theoretical perspective is feminist, in that one of its principal aims is to make previously unheard women's voices heard; social constructionist, in that it acknowledges the shifting, contextual nature of identity and history; and critical humanist, in that it foregrounds life stories and other 'documents of life' (Plummer, 2001) as tools for social research, seeing the research process as being social, moral and political at every stage.

The initial intention of the project was a broadly ethnographic one, aiming simply to describe an under-researched community and to allow their opinions, attitudes and experiences to be heard. The provision of such extensive new data about a population that has been so overlooked can be regarded as an original contribution to knowledge in itself, and my original research question could have been expressed as simply as, 'When older lesbians do become visible, what can then be learned about their lives and experiences?' As in any inductive research, however, other questions soon emerged, to be refined during the research process. More specifically, this study now addresses the following questions:

- ***Hidden or hiding?*** Just how 'invisible' are older lesbians? To what extent do they feel able to respond to the more liberal legal and social climate of the early twenty-first century by 'coming out of the closet', even if they have not done so before? What might be their reasons for staying hidden?

- ***‘Old, sad and alone’?*** Do older lesbians conform to the ‘old, sad and alone’ stereotype of the ageing homosexual (Dorfman et al., 1995), or to the contrasting view that older non-heterosexuals have built strong support networks (Kehoe, 1988) and offer positive alternative models for ageing (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001)?
- ***Lesbian specificities?*** Considering that most LGBT ageing research is based on samples containing more men than women, are there aspects of personal history and ontology that are specific to older lesbians, that have been obscured by research with a general ‘LGBT’ focus?
- ***A meaningful category?*** Given the wide social, political and economic diversity of the research sample and the variety of their life experiences as revealed by the data, do older lesbians really have anything in common other than their sexual orientation? How useful is the term ‘older lesbian’ as an identity category?

0.3 Definitions

Since all the ways in which we categorise ourselves and others are socially constructed, it is necessary to explain briefly here how this study defines the category ‘older lesbian’. The publicity material I distributed at the start of the project (Appendix A) referred to ‘older lesbians’ and carried the headline ‘Woman over Sixty? Lesbian/Gay? Please take part!’ This meant that those who volunteered to participate would be people who self-defined in these ways. However, since the terms ‘older,’ ‘lesbian’ and ‘woman’ are both socially constructed and historically contested, I have outlined below their meanings in the context of this thesis.

‘Older’

Research into lesbian and gay ageing shows no consensus about what constitutes an ‘older’ lesbian or gay man. It can be as young as 40+ (Berger, 1982) or 50+ (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003). Clunis et al. (2005) interviewed lesbians over 55; Kehoe’s (1988) survey included lesbians over 60; Claassen (2005) studied a group of lesbians of whom the youngest was 67.

This study focuses on women who were aged over 60 in 2010; that is to say, those who were born in 1950 or before. I decided on 60 as the lowest age for the study for two main reasons. The first was that, for these generations of women in Britain, 60 was the official retirement age. Thus ‘women over 60’ is a culturally constructed and institutionally regulated age category (Bytheway, 1997:13). The second reason is that, although their ages range over some 30 years and they could be seen as belonging to two or even three different generations, they form an identifiable group in that their childhoods, and therefore the early formation of their cultural and moral values, pre-dated the major social changes of the 1960s and 1970s. Their lives and attitudes were shaped by the social history of the first half of the 20th century.

In a society that privileges youth and able-bodiedness, the word ‘old’ has negative and usually derogatory overtones (Cruikshank, 2008; Slevin, 2006). The term ‘older’ was strongly preferred by the focus group participants and is generally seen as more acceptable; I have used it here for those reasons.

‘Lesbian’

Grossman (2008:55) observes that, ‘One of the biggest challenges in conducting research with older LGB⁴ adults is measuring sexual orientation.’ In this case the task of identifying ‘lesbians’ was left to the participants, who identified themselves. In advertising the research and asking for participants, I decided to use the word ‘lesbian’ (even though many older women still habitually refer to themselves as ‘gay’) because I thought it was probably the most generally recognisable and acceptable word both to the generations I was studying and to the potential audiences for the research. The definition of lesbian identity which emerged from the data is that defined by Brown (1995:4): ‘a self-ascribed definition held by a woman over time and across situations as having primary sexual, affectional and relational ties to other women.’

The changing meanings of the word ‘lesbian’ and of same sex love among women through history have been discussed elsewhere (Faderman, 1981; Donoghue, 1993;

⁴ Grossman was writing before the ‘T’ (for transgender) or the ‘Q’ (for queer) became a conventional part of this shorthand way of referencing alternative sexualities. In this thesis I have used different forms of the acronym in different places, according to the historical and political context being discussed and the usage favoured by the writers quoted.

Oram and Turnbull, 2001, among others). The cultural meanings of lesbianism that were formative for participants in this study are those that were current in the first half of the 20th century, as illustrated and analysed by historians such as Laura Doan (2001) and Rebecca Jennings (2007). For Doan, the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 was a 'crystallising moment' in the construction of a visible modern English lesbian subculture, and Hall a key figure in the production of the 'classic iconic type of the mannish lesbian' (2001:xii-xxiii). Although Doan and Garrity (2006) have demonstrated the existence of a range of 'sapphic modernities' – alternative, competing models of lesbian identity and desire – in the inter-war period, some older participants described how they grew up with the stereotype derived from Hall's protagonist Stephen Gordon as their only available cultural model of a lesbian. After the Second World War, the growth of a more varied lesbian social scene and the impact of feminism offered a wider variety of options to those forming lesbian identities in the post-war years. After the mid-century, the Women's Liberation Movement offered some women new models of lesbian identity. Jennings (2007) provides a detailed account of these developments, tracing the emergence of the lesbian social scene in Britain, beginning in the nightclubs of post-war London, and developing more widely through lesbian magazines and social organisations. These are the historical events against which the women in the study developed their sense of lesbian self.

'Woman'

The sex and gender of the participants were also a matter of self-definition. The overwhelming majority of the survey respondents (see Chapter 3) described themselves as female.

0.4 Outline of chapters

Chapter 1, 'Missing Sisters', reviews the existing research literature on non-heterosexual ageing, and on older lesbians in particular, showing the need for this study. Chapter 2 describes the project's methodology, including the research design, how the methodology worked in practice and the ethical considerations that it raised.

The remaining chapters present the findings from the research and are arranged in three sections: 'Living in the Present,' 'Talking about the Past' and 'Thinking about the Future.' This life-course approach to the data reveals how the lives and behaviours of older lesbians in the present (as well as their expectations for the future) are intimately connected to their experiences of the past.

Section II, 'Living in the Present', describes the current lives of the women in the study, emphasising their diversity as well as what they have in common. Chapter 3, 'Similarities and differences', introduces the participants and raises a recurrent theme of this thesis: the tension between the ways in which older lesbians are like other older people (and different from each other) and the ways in which their sexual orientation might make them 'different' from others (and more like each other). Chapter 4, 'Everyday Life', describes participants' daily lives, domestic arrangements and relationships. Chapter 5, 'Community and Friendship', describes aspects of older lesbian life and friendship that can be seen as characterising the collective 'difference' of this population.

Another recurrent theme of this research is the way in which past lives and experiences continue to shape identity throughout the life course. Section III, 'Talking about the Past,' draws on participants' life histories to explore the extent to which older lesbians' characteristic attitudes and behaviours in the present have their roots in their shared past. Chapter 6 describes the formative experiences of those who were aware of their same-sex desires or their gender non-conformity at an early age. Chapter 7 uses a metaphor of place drawn from cultural geography to explore two contrasting milieus (the women's Armed Forces and the Women's Liberation Movement) in which women could develop a variety of lesbian identities. Chapter 8 looks at the experience of living with a stigmatised identity and takes Plummer's (1995) idea of sexual stories as narratives of 'suffering, surviving and surpassing' to consider some of the ways that older lesbians have dealt with prejudice and discrimination.

Section IV, 'Thinking about the Future', (Chapter 9), continues the theme of identity careers as shaped by past experience. It presents participants' expectations and concerns about what might lie ahead for them as they grow older, and suggests that these futures, like their lives so far, will be determined partly by their sexual orientation but also by

the myriad other intersecting identities and social forces that have shaped their lives up to now.

Chapter 10 summarises these findings in the light of the research questions outlined above.

CHAPTER 1

‘MISSING SISTERS’: THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

1.1 Mechanisms of exclusion

Introducing her study of working-class lesbians, Taylor (2007:1) asks, ‘why they weren’t included in the first place?’ and the same question might well be asked about older lesbians. The answer, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, is that the production of knowledge is not only classed and gendered but also aged; and that women who are both lesbian and old are frequently marginalised to the point of invisibility.

Cultural geographers Chouinard and Grant (1996) have also drawn attention to what they call the ‘missing sisters’ in social research. They argue that even the radical ‘project’ in critical geography, with its emphasis on processes of oppression rooted in class, gender and race, can be discriminatory. By its very concentration on those three mechanisms of oppression, it implicitly excludes others: ‘The disabled, lesbians, gays, the elderly and children are frequently invisible’ (1996:171). Such absences are not confined to geography: as this chapter will show, scholars in other disciplines demonstrate a similar inability to consider more than one identity category or process of oppression at a time.

Older lesbians occupy two of Chouinard and Grant’s exemplary categories of exclusion and are liable to be ignored on both counts. In sexuality studies, their omission can be the result of a concentration on the shared oppression of lesbians and gay men (and, more recently, of bisexuals, trans people and others with alternative sexualities). By implicitly assuming a monolithic commonality of experience, this approach can unintentionally erase the experiences of women. Given the importance of gender in structuring everyday life, such commonalities cannot be taken for granted, as Chouinard and Grant themselves point out:

To state the obvious: lesbians are women, gay men are men and thus common experience cannot be presumed [...] Both lesbians and gay men engage in same-

sex relationships and experience oppressive marginalisation, but there is no reason to assume they must have any more in common than that (1996:177-8).

As I will show later in this chapter, the occlusion of lesbian experience has also characterised much work in the newer field of LGBT ageing studies, where women have been consistently under-represented. Specifically lesbian research has offered older women no better representation: while honouring lesbian experience, it routinely fails to consider the old (Barker, 2004:30).

This chapter summarises existing research in non-heterosexual ageing studies, showing how it has marginalised women and led to a lack of broad-based ethnographic and empirical data on older lesbian lives in the UK.

1.2 Beginnings

For much of the 20th century, the study of sexualities on both sides of the Atlantic was the province of medical science; its main reference points were still 19th and early 20th century sexologists such as Hirschfeld, Freud and Krafft-Ebing, and biologists such as Kinsey (Plummer, 1992). It was not until the 1970s that the interdisciplinary project we now recognise as lesbian and gay studies began to emerge, initially within the disciplines of psychology, sociology and history. Sexualities research in this period can be seen as a form of activism, often by openly lesbian and gay academics. Perhaps inevitably, their work reflected their own lived experience, and rarely if ever considered the existence of older lesbians and gay men. American gerontologists Butler and Lewis (1976:56), writing about sexuality in old age, could only hypothesise that ‘homosexual unions exist among older people,’ admitting ‘little is known about them’. Specifically lesbian studies are rare in this period, and are no better at addressing, or even identifying, the existence of older lesbians. For instance, a pioneering survey of lesbian identity management (Moses, 1978) makes no reference either to ageing or to older women. This persistent gap in the data leads to some extraordinary conclusions: Poor (1982: 165) deduces that ‘relatively few women over sixty-five identify themselves as lesbians’, adding later, more accurately, ‘We do not know the number of lesbians over sixty-five.’

On the rare occasions that the intersection of ageing and sexuality was considered, it was by American scholars, and the subjects were, as they acknowledged, almost always (white, middle-class) men. Kimmel (1978) noted the absence of available data on older 'lesbians and non-advantaged males'. Berger (1982:155-6), set out to study gay men and lesbians over 40 but, after failing to recruit more than a handful of women, decided to limit his analysis to men. He suggests that the absence of female respondents, in spite of 'many efforts', reflects the fact that the public gay scene is dominated by white males. Much of the recruiting for his survey was done in gay bars and bath houses; Berger does not go on to speculate about where the older lesbians might have been found.

1.3 Older lesbians speak for themselves

It remained (then as now) for older lesbians to make themselves visible. Among the first were three older women in the Women's Liberation Movement who had found themselves marginalised not only by men but by younger feminists. Macdonald and Rich (1991; first published 1983) and Copper (1988) produced powerful polemics challenging ageism between women and demanding a voice for old lesbians. Their work is among the first to explore the intersections of age and gender, ageism and heterosexism:

[T]o begin to understand ageism is to recognize that it is a point of convergence for many other repressive forces (Macdonald and Rich, 1983:61).

These early writings by and about older lesbians tend to be auto-ethnographic. Dunker (1987) like Macdonald, Rich and Copper, frames her 'observations and speculations' on being an ageing lesbian with an autobiographical sketch. She represents lesbian old age in a positive light, suggesting that old women who are also lesbians are advantaged by being of necessity independent, adaptable, able to support themselves:

We're not likely to have dependents. We're used to making choices, and we've paid our dues. We can take good care of our health, to stay alive, and lively. We've survived despite discrimination and oppression. We can ignore the stereotypes and take risks (1987:79).

She speaks here, however, as an educated, middle-class woman. Less advantaged older lesbians might well, as Kehoe (1988:76) suggested in her study of older lesbians in the US, feel less confident in the face of their multiple oppressions.

Although the 1980s also saw the first empirical studies of lesbian old age (again in the US), many of these were unpublished Masters' theses⁵ and made comparatively little impact. Robinson (1979, cited in Kehoe, 1988:7) interviewed 20 lesbian women over 50 for her Master's research at California State University; seven were over 60. Almvig's descriptive study of 25 lesbians over 60, *Aging and Lesbianism: The Invisible Minority* (1982), also originally a thesis, was published in the same year that Poor (1982) was remarking on the non-existence of older lesbians. Adelman carried out research with older lesbians throughout the 1970s, completing her doctoral thesis in 1980, and published a collection of life stories based on her interviews (Adelman, 1986). Meyer and Raphael (1988) studied a group of lesbians over 50, observing the ways in which they adjusted to ageing.

If these early studies are the foundation stones of lesbian gerontology, then the work of Monika Kehoe must stand as the first major edifice. Kehoe is forthright about the need for her research:

Invisible as a female, aging, and deviant, ignored by gerontologists, feminists, even sexologists dealing specifically with homosexuality, lesbians over 65 have been an unknown, mysterious minority. They are a social embarrassment to the wider community and the presumption has been – if anyone thought about it at all – that lesbians, as well as gay men, are either 'cured' when they reach seniority or die young from alcoholism, suicide, or social diseases (1986:139).

Her initial survey (Kehoe, 1986) involved fifty lesbians between the ages of 65 and 85. She followed it with a much larger, national study (Kehoe, 1988) carried out by postal questionnaire, which gathered data from 100 women over 60. This survey is wide-ranging: its 87 questions cover identity, health, family and social relationships, lifestyle and life-satisfaction. Inevitably, given the necessity for the 'snowball' method of recruiting respondents from a deeply closeted population, the study did not represent a

⁵ Cruikshank (1991:82-3) gives a comprehensive list of these.

full cross-section of the lesbian community. Kehoe acknowledges that the majority of women in her sample were 'literate, articulate Caucasians, above average in health, education and income', and that ethnic minority women, as well those she describes as 'less educated, less secure', were under-represented (1988:6). Kehoe's older lesbian is summed up as:

...a reasonably well-adjusted, happy individual who, in spite of the strain of living as a deviant, has been a productive citizen, functioning in what must have been, at least at times, an unsympathetic environment (1988:84).

In compiling this composite portrait, Kehoe recognises the comparative privilege of most of her respondents, and acknowledges 'the real problems of the nearly two million lesbians over 60 in the United States not reached by this survey [...] who may be ill, economically deprived, institutionalized, or living with unsympathetic relatives' and who, she suggests, 'are probably in the majority' (1988:76). The most serious problems affecting the older lesbians in her study were 'those that affect many women of advanced age in our society: loneliness and economic problems' (Kehoe, 1988:77).

Carrying out this ground-breaking research in her late 70s, Kehoe sees herself as an activist for the rights of her own generation:

The new project was to gather information on a hidden population that had never before been investigated exclusively in this age group, in order to secure a needs assessment, and to disseminate the findings as widely as possible. Doing so could (a) help to reduce homophobia, (b) sensitize those who work with the aged, and (c) support the establishment of retirement facilities for lesbians (1988:4).

She expresses the hope that:

...university departments [...] will be persuaded to allow, and even support, graduate students and faculty wishing to pursue this long-neglected field of enquiry (1986:7).

Kehoe also calls for researchers ‘to investigate further this hidden population that is another fascinating component of our diverse society’ (1988:76). In fact, nothing approaching the scale or scope of her work was to be achieved for 20 years or more.

1.4 Theorising lesbian and gay ageing

These early studies of lesbian and gay ageing share a theoretical position: the determination to challenge stereotypes of homosexual old age as sad and lonely. Reid (1995) cites Weinberg and Williams (1971), Kelly (1977), Minnigerode and Adelman (1978) and Berger (1980), who all represent older lesbians and gay men as functioning well and having supportive networks of friends that serve as buffers against society’s heterosexism and homophobia. Kimmel (1978:117) suggests that the coping mechanisms developed to deal with the experience of stigma might function in a positive way to assist ageing: once homosexual people have resolved the early life crisis that results from identifying as gay, they may have gained a ‘perspective on life crises and a sense of crisis competence that buffers the person against later life crises’. Friend (1987:311) supports this view, identifying ways in which a gay lifestyle ‘may function to allow the older homosexual to develop ways of taking care of themselves that feel comfortable and appropriate.’ From a similarly positive perspective, Reid (1995:215) argues that:

The assumption that aging is synonymous with decline becomes particularly negative when generalized to older lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals who have been incorrectly portrayed as lonely and pathetically miserable. Such myth and stereotypes are not substantiated by research on the lives of older gay men and lesbians.

Like Kimmel (1978), Reid believes that ‘[t]he unique adaptations made by gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals serve to illustrate concepts of optimal adult development and aging’ (1995:218). Citing the work of Friend (1980) and Raphael and Robinson (1980), he points out that ‘we now know that older gay men and lesbians are not inevitably alone and despondent.’ For instance, he says, they are quite likely to have had heterosexual marriages producing children and /or to have ‘reconstituted families in the form of friendship and support networks, which serve as substitutes for traditional families’ (1995:218).

Friend (1987) later developed a more nuanced approach: his proposal for a theoretical framework for studying non-heterosexual old age presents these positive and negative views of lesbian and gay old age not as contradictory but as two points on a spectrum. Both depictions can be accurate, he says: the 'double stigmatisation and oppression of both age and an unpopular sexual orientation' can result not just in support networks and coping mechanisms, but also in 'unique conflicts and problems' (1987:309).

Friend's theory of 'successful non-heterosexual aging', developed in two further articles (1989 and 1990), rests therefore on the idea of a 'continuum' that acknowledges the diversity of older lesbian and gay experience. He identifies three points on this continuum, which he labels 'Stereotypic', 'Affirmative' and 'Passing.'

'Stereotypic' older lesbians and gay men are at the negative end of the spectrum. They 'conform to the stereotype of being lonely, depressed and isolated' and their responses to heterosexism are 'in the direction of internalised homophobia'. In the middle are the 'passing' older lesbians and gays, who accommodate heterosexism by 'marginally accepting some aspects of homosexuality but still believing that heterosexuality is inherently better'. They have 'a strong investment in either passing as non-gay or non-lesbian, or at least not appearing to be stereotypically lesbian or gay.' At the positive end of the scale are 'affirmative' older homosexuals, who 'are described in the research literature as psychologically well-adjusted, vibrant and adapting well to the aging process'. They 'represent those whose response to heterosexism is one of reconstructing a positive and affirmative sense of self' (1990:104). Friend's theory is that the continuum of responses outlined above mirrors the range of successful or unsuccessful ageing. Thus 'those who will age successfully are those whose identities are formed in the affirmative direction' (1990:109).

Grossman (1997) builds on this approach with his concept of the 'virtual' and 'actual' identities of older non-heterosexuals. Citing Kehoe's (1986) 'invisible minority', he notes that many older lesbians and gays *choose* that invisibility, a continuation of passing as straight earlier in their lives, and a position which he sees as informed by internalised homophobia. In his view these people present 'virtual' identities to the world, concealing their 'actual' (homosexual) identities. Grossman also suggests that, as well as subscribing to stereotypes of gayness in the ways outlined by Friend, many older

lesbians and gays also subscribe to the myths about ageing, leading to internalised ageism. Both attitudes must be challenged, because:

The invisibility, myths and stereotypical attitudes about older lesbians and gay men are a form of social control that serves to keep this group powerless. [...] They are deprived of quality of life (1997:613).

For Friend, then, happy old age requires the eradication of internalised homophobia and the development of a positive attitude to one's sexual orientation. Later writers developed this idea further to suggest that 'coming out' is the route to a good old age. The idea that successful adaptation involves 'coming out' has become a truism of lesbian and gay studies: for Sedgwick (1990:71), the closet is 'the defining structure for gay oppression in this century' and for Seidman (2002:30), to be in the closet is to suffer 'systematic harm'. Coming out is therefore seen as the 'healthy' choice, although Reid (1995:219) observes that, because it is such 'a major developmental transition', in which the individual must 'terminate his or her previous life structure and initiate a new self concept', it may tax some people's coping strategies, rather than lead to personal growth. Finally, however, he concurs with Kimmel's (1978) and Friend's (1990) opinion that – however long it takes and at whatever age it occurs – coming out of the closet is beneficial to the individual.

Three main themes, then, can be said to characterise critical writing on lesbian and gay ageing in the late 20th century: the first, seeking to counteract negative stereotypes, emphasises the strengths and resilience that result from managing a stigmatised identity; the second focuses on the role of internalised homophobia in decisions about self-disclosure; the third considers the damaging effects of self-concealment and equates 'coming out' with optimal ageing development.

1.5 Meanwhile, in the UK...

At this point it is important to point out that, without exception, the research on non-heterosexual ageing referred to so far in this chapter was carried out and published in the United States. Further, as both Turnbull (2002) and Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2004) have noted, the applicability of existing North American studies to the British

context is limited. Until about ten years ago, however, it was all that was available, since lesbian and gay gerontology in the UK was almost non-existent.

Although some important early work on sexualities was done by British researcher-activists (among others, McIntosh, 1968; Plummer, 1975, 1981; Weeks, 1990, first published 1977), the UK's contribution to the development of lesbian and gay studies has been called 'negligible' (Plummer, 1992:7). It would probably be fairer to say that sexualities research and activism in Britain in the second half of the 20th century was largely focused on domestic political issues. Of the three high-profile political causes (the 1960s campaign to de-criminalise sex between men, the controversy around Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988⁶ and the advent of HIV/AIDS) that dominated discourses about homosexuality in the UK in this period, the first two were specifically national issues.

The nature of all three debates ensured that, while homosexuality became culturally visible in Britain, it was men (and, most often, young men) who were its public face, as homosexuality became a topical subject for journalists. Although lesbians had always been less culturally visible, the media spotlight that was thrown on to gay men by the campaign around the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 was occasionally directed on to women. The tone of television documentaries about lesbians in this period – such as *Lesbians* (1965), and *Consenting Adults: the Women* (1967) – is one of fascinated but slightly pitying curiosity: a style of journalism which takes 'the (assumed straight) viewer on a whistle-stop tour of "the twilight world of the homosexual", a place peopled by back-lit, silhouetted victims' (Richardson, 1995:236). Following the change in the law on male homosexuality in 1968, Robert Kitts' film *The Important Thing is Love* (1971) marked a shift in attitude, no longer presenting lesbians as pitiable misfits but as the victims of social injustice. These documentaries mark an important stage in the growth of cultural visibility for lesbians in the UK – or, more accurately, for young, conventionally attractive lesbians. Although 1970s Britain was cautiously ready for the idea of The Lesbian, it had not even begun to imagine The Old Lesbian.

⁶ This Section of the Act stated that a local authority 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. It was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in the rest of Great Britain in 2003.

Academic research in this period reflects the same low levels of lesbian and gay visibility, and the same unconscious ageism. UK scholars produced nothing comparable with the work being done by Adelman and Kehoe in America. In 1980s Britain older lesbians, if mentioned at all, were more likely to be found in feminist fiction (Lowery, 2007), oral history (Hall Carpenter Archives, 1989; Lesbian Identity Project, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) or drama (the film *The Killing of Sister George* was first shown in London in 1968). This cultural context makes the work of Neild and Pearson in the late 1980s even more remarkable. They produced two documentary films about the lives of lesbians over 60 (*Women Like Us*, 1990, and *Women Like That*, 1992), which were screened on prime-time television,⁷ and subsequently published a book (Neild and Pearson, 1992) on the same theme.

The uniqueness of their work lies in its representation of *older* lesbian women, and its determinedly anti-ageist stance. Pearson explains:

Lesbians in the late 80s were rarely mentioned on TV and older lesbians simply did not exist in the world of television. Older people, and in particular older women, were not considered to have any sexual passions, were not expected to have radical views, and if they strayed from these narrow and diminishing stereotypes were seen as endearing eccentrics, and were more or less invisible. We wanted to redress that balance. (Interview, cited in Traies, 2009:52)

The films feature 16 older lesbians, aged between 54 and 81, talking about their lives. These women challenge many prevailing lesbian stereotypes, being neither tweedy butches like Sister George nor the hyper-feminine lesbians of heterosexual pornography; they are neither predatory nor man-hating. The second film, *Women like That*, is in some ways the more radical of the two. In the second half of the programme, the women reflect on relationships, love and sex. They talk about new lovers and the pain of parting from old ones; about their ageing bodies and the changing nature of desire; and about their plans for the future. The unique achievement of *Women Like That* is not simply its focus on old women talking about their lives but what it has to say about old age and intimacy. It was ground-breaking then and it is still extraordinary

⁷ *Women Like Us* was first broadcast on 10 April 1990, in the second season of Channel 4's lesbian and gay series, *Out On Tuesday*. It was repeated two years later, together with the sequel, *Women Like That*.

because, although the sight of people discussing every aspect of their lives on television has since become commonplace, it would still be extremely unusual for prime viewing time to be given to elderly women talking with such candour about their intimate and sexual relationships. *Women Like Us* and *Women Like That* show old women as having strong subjectivity, as agents in the making of their own present and future lives. They position old lesbians as independent, creative and politically active.

More than two decades later, it is apparent that these two films and the book that followed them were not the precursors of the greater visibility for older lesbians Neild and Pearson hoped for. On the contrary, the programmes still constitute a unique cultural text. Neither the advocacy of Copper, Macdonald and Kehoe in the US nor the ground-breaking work of Neild and Pearson in the UK brought about the increased awareness of older lesbian life that their authors sought. Older women continued to be under-represented in academic research as well as in the broadcast media and popular culture; older lesbians remained invisible.

1.6 Twenty-first century developments

As the ageing of populations in Western societies becomes an increasingly urgent issue for politicians and policy-makers, gerontology as a discipline has expanded on both sides of the Atlantic. Until very recently, however, lesbians have remained an ‘invisible minority’ in this research field too:

Like women of color, lesbians are ‘special’ and unlikely to be seen as norms for aging. Nearly all published work on women’s aging assumes heterosexuality (Cruikshank, 2010:121).

The situation is changing, slowly, as concerns about the provision of services for old people prompt a new interest in the diversity of ageing populations. The last decade has seen a marked increase in the study of non-heterosexual ageing, in both Britain and the United States. As the field expands, it is possible to identify differences of research emphasis between the two.

Concluding her comprehensive survey of lesbian ageing studies in the US, Barker (2004: 67) concludes:

Before wider social justice can be achieved for any oppressed sexual minority population, rigorous, detailed, accurate and extensive empirical data must be gathered and used to present contextualised and complete descriptions of their lives and circumstances.

This ethnographic enterprise, of making a little-known population visible, has produced some important recent studies of older lesbians in the US, building on the foundations laid by Kehoe in the 1980s. For instance, Garnets and Peplau (2006) and Moran (2008) have studied sexuality in the lives of older lesbian and bisexual women, focusing on the way in which women's sexual orientation can change over time. Clunis et al. (2005) studied 62 lesbians aged over 55 in Washington, Oregon and California, resulting not just in a collection of oral histories but also in a detailed picture of the women's present lives. Claassen (2005) has produced an interview-based ethnographic account of a group of wealthy middle- and upper-class older lesbians living in the Appalachian mountains in South Carolina. Her work challenges lesbian stereotypes and is also important because it provides rare information about the 'old-old': her youngest participant was 67 and the oldest 88. These two studies add to the variety of older lesbian lives on record. Both also display the activist-advocacy of the 'insider' researcher. Clunis et al. describe how they

...embarked on a project which we hoped would bring our lesbian elders out of the shadows, restore our history, and provide at least some of the information necessary to meet the future needs of aging lesbians (Clunis et al., 2005:ix).

Dana Rosenfeld (1999, 2003, 2005) has used similar empirical research with older lesbians and gay men to produce a carefully developed theoretical framework for considering the relationship between age and other aspects of identity. She is interested in 'the complex interplay between life-course and experiences, generation, and the local production and elaboration of personal and group identity', and she suggests that these effects can be most clearly seen in the experiences and expressions of members of stigmatised groups whose recent history includes an identity politics that often explicitly continues to reformulate the 'nature' of its members. 'Elderly members of stigmatised

groups in particular have witnessed – and been implicated in – a number of reformulations of their stigma and their subcultures, and thus have access to an especially complex set of resources through which to construct their identities’ (1999:122). Among such groups Rosenfeld identifies the ‘distinctiveness of lesbian and gay elderly’, saying that:

[W]hile all elderly have witnessed the radical reformulation of identities such as race and gender in the course of their lives [...] elderly gay men and lesbians’ distinctive historical location in this century’s rapid, ongoing discursive reinvention of homosexuality makes their identity work a rich investigative area (1999:122).

To explore this idea, she uses the concept of ‘identity careers,’ originally coined by C. Wright Mills (1959, cited in Rosenfeld, 2003), arguing that:

[B]iographical narratives are not just accounts of life-long experience, but are significantly shaped both in form and content by the ideas and values of the historical period in which they are embedded. How people experience their later years, for example, is strongly influenced by the period in which they came of age. This bears especially on their sense in later life of who and what they have become (Rosenfeld, 2003:160).

Rosenfeld’s theory is built on a series of interviews with older gay men and lesbians living in Los Angeles in 1995 (unusually, there are more women than men in this sample). She says that, regardless of birth cohort, there are two distinct identity cohorts within the group, differently situated in relation to the two different discourses about homosexuality ‘and whose identity work centres on the differential and consequential use of the discourse into which they “came out”.’ Rosenfeld describes how she was struck by

... the extent to which ‘the emergence of gay liberation in the late 1960s and 1970s – which divided subjects’ lives into an era in which homosexuality was exclusively constructed as a shameful stigma and a new period in which being gay was increasingly viewed as a positive identity – affected their recollections of sexual experiences and the identity issues that flowed from them. [...] these

subjects were members of a cohort who formed sexual identities at a time of tremendous change, and they were now constructing narratives of life experiences that reflected just how much their identity careers were still being shaped by these events, even later in life (2003:161).

In *The Changing of the Guard* (2005), Rosenfeld expands on the nature of this historical change, which she characterises as moving from the 1950s, when the only identity model available was a stigmatised one, to a period of liberation that complicated the array of options and included an ‘accredited’ identity. Depending on the choices people made, they fall into two different identity cohorts: the ‘discreditable’, formed before the 1960s, and the ‘accredited’, formed after that period of change. According to this model, people of the same chronological age can have different identity careers and fall into different ‘identity cohorts’. Cronin (2004) has made a similar point when she suggests that, in addition to age cohorts that pre- and post-date liberation, men and women who adopted a non-heterosexual identity and/or lifestyle in later life might form a third identity cohort, cutting across age boundaries. According to this theory, date of birth can prove to be less significant for identity formation than – for instance – date of coming out.

While North American researchers have continued to produce broadly ethnographic and empirical work on which to build theory about non-heterosexual ageing, recent research in the UK has had a more utilitarian focus, drawing attention to the needs of older LGBT people and intended to improve services for them.⁸ Hubbard and Rossington (1995:16) note this difference when they say, ‘US research on lesbian and gay ageing [...] is abstracted to some degree from policy concerns.’ The recent growth in research on LGBT ageing in Britain, by contrast, has been driven almost entirely by issues of social policy.

Concerns about the health and social care needs of older lesbian, gay and bisexual people are not new: Ridley (1989) was among the first to highlight the lack of awareness of LGBT issues in social work with older people, and a report by the Pensioners’ Link Lesbian Workers’ Group in the same year (1989) contains several case

⁸ Recent Australian research is similarly focused: for example, Barrett (2008); Hughes (2009); Hughes and Kentlyn (2011).

studies of older lesbians reliant on social services who had been severely disadvantaged by social work practice that did not provide for their needs. But these were very much lone voices and their work was not widely accessible. One of the first systematic surveys of the housing needs of older lesbians and gay men formed the basis for a report by Hubbard and Rossington (1995) recommending specific housing and social care provision adapted to the needs of older LGB people and calling for training for service providers. Brown (1992, 1998) advocates that good anti-discriminatory social work practice with LGBT people should be part of wider good practice (1998: 21), and Langley (2001: 917) highlights key challenges for social workers, including ‘the need for greater awareness of the heterosexist assumptions which influence institutional responses and individual practice’. These attempts to make non-heterosexual people visible to the health and social care professions have developed alongside a growing awareness of the need to address the sexuality of older people generally (for example, Wilton, 2000; Hall, 2006).

In the absence of official data about LGBT older adults, research about them is often based on studies conducted (and funded) by community organizations (De Vries and Croghan, 2014). Some of the strongest recent research into the needs of older LGBT people in the UK has been the result of participative projects in which communities work in partnership with academic researchers. Ward, River and Fenge (2008) have described two of these. The *Polari in Partnership Project* was conducted by the London-based voluntary organisation Polari. It was conceived as a result of previous research and consultation (Hubbard and Rossington, 1995; Davies et al., 2006) into the views and expressed needs of older lesbians and gay men, and carried out in collaboration with local LGBT groups, planners, commissioners and providers in three London boroughs. The second project (Help and Care Development, 2006) was a joint initiative between a voluntary agency, working with older people and their carers on the south coast of England, and Bournemouth University.

Common to both projects were frequent encounters with service providers and policy makers who had previously employed terms such as ‘hard to reach,’ ‘hidden,’ and ‘invisible,’ to collectively label older lesbians and gay men.

However, both initiatives demonstrated that OLGs [sic] are not silent by choice;

they are often silenced by policy and practice which actively excludes and marginalises their needs and perspectives (Ward, River and Fenge, 2008:159).

More recently the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, in partnership with researchers from Kingston University, undertook the project ‘Older LGBT Matters,’ which resulted in training and awareness-raising across the borough and beyond. Such collaborative projects, characterised by community engagement with academic research, are a strong feature of contemporary British research in this area.

Two more traditional, large-scale studies (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003; Stonewall, 2011) have made a significant contribution to the understanding of older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lives and, potentially, to public policy. The research into the social and policy implications of non-heterosexual ageing conducted by Heaphy and his colleagues in 2001-2 and analysed in successive articles (e.g. Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003, 2004; Heaphy and Yip, 2006) explored the experience of self-identified lesbians, gay men and bisexuals aged between 50 and 80-plus, and generated cross-sectional, prospective and retrospective data on ageing and living as an older non-heterosexual. A key finding of this research is ‘the complexity of social exclusion in relation to older non-heterosexual lives. Participants broadly shared the view that lesbians, gay men and bisexuals are discriminated against in society’ (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003:3). Heaphy and Yip (2006:443) conclude that:

Current discourse on older people’s needs and citizenship is framed by a heteronormative perspective, which marginalises lesbians and gay men. It is only recently that some advocates for older people have recognised the existence of older lesbians and gay men. For instance Age Concern, in 2001, acknowledged that the ‘invisibility’ of older lesbians and gay men at all levels of relevant policy means that they face particular risks of exclusion.

For my purposes, the chief limitation of this research is the under-representation of lesbians in the over-60 age groups. The authors acknowledge that their final sample is not as balanced as they had wished in terms of gender (just under 40 per cent women, and over 60 per cent men) or age: ‘While accessing women in their 50s proved relatively unproblematic (78 per cent of the female sample), difficulties were

experienced in recruiting women over 60' (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003:6). Only three of the women in the study were over 70.

A recent report by the lobbying group Stonewall (2011) is based on by far the largest sample to date: 1,050 heterosexual and 1,036 lesbian, gay and bisexual people over the age of 55 across Britain. The main thrust of the report is that:

Getting older can be much more complex for lesbian, gay and bisexual people than heterosexual people as they are more likely to face the prospect either alone or without as much personal support as their heterosexual counterparts (Stonewall, 2011:3).

It follows that:

...[w]ith diminished support networks in comparison to their heterosexual peers, more lesbian, gay and bisexual people expect they will need to rely on formal support services as they get older (Stonewall, 2011:3).

This research (commissioned by Stonewall and carried out by YouGov) had an overtly political purpose and the findings are presented in the way that will make the most forcible case for change. Hence, the picture of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender ageing presented in the report emphasises the problems faced by this community. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people over 55 are more likely to be single than their heterosexual counterparts; more likely to live alone; less likely to have children and less likely to see biological family members on a regular basis. In addition, older lesbian, gay and bisexual people drink alcohol more often, are more likely to take drugs and are more likely to have a history of mental ill health. Half of those surveyed felt that their sexual orientation already had, or would have, a negative effect on their experience of ageing (Stonewall, 2011:3).

Unfortunately the Stonewall report does not include a demographic breakdown of the survey sample so that, although respondents of different ages and socio-economic groups are mentioned in the text, it is not immediately obvious what proportion were (for example) from more or less advantaged socio-economic groups, or of minority ethnic heritage, or over 70. Another limitation is that, with one or two exceptions, the report does not distinguish between lesbians and gay men. Further investigation shows

that the 1,036 lesbian, gay and bisexual people who responded to the Stonewall survey comprised more than twice as many men as women (69 per cent were male and 30 per cent were female).⁹ Moreover just 56 per cent of the women – a mere 17 per cent of the whole sample – were over 60. Only six per cent of the whole sample were over 65, and one per cent over 70. This means that findings presented as descriptive of all ‘older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals’ are predominantly based on the responses of gay men and of women in their 50s.

In spite of these shortcomings with regard to older lesbians, the Stonewall report is important for several reasons: it is the first piece of research to make such a wide-ranging and revealing comparison with the mainstream heterosexual population; it makes a strong case for changes in service provision, which are clearly much needed, and offers a counterbalance to the image of cheerful, independent survivors which characterises much previous research on LGBT ageing. However in doing so it risks reinforcing the even older stereotype of ageing lesbians and gay men as ‘lonely, depressed and isolated’ (Friend, 1987).

Because (unlike in the United States) ‘the research community in the UK has largely ignored older LGBT people’ (Archibald, 2010:31), media coverage of the Stonewall report marked a rare public appearance for this hidden population. Set against a general lack of representation of older LGBT people, and the absence of theorised ethnographic work such as Clunis, Claassen and Rosenfeld have produced in the US, newspaper headlines depicting a needy, deficit model of lesbian, gay and bisexual old age resurrected an early stereotype of the ageing lesbian or gay man as ‘old, sad and alone’ (Dorfman et al., 1995).

Woodward (1999:155), commenting on the insufficiency of current models of female ageing ‘as we live into lives longer than we had imagined’, has suggested that we need ‘to create for ourselves cultural models of older women as a way of generating alternative futures for ourselves’. There is now a pressing need for older lesbians to do the same thing.

⁹ I am grateful to James Taylor, Senior Health Officer at Stonewall, and Susan Westwood, University of Keele, for these figures (personal emails, 24 September 2012).

1.7 Limitations of ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender’ ageing research

Grossman (1997) makes three important observations about the limitations of research on older lesbian and gay elders at the end of the 20th century. First, he says, such research has always been based on convenience samples and so, for the most part, the participants have been white, middle class and in the ‘affirming’ category: therefore existing data do not yet represent the diversity of class, ethnicity or economic status that actually exists. This situation has not changed, and also applies to my own research, since there are still no comprehensive, reliable national data on either side of the Atlantic that would enable random sampling of the LGBT population.

Second, he says, research has been biased towards the male:

The experiences of older lesbians have barely been researched. What research has been conducted is similar in its selectivity to the male cohorts, that is, with primarily white and middle-class participants (1997:620).

This lack of specifically lesbian (as opposed to lesbian and gay) ageing research is significant if, as Kehoe (1988), Friend (1990) and Grossman (1997) all suspect, the experience of non-heterosexual old age is different for men and women. Kehoe (1988) compares her results with those of Berger’s (1982) survey of older gay men, and finds significant differences. Among others, the lesbians were twice as likely to be married, ten times more likely to be celibate, and twice as likely to be unsatisfied with their current sex lives). Friend, too, is aware of the differences between lesbian and gay experiences of ageing. He suggests, for instance, that lesbians may be advantaged as they age because they place less importance on physical appearance than either gay men or heterosexual women, and put more value on ‘interpersonal qualities and relationships as measures of success’ (Friend, 1990:326).

Differences between the experiences of women and men can easily be lost when research is nominally ‘lesbian and gay’ but unbalanced in regard to gender. Feminist researcher Margaret Cruikshank is an exception. Reflecting on her own multiple

identities – woman, lesbian, old – she asks, ‘Is “old” as fundamental an identity as “woman”?’ and points out that, ‘As an old lesbian, I (usually) have more in common with heterosexual women my age than with my gay male contemporaries’ (Cruikshank, 2008:151). As later chapters will demonstrate, she speaks for many in her generation of lesbians; but it is a voice too often left unheard in studies that do not distinguish between the experiences of men and women.

The third limitation on existing data identified by Grossman is that most of the ‘older’ lesbians and gays studied are not actually very old. With Western populations increasingly living to very advanced ages, those over retirement age may now comprise two or even three generations as Friend (1990) points out, ‘There is virtually no information about the oldest old – those 70 years and above’ (1990:622).

Turnbull (2002) notes an almost identical list of shortcomings in research with older lesbians and gay men:

Research focuses on the ‘young old’ of 50 years, or younger, to 69 years. We know very little about lesbians and gay men over 70 years of age.
 Much research does not differentiate between gay men and women.
 Research reflects the experiences of those living in large urban communities.
 Research reflects the experiences of white, well-educated, affluent individuals
 (2002:2).

I would add two further limitations to Grossman’s list. The first is that lesbian and gay elders are still likely to appear *only* in work relating to lesbian and gay ageing. They are rarely, if ever, included in research on other aspects of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender life. Otherwise excellent studies of lesbian life styles and identities (for example Dunne, 1997; Estenberg, 1997) find no place for the experiences of older women, while mainstream gerontological studies (Allatt et al., 1987; Jamieson, Harper and Victor, 1997, among many others) rarely, if ever, include lesbians.

Finally, older lesbians, when they are mentioned at all, tend to be treated as a single, homogenous group. This is connected to the point made at the start of this chapter about the inability of researchers to consider the ways in which identity categories (and mechanism of exclusion) intersect. Kehoe’s (1986) use of the phrase ‘triply invisible’.

frequently reiterated by others, draws attention to the multiple oppressions that afflict older lesbians. At the same time, in highlighting that combination of ageism, sexism and heterosexism, it implies that all older lesbians will suffer similar levels of marginalisation and disempowerment. In fact, several studies of older non-heterosexuals (for instance, Hunt and Fish, 2008; Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2004; Valentine, 1996) show that not only age, gender, ethnicity and class but also health status, social networks and geographical location can intersect to determine their life chances. As Cronin and King (2010) have pointed out, the ‘additive’ approach to oppressions ignores the way that these numerous power relations and social divisions interact to affect the lives of individuals and so may unwittingly re-inscribe inequalities, by obscuring differences.

Intersectionality theory offers a way of exploring the interplay between the multiple inequalities in individual lives. Using this approach, Crenshaw (1991) highlighted the interplay of race and gender; Skeggs (1997, 2004) and Taylor (2007, 2009) have explored the relationship between class, gender and sexuality while Ward et al. (2008) and Cronin and King (2010) have investigated the intersections of sexuality, gender and ageing. Since policy-makers and service providers are now beginning to challenge the traditional invisibility or misrepresentation of older lesbian, gay and bisexual service users, Cronin and King (2010:877) have also suggested that ‘this increases the imperative for academics to accurately reflect the complex and multifarious range of experiences and needs of this diverse group’. Like Taylor (2009), Cronin and King use intersectionality theory to examine the complexity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people’s lives, identities and situations:

[O]lder LGB adults are positioned at the intersection of multiple identifications, the effects of which will change depending on context. Hence, in combination with theories of diversity which offer a broad approach to the analysis of people’s lives, intersectionality enables a more fine-grained analysis of difference (2010:887).

Individual experiences are complex, and an intersectional approach allows homogenous categorizations such as ‘older LGB’ (or, in the case of the present study, ‘older lesbian’) to be disaggregated in a useful way. I have found such an awareness of overlapping

identities and diverse power relations to be essential when working with the data in this project, highlighting inequalities and exclusions, as well as instances of empowerment and resilience.

1.8 Summary

From this review of the existing literature, I conclude that:

- there has been only limited research into the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older people in the UK
- lesbians are seriously under-represented in ‘lesbian gay bisexual and transgender’ research generally, and ageing research in particular. This may have led to misrepresentation of older lesbian lives, as theories based on gay men do not always describe the experiences of women
- in particular, there are hardly any data on lesbians over 70
- treating ‘older lesbians’ as a single monolithic category can obscure differences between individuals and lead to unhelpful generalisations
- recent research on non-heterosexual ageing has focused on disadvantage and stigmatisation; there is a need for broader-based, empirical / ethnographic data that will give a more nuanced picture of this population.

In response to these conclusions, the present study offers a much-needed contribution to the knowledge base about older lesbians in the UK. It complements data already produced by existing studies of non-heterosexual ageing in the UK, such as those of Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003), Cronin and King (2010), Archibald (2010) and Stonewall (2011), with more extensive and nuanced data on lesbians over 60. In doing so, it also enables comparison with the findings of those studies, suggesting (for instance) ways in which the lives and histories of older lesbians are similar to, and differ from, those of gay men and of heterosexual women.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Designing the research

There are hundreds of thousands of older women in the UK who currently identify as lesbian. The challenges for researchers are how to find them; having done that, how to facilitate access; and then how to produce a sample that is in any way representative. This problem of representativeness is ‘a fundamental of social research’ (Jolly, Russell and Cohen, 2012:213), but is particularly challenging in the study of a hidden population. Since there is no sampling frame in the accepted sense, producing a statistically representative random sample of older lesbians was never a possibility, and I have had to rely on less formal methods (Mason, 2002) and to use ‘snowball’ sampling, the usual alternative adopted by researchers of hard-to-reach populations. Although this form of chain-referral technique has proved valuable in enabling access to people who may be reluctant to take part in more formalised studies, it does have a number of deficiencies, the chief of which are the lack of representativeness and the bias implicit in the nature of the selection (Kehoe, 1988; Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Since the chain starts from the researcher, this bias means that the sample is often weighted towards the researcher’s peers.

The initial motivation for the current project was the traditional feminist one of uncovering ‘previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience’ (Reinharz, 1992:44). Oral history has a long tradition of preserving minority experience that might otherwise be lost (Perks and Thompson, 1998:183) and my original plan was to make older lesbians visible using oral history methods only. I also believed, with Kennedy (1997:181), that lesbian and gay history can go beyond simply adding new facts to the historical record and can explore subjectivity through individual memory. However, while the validity of the personal narrative is one of the strengths of the oral history method, its concomitant weakness is that it usually involves small samples, and in statistical terms is neither reliable nor representative (Hakim, 2000). This project was time-limited and financially unsupported; restrictions which meant that the number of

interviews I could include would inevitably be small. The life history method can be also seen as privileging individual narratives over group experience (Jolly, 2012:218). For all these reasons a small number of interviews featuring a group of people who (because of the method of recruitment) could be seen as all connected in some way, would be unlikely to convince the reader of the existence of a significant and widespread sub-cultural experience. If my research was to produce a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the wider community of older lesbians, I needed to find a way of gathering a larger sample.

With these concerns in mind, I arrived at a mixed-methods research design, complementing the qualitative data from life history interviews with quantitative data obtained from a questionnaire survey. Qualitative methods are often seen as valid but not reliable; quantitative methods are widely seen as having more reliability (Britten and Fisher, 1993) and a questionnaire offers several advantages. It is likely to recruit much larger numbers of respondents than interviewing; the fact that it can be completed anonymously helps to increase participation; while it cannot entirely overcome the problem of representativeness, the greater numbers involved would lend credibility to the data; and the fact that participation was voluntary would, I hoped, challenge the assumption that older lesbians do not want to be found.

There is one further danger in the use of oral history with older lesbians. Barbara Macdonald (Macdonald and Rich, 1991:53) grumbled that, if well-meaning researchers confine their interest in old lesbians to making them the subjects of history, they run the risk of devaluing their subjectivity in the present – colluding with the cultural invisibility of older women and the social construction of old age as worthless. Since one of the aims of this research was to challenge the invisibility of older lesbians in contemporary life, it was important to find a way of foregrounding their *current* lives and experiences as well as telling some of their hidden histories. As populations age, alternative models of what it means to be old are important (Woodward 1999:155). If, as standpoint theorists maintain, the exploration of marginalised lives can throw light on questions about a whole society (Harding, 2005), then allowing older lesbians to ‘speak for themselves’ (Kehoe 1988) about the lives they are living now can make a valuable contribution to that process.

Seen from this perspective, the life story interviews became, not an end in themselves, but a means to examine present identities through a life course lens. Our whole identity career forms the context for the way we live now (Rosenfeld, 2003) and I wanted to achieve that contextualisation in my study of older lesbian lives. The relationship between past history and present existence is a key theme throughout this thesis.

2.2 The methodology in practice

I began the data-gathering phase of the project in December 2009 with a small piece of participatory action research, discussing ideas for the questionnaire with two focus groups of older lesbians. One of those discussions took place in my own home in rural Shropshire and the other in Birmingham, in the home of the woman who convened the group. The first group were all members of same local lesbian social network, so had at least met before, although they did not all know each other well. They already knew me as a member of that group, and knew something about the project; some had participated in my previous research (Traies, 2009). The members of the second focus group had all known each other for some years; two of them had met me before. All those involved knew that they had been invited because they were over 60 and identified as lesbians, and knew that I identified in the same way.

I started the focus group conversations by asking, ‘If I am going to tell the world about old lesbians, what should I try to find out? What do you want to say about us to the rest of the world? What would *you* like to know about other women like ourselves?’ The discussion that followed was wide-ranging and provided many headings for the questionnaire. Two issues were discussed at length in both groups. The first was the difference between lesbians who had only had relationships with women, and those who had previously been married or in relationships with men; the women in both groups were interested to know which of these was the more common pattern. The second question was whether lesbians were ‘just like everyone else’ (i.e. emphasising ‘normality’ and respectability) or whether being lesbian had made them ‘different’ in the way they experienced their lives. This tension between narratives of ordinariness and extraordinariness was to be a recurring theme throughout the research.

The focus groups were useful in suggesting themes for the semi-structured interviews, as well as specific topics for the questionnaire. They also confirmed my impression that the older lesbian identity of the researcher would be an important factor in the participants' confidence and willingness to talk.

Questionnaire

In order to produce data that I could compare with previous studies, I made use of some of the questions from three other questionnaire-based surveys: two American studies of older lesbians (Kehoe, 1988) and older gay men (Berger, 1982) and one of older LGBT people in the UK (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003). The finished questionnaire (Appendix B) consisted of 101 questions divided into ten sections, and elicited data on lesbian identity and social life; family relationships, marriage and children; sexual relationships; work and money; health; politics; and the experience of growing older.

To facilitate data analysis, the survey questions were almost all multiple choice; only a few required written answers. Participants who wanted to answer a question at length were encouraged to write on a separate sheet of paper, and this additional information was incorporated into the text database created from the interview transcripts and autobiographies.

I then asked several older lesbians to trial the questionnaire with specific purposes. A fast reader (a woman who is a writer and editor) and a slow reader (a woman with dyslexia) measured how long it took them to complete the questionnaire, so that I was able to add to the preamble the fact that it would probably take about 20 – 25 minutes. I also asked four lesbian friends (one who identifies as MTF trans-sexual, two who identify as women of colour and an Asian woman who worked as a diversity trainer) to read the questionnaire for accessibility and inclusiveness, and made several adjustments to the wording following their suggestions.

To encourage maximum participation, I wanted the questionnaire to be available in more than one format. As well as preparing paper copies (including a large print version), I uploaded the questionnaire to the survey software provided by Bristol Online Surveys (BOS) so that it could be completed online. I also designed postcards and fliers

describing the project and giving contact details (Appendix A). The project website¹⁰ gave information about the research, several different methods of contacting me and a direct link to the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was also available by post or email. In all the information literature and on the questionnaire itself, I placed emphasis on anonymity, and also made my own older lesbian identity clear. I set up a dedicated confidential phone line (with a reassuring recorded greeting) for enquiries, questions and offers of participation.

I launched the survey in July 2010 by emailing several hundred people and organisations. These included personal contacts and the mailing lists of lesbian organisations; national and regional lesbian social groups, including Kenric and the Older Lesbian Network; national and local organisations for the elderly; a variety of media contacts, including local radio stations; the lesbian and gay press; lesbian internet sites etc. I also distributed fliers and postcards at Gay Pride events in various parts of the country and at lesbian events such as poetry readings, performances at the Drill Hall theatre in London, and the 2009 York Lesbian Arts Festival. The project was featured in (among others) Radio Manchester's *Gay Hour*, the lesbian lifestyle magazine *Diva*, the London lesbian information website *Gingerbeer*, and *Pink News*. I was putting my faith in – but could not at that stage prove the existence of – a wide-reaching lesbian network that could disseminate my research across the UK and across barriers of class, education and economic status.

The results were immediate, and produced definitive evidence of such lesbian interconnectedness. Requests for paper questionnaires and offers of interviews arrived by email, post and phone; women too young to take part in the survey wrote on behalf of elderly friends, or to suggest new contacts, or simply to send encouraging messages. Some of the letters, emails and phone calls were from parts of Britain where I had previously had no contacts; many said that they had had the information from a friend, or through a lesbian social group; many offered to pass the details on to other groups or individuals. The existence of this extensive networking in the lesbian community was not one of the topics I set out to research, but is an important finding. It disproves the assertion of Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003) that few organised networks exist for

¹⁰ www.womenlikethat.co.uk

lesbians (as opposed to gay men). Indeed the response to my survey suggests that such networks are not only numerous and widespread but also interconnected, so that older lesbian knowledge can be quickly and efficiently shared. (I consider these networks in more detail in Chapter 6.) A handful of messages were from other researchers, generously sharing their experience and pointing me to published and unpublished work. Around a third of the women who filled in the questionnaire also wrote, phoned or emailed wishing me success and expressing their enthusiasm for a project which, while not 'outing' them individually, could make their existence visible and their views heard:

This piece of work is long overdue [email 22.07.2010].

Thanks for doing it for all of us [email.21.07.2010].

I was delighted to hear about your project, I was only thinking the other day about writing of my experiences in the early days, to be read by my family after my death [email 17.08.2010].

This research is really important [email 22.11.2010].

Some responses were from women who wanted to point out problems with the online version of the questionnaire. For instance, I had set up two questions incorrectly so that they did not work as intended:

Guess you will know by now that in the 'problems' section towards the end, it is not possible to 'tick' more than one. So I have highlighted Money (or lack of it!) as the main issue for me, but there are others! [email 14.07.2010].

Hello Jane, question 85 has no method of completing [email 21.07.2010].

Others pointed out areas of experience I had failed to include:

Can I make some comments on the questionnaire. Questions 20 e,f,g,h could these have included expartners' children and their children (the expartner could have again been split into lesbian and male expartners ie not married but having step children) Question 24 could this have included non married male partners that one had had [email 20.09.10].

or the difficulties they had experienced in answering the questions:

I have just completed the questionnaire, and found that some of the questions did not allow for an adequate reflection of my views, For example, in the early stages it asks about how I feel about various words such as queer and dyke. It all depends on the context; these words can be used as friendly and informal, political, or offensive, for example. There were other places where varieties of context meant that it was almost impossible to give an accurate answer, but I wish you well in the project [email 13.08.2010].

The impression I gained from these responses was that the women who were taking part felt a personal investment in the research and identified with it to the extent of wanting to help shape it. I answered all those who wrote to me.

One of the results of this correspondence was to give me a strong feeling of responsibility towards the women I was studying, and a determination to keep them informed about the progress of the research. From its inception, communicating my research to both academic and non-academic audiences has been an important part of achieving the project's overall aim of making older lesbians visible. During the course of the research I have made numerous presentations, both at academic conferences and at LGBT events. Disseminating my findings in these ways also made me aware of the role my own overlapping identities play in the project. By being an older woman who is an out lesbian, I contribute to the visibility I am working to achieve; by being an old woman who is a full-time student, I help to combat stereotypes of old age; by speaking in public about all these things, I challenge the cultural assumptions that make people like me invisible.

Response to the questionnaire

The number of completed questionnaires far exceeded my hopes. My original target of 100 replies was achieved in the first two weeks; by the end of July 2010 there were more than 200 and by the end of September more than 300. I had intended to run the survey for six months, but since news of the research continued to spread and, although the rate of response slowed down, participants continued to come forward, I eventually kept the survey open for a year, until June 2011.

The majority (90 per cent) of survey respondents completed the questionnaire online; only 10 per cent chose to fill in and post a paper copy. I entered the information from these paper questionnaires into the Bristol Online Surveys database, so that I could use the tools provided with that software to analyse the whole sample. Over 400 people had accessed the questionnaire, but some of these had not made a response. When I had removed the blanks, 372 completed or partially-completed questionnaires remained.

This is by far the largest number of lesbians over 60 to have been recruited to a research project in either the US or the UK. As I have shown in the previous chapter, even the largest studies of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender ageing (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003; Stonewall, 2011) have involved comparatively small numbers of older lesbians. The size of this survey sample (further augmented by the interviewees and life writers) makes a unique contribution to knowledge about the lives of older women who identify as lesbian. Given the persistent difficulty of recruiting lesbians in the over-60 age groups (Berger, 1992; Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003; Archibald, 2010), it is worth asking why this particular project was so successful. The first, and possibly the most important reason was the older lesbian identity of the researcher. Ward et al. (2008) and Archibald (2010) have both shown that recruitment is more successful where participants and researchers ‘match’ in terms of sexual orientation; in my case, age was probably equally important, since the particular experience of social stigma associated with dissident sexuality can also be seen as generationally inflected. One woman in the second focus group, for instance, described how impossible she had found it to tell her story to a previous researcher who, although gay, had been young and a man; for these reasons she had felt he would not understand her. The second reason for the unprecedented size of the sample is connected to the first, since it concerns what Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003:6) call the ‘reliance on informal, local and “hidden” networks amongst these women’. Informal they may sometimes be, but they proved in this case extraordinarily efficient and wide-reaching, and keen to assist a researcher who was seen as a trusted member of that networked community. The third factor, not available to researchers in previous decades, was the speed and reach of

internet communication and the fact that older lesbians appear to use the internet to an unusual extent compared with other women of their age.¹¹

Interviews and autobiographies

Several of the women who completed the questionnaire also volunteered to be interviewed. I replied to all these volunteers and interviewed most of them. I also approached women who had been suggested to me or who I thought would help balance my sample in terms of ethnicity or socio-economic status. From August 2010 to May 2012, I listened to the life-stories of 34 older lesbians in big cities, small towns, suburbs, villages and the countryside. I travelled to (among other places) North Yorkshire, the West Country, the East and West Midlands, the Cotswolds and the Home Counties. The interviews usually took place in the interviewees' homes; on two occasions it was in other venues chosen by the interviewees. In three cases it was not possible for various reasons to arrange a meeting, so two interviews were conducted by telephone and one via Skype.

These semi-structured interviews lasted between one and four hours and followed the pattern indicated by the checklist at Appendix C. In practice, although most of the topics were covered in most of the interviews, each conversation took its own direction according to the way in which the woman told her story. I was sometimes concerned about the effect on interviewees of stirring up old and painful memories, and quite often discussed this with them; in a few cases I made contact with them afterwards. Most often my concern proved unnecessary and even those who had been upset by revisiting painful parts of their past life expressed pleasure at having the opportunity to tell their story and be heard.

In the spirit of 'shared authority' (Frisch, 1990), I sent copies of the interview transcripts to all the interviewees, and collaborated with them on any corrections or

¹¹ Although older people are less likely than others to be computer users (Goodman, Syme and Eisma, 2003), and old women are even less likely than old men to use or own a computer (Selwyn et al. 2003; Morris et al., 2005 cited in Wagner, Hassanein and Head, 2010:876), the older lesbians in this study recorded a high level of computer use. Nine out of ten questionnaires were completed online; 97 per cent of respondents (and 75 per cent of those over 75) said they regularly used a computer.

revisions of the text. Some women made no changes at all, while others edited or re-wrote sections of their stories. Reading the transcript was a moving experience for some; Silva wrote that it was:

[...] quite emotional, reading it like this, but I am so glad I did this and it is now written down [email 09.05.12].

Owning a written record of her life was important for Judy, too:

Thank you, this is fabulous, so many memories and lovely to have it all written out [email 21.04.2012].

Jen wrote:

I think I told you I go to my favourite coffee shop most mornings and read whatever I'm working on or do a bit of writing or whatever. Today I took the transcript – had to have TWO cups of coffee, as it took so long to read, and I laughed and cried at different points! [...] I enjoyed reading it! [email 11.05.2012].

Like Jen, Brenda also wept over her story when she read it, but assured me they were 'happy tears, because it has a happy ending' [conversation, 13.10.2011].

All the interviewees were asked when they signed the consent form whether they wanted to be anonymous. I asked this question again at the transcript-checking stage, in case seeing what they had said had made them change their minds. In the event, four out of five chose anonymity (about half of these chose their own pseudonyms); a minority wanted to use their real names. For some of the latter, who had led largely closeted lives when younger, this was clearly a significant political act.

It was not possible to interview all of the women who volunteered. Of those who lived too far away for me to reach them, or who could not meet me for some other reason, 11 agreed to write their autobiographies (or, in one case, to make a voice recording) using a checklist (Appendix D) based on the questions I had developed for the semi-structured interviews. Life-writing has long been 'part of queer psychological survival and self-definition' (Jolly, 2007:722) and these 11 participants produced texts that, while telling

similar stories to those told by the interviewees, differed in style and emphasis, and added an unplanned richness to the data base.

Data analysis

The data-set produced by the combination of methods described above is detailed and wide-ranging, offering a more comprehensive view of the older lesbian community in the UK than has been available to previous researchers. Different software packages were used to analyse the qualitative and quantitative data. The data from the questionnaire were interrogated using the analytical tools provided by Bristol Online Surveys, which allows for filtering and cross-tabulation of data from individual questions. The charts were made in Excel. All the textual data (interview transcripts, autobiographies, additional notes, letters from participants etc.) were analysed thematically using the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo. This was particularly useful for the initial sorting of the data and the identification of emerging themes and questions.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

Research with hidden or vulnerable populations presents specific ethical challenges in the areas of access / recruitment, consent, confidentiality and bias.

Access and recruitment

Accessing hard-to-reach populations is an ethical issue (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), as the concept of ‘voluntary’ participation is not straightforward in such communities. Individuals from disadvantaged or powerless groups may be reluctant to volunteer (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003) or – especially where ‘gatekeepers’ are involved – may feel pressured to take part (Berg, 1989; Miller and Bell, 2002). In this research, access to potential participants was made very much easier by my ‘insider’ status, but each part of the research required a different recruitment strategy.

Accessing questionnaire respondents posed fewest ethical problems as its anonymity made the voluntary nature of participation much more straightforward. There was no pressure to take part, or any fear of anyone knowing that an individual had done so. Recruiting participants for the focus groups and interviews was potentially a more sensitive task. The first focus group was formed from my own older lesbian friends; the second group were members of the Older Lesbian Network and were convened by one of the members who had volunteered to do so. There was no pressure to attend; only women who were interested to do so took part. For the interviews and life stories, the method of recruitment varied. All the life writers, and half (17) of the interviewees were volunteers who had heard about the research and contacted me to say they would like to be interviewed. (Volunteering is not free of ethical problems either, of course: Berg (1989) warns that those who are eager to be interviewed will not necessarily be representative of the wider group.) Of the remaining 17 interviewees, five were suggested by other people who acted as a link to the interviewee; I approached the remaining dozen directly. I made it clear at all times that there was no compulsion to take part and if a woman refused I did not continue to ask her.

Consent

In gaining women's consent to take part in the research, it was important that they understood the implications of participating, as far as possible. (Yow, 2005:132, warns that 'informed consent' will not always be fully informed since – even where the researcher intends to be transparent about her intentions – the direction and scope of the research may not be clear to participants, or may change over time. Continuing negotiation may be needed for participants to remain 'informed'.)

How consent is obtained (for instance, through a verbal agreement, by signed consent form, or by assuming consent if participants do not return a refusal) can drastically affect the numbers who participate (Berg, 1989:67). In this project the issue of consent was dealt with differently according to the different research methods. The questionnaire was the most straightforward, since 'implied consent' was built in; respondents were assumed to have consented by completing it. For focus groups (and for one interviewee who is blind), it was simplest to record subjects saying that they understood the nature of the research and were willing to continue with the recording.

However for interviews, where I hoped to quote at length from individuals' accounts of their lives, I used written consent forms, to ensure that the women were 'knowingly participating in a study and [...] doing so of their own choice' (Berg, 1989:78). As previously explained, I later shared the transcripts with the interviewees, offering them the chance to amend or withdraw parts of their interviews, and in some cases re-negotiated issues such as anonymity.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality and trust were key issues throughout the research, as very few of the participants are completely open about their lesbian identities. Because it was anonymous, the questionnaire posed few problems of confidentiality. (To safeguard the anonymity of the respondents, I asked those who had questions about the research, or who were prepared to be interviewed, to make contact separately from the submission of their questionnaire.) The interviews presented more difficulty, since it could be important to some individuals that no one was aware even that they had been approached or had offered to talk to me. Ethical issues around preserving privacy sometimes arose in the interviews themselves, when a life-long habit of secrecy on the part of the interviewee presented the dilemma described by Layman (2009) of how far the interviewer should persist in the face of a narrator's reticence. As a method, focus groups pose the greatest risks to confidentiality, as members of the group share the knowledge of what was said and by whom (Gibbs, 1997) and their subsequent behaviour is not under the control of the researcher. The best I could do in this situation was to start each session with a group discussion and a shared agreement about confidentiality.

Other measures of confidentiality that I employed included: not discussing the material with others; changing names, places and other details in transcripts; disassociating names from responses during the coding and recording process; and keeping records secure. Consent forms, transcripts, lists of participants' names, pseudonyms and contact details are securely stored; all computer records are password-protected.

Bias

The ethical issues discussed above were easy to identify; the areas of potential bias in the research were more difficult to recognise and deal with. Bias is endemic to social research: few researchers in the social sciences would now subscribe to the ‘myth of the dispassionate observer’ (Jaggar, 1997), or regard the researcher’s standpoint as ‘infecting’ the purity of the quest for objective knowledge (Durkheim, 1964, cited in Westkott, 1979:61). Feminist theorists in particular have contested the idea that the pursuit of knowledge can ever be objective, maintaining that bias is not only inevitable but can be a positive element in research (Reinharz, 1992; Roseneil, 1995). Bias comes in many forms and can arise from the methodology employed, from the subjects of the research, and from the researcher herself. I deal briefly here with all three.

The potential for methodological bias is not confined to qualitative methods. Not only the analysis of quantitative data but also the construction, appropriateness and clarity of the questions will depend on the judgment and skill of the researcher (Mays and Pope, 1995). However, qualitative research (and in particular the in-depth interview) is the method most usually associated with bias. A research interview is not ‘a clear window onto the interviewee’s experience’, but the ‘joint production of an account by interviewer and interviewee through the dynamic interaction between them’ (Allred and Gillies, 2002: 146). Bornat (2001) has usefully described the process of constructing an interview as a ‘shared endeavour’ between researcher and subject. But other people may also influence the outcome: if a third person is present in the interview (for instance, when two people are interviewed together, as happened twice during this research) their presence can influence the speech and behaviour of all concerned (Mays and Pope, 1995). Other ‘voices’ also speak ‘through’ the interviewee: when Reinharz (1992) asks, ‘Who is speaking when women speak for themselves?’ she is questioning the extent to which interviewees are free to use their ‘own’ voices as opposed to saying what they have been taught, or feel expected to say. ‘Is it the voice of oppression, the voice of imitation, the authentic unsilenced self, or multiple voices?’ she asks (1992:139).

One of the ‘voices’ that speaks through an interviewee arises from what Chandler (2005) has called ‘generational bias’. She describes how membership of a particular

generational cohort influences the cultural stories available to individuals for the construction and interpretation of identity, arguing for an in-depth consideration of how generational and age-related dimensions of subjectivity can shape what and how material becomes available in interviews. There is still a tendency to regard ‘the old’ (those over retirement age) as a homogenous group (Harper, 1997). Class, race and other factors already make that assumption inaccurate; with people increasingly living into their 90s and beyond, it has also become inappropriate chronologically. The women I studied belong to two or even three generations, and their ‘generational identity’ can be expected to have been influenced by their participation in generation-specific cultural discourses. Personal autobiographical memory is shaped by the cultural myths and social narratives of a person’s own generation, and different generations form their identities according to different narratives. Although I am over 60, I and an interviewee of 90 will have had different cultural narratives against which to frame our life’s meanings. It was important for me, then, to acknowledge this ‘generational bias’ and not to assume that my subjects shared my cultural assumptions, even though both interviewer and interviewee were senior citizens and lesbians.

I found the concept of ‘shared authority’ (Frisch, 1990) helpful, both in gathering and in making sense of my interview data. The term was coined by Frisch in addressing the dilemmas around the authorship and ownership of public history. It has since been applied to a multitude of history-related disciplines (Adair, Filene and Kaloski, 2011), but has particular relevance for oral history, where it has been used to argue for a more equal partnership between researcher and subject. Borland (1991), for instance, suggests that opening up a dialogue with the subjects of the research can avoid simply gathering data to fit into the researcher’s pre-existing paradigms. This idea goes beyond more traditional kinds of respondent validation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Miles and Huberman 1984) to create a working partnership between researchers and the researched. As part of the project, I shared and negotiated interview transcripts with interviewees and asked several older lesbians for comments on chapter drafts. In this way I attempted to give the participants as much agency as possible in the creation of their own stories and to see the enterprise as a ‘mutual learning experience’ (Jolly, Russell and Cohen, 2012:219). However, I accept that the researcher must take responsibility for what is ultimately produced. As Roseneil (1995:13) admits:

However much I sought to involve the women in the research process, I have not conducted a truly collective piece of research. I have exploited and used the women I interviewed [...], extracting and abstracting their accounts to illustrate my own arguments. [...] In the final analysis, it has been my analysis that has triumphed.

There are several ways in which the researcher's own bias can affect outcomes. Those which are most likely to characterise my project include: the tendency of snowball recruitment to 'clone' the researcher (Kehoe, 1988; Atkinson and Flint, 2001); 'unconscious advocacy' (Yow, 2005:147 and 1997) and the 'motivated bias' associated with emancipatory political projects (Hammersley and Gomm, 1997). Added to this is the tendency to bias in what Creswell (2003) calls 'backyard' research (research that involves studying the researcher's own organisation, or friends, or immediate work setting). He points out that, in addition to the problem of unconscious advocacy, an insider position can lead to compromises in the researcher's ability to disclose information, and can raise difficult power issues.

Positionality was certainly an issue in this research. My own lesbian life spans nearly 50 years; I have lived with, learned from and socialised with other same-sex attracted women all that time. In research terms, this closeness to my subjects has the potential to be both a strength and a weakness (Roseneil, 1995). My position within the community I was studying undoubtedly gave me access to the trust and co-operation of many women who might not have responded so positively to a different researcher (Archibald, 2010); on the other hand, it is inevitable that personal experience has informed my interpretation of the data, and it may have skewed my conclusions in some of the ways described above. As an ageing lesbian, a feminist and an able-bodied white woman long ago relocated by my education into the intellectual middle class, I have tried to remain aware of my own multiple identities and their potential influences on this work. As a reflexive researcher, I have attempted throughout to be aware of the potential bias in my interpretations, even though, as Roseneil (1995:7) puts it, '[M]y memories and reconstructions of experiences have been plundered continually in the course of the formal research process'.

Reflexivity and the ethics of care

Different writers advocate different ways of negotiating the ‘minefield of ethical traps’ (Plummer, 2001:226) through which the researcher travels. For Mays and Pope (1995) the *presentation* of qualitative research is crucial: it must allow the reader as far as possible to distinguish between the data, the analytic framework used, and the interpretation. Samuel (1998), on the other hand, argues that the real key to correcting any bias in the researcher’s interpretation is the preservation of the original records and raw data.

In reality no list of strategies or code of practice can answer all the ethical questions that arise during research. Each problem must be considered situationally, case by case (Berg, 1989, Layman, 2009). There is no panacea for the ethical dilemmas that accompany social research, and the onus for making decisions in practice rests with the individual researcher (Akeroyd, 1989:154). This is why the approach that Harding (2005) and others have called ‘strong objectivity’ is crucial. Strong objectivity requires that the researcher acknowledges the social situatedness of knowledge, constantly interrogates her own cultural situation and attitudes, and is sensitive to the way in which the object of the enquiry responds. The researcher’s personal values are also crucial to the reflexive ethical stance (Portelli, 1997:55). In other words, the researcher needs an overarching ethics that goes beyond checklists of strategies and is informed by personal morality. Edwards and Mauthner (2002) have argued for a ‘feminist ethics of care’ that emphasises responsibility and accountability, requiring ‘contextualised methods of reasoning’ rather than a tick-box approach. They argue that, while certain universal criteria may be relevant, only detailed ethical discussion at all stages of research, addressing issues as they arise, can prevent unethical practice. In this way ‘the reflexive self becomes a key constituent in enabling ethical reflection through evaluation and reconsideration in the research process’ (2002:6). This is the ethical perspective I have tried to employ throughout the project.

SECTION II
LIVING IN THE PRESENT

CHAPTER 3

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

3.1 Demographics

These three chapters present the research findings about the current lives of older lesbians in the UK. In this chapter I introduce the women who took part in the study, first through a demographic analysis of the survey sample and then with some observations about the generational differences between the oldest and youngest participants.

Age range

Questionnaire respondents were aged between 60 and 90 at the time they took part in the research. The large majority were in their 60s; however 45 were aged 70 or over and 9 of these were over 80.

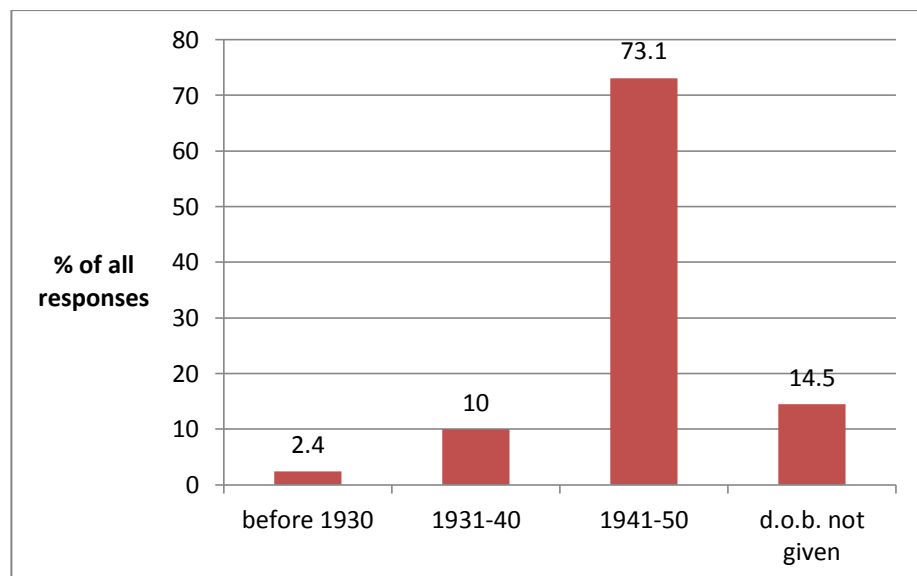


Figure 1: Dates of birth by percentage of respondents

Although those over 70 represent only just over 12 per cent of the whole sample (Figure 1), they make a significant contribution to a research field in which the LGBT community's 'old-old' have been so thinly represented.

Sex and Gender

Respondents also represent the full spectrum of lesbian genders and attitudes to gender politics. The large majority (98.5 per cent) of survey respondents gave their sex at birth as female, while four respondents (1.2 per cent) were born male, and one (0.3 per cent) intersex. Almost all (99 per cent) described their current gender as female; of the four (1.2 per cent) who did not, one defined as ‘transsexual’, one as ‘trans’, and two described themselves as ‘genderless.’

Seventeen per cent of respondents had at some time in their lives identified as butch (including at least one who had ‘passed’ as a man for part of her working life), and 13 per cent as femme. Twenty-eight per cent reported that ‘traditional’ gender roles (e.g. butch-femme, husband-wife) had been part of their relationships at some time; for seven per cent this had ‘always’ or ‘frequently’ been the case. However the majority (67 per cent), including many of those who came out through the Women’s Liberation Movement, responded negatively or very negatively to the terms ‘butch’ and ‘femme.’

Geographical distribution

Survey respondents came from all regions of Britain (Figure 2).

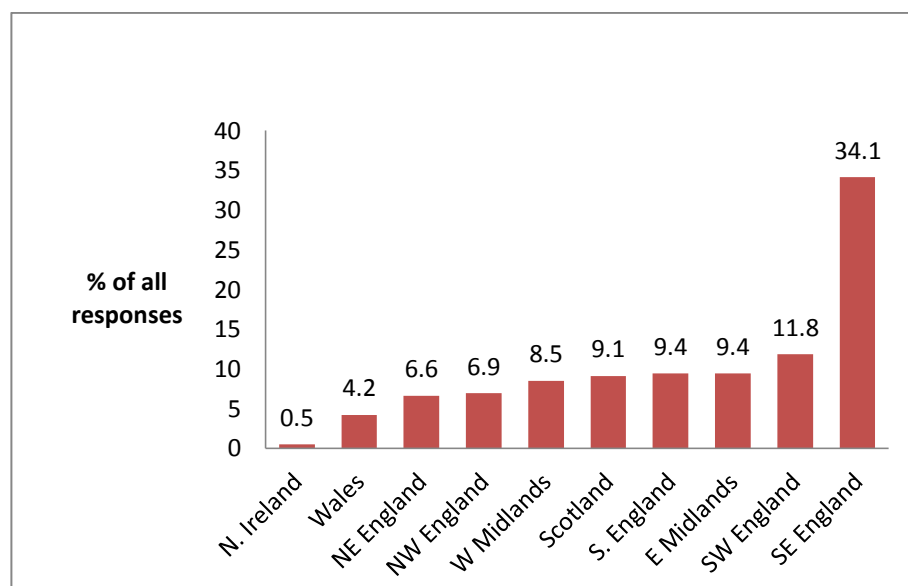


Figure 2: Geographical distribution of survey respondents

Half of the women lived in a town or city, and nearly a third in the country; 12 per cent lived in suburban areas. Of the remainder, some lived in substantial villages, one had a travelling life on a narrow-boat, and one wrote simply, ‘small town – a mistake.’

Class

Although the large majority of the women (83 per cent) now describe themselves as middle-class, nearly half were born into working-class families Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 3: Social class of origin of survey respondents

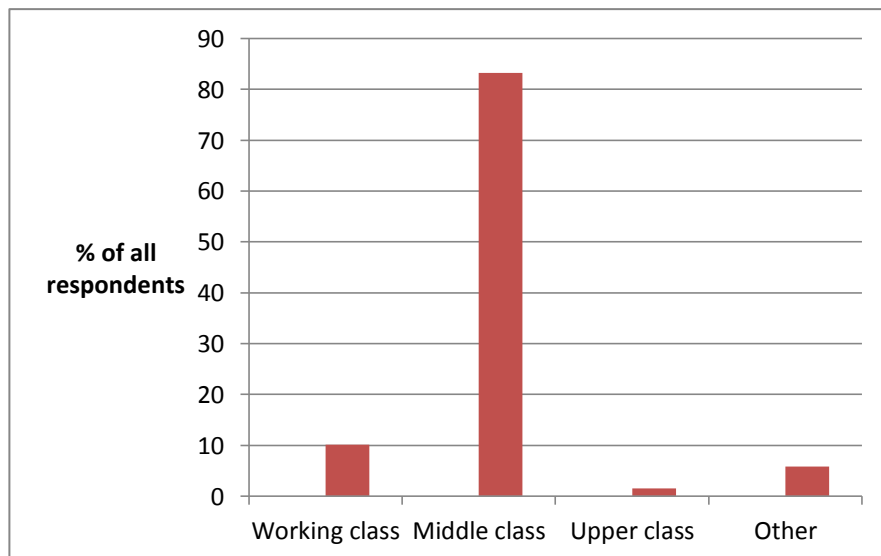


Figure 4: Current class identification of survey respondents

Participants had had a wide variety of jobs, from bookseller to bus driver, and bingo-caller to calligrapher. They included artists and antique dealers, company directors and cleaners. Many had had careers in the public sector, as teachers, nurses, social workers or civil servants. These occupations reflect the educational opportunities of the post-war generation who make up the majority of the sample, and perhaps also the career-patterns and earning power of single and childless women in that period.

Money

The range of respondents' annual incomes, both while working and since retirement, reflects the diversity of their backgrounds and career patterns, showing that older lesbians include both low and high earners (Figures 5 and 6).

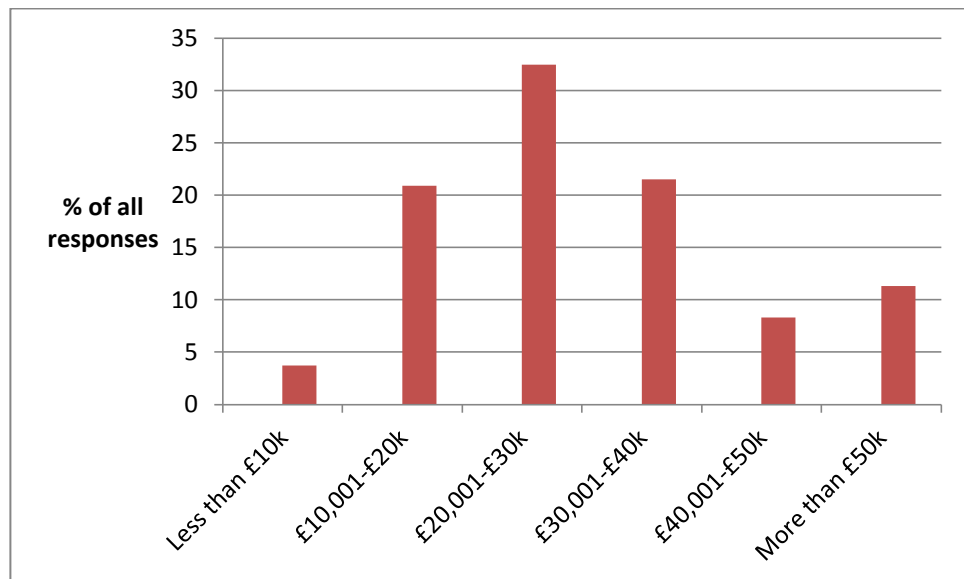


Figure 5: Highest annual income of respondents during working life

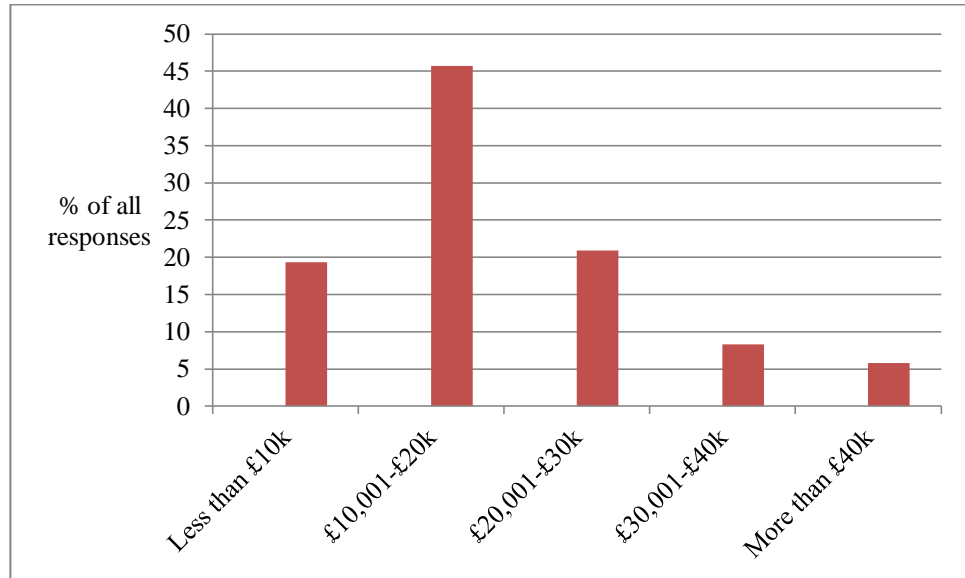


Figure 6: Annual income of respondents at time of completing survey

However, in spite of the very high level of educational qualifications in the sample (see below), only 20 per cent had maximum earnings of more than £40,000 during their working lives, and four per cent never earned more than £10,000. A fifth (19 per cent) were now living on less than £10,000 per annum.

Home ownership

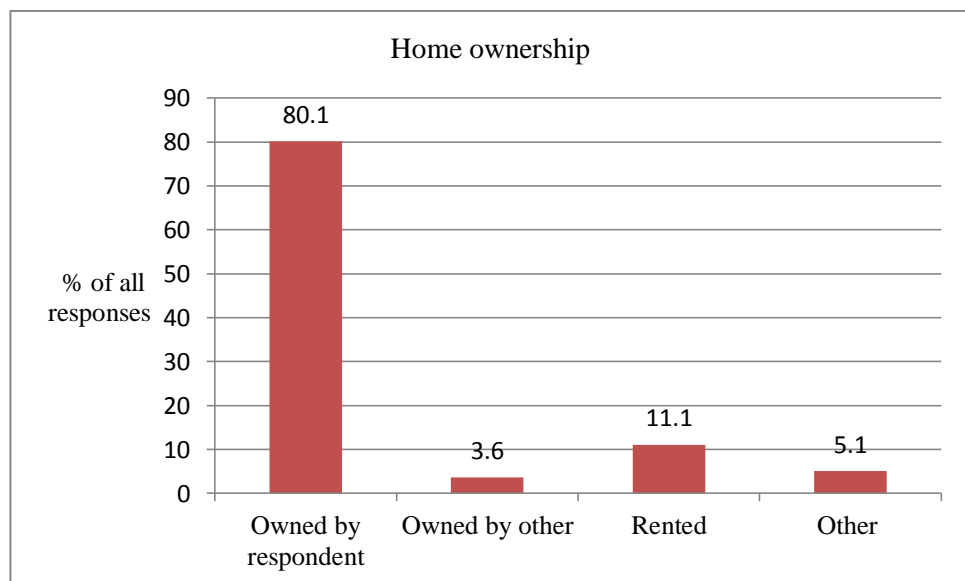


Figure 7: Home ownership status of survey respondents

Just 11% of the survey respondents rented their homes; the large majority (just over 80 per cent) owned their homes, either individually or jointly (Figure 7). This is a slightly higher percentage than the norm for older households in the UK (Age UK, 2013), and is consistent with Hubbard and Rossington's (1995:31) finding that lesbians are slightly more likely than gay men to be home-owners.

Health and physical ability / disability

Like other older women, the survey respondents varied in their levels of physical health and ability. 77 per cent described their own health as good or excellent and 23 per cent as fair or poor (Figure 8).

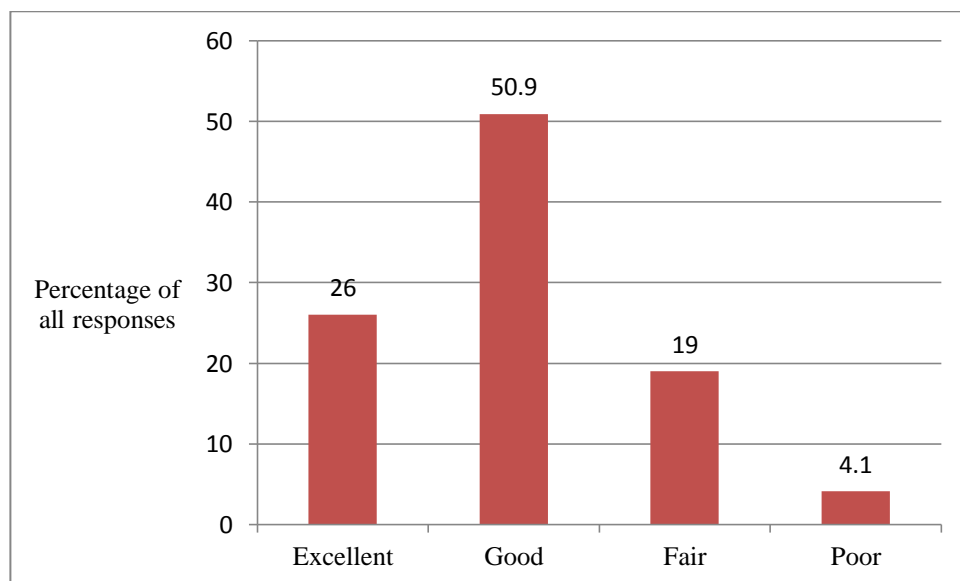


Figure 8: 'How would you rate your general physical health now?'

A third (35 per cent) suffered from physical problems or illnesses that seriously affected their activity. (Age UK (2013) estimates that 40 per cent of all people aged 65 or over have a limiting long-standing illness.) Fourteen per cent of respondents were in receipt of a disability allowance, attendance allowance or 'blue badge'. Help and Care Development's (2006:28) study of older gay men and lesbians reported a similar situation: 95.7 per cent of older lesbians and gay men in their survey indicated satisfactory to excellent health, although 47.3 per cent said they had a long term illness. These data support the findings of Hunt and Fish (2009:13) that lesbian and bisexual

women of all ages are slightly more likely than women in general to describe their health as good or very good.

Religion

Half of the respondents (50 per cent) described themselves as having no religion (Figure 9). A quarter (26 per cent) were Christian, and one per cent Jewish. None were Muslim or Hindu. The 18 per cent who ticked 'Other' included significant numbers of Quakers, humanists, pagans and atheists, as well as several individuals who described themselves as spiritual rather than religious; one Goddess worshipper; one following a Shamanic spiritual path and one adherent of Wicca.

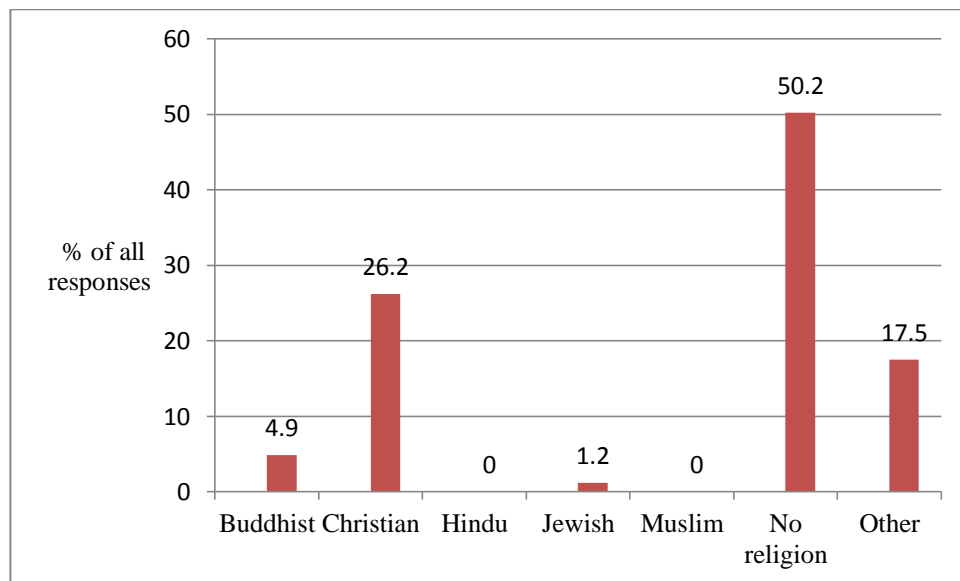


Figure 9: Religious affiliation by percentage of respondents

Ethnicity

In all the above respects, the participants could be said to be fairly representative of the British population, and they certainly demonstrated the heterogeneous nature of the older lesbian community. The sample was less representative in two important characteristics: ethnicity and education. (As noted in Chapter 3, this probably reflects the 'researcher bias' associated with snowball recruitment.)

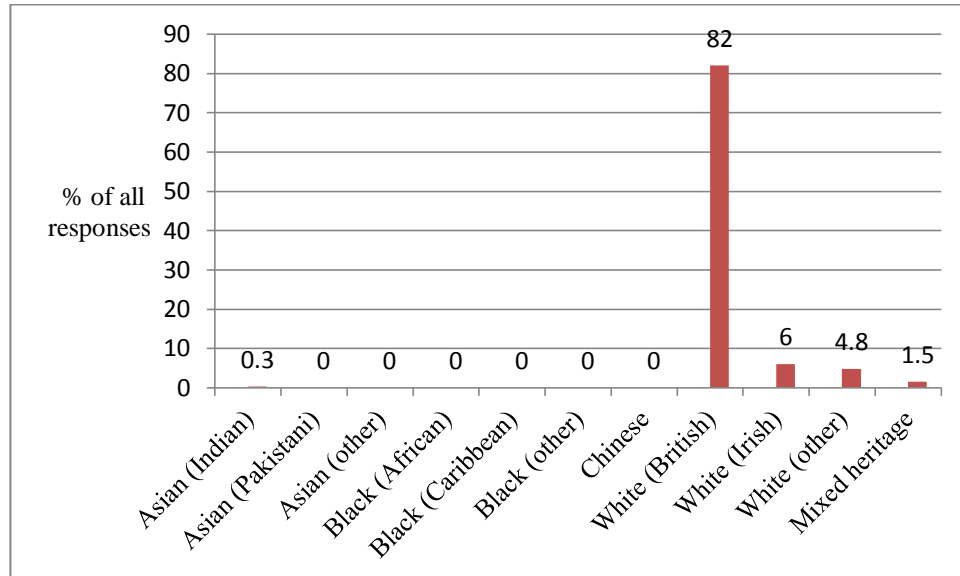


Figure 10: Ethnic /cultural backgrounds by percentage of respondents

Respondents were almost all white: 93 per cent, compared with 86 per cent of the UK's population in 2011 (ONS, 2012a). Only 1.5 per cent of survey respondents described themselves as of mixed heritage, compared with 2.2 per cent in the general population (ONS, 2012a). Only one was Asian; none identified as Black or Chinese. Respondents who ticked 'Other' included six women who identified as ethnically Jewish.

Education

The sample as a whole reported higher than average levels of education (Figure 11). While a minority left school with no qualifications (6 per cent) or with only school-leaving examinations (9 per cent), two-thirds of respondents have a university degree or the vocational equivalent.

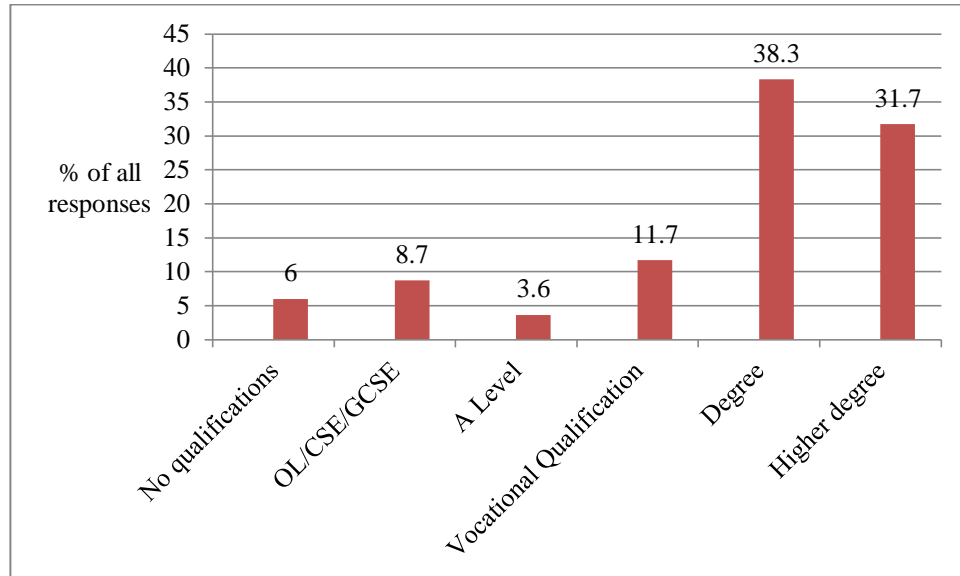


Figure 11: Highest level of education achieved

The questionnaire did not ask when these higher qualifications were gained, but the interview data suggest that many of the women achieved their qualifications as mature students. In particular those who did not have children (nearly two-thirds of the sample) may have had the time and resources to extend their education.

Interviewees and life writers

The statistics above are based on the questionnaire survey. Interviewees and life writers (many of whom had also filled in the questionnaire) had similar demographic characteristics to the survey respondents. They came from Scotland, Northern England, the Midlands, the South West, London and the South East. They lived in urban, suburban and rural environments and had a wide range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds. One woman was Asian; the rest were white. Their ages ranged from 60 to 91 at the time of their interviews.

3.2 Generational differences

There is a difference of over 30 years between the youngest and oldest participants in this study and, since this is the first project to gather data on a significant number of ‘old-old’ lesbians (aged 75 to 90), it seemed at first that the obvious way to present the

the data would be by age cohort, since shared historical experience gives every generation its own particular assumptions and cultural stories through which to create and understand its own history and identity (Chandler, 2005).

The oldest participants in this study, who were born in the 1920s, remember the economic effects of the Depression on family fortunes which were entirely dependent on a father's employment. Those who were born in the 1920s and 30s can also remember the Second World War, and the disruption it brought to family life:

[W]hen I was seven the War broke out, and my father and brother went away to the war, and my mother and I were left alone (Leo, born 1932).

I remember, with some sadness really, when my father came home from the War, because we didn't know him.... Those poor blokes, you know? (Fran, born 1935)

The Second World War affected the next generation in a different way. One of the results of the social dislocation of wartime – and a generational difference between my participants – was the increase in the number of children born out of wedlock and the consequent increase in adoption. Nearly a third of the interviewees and life writers born in the 1940s had parents who were not married. Some unmarried mothers managed to keep their babies with the support of their own parents. Merle, who describes herself as 'a GI baby' (born 1945), and Aine (born 1941) lived for much of their childhoods with maternal grandparents. However Chris (born 1946), the daughter of an Italian prisoner of war and an English nurse, and Sandy (born in 1943) were adopted at six months and six weeks respectively. Anna (born 1945) was not told that she was adopted until she was about 10; she found out later who her biological parents were, but has never met them. Carol (born 1944) has no idea who her natural parents were, and did not discover until she was 15 that she was adopted ('the shock can be imagined,' she writes).

As Rosenfeld (2003:160) has demonstrated,

[B]iographical narratives are not just accounts of life-long experience, but are significantly shaped both in form and content by [...] the historical period in which they are embedded. How people experience their later years [...] is strongly influenced by the period in which they came of age.

This is certainly true of the women in this study. However, the historical influences I have outlined above are not confined to lesbians: they are characteristics that bind these women to other women of their age, rather than marking them as different. It is important to make this distinction, not least in order to avoid falling into the trap of implying that absent fathers, displaced families, disrupted schooling, illegitimacy and adoption might have any causal relationship to later sexual orientation. Many women who have never known same-sex desire went through the same experiences. As Cheryl Claassen discovered:

Women do not become lesbians because their mothers worked outside the home [...]. Bad relations with fathers is not a significant issue in lesbian identity. [...] Ninety-three per cent of these lesbians reported a religious upbringing. None of these lesbians had lesbian parents. What we can say for sure is that stay-at-home moms and religious, heterosexual loving parents produce many lesbian daughters (2005:265).

Claassen did arrange her findings according to her participants' chronological ages, but then discovered that 'age cohort does not matter as much as I thought it would when I designed the analysis' (2005:271). Data from the present study support Claassen's conclusion. Although generational differences were sometimes significant, categorising the women in this study according to age cohort was only rarely the most useful distinction. There are two main reasons for this: first (as I show in Chapter 7), chronological age was usually less significant for a woman's identity career than was her age at 'coming out'. Second, a concentration on the differences between age-cohorts can obscure the effects of the many other factors (class, economic status, education, race, religion, geography) that determined the women's expectations about life and work, their attitudes to love and sex, and ultimately their lesbian histories. Multiple intersecting processes of advantage and disadvantage can make the stories of two women of the same age very different from each other.

The lives of the two oldest interviewees, Monica and Edith, illustrate this point. Born between the World Wars, they were both children during the Depression and teenagers when the Second World War began; they both married young (as did almost all the participants of their generation); they both fell in love for the first time with women

who could not return their affections and rebuffed them; but in every other way, including the development of their lesbian identities, their stories show significant differences due to geography, class and money.

Monica was born in 1922, the youngest child of an affluent middle-class Jewish family in North London. Her early childhood was mostly spent in the nursery, and she remembers seeing more of her Nanny than of her mother. She became aware of her attraction to girls early in her teens, but was ‘merely disturbed and frightened’ by it. She says that her conservative, middle-class parents brought her up to expect to be married by her early 20s; nonetheless she had a good deal of freedom, working for the War Office during the War, living in a flat in London with a group of other young people, joining a theatre troupe. Then, at 23, she fell ‘desperately in love – with a beautiful girl who was having a hectic wartime affair with my brother’. When Monica revealed her feelings, the girl was amazed, but was ‘lovely about it,’ saying, ‘Oh darling, I do love you, but not like that!’ Monica was ‘desperate, and sure I was doomed to that sort of rejection.’ Soon afterwards she married (‘I imagined myself in love with him’) and four years later met her first woman lover: ‘So I was 30 when I finally found out what sex and passion was all about’ (Monica, born 1922).

Monica’s marriage soon ended; she had several lesbian relationships during her long life, remaining firmly in the closet all the time. Now over 90 and increasingly isolated, she is still extremely secretive about her sexual identity.

Edith is three years older than Monica. Born in 1919, she was the fourth child of six in a working-class family in the Midlands. Her father was a butcher, whom she describes as ‘a bit of a gambler, and we hadn’t got a lot of money, and he also liked a drink’. Edith left school at 14. She was bright, and wanted to be a nurse, but had no qualifications; however she did have an aunt who taught shorthand and typing, so she learned those skills and found a job in an office, where she met her future husband.

I sort of, drifted into marriage. [...] He wouldn’t take no for an answer. [...] And when he said, ‘Marry me,’ I said, ‘Oh, all right then.’ Because that was what you did, then. That was what all the girls did, get married. We didn’t know about anything else.

In her 20s, Edith suddenly fell in love with another young mother at her children's infant school. When she revealed her feelings, the woman was shocked:

... and she didn't want to know me. She didn't want to know me, and I thought, Well, I won't do that again.

Edith told no-one about the incident. Some years later she fell in love again, this time with a woman who reciprocated her feelings:

But of course I couldn't do anything. She asked me to go and live with her, to leave my husband and go and live there, but of course I couldn't. I said, 'I can't, I've a husband and two young children'. So that was that, and I never saw her any more.

Not long afterwards, this woman found another partner; Edith was heartbroken, but could tell no-one. For the remainder of her 60-year marriage, she never spoke of her feelings for women:

I couldn't ever tell anyone. My sisters – well, years ago, in the 1970s I think it was, there was this programme on television about these kind of women... you know. And afterwards I heard my one sister say to the other, 'They are disgusting, aren't they? They all ought to be shot.' So I never dared say anything (Edith, born 1919).

Edith was 85 when her husband died; shortly afterwards she disclosed to the resident warden of her sheltered housing complex that she was a lesbian. With the help of the warden, Edith met other local lesbians and was supported by them as she came out to her daughter and the rest of her extended family. Now in her 90s, she has a small group of lesbian friends and occasionally attends lesbian social events in her area.

I have told these two stories at some length because they illustrate how many factors other than chronological age can determine the course of a life. Both women fulfilled social expectations to marry; both were rejected by the first woman they fell in love with; beyond that, their stories are very different. Edith's internalised shame and dread of family disapproval, together with her sense of duty to her husband and her lack of financial independence, not only kept her in her marriage but ensured that she never felt

able to reveal or act on her same-sex attraction. Although faced with similar early rejection and the same social stigma, Monica – middle-class, child-free and comparatively affluent – had more choices. Living in London, financially independent and moving in the more liberal world of the theatre, she was able, over time, to develop a lesbian identity and find lesbian and gay friends. Although she always kept her sexual orientation hidden from family and heterosexual friends, she moved in a supportive lesbian and gay subculture. Ironically, when Edith finally felt able to come out, it was into a social climate of acceptance that she could never have imagined as a girl, and she is more open now than Monica about her lesbian identity.

As well as significant differences between the stories of women of the same generation, such as those above, there are sometimes important similarities between the stories of women of disparate ages, as the examples in the following chapters show; chronological age is rarely the most significant factor in the stories the women tell. For all these reasons, the following analysis of the research findings is arranged thematically, rather than by age.

CHAPTER 4

EVERYDAY LIFE

4.1 Older lesbians at home

The demographic data in the last chapter show that the ‘invisible’ older lesbian is hidden in plain sight: one of the reasons she is hard to see is that much of the time she looks just like any other woman of her age, race, or socio-economic group. Older lesbians are diverse: they can be found in every place and in every walk of life, and differ from each other in class, race, religion, socio-economic status and education. This diversity quickly caused me to question the very category I had set out to explore. To what extent is it meaningful to speak collectively about so diverse a group of people in terms of an identity category based simply on sexual orientation, when a variety of other intersecting social processes have rendered their lives so various? In this chapter and the next I offer some answers that question, by painting a picture of the current lives of older lesbians that shows both their similarities to and their collective differences from other people. This chapter describes participants’ lifestyle choices and personal relationships.

Most of the interviews I conducted took place in women’s homes, and these homes were very varied. The first I visited was the bungalow on a sheltered retirement complex where Edith (born 1919) lives. I found her surrounded by photographs of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, well-tended pot plants, souvenirs from long-ago holidays, and a clock that speaks when you touch it. Edith is blind; beside her chair are piles of ‘talking books’ with which she passes the hours between visitors. Another interviewee in her 80s, Irene, lives in the suburbs of London, in the substantial Victorian house which she and her partner shared for over thirty years; one room still serves as Irene’s studio, full of art materials, sketches and paintings. Milly (born 1948) and Heather (born 1943), on the other hand, live in a small West Country village, well off the beaten track. The living-room of their stone cottage, with its stacked logs, comfortable furniture and piles of books and papers, reflects the busy life of two women actively involved in their local community. Andrea (born 1946) lives on a narrow boat;

when I visited her it was moored for the winter on a canal that cuts through flat fields on the east side of England. Chris (born 1946) moved into her bungalow on the south coast after she and her last partner parted a few years ago. It is one of many similar houses on a post-war development, but Chris told me I'd know it by the motorbike in the front garden. Her face lit up as she talked about the bike, and about the morning when she 'did the Ton'. Shortly afterwards I interviewed Shaz (born 1945). She had been homeless for some time, but had recently been re-housed in a warden-assisted flat. We arranged to meet at the offices of the housing association that had been her lifeline for two or three years before that: a battered Victorian house in a deprived area of a Midlands city.

The variety of these settings reflected the range of social and economic differences between the participants described in the previous chapter. Their domestic arrangements and personal relationships were equally varied.

4.2 Living Alone

Research has shown that older lesbian gay, and bisexual people are statistically more likely to live alone than their heterosexual contemporaries (Ward et al., 2008; Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010; Stonewall, 2011).

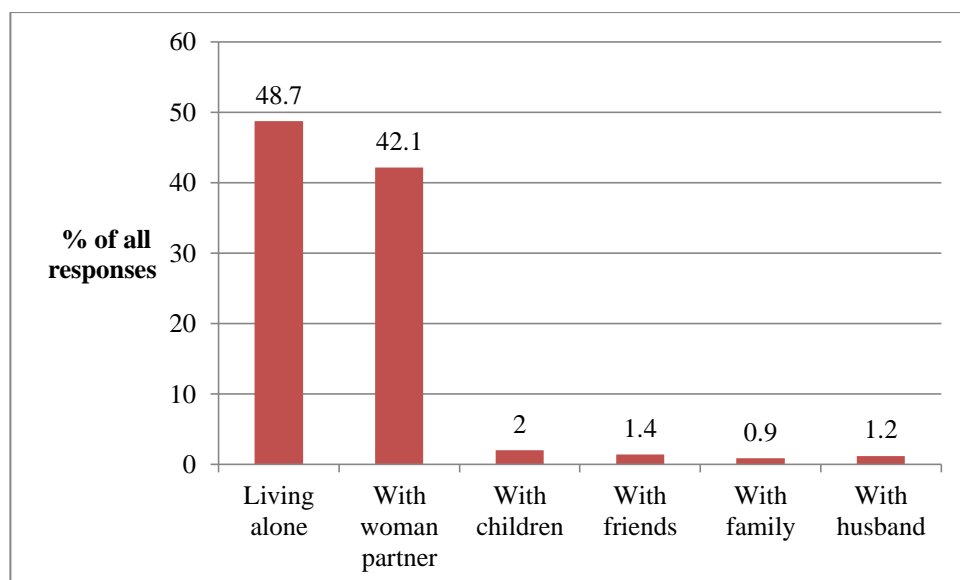


Figure 12: Living arrangements of survey respondents

My data support those findings: half of the women in the survey (49 per cent) live alone (Figure 12). This is almost twice as many as the number of older heterosexual people (28 per cent) living alone in the UK (Stonewall, 2011). It is also higher than the figures on lone living from recent joint studies of lesbians and gay men: Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003) and Stonewall, (2011) both give 41 per cent. This discrepancy could suggest that more lesbians live alone than gay men, but could also be accounted for by the fact that the sample populations in those studies were younger; unsurprisingly, the proportion of all people living alone rises with age. The difference between lesbian, gay and bisexual people and heterosexual people persists, however. In the over-75 age group, two thirds of survey respondents (68 per cent) lived alone (Figure 13), compared with just half of heterosexual people over 75 (Age UK, 2012).

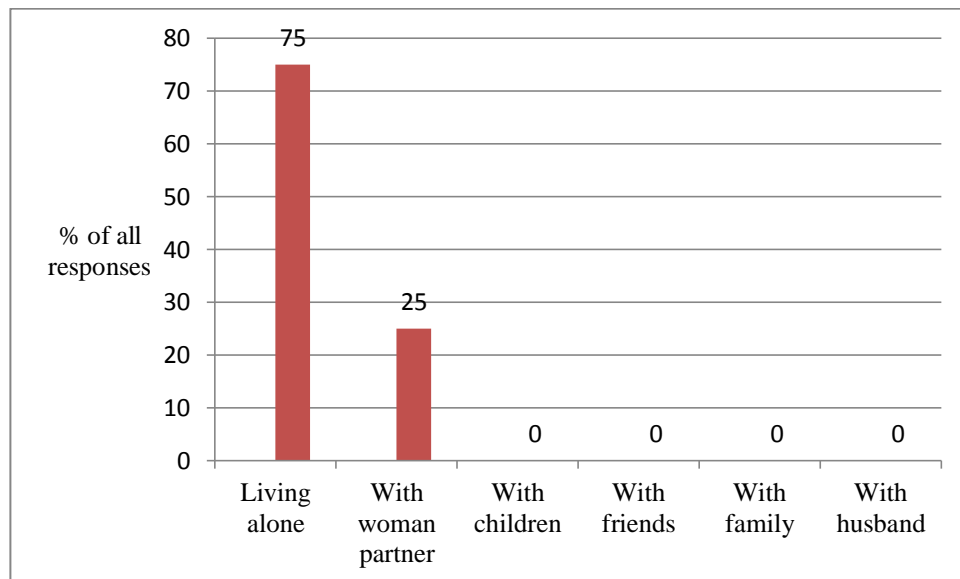


Figure 13: Living arrangements of respondents over 75

Of course, domestic circumstances are not only determined by sexual orientation and age. Socio-economic status is also a factor. Stonewall (2011) reports that the number of lesbian, gay and bisexual people living alone increases to more than half (53 per cent) in the social category C2DE (compared with just 29 per cent of heterosexual people in that social category). While my data do not break down by social category, they do show that the women currently living alone are less likely to be home-owners, more likely to rent their current homes and more likely to have lower annual incomes (both now and in the past) than those living with partners (Figures 14 and 15).

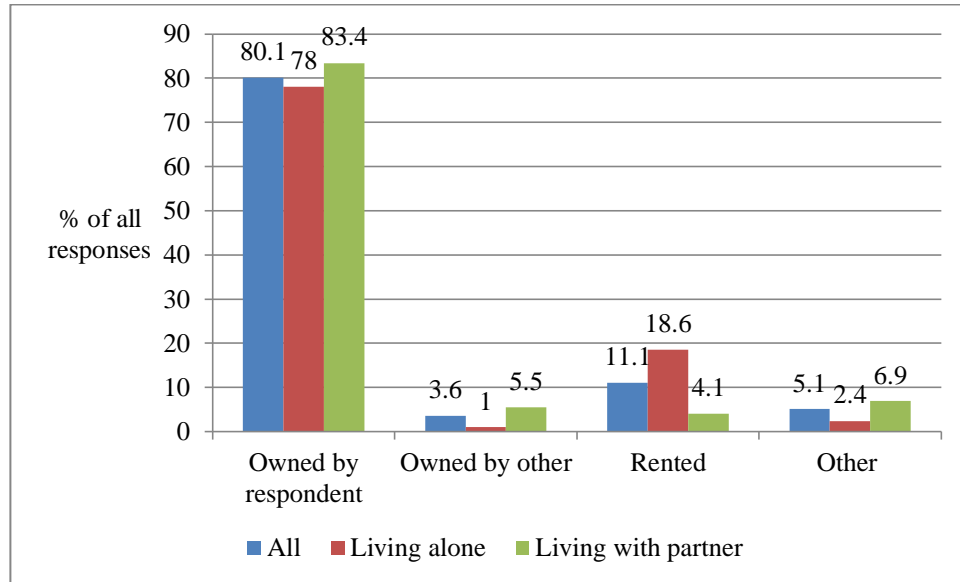


Figure 14: Home ownership and relationship status of survey respondents

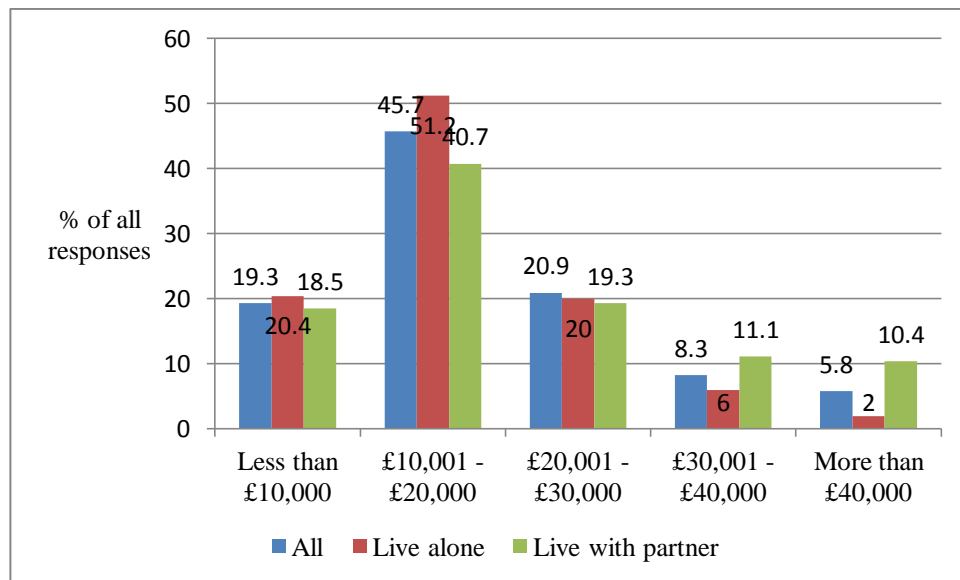


Fig 15: Annual income and relationship status of survey respondents

Economic status also impacts on how people experience living alone, and this in turn intersects with gender. Panayotes, Nunn and Nazroo (2006) found a positive correlation between economic status and loneliness; Beal (2006) found that more women than men report feeling lonely; Fokkema and Kuyper (2009) found that LGB elders in the Netherlands were significantly lonelier and less socially embedded than heterosexual elders.

Of the women in my survey who lived alone, one in four said that loneliness was a problem for them. Kehoe (1988:59) thought that ‘neither ageism nor the scars of discrimination distress these women as much as loneliness, which still seems to be the most serious emotional problem for lesbians in their sixth decade and beyond.’ The loneliness of an older lesbian can be exacerbated by feelings of social exclusion due to undisclosed sexual orientation. This is certainly the case for Angela:

I feel isolated here. I mean, I always wanted to live in a village, which is fine, but village life can be insular, and very narrow-minded and gossipy, and I would never, never come out here, at all. There have been one or two very nasty incidents about that sort of thing, and I would never ever come out, because village people, they’re not very well educated in the ways of the world. So it’s difficult on one’s own. I live a distance away from my gay friends anyway. So I don’t know what the future holds. I’m looking after my dogs, who have all got medical problems; that takes a lot of time, and a lot of money, but I’m committed to them, and I do the very, very best I can. I want them to live a long time. So life isn’t great, but it’s certainly not unbearable. I get a great amount of pleasure from my artwork, I enjoy my own company, I don’t look for other people to solve my problems or to lean on, because I’ve learnt that I have to stand on my own two feet and do the best I can (Angela, born 1939).

Angela’s dogs are her ‘family’. Kehoe (1988) regretted not having asked her respondents about their pets, because of their proven therapeutic value in older people’s lives. My questionnaire did ask about pets: in spite of the persistent cultural stereotype of the lesbian who owns many cats, only five out of ten of all my survey respondents kept any animals, and of those who lived alone, only four out of ten had a pet to keep them company.

4.3 Living with Others

A small number of the survey respondents (Figure 12) live with people other than partners or lovers: for instance, friends, children or other family members.

Monica shares her home now, as a way of retaining her independence. Forty years ago, that home was a range of dilapidated barns and sheds on the edge of a pretty village in the south of England; Monica turned the ruins into a uniquely beautiful house, and has lived there ever since. When she was in her late 80s, her health deteriorated to the point where friends and family (all far away) were concerned about her ability to go on living alone. Then someone suggested she should investigate home-sharing schemes.

I joined a thing called 'Homeshare'. [...] I got onto them, and the first thing that happened was that I got some woman who was also looking for something, and she came for a couple of days, but it didn't work out... and then I got him. And we met him – I got my friend from [nearby village] and various people, and we had lunch together to meet him – and they all said, 'He seems very nice', and there you go!

Her lodger pays her in kind, by doing the things she can no longer do:

[...] and he's very good to me. He does all sorts of things for me, he does shopping for me, and sees that I eat. He used to do a lot more for me, but I'm getting better at doing things for myself. He wakes me up in the morning, otherwise I might never get up... [laughs] and he's just a very good man, I'm very lucky to have him [...] because I couldn't be here alone. I'm very lucky with him. And I have nothing in common with him at all. Except we do the crossword together sometimes. But he's just a very kind man (Monica, born 1922).

Even so, Monica is still lonely for like-minded company. Gazing wistfully out at the garden she created, which for many years was the scene of famous lesbian parties, she says, 'I don't think any of my neighbours know I used to be a lesbian.' She is probably right. The lesbian identity of older women is obscured by so many cultural assumptions. Monica's single status, her married name and her great age almost certainly prevent her neighbours from 'seeing' her. Like half the lesbians in the survey, Monica was once married. For most people, the prefix 'Mrs' will reinforce their unexamined assumption that a woman is (and always has been) heterosexual. The absence of a partner (assumed to be male) can be accounted for by death or divorce; it is unlikely that anyone would deduce the truth, that Monica left her husband in order to live a lesbian life, and that her

last love affair with a woman took place in this house. The groups of lesbian friends who used to enjoy her hospitality are now too old themselves, and too far away, to be noticeable. Monica's lifelong habit of hiding is hardly necessary now.

4.4 Living together

Just over half the survey participants (55 per cent) were in intimate relationships with other women at the time of completing the questionnaire, and the large majority of these couples shared a home. Current partnerships varied greatly in the length of time partners have been together: 15 per cent of respondents had been with their present partners for more than 25 years; the longest current relationship reported was 43 years (Figure 16).

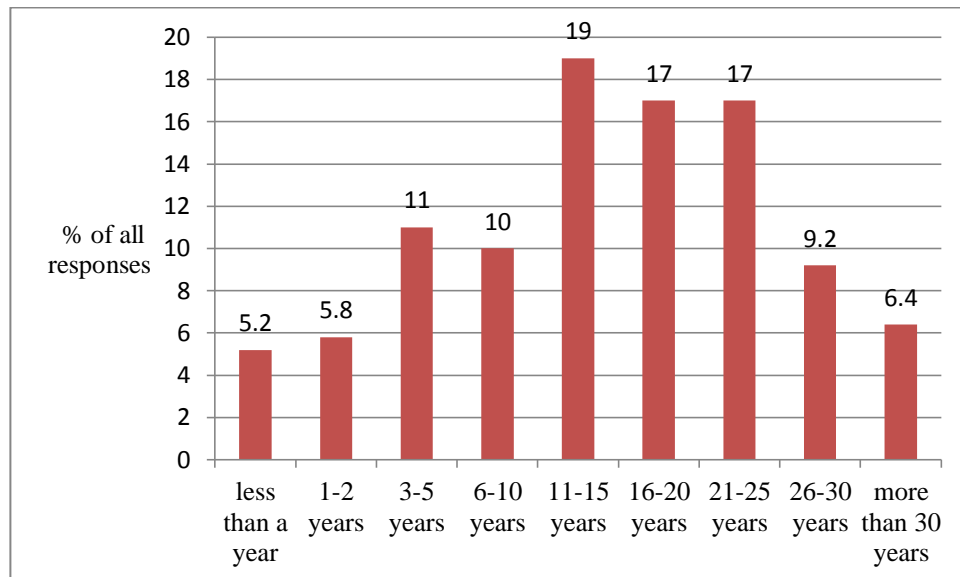


Figure 16: Length of current relationships (as percentages of all current relationships)

Among the interviewees and life writers, Milly and Heather have been together over 30 years, as have Sylvia and her partner; Aine and Merle have recently passed their 20th anniversary. When I met Leo, she was grieving the death of the woman with whom she had shared life and work for 44 years. Their love story began in the 1960s, in a time and place where they could tell no-one about their relationship, and when social expectations might well have driven two women apart; but, says Leo, 'There was no question about anybody else, once we'd met. [...] That was it.' (Leo, born 1932).

A successful long-term partnership like Leo's can nourish other people as well as the couple themselves. Irene, whose partner died after more than 30 years together, describes them as 'lovers, companions and members of a "team" which concentrated on doing things for others.' She writes about the way in which they:

... settled into a pleasing and satisfying routine, and over the 32 years we were together we gave friends and family – and ourselves – a really good time. We fostered cats, fed and watered the homeless, organised charity fairs, church sales and prayer groups and for nine years ran a group for Catholic (and other) lesbians (Irene, born 1929).

Andrea, a generation younger than either Leo or Irene, took a different approach to her long-term committed relationship:

When my long-term partner and I got together, we mostly, almost always, eschewed being thought of as a couple; partly because when we were younger I think we looked towards older lesbians and (probably quite unkindly in some senses) thought, we don't want to end up as a couple of old dykes like those are, two comfortable old people! [...] I think we still regarded ourselves as independent people who had chosen to live together (Andrea, born 1946).

Not all long-term partnerships lasted as well as Leo's. Irene's relationship grew difficult towards the end:

[S]omewhere, somehow, something got out of gear and matters between us began to deteriorate – very slightly and very slowly we had begun to drift apart while still retaining a genuine personal affection and a deep need for each other. In my case, I suppose it was the impulse which dogged every relationship I've ever had: the need for real independence and for time and space to call my own; no commitment and no ties. I just wanted my life to myself. It was an unspoken need, and it did not take into account what my partner wanted and needed. This was, probably, as I reached my 70s, and although extremely active felt less and less like travelling as my partner wanted to, and sex had become rather routine; she wanted other friends and different things to do outside the home. I ought to have seen it, and we ought to have talked about it – but we didn't. We began to

go our separate ways, without ever separating; we loved our home and both of us wanted to stay together in it (Irene, born 1929).

Andrea also talked about the way in which a long-term relationship can become restrictive:

One of the things I think is interesting these days about growing old in a relationship with somebody, is that you – I mean, we're all living so much longer, and so relationships are longer, and barring nasty unseens, we're mostly living through them – is that one of the things that I think I've rediscovered is the wish to come across as different to different and new people. And one of the things I've found most annoying is when my long-term partner will say things like, 'But you don't like yellow!', or 'But you don't do X, or you don't like Y.' [...] I think it makes it very difficult for people to re-invent themselves in a good way as they grow older. [...] And it's not necessarily that you want a new person in your life – maybe you want to *be* a new person in your own life, and your current life is stopping you! (Andrea, born 1946)

The diversity of experiences and attitudes reflected here shows that lesbian relationships vary as much in length, intensity and quality as heterosexual ones, and share many of the same challenges. The only major difference – at the time of this research – was that it was not possible for the partners to marry. Some (but not all) of those in relationships had registered a civil partnership, however.

4.5 Civil partnership

Although over half the women in the survey are currently in a relationship with another woman, fewer than half of those have formed civil partnerships. There has been a significant discrepancy between the number of men and women registering such partnerships (Office for National Statistics, 2012b), suggesting that lesbians have more reservations about civil partnership than gay men.

The interview data throw some light on why women in committed lesbian relationships might, or might not, want to register their partnerships. Often their reasons are political.

Tamsin, for instance, sees civil partnership as a step on the road to the heteronormative assimilation of lesbian and gay people (reminiscent of the ‘legitimisation’ that Vaid (1995) distinguishes from true ‘liberation’).

I’m actually rather worried that all the focus on civil partnership – good as this has been – is defining us again as being ‘just like everyone else, only same sex’ – and actually we’re not, necessarily (Tamsin, born 1947).

Some women who are also feminists have reservations about the institution of marriage and hence about anything which approximates to it:

Fran: Twenty-odd years! Twenty-two, I think ... it’s a long time. But we won’t have a civil ceremony or anything. [...] I think a lot of people do it because of complications about wills, and things like that, and there ain’t no complication for us! Because I haven’t got any family, and when I die, I don’t give a toss what happens.

Interviewer: And you don’t feel any desire to...

Fran: Flaunt it?

Interviewer: ...have a partnership for any other reason?

Fran: No. I’m not sure – I don’t know – why I don’t want to go down that path ... I mean, I know a lot of people do, and I’m sure there are sound political reasons for doing it – to show people that their relationship is just as valid as the great marriage thing – but I feel our relationship is valid anyway, I don’t need to validate it! I suppose it’s a good excuse for a good party [laughter]...

Interviewer: I think a lot of women do think of it in terms of marriage, and they have political issues with that...

Fran: Yes, I do, yes. I just don’t want to. And [partner] feels the same, luckily. I mean, if [she] said to me, Look, I really want to do this, well I’d do it, for her. But for me, I don’t feel I need to do that, really.

This feeling, that public affirmation of their relationships by mainstream society is unnecessary, arose quite often in the interviews: as Andrea (born 1946) says, ‘We felt that we didn’t need that sort of public declaration of togetherness that the Civil Partnership seems to proclaim.’ This attitude could be connected with the fact that, prior to the availability of civil partnership, lesbians and gay men had already found other ways of validating their relationships. Many created their own, usually entirely private, rituals or commitment ceremonies. Aine described how she and Merle ‘got married’ twenty years ago:

This was in the March, after meeting in the November previously. We decided that we’d get wedding rings then, so we went in to respective jewellers ... because they didn’t have the sizes that we needed, they had one in one shop and the other size in the other shop, fortunately. And we bought our two rings, and then – we probably should have made more of a ceremony out of it – but in the middle of [the] High Street, at three o’clock in the afternoon, I gave you the one from me and you gave me the one from you! [they both laugh] And we wore them, ever since, after that. Except we got new ones when we had our civil partnership.

It is clear from this account that Merle and Aine see their relationship as a marriage in all but name.

I do equate it with the marriage that you’d have – if heterosexual couples can get married, then why shouldn’t we? (Aine, born 1941)

Civil partnership has offered same-sex couples the opportunity to claim that equality: for Marguerite (born 1946), it was about ‘being able to say [...] that we could be responsible for each other in the way that everybody else can.’

Another important reason for choosing to register a partnership was to clarify inheritance issues:

And we could feel safe that if one or other of us died, there was going to be absolutely no problem about what was going to happen to our assets and pensions and all the rest of it (Marguerite, born 1946).

And also, it's something to do with [...] being able to leave your money.

Because I had a lot of trouble last time, with the death duties (Merle, born 1945).

Even for a couple who prefer not to disclose their relationship in all contexts, there are moments when official acknowledgment is important:

Aine: Merle felt that you weren't regarded as family, you see.

Merle: That's right.

Aine: And so we wanted to say that we *are* family, and I'm her immediate next of kin, and Merle's mine. That was probably... the legal bits that go around it are important.

Merle: And when you go into hospital, you can say you're next of kin.

Aine: I always put Merle down. And our doctor knows. But we don't go shouting it from the rooftops...

When women had decided to become civil partners after a long time together, they often expressed surprise that they 'felt different' afterwards.

Yes, I think to our surprise we did! I mean, we wrote our own things we wanted to say, and we used other people's words as well, and... yes, even after all the years, it was very real, and did affect us very much. You know, we just felt that somehow we were altogether [pause] kind of more legitimate, because in the eyes of the world we could be totally upfront. It's strange... (Marguerite, born 1946).

Sally writes about the difference in terms of a new sense of legitimation and confidence:

[We] had our civil partnership registration in February 2006 and although we convinced ourselves that this was primarily just for legal and financial reasons in reality it was a very significant day for us and I recall a real sense of legitimation of us as a couple. The registry office is in the Town Hall [...] and we were so well treated by all the staff we encountered. Being civil partners did give me a stronger sense of confidence particularly in relation to such things as booking a

double room in a hotel or in filling in official forms. The fact that we had a legal partnership made a much greater difference than I had anticipated on this sense of legitimacy, and entitlement to things that heterosexual people take for granted. [...] Following [partner]'s death I was awarded a bereavement allowance for 12 months and a bereavement grant for the funeral. I also received three small pensions from her pension funds, none of which would have occurred without the civil partnership (Sally, born 1950).

Although registering a civil partnership implies a public declaration, some women managed to do it very discreetly, without the knowledge of anyone beyond the registrar and their witnesses. Leo and her partner thought that was what they were going to do; in the end, however, it meant coming out of the closet in a way they had never expected:

So we thought we would do it very quietly. We had a couple of friends coming down to stay [...] and we thought, 'Well, when [they] are here, they can be our witnesses, so we'll have it on that day.' [...] I mentioned it to my brother, who lives in Australia, just as a matter of news. And the next day he rang up and said, 'I'm coming.' So if you have one relation, you have to ask the others... And I thought, 'Well they won't come, you know, because it's mid-week, and they've got children and jobs...' They all came. And they made a wedding cake; and you know... The whole thing was rather taken out of our hands. And then, of course –

Interviewer: You're pleased, really, aren't you?

Leo: Well, it happened, and you have to be pleased with what happened. And you know the banns, or whatever, have to be posted up [...] but it was a bit of a shock to discover that all of [town] and most of [the county] would then discover. [...] And obviously [our neighbour] had been discussing us... Anyway, we didn't have any more chance to be in the closet. I mean, everybody was terribly discreet, and congratulatory, and very loving, and they all, dammit, turned up, and packed the place. I mean, we'd invited quite a lot of people, but there were quite a lot of free-range characters who just came – and we weren't prepared for this. I hadn't even washed the car. It was all frightfully kind of

impromptu and amateur – but it was great fun, and everybody was terribly nice. [...] And we didn't expect it to make us feel different, but we did feel different.

Interviewer: Oh that's interesting. In what way?

Leo: Well, that's a question that I cannot answer you.

Interviewer: But so many people have said that to me.

Leo: Yes, but I bet they haven't been able to define exactly what it was. And I know a couple of male friends who were married recently, and one of them found it different, but the other one didn't know what he was talking about [laughter]. So perhaps not everybody does; but we felt different. But I can't say more than that.

Attitudes to same-sex marriage and civil partnership vary between generations (Heaphy, Smart and Einarsdottir, 2013), but the variety of stories and opinions among the participants shows that it is no more possible to generalise about older lesbians' attitudes to civil partnership than it would be to generalise about the attitudes of heterosexual people to marriage.

4.6 'Living apart together'

Joan (born 1930) and her partner are prominent members of a Christian congregation, which is where they met. This affected their decision about where to live when they became a couple:

Joan: We decided quite categorically that we would not live together, because we thought that wouldn't be a good idea as far as the Church was concerned. They would look and say 'Ah, well, you know! They were very good friends!'

Interviewer: How often do you see each other?

Joan: Most days. [...] We sleep in each other's houses most nights, but there's usually maybe one night when we don't – mainly because of what we're doing the next morning. Something of that sort. Or she's going to her daughter's, and

stays overnight. So yes, I suppose most nights we're together. Very little during the day – we both do our own thing in the day. And if she goes to the family, or if I have family, then that's fine (Joan, born 1930).

They are not unique in this decision. Although five out of ten women in the survey had partners, only four out of ten (42 per cent) were living with them. One in ten of the participants is a 'LAT,' ('living apart together' in what Levin (2004:223) has called a 'historically new family form'). Stonewall (2011:6) records a similar proportion of older lesbian, gay and bisexual people living apart from their partners, and shows that it is three times as great as the number of heterosexual older people in the same living arrangement. Some lesbian and gay people, like Joan and her partner, live apart because they feel they need to conceal the nature of their relationship. However couples choose not to live together for a range of reasons (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003). For women it is just as often a matter of preserving freedom and independence. Interviewee Barbara compared her own view to that of a woman in the television documentary *Women Like Us* (1992).

There was one in *Women Like Us*, who'd not broken up with her partner, but had broken up the housing relationship, saying, 'I'm 60, I don't want to live with someone else anymore.' And I thought, Yes, that has a point (Barbara, born 1936).

Some women enjoy a close relationship but have come to value their own space:

I certainly don't want to live with anyone again. I don't want anyone to live here with me again. And that was good with [ex-partner], because she didn't want anyone to live with her, either! And she was only 20 minutes away (Crunchy, born 1939).

For Jen, the situation evolved over time, and was influenced by the fact that her partner had a child still living at home:

We've both had dreams of living together, but they've never coincided. I wanted her to leave [husband] and come and live with me, and then she said, 'No, I need to live on my own, I have never lived on my own.' And actually she still had one son who was very attached to her, so she and [son] went to her

house. Then she wanted us to live together, after [son] went to University, and I by this time had decided I rather liked how we were, so I said no! And then we developed this pattern of living on our own in the week and at her house at weekends. It was meant to be alternate, but it doesn't work at my house, it absolutely doesn't (Jen, born 1942).

Julia didn't expect to go on living on her own when she met Philippa:

I think when our relationship started, my expectation would have been that we'd eventually live together, and it then became clear to me that that wasn't what Philippa did. And I had to have a bit of a tussle with myself about that, because I actually think it's more fun, and less strain in some ways, to live with somebody, in that you're kind of grounded in your unit, you know, you share expenses... I think it gives a more emotional togetherness... I think it's a more natural way of living.

She still has mixed feelings, but has come to see Philippa's point of view:

Well, emotionally I'm still drawn towards the idea of living with a partner, but if I really think about it, I did that with all my previous partners, right up until [previous partner] died, but then I was five years on my own, and I had my own place... Then it's difficult, isn't it? You start thinking, 'Oh, I'd have to sell my property, I'd have to get rid of some of my possessions ...' And none of these things should be important, but [...] as you get older... As much as I would like to have the emotional security of being in a property together, it's all very well when things are going well, but then what happens in a worst-case scenario? So, it's a difficult one... For me I think I'd have to say that living with someone is the ideal in my head, but would it work out? I don't know. And it certainly won't work out if the other person is not used to doing it, so one just has to be a bit realistic about it, I suppose (Julia, born 1948).

These alternative living arrangements are ways in which older lesbians can be seen as contributing to wider changes in 'the staging of everyday life' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, cited in Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010:810). The erosion of traditional constraints and conventions is a theme in current sociological debates about

the increasing diversity of family lives; Roseneil and Budgeon (2004:128) have suggested that ‘visible, “out” same-sex relationships, and the related reordering of the sphere of sexuality’ have contributed to a ‘significant challenge’ to the notion of the conventional family. Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003) see the lives of older non-heterosexuals as an indicator of experiences that increasingly cut across the homo/heterosexual dichotomy. In other words, heterosexuals are beginning to make families in ways that lesbians and gay men already know about. Giddens (1992:135) called people in same-sex relationships ‘prime everyday experimenters’, because they have been at the forefront of these social changes.

4.7 New Relationships

Not all the relationships reflected in the data are as long-lasting as some of those described above. The shorter – and therefore newer – relationships are in some ways more remarkable than the long-term ones, because of the way in which they challenge prevailing stereotypes of the sexless older woman. Eleven per cent of the intimate relationships reported in the survey were two years old or less, and five per cent were less than a year old, showing that some lesbians go on finding new sexual partners well into their 60s and even their 70s.

These older women also go on experiencing the pain of relationships ending; more than one interviewee described a recent break-up. Crunchy’s story contains both the pain of parting and the possibility of a new relationship:

Interviewer: Because you must have been – what? – in your late 60s, when you got together with [ex-partner]?

Crunchy: Yes, 69 , I was. [...] I’m going to a barbecue, not this weekend but the next... this woman who fancies me, but I don’t fancy her at all [...] And she’s very attractive and everything else, but I don’t fancy her; I still fancy [ex-partner], I expect, that’s why. But I’m going to her barbecue, anyway. And she’s always emailing me and ringing me, and stuff like that (Crunchy, born 1939).

It is much more unusual to begin a *first* lesbian relationship so late in life, but that is what happened to Joan (born 1930). She was a widow of seventy-six when, to her surprise, she fell in love with a good friend and they became lovers. Four years later, when I interviewed her, she said of their relationship: ‘To be quite honest, it’s still growing. It’s still something very beautiful, for both of us.’

4.8 Sexuality

The interview data and the wording of the survey questions make it clear that these new relationships are physical / sexual as well as emotional. The sexuality of older lesbians presents a number of challenges to prevailing cultural assumptions. There are still ‘huge cultural roadblocks’ (Barker, 2004:53) to the idea of older people, even heterosexual ones, as sexually active. Bildtgaard (1998) has shown that, to an overwhelming degree, the elderly are culturally depicted as having no sexual life at all, with a need for tenderness and warmth replacing sexuality. Being single as well as older can deepen this sexual invisibility, as Sally discovered after her partner died:

As I get older I believe the issue of my sexuality will become increasingly invisible again unless I continue to assert it. Older women in general are assumed to have no ‘sexuality,’ so in order to protect my identity it does feel as though I will have to continue to ‘come out’ in a range of situations. Since [partner]’s death I have joined a number of organisations (choir, badminton, gym) as a means of getting out of the house and meeting people. This has felt hard; I find socialising difficult and particularly when people make assumptions about me (Sally, born 1950).

There has been little or no life course research about lesbian sexuality, despite the fact that ‘most women who are not heterosexual have a “coming out” story of sorts, which focuses entirely on sexuality over the lifespan’ (Rothblum, 2000:202). Nonetheless the small amount of data available (Kehoe, 1988; Adelman, 1991; Help and Care Development, 2006) show that lesbians over 65 do remain sexually interested and active, though evidence for those aged 70 or more is ‘extremely skimpy’ (Barker, 2004:

53). My survey confirms these earlier findings and supplies new data for the older age group.

The definition of ‘intimate relationship’ given to respondents was ‘one which is both emotional and physical/sexual.’ Well over half (57 per cent) of women in the survey were currently involved in an intimate relationship with another woman (Figure 17). The percentage decreased with age, but four out of ten women over 70 and three out of ten of those over 80 reported being in such relationships.

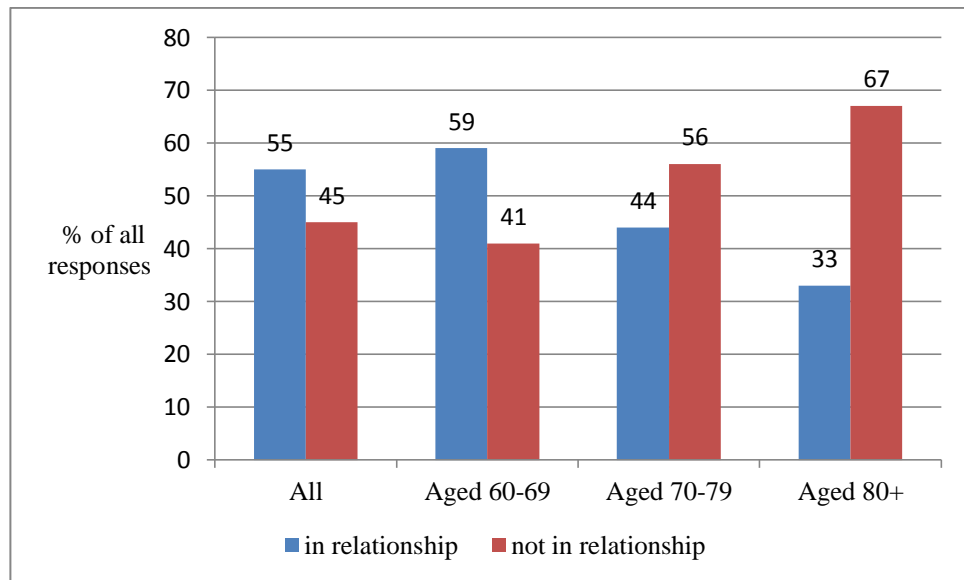


Figure 17: Relationship status by age

Respondents were also asked, ‘Over the last year, how often were you physically sexual with another woman?’ One in five women said monthly or more often; one in ten said once a week or more (Figure 18).

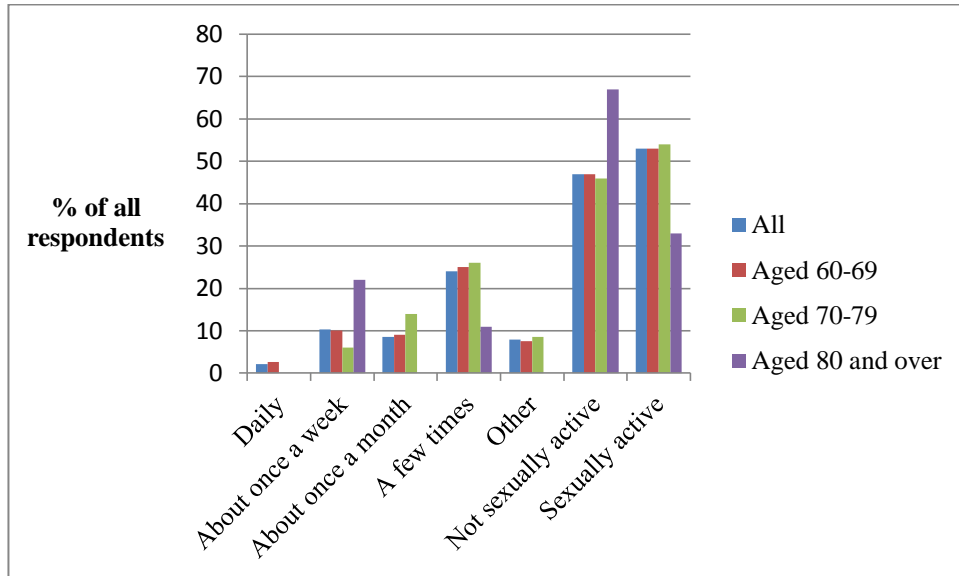


Figure 18: Frequency of Sexual Activity

Of course, these results beg the question of what counts as ‘sex’ to a lesbian (Richardson, 1992). Rothblum (2000:203) has suggested that lesbian sex remains misunderstood because ‘sexual behaviour is still defined in genital ways that may not accurately reflect the totality of women’s sexual experiences.’ Garnets and Peplau (2000:181) make a similar point:

Researchers and theorists who attempt to generalize about sexuality and sexual orientation in both men and women often take male experience as the norm and ignore unique aspects of women’s lives.

Indeed Marilyn Frye (1991) sees the very terms ‘sex’ and ‘having sex’ as so ineradicably phallocentric in their cultural definition that they are inappropriate to describe that gamut of ‘emotional intensity, excitement, bodily play, orgasm, passion, and relational adventure’ that constitute the acting-out of lesbian desire. She pours scorn on the idea that it is possible to say how many ‘times’ lesbians have ‘had sex’, asking, ‘What does he think he means, “times”? What will we count? What’s to count?’ (1991:2) Garnets and Peplau (2000:181) see the need to establish ‘a new paradigm’, one that ‘recognises the great diversity of women’s erotic experiences and the many sociocultural factors that shape women’s sexuality and sexual orientation across the lifespan’. Until that diversity is recognised and described, ‘[w]omen’s sexuality is an

area where we don't even know what most of the questions are, let alone the answers' (Rothblum, 2000:203).

Framing the survey questions on this topic was therefore something of a challenge. In the end I decided, for the reasons above, to avoid the phrases 'having sex' and 'how many times?' and to borrow my wording from Kehoe (1988), who asked, 'How often in the past year were you physically sexual with another woman?' Even so, one respondent wrote: 'Not sure how you are defining physically sexual. If intercourse, a few times; if hugging, kissing and being close, all the time' – a response that in its turn raises the question of how this lesbian defines 'intercourse.' The comments in the 'Other' box for this question also included 'Cuddles and kisses' and 'Physical affection but not actually sexual.'

Whatever lesbian sex is, the survey data show that it happens a good deal after the age of 60, and remains a significant part of women's lives and identities. Asked about the importance of sex in a lesbian relationship, while eight out of ten women said it was the 'main part' or 'an important part' of a relationship when they were younger, six out of ten still rated sex as an important part of a lesbian relationship after the age of 60. These findings resonate closely with the data produced by Help and Care Development (2006:37):

Very often older people are deemed to be asexual, i.e. that after a certain age sex becomes less important. Whilst 19.8% of people questioned said they did not have sexual needs 75.8% said they did. Also 58.2% said an active sex life was important to them and 42.9% said that their sexual needs were being met.

Just under half of my survey respondents (47 per cent) had not been sexually active in the previous year.¹² This was not always because they were single; one respondent described her situation as: 'living with partner but sex not featuring much at present.' Of the women in the survey who were not sexually active, four out of ten said it was not

¹² Unfortunately I omitted to ask about auto-eroticism in the questionnaire. The subject of female masturbation is yet another cultural taboo which, combined with asexual stereotypes of old women, means that we know little about this aspect of older women's sexual lives.

by their choice. Life writer Kathryn and her partner are in this situation; their relationship has not been sexual for the last five years. She writes:

One thing I miss now [...] is to have sex again, and yes I would cheat on her, as I need it, but I also love her in so many other ways, as one does in a complete committed relationship.

Kathryn sees her age as a barrier to meeting new sexual partners:

But at my age although I feel very young and have a young outlook, where can one find women to have some fun? Most of the clubs are for young people and most of the adverts in *Diva* are the same. [...] I don't want to leave my life partner, I just want some sex; unlike men, and the straight scene, there are no cruising grounds for women (Kathryn, born 1949).

Others, however, say they are content to be celibate now. Interviewee Chris says she is happy with her single state:

I've been single for nearly five years, and I enjoy it! [...] We all miss certain things obviously... the companionship side of it... but I've got some darned good friends from many years ago, most of my friends I've known for at least five or six years.

Even so, she hints that she has not entirely ruled herself out of the dating game:

But maybe one day, who knows? It's never too late ... I'm very much visible, in as much as I do go out and about, I go to clubs and things. I still like my dancing! I can still show them how it's done, even if I can't get up off the floor again! [laughter] Yes. I still keep going (Chris, born 1946).

Before leaving the subject of older lesbian sexuality, it is worth noting that three of the participants have never had a sexual relationship with a woman, but still claim a lesbian identity. As historians such as Jennings (2007), Doan (2001), and Doan and Garrity (2006) argue, lesbianism is a culturally-produced identity that embraces more than the physically sexual. The data strongly support the idea that 'being' lesbian involves not only a sexual but also a social and emotional life that is woman-centred.

4.9 Heterosexual marriage

A subject that arose almost immediately in both focus groups was that of ‘once-married’ and ‘never-married’ lesbians. There are older lesbians who have been married (or have had significant relationships with men) and older lesbians whose significant relationships have been only with women. Women in both categories expressed a curiosity to know which state was the more common and whether ‘most’ other lesbians were like them: which experience was the more usual? This difference is often seen by lesbians themselves as a significant division in their community, although it is also very common for older female couples to be made up of one never-married and one once-married woman (all the couples among my interviewees were of this kind).

The answer to the focus groups’ question about which state is the more usual, is that these two categories of older lesbian were more or less equal in size. Slightly over half the respondents (52 per cent) had been married, sometimes more than once (Figure 19).

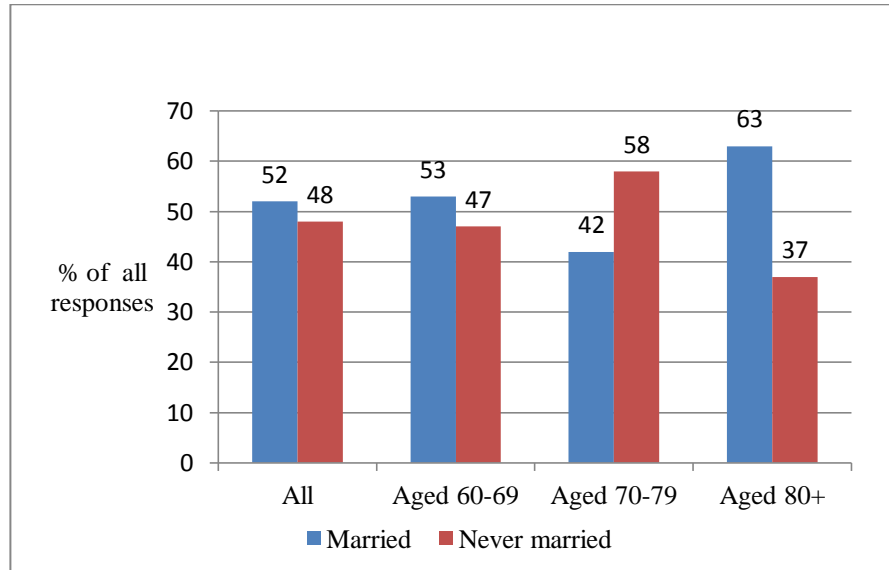


Figure 19 Percentage of respondents who were married to men, by age

The data offer no explanation why women in their seventies in this sample were slightly less likely than others to have married; however the higher proportion of marriages among the over 80s can be assumed to reflect the strength of social expectations of the inter-war period in which they grew up. The most common reason for marrying (given

by 60 per cent of survey respondents who had been married) was simply that ‘it was the expected thing’.

Interviewee Chris, one of the minority of lesbians¹³ who have never had any relationships with men at all, reflected on how she escaped this pressure to marry:

I don’t think I could ever have done what Mother expected, and settled down, and had grandchildren, it’s not me. [...] I think it was luck. I think the kind of pressure perhaps that we were under was not as heavy as some people got, with all the emotional blackmail, if you like, to please somebody else. I wasn’t out to please anybody else, not in that respect – this is my life, and I’ve got to live it my way (Chris, born 1946).

More than one in ten of the women who married said they did so mainly because they wanted children. Unmarried motherhood was highly stigmatised; for the same reason marriage was often the only option for single pregnant women. Respondents who had been forced to marry their child’s father recalled the strength of that social pressure, and the suffering it could cause. Other respondents hinted that they might not have married if they had had a better understanding of their own natures, saying, ‘At the time I didn’t realise I was “GAY” ’ and ‘Didn’t realise I was a lesbian’. But others ‘knew’, and married anyway. A small minority (5 per cent) said they had married because they thought it would make them heterosexual.

It is also important to note that four out of ten of those who married said that they did so because they were in love with their husbands. This is a significant statistic, because it challenges the essentialist view of sexual orientation and supports recent theories of women’s ‘erotic plasticity’ (Diamond 2008; Peplau and Garnets, 2000; Garnets and Peplau, 2000, among others).

Many of the marriages did not last: some were fractured by the woman’s discovery of lesbian love (see the examples in Chapter 7); others ended before or after that. But some marriages did last for many years, sometimes until the husband died: a handful of

¹³ Garnets and Peplau (2006:73) put the proportion of older lesbians who have had heterosexual relations, though have not necessarily married, at near to 75 per cent, saying, ‘More than three quarters of lesbians report having had heterosexual intercourse at some point in their lives.’

respondents reported marriages lasting 30 or 40 years or more. Interviewee Edith and her husband were married for almost 60 years; it was only after he died that Edith, then 85, spoke for the first time about the fact that she felt she had ‘always’ been a lesbian (Traies, 2012:80).

Many of the once-married lesbians, even those whose marriages ended many years ago, have kept their married names, either as a heterosexual disguise or as a way of retaining what they see as a socially respectable status.

Frieda: I don’t know how many people I know, know that I’m gay [...] and a lot of my life has revolved around [...] being just ‘Mrs R’. I wondered when I was teaching, especially when I was Deputy Head, whether there would be any repercussions – there must have been quite a number of people who knew I was gay – but to my knowledge there were never any repercussions at all.

Interviewer: Do you think that being ‘Mrs’ helped?

Frieda: I think it did (Frieda, born 1928).

Claassen (2005) organised the analysis of her findings (about a group of older American lesbians) according to the chronological ages of the respondents, but later concluded (2005: 271) that:

...age cohort does not matter as much as I thought it would [...]. Instead, it seems that a more natural social division in studies of lesbian lives is the never-married / once-married division.

Claassen found significant differences in economic status between these two groups, with never-married lesbians being more likely to have pensions, enjoy higher incomes and own more valuable properties; although she also speculates whether this is because the ‘never-married’ are also unlikely to have had children.

However, data from the present study suggest that this ‘once-married / ‘never-married’ distinction is at best a very blunt instrument for analysing women’s experience, and at worst a distortion of it: a piece of shorthand which says more about our love of binaries than about lesbian identity across the lifespan. The participants include lesbians who

have been happily married and lesbians who have been unhappily married; lesbians (both married and unmarried) who have had significant and loving relationships with men; lesbians who have had unimportant or downright bad relationships with men; lesbians who have only ever had relationships with other women, and women who claim a lesbian identity although they have never had sexual relations with anyone. There are women who married when they were identifying as heterosexual, and women who married although they knew they were not. Listening to older lesbians talking, I would suggest that the distinction they draw between once-married and never-married lesbians functions as a kind of shorthand for the diversity of their past experience, and is also about claiming lesbian identity. Sometimes the distinction hints at a disagreement about how to define a 'real' lesbian:

[T]here are lots of people who've been married and everything, bless them; they've been married, all that time; they did it really because they thought they ought to. And people say [disapproving voice], 'Oh!' and 'They were married!' and stuff like that. And I say to them, well, but for the grace of God that could have been you or me, or anybody else – especially me, being brought up [where I was]!

As Crunchy suggests here, some never-married older lesbians still express doubt about the authenticity of lesbians who have been married.

4.10 Children and Other Family

Until comparatively recently, choosing a lesbian lifestyle almost inevitably meant forgoing motherhood. For most of those who formed their lesbian identities early in life, and never married or entered into heterosexual partnerships, having children was simply not an option; the phenomenon of lesbians choosing to have babies together is relatively recent. More than half (58 per cent) of the women in this survey had not had children; this is three times more than in the female population at large (Rendall and Smallwood, 2003; Stonewall, 2011). In their old age, this may be a more significant social difference than either sexual orientation or marital status: an old woman who cannot talk about her grandchildren is at the same kind of social disadvantage as a man who is not interested

in sport. Childlessness is culturally constructed as a misfortune, a tragic condition to be medically corrected or, failing that, courageously borne. Reynolds (2011) has described the identity of 'childless older woman' as a deficit identity, to the extent of being defined by what one is not. Interviewee Andrea described how she has sometimes felt this to be so, even among lesbians:

I find it sometimes quite uncomfortable, because if I'm in a bunch of older lesbians and they start talking about their children, I'm at a loss, because I've not got any – I haven't even got any nieces or anything that I can use to empathise with. And I think, 'What's going on here?' [...] Are they finding their identity in this sort of business of being women first and lesbians second? And I do feel a bit uncomfortable with it (Andrea, born 1946).

Only 42 per cent of women in the survey were mothers (the same percentage is reported by Heaphy, 2003, and Stonewall, 2011) compared with almost nine in ten of heterosexual women (Stonewall 2011). This suggests that the majority of older lesbians are facing the future without children of their own (though many childless lesbians whose partners were mothers had taken on the role of step-parents to their partners' children). Those who had children conceived them while married or in relationships with men. The idea that lesbians could have children together was not current when these women were young, but only few of them (only 5 per cent) said they felt 'very negative' about lesbian couples having babies. A majority also said they approved of lesbians adopting children than actually giving birth to them within a lesbian relationship (Figure 20).

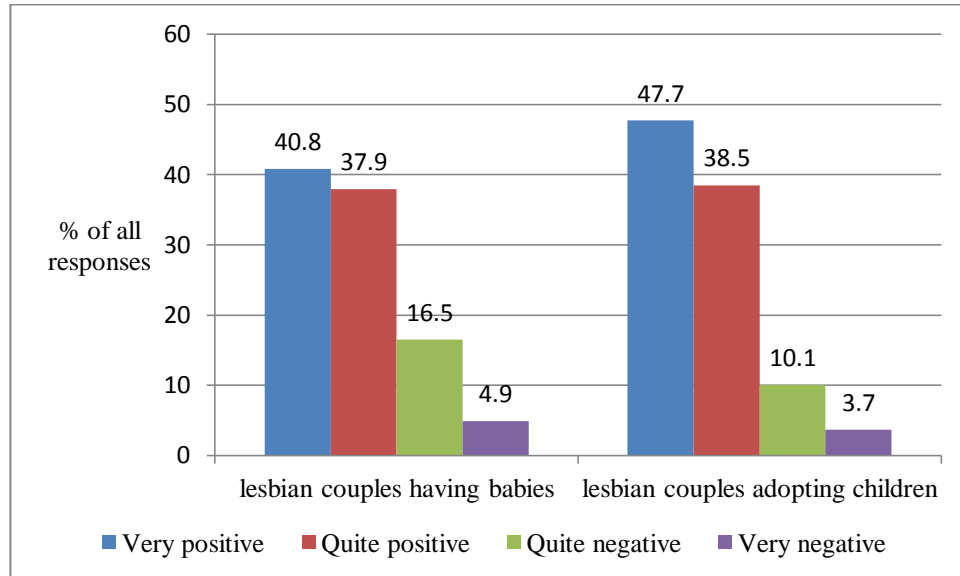


Figure 20: Attitudes to lesbian couples having babies and adopting children.

Although a significant minority of survey respondents had never come out to their children or other members of their families, more than eight out of ten had done so (see Chapter 5). Previous research (Friend, 1990; Grossman, 1997, among others) has emphasised the benefits to the lesbian or gay person of coming out, but there are also benefits to the family (Friend, 1989). Elaine explains:

A family with a lesbian in it is a different sort of family than a family who hasn't [...] because they're aware that lesbians aren't something 'out there' and peculiar people; it's your sister! And your sister's partner, whom you've learnt to love as well. In fact, in my family my nephew's gay as well, so they're extra lucky, because they've got two! [laughter] I mean, if a member of a very straight family married somebody who's black or Asian or whatever, that's going to make a difference and also improve the understanding of the world among people of the extended family. It's a bit like that really, I think.

In this way, she thinks, family members gain some insight into the process of coming out:

They also have to confront how much they're prepared to say to other people, you know? It's a real thing, that makes people think more (Elaine, born 1941).

Although some recent research suggests that older lesbian, gay and bisexual people are much less likely than heterosexuals to see their biological family on a regular basis (Stonewall, 2011), or to receive support from them (Dorfman et al., 1995), data collected by Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003: 10) have shown that relationships older non-heterosexuals have with their families of origin are likely to be more important than is suggested in the existing literature. My data support this more positive view, suggesting that the large majority of older lesbian mothers have maintained satisfactory contact with their children. While a small number (fewer than one in ten) do say that they ‘seldom or never’ see their sons or daughters (Figure 21), over 80 per cent say that they see them ‘regularly’.

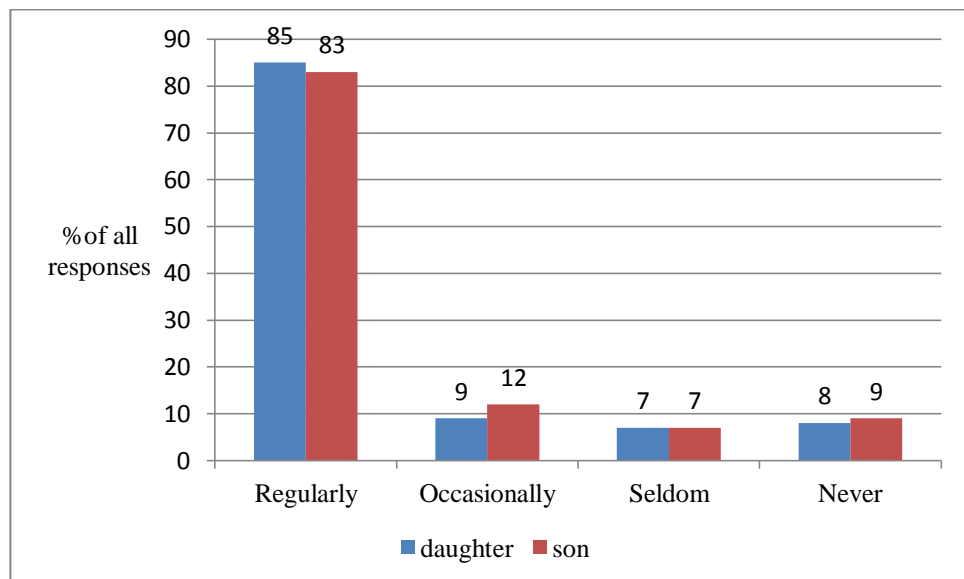


Figure 21: Contact with children

Acceptance, support, and love from family members have been shown to help deal with the stress resulting from minority status (DiPlacido, 1998:145). As Hubbard and Rossington (1995) discovered, the stereotype of the lonely, embittered older lesbian without family or friends tells us more about homophobia and societal attitudes than it does about the experience of being an older lesbian.

4.11 Summary: diversity and difference

The older lesbians described in this chapter do not appear to be easily gathered into a single category. They are diverse: they come from a variety of social, ethnic and religious backgrounds; they are to be found in all sorts of places and in every stratum of society. Although they are more likely than heterosexual women to live alone, to be childless and not to have married, there are also ways in which they have much in common with other older women. Some are single, but others live with a partner, with whom they might or might not continue to have an intimate sexual life. Many are closely attached to their families and a good number have children and grandchildren (albeit to a lesser degree than their heterosexual counterparts). For some of the women, as they age, it may well be that other factors – race, class, poverty, childlessness – give them a greater feeling of difference from other women than does their lesbian identity.

The question to be answered, then, is whether there are any ways in which older lesbians are collectively alike and so collectively different from other people? Do they have a recognisable common identity based on their sexual orientation? The participants themselves clearly think that they do. While I was carrying out the interviews, I travelled all over England and visited, as I have described, a wide variety of homes. That variety spoke of a broad social and cultural diversity – yet the inhabitants of these diverse dwellings, to a woman, all welcomed me as a member of their own tribe. They thought they knew what we had in common, and it enabled them to trust me.

My task throughout this research has been both to identify and to question that collective identity. This chapter has shown that many of the differences between older lesbians and heterosexual older people – for instance, that they are more likely to live alone or to be unsupported by family – are differences of degree rather than of kind. By contrast, in the next chapter I describe two features of older lesbian life that, I suggest, are particular to older lesbians as a group and do make their collective everyday experience genuinely different from that of heterosexual women.

CHAPTER 5

COMMUNITY AND FRIENDSHIP

5.1 In and out of the closet

This chapter describes two characteristics that set the life of older lesbians apart from that of other older women. The first of these is the dimension of secrecy in their lives: the extent to which many older lesbians still conceal their sexual identity from other people. The second, intimately connected to the first, is the nature and importance of lesbian friendship networks, both informal and within organised social groups. I argue that both of these aspects of lesbian community derive from the shared experience of social stigma, which remains a defining element of older lesbian identity.

Veteran lesbian novelist Katherine V. Forrest, speaking at the York Lesbian Arts Festival in 2007, described ‘coming out’ as ‘the unfinished business on our community’s agenda’. Although many of the research participants said they felt able to be reasonably open about their sexual orientation, many did not; one of the main barriers to the cultural visibility of an older lesbian is still that she is unlikely to reveal herself. In fact she has probably spent many years perfecting an unobtrusive but highly effective camouflage. Even if she would like to be more open (and 13 per cent of survey respondents said they wanted to be ‘more visible as a lesbian than they are now’), she may struggle to break the taboo of a lifetime. Angie’s story is not an uncommon one in her generation:

Angie and Pam hid their relationship from their families and work colleagues, taking extreme measures to conceal even the fact that they shared an address. They had an active social life within the lesbian community, but kept the different parts of their lives strictly segregated, making sure that their friends, family and work colleagues never met each other. When Angie died suddenly, Pam had to break the news to Angie’s family that she and Pam had been lovers for over thirty years and had recently registered their civil partnership. There was no mention of their relationship at Angie’s funeral (Traies, 2012: 74).

Older lesbians are more open about their sexual identities today than they were in the past (Figures 22 and 23).

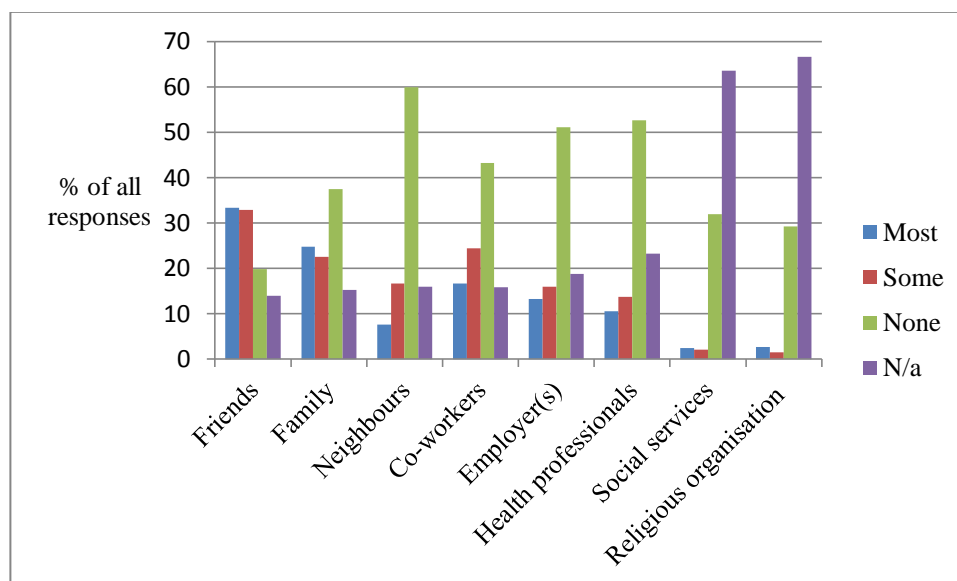


Figure 22: Thirty years ago, who knew you were a lesbian?

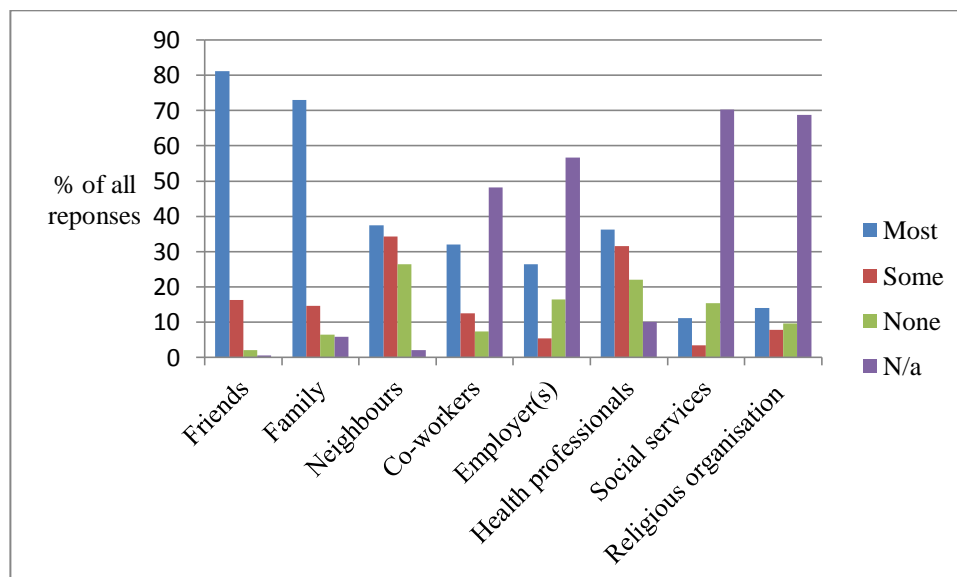


Figure 23: Who knows you are a lesbian now?

Change is slow, however; they were still more likely to be out to their friends than their families, and less likely to be out to their neighbours or other people (Figures 22 to 28).

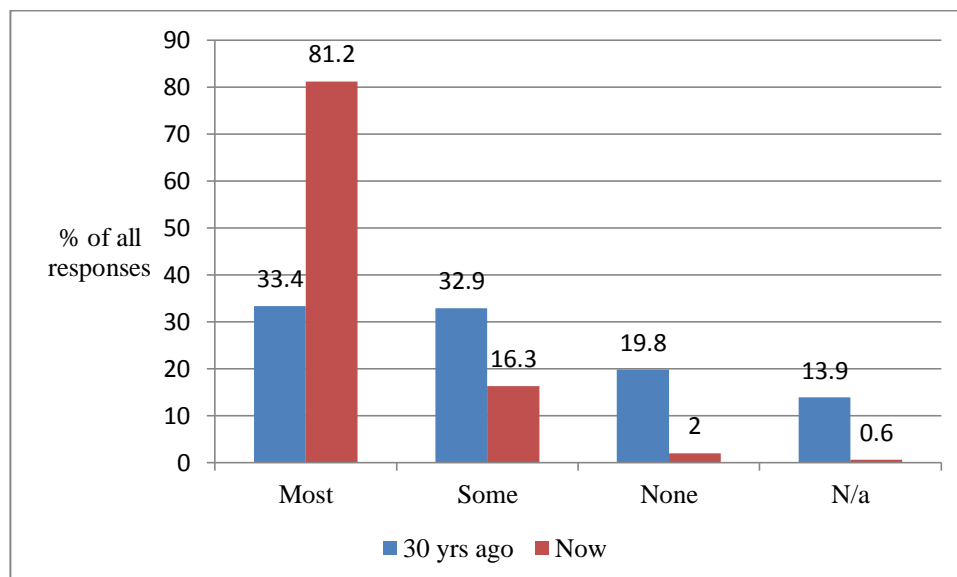


Fig 24: Who knew/known you are lesbian? (Friends)

Asked, 'At the time of filling in this questionnaire, who knows you are a lesbian?'

82 per cent said that 'most' of their friends knew, compared with only 33.4 per cent who said that most of their friends knew thirty years ago. Only two per cent said that none of their friends currently knew about their sexual orientation, whereas 19.8 per cent said that this was the case 30 years ago.

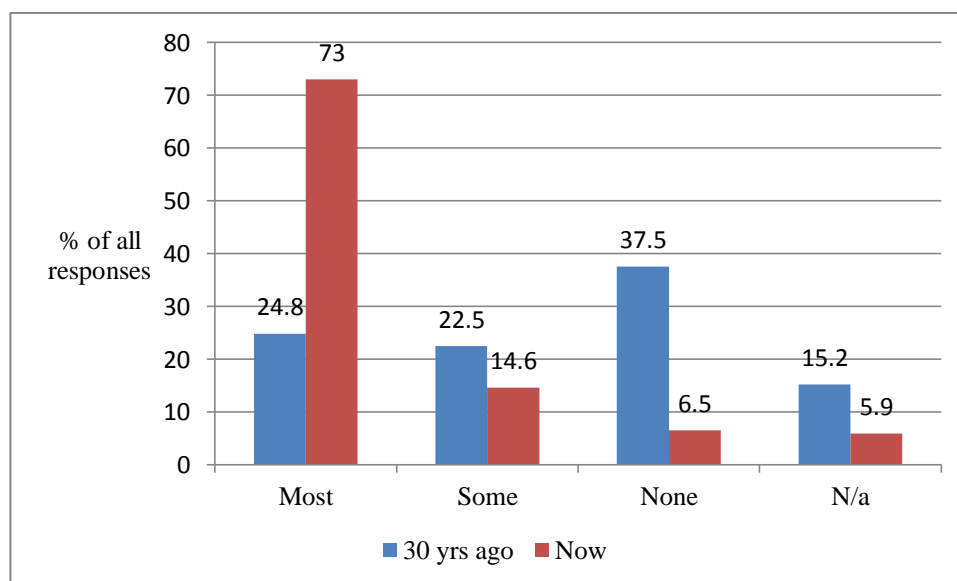


Figure 25: Who knew/known you are lesbian? (Family)

Friends have always been more trusted than family. However, 73 per cent said that most of their family now knew about their sexual orientation, and another 14 per cent that

some of their family knew; but *nearly six per cent* said that *no one in their family knew, or had known, about their lesbian identity* (Figure 25).

Outside the circle of trusted friends and family, respondents exercised even more discretion. A third said that most of their neighbours knew they are lesbians, and another third said some neighbours did (Figure 26). However, more than a quarter said that none of their neighbours knew.

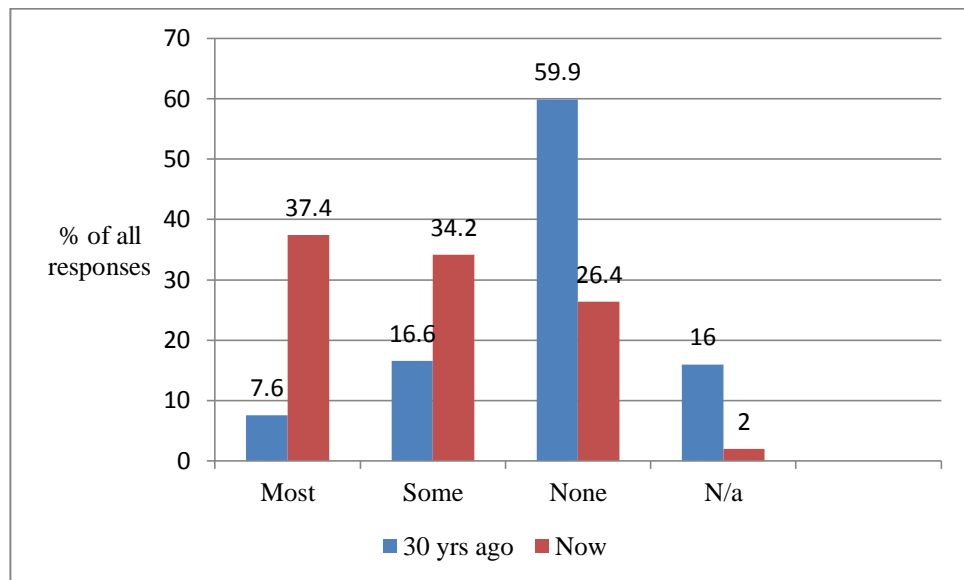


Figure 26: Who knew / knows you are lesbian? (Neighbours)

Health professionals were trusted to roughly the same extent as neighbours, with about a third of respondents reporting that they were out to ‘most’ health professionals and another third saying they were out to ‘some’ (Figure 27):

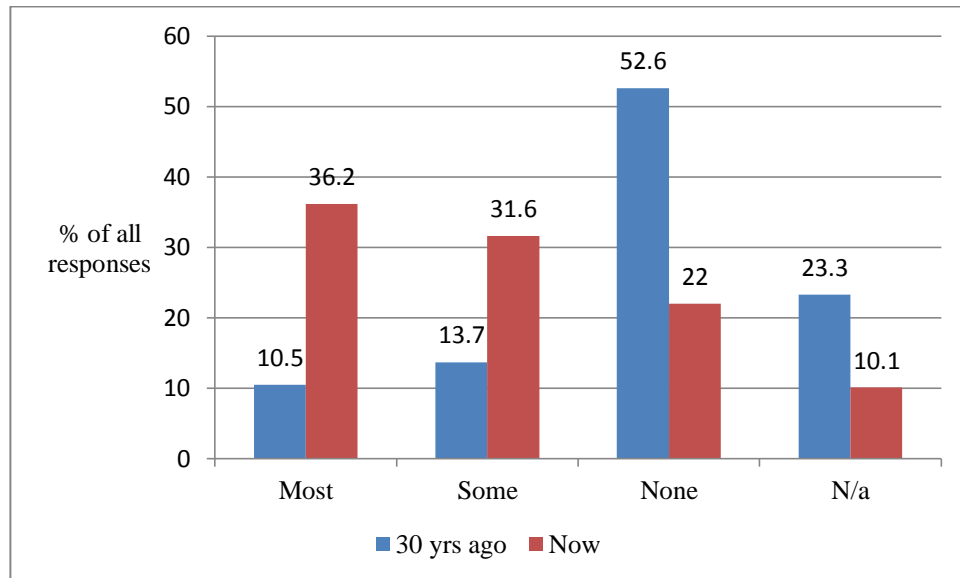


Figure 27: Who knew / knows you are lesbian? (Health Professionals)

Nearly a quarter (22 per cent) said they were not out to any health professionals, and nine per cent ticked the 'not applicable' box, suggesting they had no contact with health services at all. Four in ten respondents said that their doctor did not know they are lesbian: a slightly lower figure than the 50 per cent recorded in a general survey of lesbian health (Hunt and Fish 2008). Even more – 60 per cent – said they had never felt able to discuss sexual matters with a health professional.

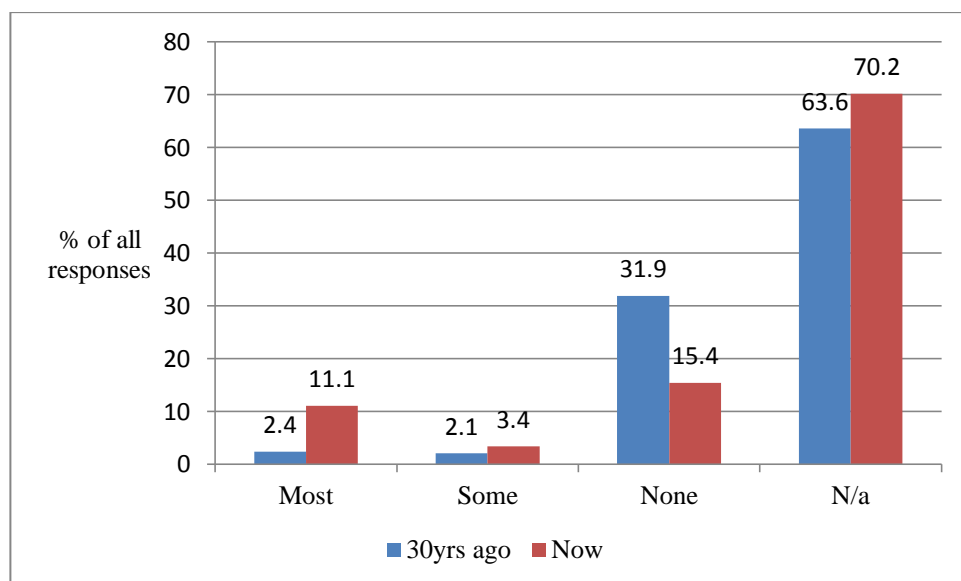


Figure 28: Who knew/knows you are lesbian? (Social Services)

The results for social services show the lowest levels of disclosure (Figure 28). About a third of the women had some contact with social services, and of these more than a third said they were out to 'most,' but half of service users (49 per cent), including all of those over 80, said they were 'out to none' of these services. The interview data support the view of Ward et al. (2008:149-50), that this distrust of health and social services professionals can be attributed to long-standing experience of institutionalised discrimination.

The positions illustrated by these figures can be entrenched ones. A large majority (79 per cent) of respondents either agreed or agreed strongly with the statement 'My sexual orientation is nobody's business but my own'; and in answer to the question, 'Would you like to be more or less visible as a lesbian than you are now?' more than eight out of ten (84 per cent) said they were 'happy with the current situation'.

The decision about whether or not to 'come out' is not a single moment of choice but an on-going, dynamic process. Every unfamiliar person and place demands yet another decision about disclosure. Many things will affect that decision, including the expectations, based on past experience, that the individual brings to the situation.

Kathryn (born 1949) writes:

I am out only to gay friends, even now. People at the Golf Club would be totally homophobic, and my life there would be unbearable. [...] I believe my life has been led mostly in secret, well at least for 30 years. I live a double life, as does my partner. [...] I still believe my life would be changed if I came out to a lot of my straight friends, I don't think they have any understanding of being gay. [...] Having lost my business after I left the [Civil] Service because I was outed, I trained as a massage therapist. (Women don't want to take their clothes off in case you do something to them, and men think they are in with a chance). There is now no way I can come out in real life. [...] I have had to be two different people for most of my life. My partner and I live as sisters to most of our friends. I would like to be able to live as a Lesbian couple for once in my life. However the fear of discrimination and recrimination prevents my partner from ever being able to take this step. If we both could do it, I am sure we could cope together but not individually (Kathryn, born 1949)

Kathryn has experienced damaging homophobia in the past and this affects her expectations about what would happen if she revealed her sexual identity now. This kind of secrecy is stressful, and can worsen the loneliness and isolation of older lesbians who live on their own. Another life writer, Angela, has also led a closeted life since she was a young woman, and now feels isolated:

I would like some more gay friends, of course. I really feel very... annoyed sometimes, that I have to keep up this pretence all the time of being somebody I'm not, in my life, to the point where if I have people, or I have visitors or people come that aren't gay, then I have to make sure that magazines like *Diva* are out of the way, gay films are under lock and key, and that sort of thing. And of course I have to be careful that I don't land myself in it! (Angela, born 1939)

By contrast Sally, whose lesbian life started more recently, writes that she has 'always felt relatively free to live my life as a lesbian since coming out, although I continue to be selective about when and how I tell people in new situations'. She describes the benefits of this openness in terms of the support she was offered after her partner died suddenly:

Most of the people I dealt with through the probate process were straightforward with me about my situation although in some instances the forms and paperwork had not caught up with the new position for civil partners. I guess there had not been that many deaths of partners from civil partnerships in 2007 given that the law establishing civil partnerships only came into effect in December 2005. My employers were very straightforward about my situation; I had nearly four months on sick leave before returning on a phased return to work. At each stage I was treated with kindness and fairness both by the hierarchy of the university and by my immediate colleagues (Sally, born 1949).

Kathryn and Sally, two women of the same age, have had strikingly different experiences: of homophobic prejudice in the workplace and a life of closeted secrecy on the one hand, and of freedom to 'live as a lesbian' and find fairness and support from colleagues on the other. What other forces are at work? At first sight they both appear to have the privileged class and occupational positions that might offer protection against discrimination or at least the confidence to stand up to it. Both have had successful

careers in the public sector, Kathryn as a senior executive officer in the Civil Service and Sally as a probation officer and later a university lecturer. Their stories reveal other intersecting influences, however. Kathryn, from a working-class family that did not place great importance on education, especially for girls, did well at school but found exams difficult, after a severe head injury at age seven left her with an impaired memory. Although she failed the 11-plus, she did eventually transfer to grammar school, but left with only two 'O' Levels, and went into the Civil Service, working her way up the grade structure over the years. Sally's lower middle-class parents had had no further education either, but had social aspirations for their children and encouraged Sally through grammar school and university, after which she took a social work qualification. Possibly the most obvious difference between the positions of the two women, however, is the one described by Rosenfeld (2005): Kathryn identified as a lesbian in her twenties, and constructed a stigmatised identity based on the social attitudes of the time; Sally came out nearly two decades later, at the age of 40, and has been able to overcome the internalised homophobia of her youth to adopt an 'accredited' lesbian identity.

In general the life history data suggest that women who adopted their lesbian identity early in life (at a time when social attitudes were almost entirely negative and the penalty for being a lesbian could include losing both children and job) are the most likely still to be in the closet, especially when their own experience has, like Kathryn's, fulfilled their fears about homophobia. Women in the study who formed lesbian identities later in their lives, particularly during the Women's Movement and the social and legal changes of the 1970s (see Chapter 7), tend to feel less pressure to hide their sexual orientation.

The orthodox view of the closet in lesbian and gay studies is that it is always a bad thing, arising from internalised homophobia (Friend, 1990) and damaging to the closeted person (Seidman, 2002). Closeted elders may feel devalued or depressed and experience stress and pressure from maintaining a façade of heterosexuality (Barrett, 2008). Where people have not felt safe being open about their sexuality, their lives are often more constrained and difficult (Help and Care Development, 2006). While I do not contest these findings, my research suggests that the issue is not so clear-cut. Coming out (as Chapter 8 illustrates) can also have damaging or negative consequences.

As Adelman (2008:30) suggests, when prevailing social attitudes are felt as negative, the closet can provide 'comfort in a hostile environment by allowing one to have a positive self-image' unavailable in the outside world.

In fact the data suggest that real-life situations are rarely as clear-cut as being 'in the closet' or 'out'. For many older lesbians, 'outness' is a subtler issue than many researchers suggest; a shifting and dynamic position or, as interviewee Maureen describes it, 'situational':

So perhaps you are slightly challenging me, really, about how open I am? I'm as open as I... I'm very situational.

Interviewer: That's a wonderful word. It encapsulates in one word what a lot of people have been trying to say to me.

Maureen: Yes. It depends. If I feel – not exactly threatened, but – if somebody's making unthinking assumptions which harm the nature of our interaction, then I have to say something. But if I'm out buying a pound of walnuts, or getting a lift, and somebody says, 'Oh, what about your...' whatever – nobody's yet said 'mother', or 'daughter' [laughter] – I'm seven years older than [partner] – I let a lot of things go. [...] You have to decide what is worth taking on (Maureen, born 1945).

The data show, then, that very few older lesbians are as closeted as they were years ago; on the other hand, very few are out to everybody all the time. Most, like Maureen, have developed a continually-negotiated, 'situational' position, where they are perhaps out to some friends and some members of their family, and to other people as and when appropriate; or not out to anyone except gay friends and family of choice; or whatever combination of these enables them to live comfortably. But wherever they are on this spectrum, the awareness of difference is always present.

5.2 Lesbian Friendship

The fact that the large majority of older lesbians in the survey were out to ‘most’ of their friends (Figure 24) must be qualified by the fact that most of these friends were also lesbians. Six out of ten (57 per cent) respondents said, ‘Most of my closest friends are lesbians;’ eight out of ten (81 per cent) said, ‘Most of my closest lesbian friends are within 10 years of my age;’ and nearly half (47 per cent) said that they saw their closest friends once a week or more often. Data from the interviews also suggest that many older lesbian friendships operate within close-knit groups and have lasted for many years.

The idea of ‘friends as family’ has become closely associated with lesbian, gay and bisexual lives; Kehoe (1988), Weston (1991), Barker (2004), Almack, Seymour and Bellamy (2010) and others have written about the importance to older lesbians and gay men of these ‘families of choice’ or ‘chosen families’.¹⁴ Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (1999:44) describe chosen families as ‘flexible but often strong and supportive networks [...] which provide the framework for mutual care, responsibility and commitment for many lesbians and gay men’. Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003:11) noted that, for older lesbians and gay men, ‘Friends are on a par with partners and family when it comes to material support in times of need, and come into their own when it is emotional support that is required.’ Croghan, Moone and Olsen (2014) in their study of informal caregiving experience for midlife and older lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) adults, found that the majority of respondents identified a primary caregiver who was not a legal relation; and compared to the general population were more likely to be serving as a caregiver to someone to whom they were not legally related. Stonewall (2011) found that more than twice as many lesbian and bisexual women as heterosexual women say they would turn to a friend if they were ill and needing help around the home.

However older lesbians in the present research (and especially those who did not have partners to look after them) were more likely to turn to family members than friends in

¹⁴ Roseneil (2006:333), however, has drawn attention to the normalising effect of the term ‘families of choice’ used to describe lesbian and gay friendship networks, pointing out that it serves to direct attention away from the extra-familial, counter-heteronormative nature of many of these relationships.

those circumstances (Figure 29), again hinting at higher levels of family support than is suggested by studies that includes gay men as well as lesbians (Help and Care Development, 2006; Stonewall, 2011).

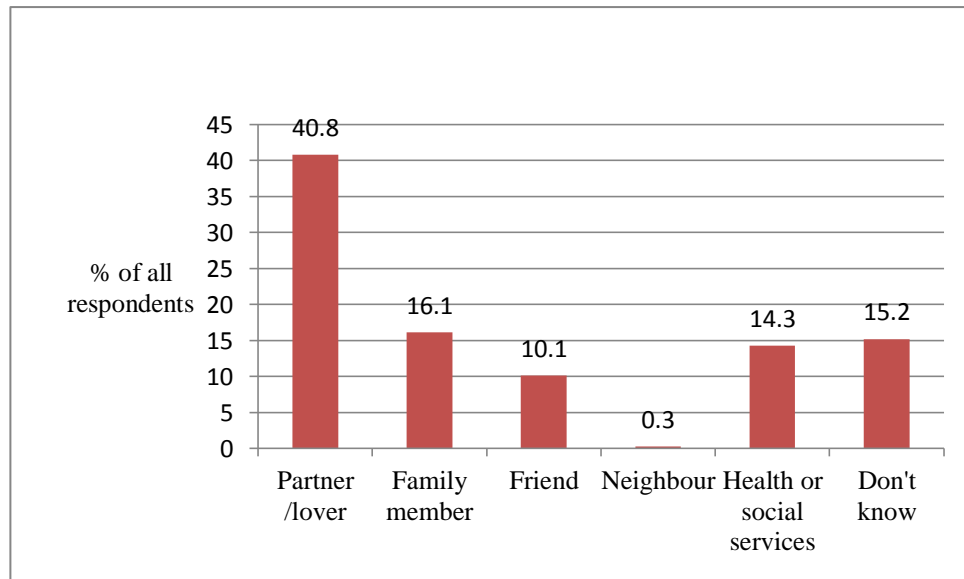


Figure 29: Respondents' first choice of helper in sickness / disability

However, when asked, 'Who would you turn to for help with emotional / mental health problems?' (Figure 30) the result is markedly different: only a very small minority (three per cent) said they would seek help from their families, while three out of ten would confide in a friend:

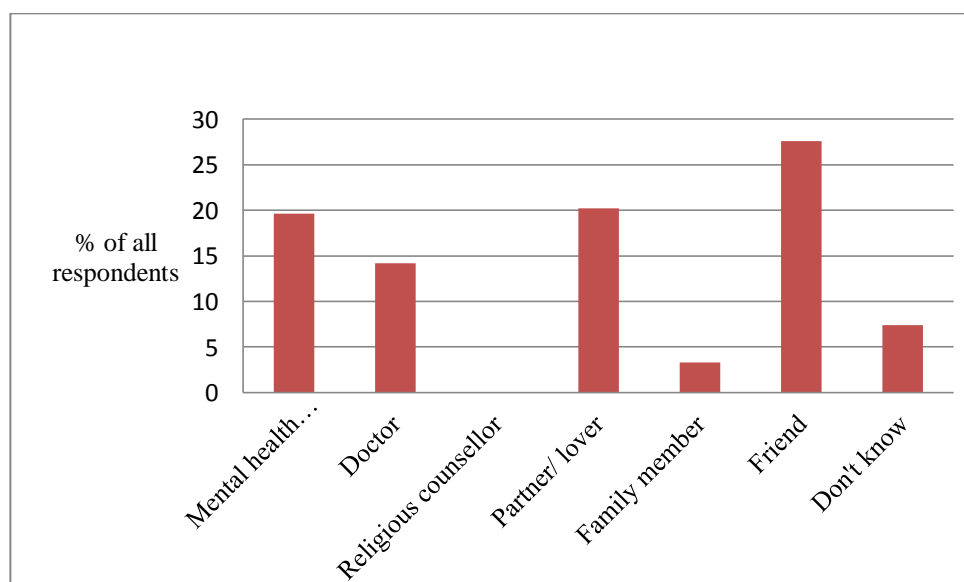


Figure 30: Choice of support for emotional/mental health problems

DiPlacido (1998:145) has argued that this kind of social support from friends within the lesbian and gay communities can 'help fend off the negative consequences of stress resulting from stigmatization, homophobia, and heterosexism'. American psychologists Taylor et al. (2000:411) have suggested that 'tending and befriending' might actually be a specifically female response to stress:

The human stress response has been characterized, both physiologically and behaviorally, as "fight-or-flight." Although fight-or-flight may characterize the primary physiological responses to stress for both males and females, we propose that, behaviorally, females' responses are more marked by a pattern of "tend-and-befriend." Tending involves nurturant activities [...] that promote safety and reduce distress; befriending is the creation and maintenance of social networks that may aid in this process.

From this perspective, lesbian sociality could be seen not only as buffer against the stress of stigmatisation, but as a bio-behavioural response to it: the more threatened we feel, the more we look after each other. Groups of friends certainly emerge as crucially important support structures in the lives of many older lesbians in this study. They appear in two overlapping forms – personal friendship networks or 'families of choice', and organised or semi-organised lesbian social groups.

Families of choice

An older lesbian's 'chosen family' will sometimes consist entirely of other lesbians and gay men; but more often it will be 'a mix of social and biological family links, friendships and inter-generational connections' (Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010:916). In the case of many older lesbians, the relatives of partners and ex-partners may be members of the family of choice. Interviewee Chris, for example, counts her god-daughter, whose mother was once Chris's partner, among her family of friends:

Interviewer: So, when you say you've got good friends, are you mostly talking about gay friends?

Chris: Mostly. That's because of where life kind of leads you... although my god-daughter's also a friend, and a good one... but that's a different kind of friendship, in a way. I've got friends of many, many years' standing... we don't

live in each other's pockets, we probably won't see each other for about six months, but when we do, it's like yesterday! (Chris, born 1946)

These are what Mason (2008), examining current definitions of kinship, would define as 'negotiated and creative affinities'. Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2004:890) stress the importance of recognising this kind of kinship in later life:

Given the significance of friendships and some family relationships to many of our participants, we argue that these conceptions of 'chosen' and 'negotiated' families are also highly relevant to the understanding of the relational contexts in which non-heterosexuals age.

One of the times at which chosen family can be most important for a lesbian is during the ending of a relationship and its aftermath, because other lesbian and gay people can model and mirror a woman's life-choices and give social validity to her personal experiences in a way that her heterosexual friends and family might not be able to do (Becker, 1988:213). This was true for Julia after her partner died:

[M]y friends were there to help hold me together, my gay friends. And what happened after a year, eighteen months... I was obviously seeing my friends, and I used to say, 'Can I give you a hug, because I can't hug her? Can I tell you I love her, because I can't tell her anymore?' And they were just really sweet. And one of them said to me, 'Look, there's this organisation, the Older Lesbians' Network, and they meet once every month, it's in Millman Street, and you don't have to book up, you can just go along when you want to, there's no kind of pressure or anything.' And to me that sounded like the ideal sort of thing. And I think they were trying to give me a bit of a push, because they felt I ought to get to know new people, although my own friends were very kind and supportive. And so I did go along, and yes it was true, it really was a life-saver, a really good move for me. I used to just go along for the meetings, I didn't go on to the social events afterwards, and I was able just to meet new people (Julia, born 1948).

The Older Lesbian Network that helped Julia was founded in 1984 and still meets monthly in central London (there are also Older Lesbian Networks in Birmingham and

the North-East). It is one of many regional groups for lesbians that exist all over the UK and have been a life-line for many women. Some of these groups began as branches of Kenric, a lesbian network which started in London in the 1960s and has since spread through much of England and Wales; others were formed by a handful of friends looking for like-minded company.

Organised social groups

When Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003:6) say that ‘few organised networks exist for older lesbians compared to gay men,’ and go on to suggest that ‘there is a greater reliance on informal, local and “hidden” networks amongst these women,’ they are drawing a frequently-made distinction between the lives of lesbians and gay men. Jennings (2007:5) sums up the discourse that underpins it:

Theorists have emphasised the importance of gender in shaping lesbians’ experience of space as distinctly different from that of male homosexuals, constructing lesbians’ social interaction in terms of private friendship networks rather than the public spaces of bars and the street. Longstanding narratives opposing public and private space, which have historically linked the female gender with the private sphere, have shaped much of this debate.

However my data suggest that the distinction between ‘organised networks’ and ‘informal, local and “hidden” networks’ is unhelpful. In reality most lesbian social organisations fit into both categories. Groups operate mainly at a local level, and still exercise a good deal of secrecy around their existence and the identities of their members, but are often highly organised through newsletters, email groups, social media and so on. Many women belong to more than one group, so that the lines of communication, both formal and informal, between individuals and groups make up a far-reaching web of connections capable (as described in Chapter 3) of rapidly circulating a call for participation in a survey of older lesbians. The response to this research showed that I had under-estimated both the number and the inter-connectedness of lesbian social groups in the UK. The most frequent reply to the final

question in the questionnaire, ‘How did you hear about this research?’ was either ‘Through a friend’ or the name of a lesbian group.

Many of these groups, whether specifically designated as ‘older’ lesbian or not, have very few members under 40. Many started at a time when lesbians led deeply closeted lives and there were limited opportunities to meet other women. Outside large cities, there was no lesbian ‘scene;’ the groups (typically meeting in women’s homes) built communities where a woman could develop and maintain a lesbian identity and lifestyle. In contrast to mainstream and local communities, such networks still provide much-needed support and resources, offering places, spaces and relationships in which individuals can be themselves (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2004).

Interviewer: I think some of these groups have been going for a very long time.

Crunchy: Oh, this one’s been going – I’ve been in it for years! And it was very handy, actually, to mix up with – it was after [partner] died – it was very nice to mix up with people, and I found two people in the group that knew [her], you see, as well, which was lovely. And as I say, we meet once a month in the gay pub, and it’s a really nice group. Sometimes there’s only half a dozen there, other times there’ll be maybe twenty will turn up (Crunchy, born 1939).

No fewer than eight out of ten survey respondents (82 per cent) had belonged to a lesbian social group at some time; more than four out of ten (45 per cent) still did (Figure 31). Of women who lived alone, slightly more (51 per cent) currently belonged to a group.

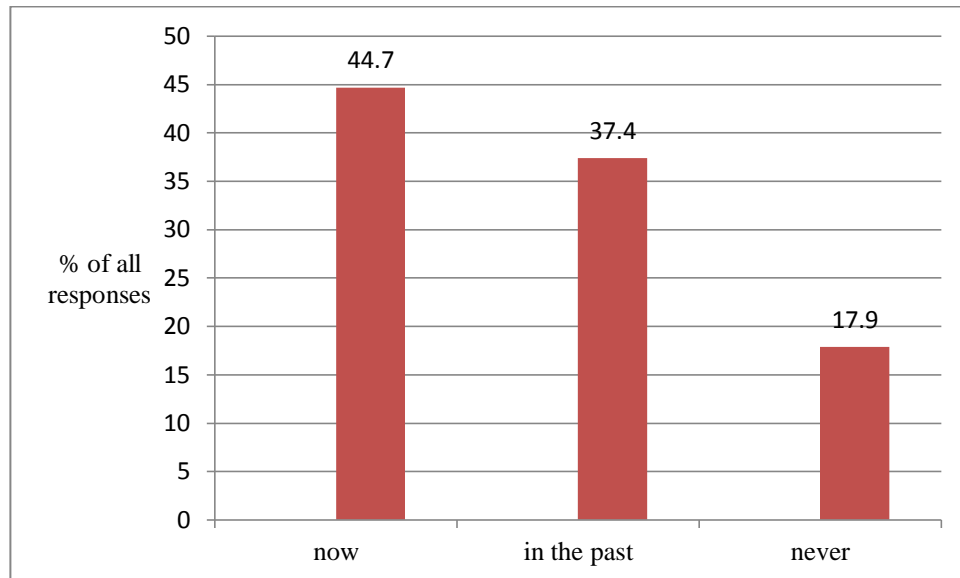


Fig 31 Percentage of respondents who have belonged to a lesbian social group

Some lesbian social groups have been in existence for 30 or even 40 years and will usually have a core of long-standing, older members who have become good friends. Groups like OLN are open to all, but smaller, local groups, particularly those with a history of meeting in members' houses, have sometimes felt the need to regulate who can join (for instance, more than one group has had recurring discussions about the acceptability or otherwise of trans-women as members). Over time, groups develop their own character. Barbara and Joyce compared the class composition of two groups they attend:

Barbara: Well, [that] one is a very middle class group –

Joyce: Anyone who doesn't fit in...

Barbara: Yes, that poor girl who came and...

And there's always [name]! She doesn't fit in, but [she] is too obtuse to have noticed, and everybody loves her! [laughter]

Joyce: She's a big butch, and she drives a big van, and she carries the wine boxes from A to B... She's not as rough as I'm saying, but yeah, she doesn't fit in at all. But everybody loves her, because she's honest and straightforward. She's likeable, isn't she?

Barbara: Yes.

Interviewer: But basically you're saying that is essentially a middle-class group?

Barbara: Yes, whereas the [other] group isn't. ...

It is clear, too, that these social networks continue to play an important part in the lives of older lesbians:

Sandy: I remember [ex-partner] saying, when we were splitting up [...], 'You're really lucky, because wherever you go in the country you will have a ready-made supply of friends.' And that's true, isn't it? You know, there's always a gay community wherever you go. Whereas for somebody who's straight or bisexual, it's much more difficult when they're getting older to get friends, or to find friends, I think.

Interviewer: Yes, that's a good point. The lesbian groups that we've belonged to have been quite important in our lives, haven't they?

Sandy: Absolutely! Yes, yes. And I think still are. When you talk to women who come to OLN and things like that, you know often it's the only gay contact that they have; but at least they have that (Sandy, born 1943).

Interviewee Maureen makes a slightly different point about the link between outsider status and the need for community:

[T]his closeness in the community depends to some extent on us being outsiders for its fulfilment. The more outside you are, the more you need one another, and the more it fosters something or other... So our new status, it's not... It's interesting. It's not unalloyed... It's wonderful, of course it's wonderful, I'm so thrilled to see the day of civil partnerships and all this, but something has been lost as well... (Maureen, born 1945).

She is suggesting here that the more lesbians become assimilated into mainstream society (civil partnership being a major stage in this process), the less such close and supportive communities will be needed. It is interesting to speculate whether the

existence of the kind of lesbian social groups described here, which derive from a sense of minority status, will decline over time if younger generations of lesbians no longer feel the need for such support.

In spite of the very clear benefits of these social networks to so many of my survey participants, one in five had never belonged to one (Figure 31). It is important to remember that ‘not all older LGB adults have equal opportunity to participate in LGB-focused friendship groups and social networks’ and that it might not be appropriate to generalise about an ‘LGB-centred culture of ageing’ at all (Cronin and King, 2010). The concepts of ‘friends as family,’ and ‘families of choice,’ are ‘intersected by other salient factors, such as class and gender’ (Cronin and King, 2010:882). From this perspective, the 20 per cent of older lesbians in the survey who had never been involved with an organised lesbian social group could have had a variety of reasons for not doing so. The data show that they were more likely to live in rural areas, recalling Bell and Valentine’s (1995a; 1995b) findings that social group membership is affected by geographical location. Help and Care Development (2006:24) also found that ‘gay social groups and personal support structures are not fulfilling a need for the majority’ of older gay men and lesbians in rural Dorset.

Survey respondents who were not members of a group were also more likely to be in a relationship and living with their partner, so might not feel the same need for an organised social life as single lesbians. But they might simply be people who do not choose to organise their social lives in that way, or who do not wish to identify with the lesbian community, whether publicly or privately. This could also be the reason why women who had never belonged to an organised lesbian group were only half as likely as others to have attended a Gay Pride, or taken part in a Pride march, or to have been active in another political movement such as feminism.

Women who had never belonged to a lesbian social group were only slightly more likely to say that loneliness was a problem for them. Anna is single, and admits to feeling lonely and isolated, but doesn’t feel that socialising with other lesbians is the answer:

I don’t want to be in a group just because of orientation. I can’t really see the point of that. [...] For instance, I could have gone round in a group that walks round Kew Gardens, all lesbians. Why would I want to go walking around Kew

Gardens with a lot of people who happen to be of the same sexual orientation?
(Anna, born 1945)

In later life, illness and disability can lead to isolation from lesbian society, even for those, like Monica, who were previously active members of a group:

Interviewer: And are you still in touch with any of the people that used to come to the parties?

Monica: Not really, no. [Pause] Yes, one or two. One or two of them I'm in touch with... but none of them live anywhere near, so I don't see them (Monica, born 1922).

Although Monica has good friends and neighbours who call on her, none of her once-extensive lesbian friendship network live near enough to visit regularly. When she says, 'I don't know if any of my neighbours know that I used to be a lesbian,' she seems to imply that her lesbian identity has withered as her lesbian relationships have died away. Her remark suggests that she sees 'lesbian' as a sexual and social identity, rather than in-born. At nearly 90, she no longer has a lesbian social life; so she 'used to be' a lesbian.

Ex-lovers as friends

One of the features of a long-established lesbian social group is that, because in many cases it will have offered women the only way of meeting other lesbians in their area, it is likely to include both members of a previous relationship. Linda remembers:

One of the very first things that struck me when I went to a [...] lesbian group weekend was the number of people who were there with their exes [...] apparently managing well; and I thought that was pretty amazing (Linda, born 1934).

Patricia describes a similar situation:

I think in my social circle it is a feature. I can think of occasions when I've been at a party, at somebody's house, and you sit with a big group of people, and I've been able to notice and sort of count up [...] the three previous partners, all there! (Patricia, born 1950)

When Aine was relatively new to the lesbian scene, she found this aspect of lesbian social life disconcerting:

And so I got involved with another group. I didn't go out with anybody there, though; they were all very... incestuous, let's put it that way. One was going with another one, the next week they'd be going with somebody else in the group, and so I thought, I'm not going to get involved with this lot! (Aine, born 1941)

Patricia explains:

I think it's a peculiar situation which comes about because it's a very small community. And there's a big fear of isolation. If something comes to an end [...] people are concerned about their social circle, and they don't want to lose it, and they don't want to feel isolated and out in the cold. And I think it's a situation that's not mirrored [...] in the heterosexual world so much (Patricia, born 1950).

Linda makes a similar point when she says:

We're a very – certainly if you look at the age group – we're a very small group of people; and it really pays to do that if you can, doesn't it? (Linda, born 1934)

Parting can be particularly difficult when two women share not only the same friends but the same interests and social groups.

An older lesbian's ex-lovers are not only likely to remain in her social circle, as described above; they are often among her best friends. It is not uncommon, as Almack, Seymour and Bellamy (2010:912) have pointed out, for lesbian and gay families of choice to include both ex-partners and the current partners of ex-partners. Often a lesbian's previous partners are her closest friends (Clunis and Green, 1988:98). Almvig (1982:148, cited in Friend, 1990:113) noted that, by the time she reaches old age,

'family' for the older lesbian can be made up of a current lover, past lovers and friends, besides her own blood-line family.

My interviewees provided many examples of this phenomenon. Monica, remembering a parting long ago, added, 'I went on remaining friends with her for ever.' Judy said of her first partner:

[W]e were together for ten years. And it has to be said, it was entirely my fault we parted – but I'm delighted also to be able to say that we are now the best of friends (Judy, born 1942).

Frieda had two long-term relationships:

I still see [first partner], and I still meet [second partner] for coffee. [...] Well, I think [first partner]'s my best friend.

Interviewer: But was it so when you first parted?

Frieda: Yes, it's been the same always. And with [second partner]. [...] I think most of it was because of me – I didn't want to lose them totally. I think probably they would have just gone, and thought, 'Oh, that's history.' But I'm not like that. I'm still very friendly with my ex-husband. Well, I think when people have been that much part of your life ... I hate the idea of them just vanishing. And I still love all of them. I'm not in love with them. You know, it's moved on that much (Frieda, born 1928).

For Monica, the effort to retain the friendship needs to come from both sides:

Interviewer: You seem to be very good at remaining friends with people.

Monica: Well, yes. Because when you've had a lot with somebody... and it's up to them as well. It's more difficult for some people than others. After a certain passage of time, you realise the real things about a person, rather than just the sex, or whatever it was that got you together (Monica, born 1922).

Monica and Frieda both express the need to preserve something that transcends the now ended love-affair. Becker (1988:212-3) theorises that the experiences women have shared as lesbians may mean that even after parting they have more in common than other people:

Because lesbians are a stigmatised minority group, lesbian ex-lovers are united to one another by a bond of sisterhood. As lovers, they have fought for acceptance and understanding from their nuclear families, their children, their colleagues, and their neighbours. Having grown up in a homophobic environment, they have shared a battle against internalised homophobia as well. [...] lesbian ex-lovers remained connected by an overriding common cause – that of combating negative stereotypes of themselves, their relationship, and their lifestyle.

Some women I spoke to found that the later friendship was more comfortable than the love-relationship:

In the end we parted; she went back to her husband. [...] And I realised – I mean we're still friends; I actually just had a postcard from her this morning. We meet occasionally, and have a good *craic* – but as partners, it was a dead loss.
(Pauline, born 1934).

Marion and a woman who is now one of her best friends were political activists together in the 1970s, and were lovers until their relationship was put under pressure by the politics of race. Marion reflects that:

...in a way it was inevitable, when the Civil Rights Movement was blazing away in the States, and she was moving towards a kind of Black separatism [...]

Interviewer: Was that why your relationship ended, ultimately?

Marion: Yes... in a way. [...] But our friendship transcended that. There was a wobbly time, when I thought, 'Oh God, I represent everything she hates!' But she's not a hatey kind of person [...]. And it's a friendship that's important to both of us. Really, really important (Marion, born 1942).

Kitzinger and Perkins (1993, cited in Cronin and King, 2010:882) have suggested that, unlike heterosexuals, lesbians are less likely to make a rigid distinction between a love relationship and a friendship relationship. Joyce's joking remark during her interview had an undertone of seriousness:

I think actually the best way to make a friend is to have a brief affair, and then you end up with a friend! (Joyce, born 1940)

Monica describes her most important relationship like this:

There were like two phases in our relationship, when we were together physically, and when we were together just as friends. So until she died, I was friends with her, and I used to go and see her, and go and stay with her (Monica, born 1922).

The point of transition from lover to friend is usually clear (and painful), but sometimes the relationship moves slowly and almost imperceptibly from one to the other. Andrea (born 1946) was in this state of transition when I met her. She and her partner had stopped living together but, as Andrea explained, ‘there’s some doubt as to whether we’re still a partnership or a close friendship’. Another interviewee, Tamsin, also describes a relationship which lasted for:

...really only one year, two years at the most, and then went on as a kind of friendship where we weren’t a couple, but everyone thought we were, for about five years (Tamsin, born 1947).

The fact that the end of the lover relationship is not always visible to outsiders proved useful to Lynn and her partner when they decided to adopt. They did not feel that the concept of ‘lesbian ex-partner as family’ would be intelligible to the authorities, whereas ‘lesbian couple’ would:

So we decided to do this thing, went through the process of assessment, and by this time, although we were living together, [we] weren’t really a couple, but we didn’t tell them that. It sounds perverse really, but we didn’t, so they thought they were assessing this lesbian couple, and actually they were assessing two lesbians with a familial relationship, and I felt that they wouldn’t understand that, and they wouldn’t see it as a strong relationship, so I never told them that by that point we weren’t a couple. [...] [Ex-partner] lives nearby, and we share gardens and dogs and stuff, but we don’t actually live together. But she’s always had a commitment to [adoptive daughter], and for the first five years – I said to her then, when we took [adoptive daughter] on, and she agreed, that she would

be committed to her in terms of living there, supporting us both intensely, for at least five years, even though by that point, as I say, we weren't a couple. And she did have a relationship with another woman. But she was completely steadfast in that, and indeed it would have been very difficult. I had a lot of friends, but it was hard, you know, you need somebody around when you've got a kid like that on your hands... (Lynn, born 1948).

Several women commented that the transition to a good friendship with their ex-lover was made easier when they both found new partners. Marguerite's ex-partner always wanted to remain friends, but at first Marguerite experienced pain and anger, which made this very difficult for her.

[I]t isn't so difficult now, obviously, because I'm in a fantastic relationship, I've been happy for over twenty years, and that's all fine (Marguerite, born 1946).

Maureen thinks that:

...it's much easier to become friends again when both parties have other partners. I think that's a pretty important thing. [...] So when you feel happy and settled, of course the other person who's walked away from you feels less threatened, because they think that you've now got someone of your own. (Maureen, born 1945).

Two women told stories that show how keeping in touch after parting can leave the door open for the healing of old wounds, sometimes many years later. Philippa has been in her present relationship for several years, but kept in touch with one previous partner as a friend:

We were in touch until she died; [...] she died in January of this year. [...] But towards the end of her time, when she was in her eighties – and she died at eighty-eight – she was getting frail, so I was taking her away for holidays, I was doing the shopping, I was making certain she was all right (Philippa, born 1938).

Another interviewee, Crunchy, told how she was able to repair an important relationship. She had lived with this partner until, in her words,

I was very naughty, and I went and had an affair, and we split up.

They had friends in common within their lesbian network, and did not lose touch. Eventually they began to see each other again:

And in between I'd had two other relationships, [...] but I kept in touch. [We] always kept in touch, you see.

When the ex-partner was diagnosed with inoperable cancer, it was Crunchy who became her full-time carer. She describes that time as 'awful – just terrible,' but at the same time is clearly grateful that she had this second chance to be close to, and look after, someone she loved:

I was so pleased that my life worked out that I was around to look after her. Because she wouldn't have wanted anybody else bathing her, and stuff like that. [...] And it was lovely, really. It was sad, but it was lovely, Jane, you know?
(Crunchy, born 1939)

Such stories are moving, not only because they describe the enduring nature of some individual relationships, but also because they bear witness to the strength of bonds formed within a closed and stigmatised community.

5.3 A sense of difference as a common bond

This chapter has described ways in which older lesbian experience might be different from that of other older people. It concludes by looking at how older lesbians themselves perceive their difference.

It has frequently been suggested (Kimmel, 1978; Berger, 1990; Brown, 1998, among others) that lesbians and gay men, having learned to cope with a stigmatised identity very early in life by developing self-affirming attitudes and by seeking support from others, might approach old age differently, since these same skills and attitudes will be useful in adapting to the stigmatised status of elderly person. Dunker (1987) sees old lesbians in particular as having this advantage: as being, of necessity, independent, adaptable, able to support themselves. Brown (1992:213) agrees:

Lesbians are more likely to have had more equal domestic relationships than heterosexual women, and may well be skilled in a wider range of domestic responsibilities, whether they have lived with others, with partners, or alone. If they are bereaved, they may be in a stronger position to continue with day-to-day existence, cooking, changing fuses, paying bills.

This particular view of lesbian 'difference' met with widespread agreement from interviewees:

Yes, I could go along with that. I mean, I can change a fuse, change a light bulb, put a shelf up, change a wheel. Yes (Judy, born 1942).

You're not always asking... I mean, my goddaughter, she'll ask her husband to do this that or the other, whereas I wouldn't do that – I know I want it this way, I'll do it this way. I've got all the tools, and drills, and everything else like that. [...] Because you are used to coping and not relying on somebody else (Chris, born 1946).

I've often been the one that's done the driving, I've phoned up and booked the table, whatever... I haven't had any experience of being, you know – this is stereotypical stuff, but – of being the wallflower, sitting on the side lines waiting to be asked (Patricia, born 1950).

Some interviewees talked about other ways in which they feel they are different from heterosexual people:

I wouldn't say we are special, just a wee bit more that way than most people, perhaps... Or we're forced to reflect more on our lives (Maureen, born 1945).

For Elaine, this sense of difference makes a common bond with other lesbians:

...we've sort of veered off in a different direction from the mainstream, and that gives you... what am I trying to say, I wonder? [...] It gives you an instant recognition – I was going to say rapport, but I've changed my mind – an instant recognition factor, with other people who are lesbians. [...] And it's 'a life less ordinary', in a way... [laughter]

Elaine makes a link here between a life-course which at some point in the past has ‘veered off [...] from the mainstream’ and the sense of difference that she feels in the present, and has in common with other lesbians.

Like the need for specifically lesbian social groups, this strong sense of difference, with its ‘instant recognition factor,’ is a bond which may not be shared by younger generations. It has its roots in a particular historical time, and comes from the experience of having lived with a stigmatised identity (Cronin et al., 2012). It is this experience of stigma, I would argue, that makes the real difference between older lesbians (and gay men) and the heterosexual mainstream, and is the source of the common bond my participants perceive themselves to have with each other and with me. It is the mutual recognition of an oppressed group who have faced danger and discrimination together, and may invalidate more obvious social divisions (Bayliss, 2000; Coon, 2003, cited in Cronin et al., 2012:103). The experience of the past continues to shape the identities of older lesbians and gay men in the present (Rosenfeld, 2003); the reasons for the secrecy and the closed social circles described in this chapter can only be fully understood through a life-course approach that takes account of past events and experiences. Those experiences are the subject of the next three chapters.

SECTION III
TALKING ABOUT THE PAST

CHAPTER 6

LEARNING TO BE DIFFERENT

This section explores the life-events which have shaped (and continue to shape) the identity careers of older lesbians. For some of them, lesbian identity formation took place early in life and for others it came much later. This chapter explores the childhood and adolescence of those interviewees and life writers for whom the awareness of gender non-conformity and/or same sex attraction occurred at an early age.

6.1 ‘I had no language’: knowing and naming

One of the questions asked in the life-story interviews was, ‘When and how did you first become aware of the possibility of women loving women?’ What emerges from the majority of the responses, from women of all ages, is the complete absence of such awareness as they grew up and, often, their lack of any language to describe their feelings. Although a minority of participants said that they first recognised their emotional and physical attraction to women in childhood, for most it was much later and for many, as the life-story data make clear, their ability to understand and act on their desires was hampered by having neither words nor concepts to describe what they felt:

[T]here were things that were pointing in the direction that my life was going to take ... but I had no language. I would never have said ‘I’m a lesbian,’ because I wouldn’t have known the word! (Fran, born 1935)

I suppose, using terms like ‘crush,’ I’d say, ‘Elspeth’s got a crush on me...’ I didn’t know the word ‘lesbian,’ I don’t think. I knew crushes – that some adults were a bit twitchy about crushes – but I didn’t understand why (Jen, born 1942).

Linda thinks she might have been aware of the word ‘lesbian’ without knowing what it meant:

Interviewer: Would you say that as a schoolgirl you were aware of the possibility of love between women? When did that idea come to you?

Linda: [pause] I can't remember... I think probably not until a fairly considerable age. [...] I think I was aware of the word 'lesbian,' because I remember someone else I met fairly recently saying that when she was at school she'd never heard the word, she didn't know the word until much further on... I don't remember anyone uttering the word (Linda, born 1934).

Marion laughed as she remembered the first time she heard the word 'lesbian' from a school friend:

[S]he'd read or heard some article, or it was something she heard her parents discussing, about Nancy Spain,¹⁵ and she said something about 'lesbians,' and we didn't know how to spell it! We looked it up in the dictionary and couldn't find it; I think it was because we were looking up 'lesbion'! That's what I remember ... [laughter] It's funny now, isn't it? It's very difficult to look back on those days; you think, 'Well, I must have been very, very naïve...' but none of us really knew what that was about (Marion, born 1942).

Tamsin remembers hearing the word used in a derogatory way at school:

I knew the word 'lesbian,' but I didn't really think about it. Yes, sometimes if you were chatting with a girl and you had your heads close together, other girls would go, 'Ooh, lez! Look at those lezzies!' So, I don't know... (Tamsin, born 1947).

Although, as Oram and Turnbull (2001:201) have shown, the concept of lesbianism was 'widely shared as part of social knowledge' from the 1920s onwards, it was not regarded as knowledge appropriate for girls growing up, since it was feared that general awareness of such behaviour might lead to its increase.¹⁶ The result was that most of the

¹⁵ Nancy Spain (1917-64) was a radio broadcaster, journalist and television personality. Her lesbian relationships, though never publicly acknowledged, were an open secret (Collis, 1997; Gardiner, 2003).

¹⁶ This was one reason for the defeat of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill of 1921, an unsuccessful attempt to criminalise female homosexuality. Lt.-Colonel Moore Brabazon, speaking against the Clause, argued that to criminalise sexual acts between women would 'do harm by introducing into the minds of

participants in this study had no concepts available for understanding their own developing sexuality.

Jennings (2007:17) argues that, because the ‘crush’ culture in many post-war girls’ schools was accepted as part of a normative sexual development, same-sex emotional attachments between girls could be simultaneously interpreted as both normative and deviant. Crushes were viewed simultaneously ‘as a harmless phase in sexual development and a sinister indication of lesbian sexuality’. Schools that were resistant to the idea of pupils as sexual beings, as most girls’ schools were, ‘remained reluctant to offer formal sex education’ (2007:18). Interviewee Joyce was caught in this set of contradictions:

Interviewer: Did you have any idea [at school] that women could love each other?

Joyce: None at all. Never heard of it; not a clue. It never even dawned on me. So when we all had crushes on the prefects, I suppose in the third year [...] the fact that I followed Joan around everywhere was neither here nor there. But the year afterwards, some of my friends started going to the Rugby Club and talking about boys, and I was still following Joan about. And then the year after that, she left, and I found myself following a girl about who was younger than me, and not quite knowing what was going on here [...] And I thought, That’s odd... I had no idea what was happening at all. Remembering it now, I have an idea what was happening, but at the time, it was complete, total ignorance and innocence! (Joyce, born 1940)

Leo was at a mixed school, but was never attracted to the boys:

Leo: Well, I became aware of another girl, that I thought was rather wonderful, and I thought... I mean, boys on the whole were just boys, you know, people you borrowed a Latin prose from, and things like that... but I definitely felt differently about this girl. Not that anything happened; she had a perfectly excellent boyfriend, and so on, but I remember feeling a little puzzled...

perfectly innocent people the most revolting thoughts’ (Parliamentary debate of 4 August 1921, cited in Oram and Turnbull 2001, p. 168-9).

Interviewer: Puzzled about...?

Leo: Well, that I didn't seem to be quite like other people (Leo, born 1932).

Barbara, who also had crushes on other girls and teachers at school, and 'didn't know why they didn't go away by the Sixth Form,' says she feels angry now that:

[W]e had no proper sex education. We had no emotional education – we weren't told, 'Some people do this; it's normal.'

Interviewer: So were you aware at that stage, when you were at secondary school, that women could love each other?

Barbara: Not really, no. No.

Interviewer: So what did you think about yourself?

Barbara: [pause] I don't... I can't say (Barbara, born 1936).

This ignorance often continued into young womanhood: Barbara 'only became aware that there were such things as lesbians in my mid-twenties, I think.' Those rare moments at which same-sex desire did become culturally visible are often burned into the memory, as another interviewee, Carol, relates:

I didn't know anybody personally, but I remember being very strongly affected, in my early twenties, by a television drama. [...] I know I was still at home, so I can pinpoint it that far down, I must have been less than twenty-four. And everybody was out, and I was watching this drama on my own, and it was about women in the army. And there was a very strong undertone of female-female relationships, and a lot of stuff around... well, of course it was illegal in the army, so around 'So what? It happens anyway.' And I can remember very clearly that this young woman, referring to an officer and an older woman with whom she's obviously had a bit of experience, and saying, 'Well she looks very official and stern in her uniform, but I know what's underneath it!' And you know, there was no on-screen woman-on-woman activity, but I was left in no doubt as to what it was all about. And as I say, I can't now remember where my awareness was at the time, but I remember it had a huge impact on me.

Interviewer: Can you describe what the impact was?

Carol: Well, I suppose just really a confirmation that maybe – and I'm guessing now, because this part I don't really remember – that, well, I'm not the only one, then (Carol, born 1944).

For many of the women, ignorance led to an unhappy confusion about themselves.

Angela remembers:

I didn't know anything at all about the possibility of women loving women for a long, long time. In my teens I grew up feeling [pause] not masculine – certainly not masculine – but not feminine either; I didn't know what I was at all. In fact I started to feel really mixed up.

In her first job she felt strongly attracted to a girl she worked with,

...but I didn't realise I was gay. Maybe I was thick, I don't know, but I didn't realise anything about sexuality and the various branches of it, I just didn't know anything at all (Angela, born 1939).

Anna only became aware of homosexuality after she started work:

I made a friend when I was at the Library, I didn't really understand it, because I didn't really know anything about homosexuality, but this guy had got another guy who was always wanting to know where he was, and if he didn't know where he was, he'd get upset. And I used to think, 'Well, why's that? Why's he getting so upset?' And it didn't really hit me for a long time (Anna, born 1945).

For some of the participants, this lack of knowledge was a kind of freedom. Marguerite attended an Anglican convent school from the age of five to 18, and:

[B]eing in an all-female environment, I thought that everybody felt the way I did about females! I never knew – and of course, I never knew the word, either. [...] I wasn't worried, there was nothing about it that worried me, I just sailed on oblivious ...

Interviewer: Do you think that was because you hadn't named it?

Marguerite: Yes. I think because I knew nothing about it at all (Marguerite, born 1946).

The effects of ignorance could have long-term consequences. Looking back at her younger self, Kathryn writes:

I always said I would never get married, but I did. I believe if I had met a woman by this time aged 21, I would never have got married. I even had a crush on my bridesmaid. However how did you meet other women in those days, and I did not know anything about Lesbians or Homosexuals (Kathryn, born 1949).

For years Fran had no words for herself other than ‘tomboy’:

Interviewer: I’m interested in what you say about not having a language to express those feelings... Can you look back and say at what point in your life you did become aware, even if you didn’t know the word, that women could love each other?

Fran: Women’s Movement. Politics, Socialism, Socialist Feminism.

Interviewer: As late as that?

Fran: As late as that. Because I was – I got married, you see. I mean, I’m still with the ‘tomboy’ language ... which was acceptable, wasn’t it? (Fran, born 1935)

In spite of the limitations of language, a few did recognise their feelings:

Interviewer: You said to me before that you always knew you were gay, though – how young do you think you knew?

Shaz: I was just twelve years old when I had the inkling I were gay, because I was fancying women...

Interviewer: So you knew there was such a thing...?

Shaz: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did you know?

Shaz: Well, there was a couple of my friends at school, they were gay, and they used to go to this gay group in town, and I went there once. And there was a lot of people, and I got on with the people, but they said to me that, with me being so young, I'd got to make my own mind up. They said, You might be bisexual. But I wasn't. I knew (Shaz, born 1945).

It is difficult at this distance in time to know what motivated these discouraging comments from older members of the lesbian and gay community; whether they genuinely believed that her lesbian identification was a 'passing phase,' or were simply reluctant to encourage a young teenager to adopt a such a stigmatised and oppressed identity. Shaz remained confused, went on to become pregnant and to marry, even though she says, 'every time he came near me, I just used to freeze up. I had to be drunk to get pregnant [...] I had to be really drunk' (Shaz, born 1945).

6.2 Sex and other muddles

Very often a girl's ignorance extended to sexuality of any kind. Many participants report having had little or no sex education. Kate's working class home in north London had only one bedroom, but she says:

As a small child I was deeply muddled over both sex and gender. At some level I 'knew' what was happening in my parent's bed but it was shrouded in such secrecy and surrounded by so much punishment for me should I be awake, or if in the waking world I showed any interest in 'doctors and nurses' with my cousins, that I couldn't even begin to articulate to myself what this feverishly exciting and dangerous activity was about (Kate, born 1938).

Sex education, where it did exist, could be less than helpful. At Marguerite's convent school:

[T]he nuns were very, very keen on us keeping our virginity [...]. Once they found out that some girls were using Tampax – I was, because my mother had

given me some to take back to school. [...] We said – we were so innocent you can't believe it – 'What's wrong with it?' Well, they said it was because it would 'interfere with our purity'. And we still didn't understand; we thought it was germey or something; and they said, would we send them back to our parents through the post! Well, [laughs] my mother was absolutely stunned when she got them back! And we still didn't know what was wrong with it (Marguerite, born 1946).

In a handful of cases, factors other than simple ignorance contributed to the confusion and shame that a girl felt about sex. Brenda's father regularly attracted the attention of the police for his relationships with under-age boys, but the matter was never openly discussed. So, Brenda says:

[I]n my head, that all got mixed up with 'it's not a good thing.' So homosexuality and paedophilia all got mixed up. And so it took me a long time to sort of untangle that, and decide that it was okay for me to be how I am (Brenda, born 1948).

Interviewee Jen (born 1942) remembers that her relationship with her father was 'hugely sexualised' and 'that had huge long-term consequences' for her later (heterosexual) relationships: 'Because as soon as I'd lie down, and there was a man looming over me, I'd go into the sort of catatonic trance...' Three other interviewees were sexually abused by family members in childhood, leading to psychological and emotional problems with sexuality later. However there is no suggestion that the proportion of sexually abused women in the survey is any different from the proportion of women in the general population who suffer childhood sexual abuse. Nor is there any suggestion of a direct causal relationship with their lesbianism. But for girls who were struggling to understand their own sexuality, it could at the least make the whole process more confusing.

6.3 Gender: 'Boys was best'

It has been argued that pressure to conform to gender norms was particularly strong in the period immediately before and after the Second World War. Adams (1997) has

traced the process by which, between the 1920s and the 1940s, an increasingly strong hetero-normative discourse became established in British and North American culture. She argues that during that period a discursive shift took place in which 'definitions of heterosexuality came to encompass notions about proper gender roles, about the nature of sexualized relationships between women and men'. After the comparative freedoms that some women had enjoyed during World War II, the 1950s saw a return to more traditional gender roles, and 'the ability to lay claim to a definition of normality was a crucial marker of postwar [sic] social belonging' (1997:166).

All the participants grew up in this strongly-gendered heteronormative culture, but some of them resisted gender stereotypes from an early age: 'I was considered to be a tomboy and fought many boys,' writes Mary (born 1939). Life writer Sally thought that boys had 'all the fun and adventure,' and wanted to be like them:

I was aware, at the age of about 9 years, that I much preferred fighting with the boys on the local farm, wearing jeans (bought for me for the first time at the age of 9 by my grandmother), and a gun in a holster (another birthday present aged 9), climbing trees etc. to doing 'girly' things such as playing with dolls. At that age my aspiration was to be like the boys (Sally, born 1950).

It seemed to Brenda that boys were more valued than girls:

I wasn't particularly planned, or wanted, and I was a girl and you didn't educate girls, but even before that I think I knew there was this whole thing about 'boys was best'. [...] From a very early age, I wanted to be a boy. One of my earliest recollections is about getting up very early before anybody else, and God knows what time that was, and sitting by the embers of the fire in my pyjamas pretending to be a cowboy; and I put my cowboy hat on, and my walking shoes, 'cause they were my boots, - and I strode, and did this [demonstrating] - because we used to watch a lot of cowboys on the telly round about that time, Hop-along Cassidy and High-Ho Silver and all of those...

Interviewer: How old would you have been then?

Brenda: Three and a half? Four? [...] I was strutting, I remember strutting, because I'd got the spurs on, you know, and sort of making them clink, you know, that sort of thing [laughs] (Brenda, born 1948).

As Halberstam (1998:6) has noted, tomboyism in young girls is usually socially acceptable, and tends to be understood as a 'natural' desire to be associated with the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys. However, that tomboyism is punished 'when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification (taking a boy's name or refusing girl clothing of any type)'. That was Sandy's situation:

[V]ery early on in my life... I always wanted to be a boy. And I always wanted boys' toys, and boys' clothes, and boys' everything (Sandy, born 1943).

For Sandy and other women like her, masculine identification was not a passing phase. Approaching her 80th birthday, Leo reflected on her gender identity:

Well, it's so difficult, isn't it? Because I'm never sure whether I'm really a lesbian, or whether I'm transgendered, or one of these mixed-up in-betweens. [...] I've never really come to any fixed conclusions, except that I'm not like any other women.

Seventy years ago, she had no such concepts to explain herself to herself; but she remembers:

[W]hen I was quite little, our house bordered a golf course, and at the far side of the golf course there was a golf club, and there were steps going up to a central door, and I had a feeling that the women went up one set of steps and the men went up the other set. And I really felt that I ought to be going up on the men's side (Leo, born 1932).

Philippa, too, says she 'never really felt like' a girl:

I had a tantrum, aged very young, because they told me I couldn't be Lord Nelson when I grew up! And my Aunt used to make clothes during the War, and I ordered a pair of dungarees, but they must have seven pockets, in precisely

the right places... So you know, there was some ambiguity around there, for most of the time (Philippa, born 1938).

There was no ambiguity for Kate – she just wanted to be a boy, penis and all:

I longed to metamorphose into a boy, to wear grey flannel shorts and long grey socks, to play football, and cowboys and ‘indybums’, to pee standing up. I remember undressing before my weekly bath and being terrified that since the last time I looked, I had sprouted a willy, so much did I want one (Kate, born 1938).

A significant minority of survey respondents (16 per cent) said that they had at some time in their lives wished they could change their sex. In childhood, that wish appears to have been more often about male privilege and freedoms than about sexual orientation; but for those who reported having such a wish in their adolescence or early adulthood, it was more clearly connected to an emerging sexual identity. One survey respondent wrote, ‘It would have made it easier to have girlfriends.’

The mixture of longing and terror described by Kate is echoed by Pip, who writes:

It was during my first couple of years [at secondary school] that I felt completely sure of my sexuality as a lesbian; it freaked me out but I was sure of it. I was very afraid that I would somehow give myself away or that it would somehow be visible to others - I was very tall and somewhat androgynous looking and a late developer in terms of periods, breast growth and so on. I was obsessed with my body and used to inspect it regularly to see if I was turning into a man. I used to join in with everybody else telling jokes against lesbians and gay men to try to cover my tracks. I can remember dreading anything concerning homosexuals appearing in the news in case I was somehow spotted.

Had they been born at a different time, these girls might have had language and concepts better to understand their feelings; but they knew no-one like themselves and understood their difference only as a shameful secret.

6.4 Sexuality: kissing girls

Helen (born 1936) says, 'I was aware from the age of nine that I was attracted to women,' and Andrea remembers:

I must have been about seven or eight. And I knew then. [...] I knew that I was attracted to other girls, not boys, at that age. I didn't do anything about it, it was all that sort of 'you show me yours, I'll show you mine!' sort of thing. And then you forget about it, or it's dormant, while you get interested in collecting stamps or going to the Zoo or all of those other things that children do. And then it re-emerges, and it did with me in my very early teens – I was twelve, thirteen (Andrea, born 1946).

Halberstam (1998:6) argues that gender rebellion is tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent; 'as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl'. Wanting to wear a cowboy hat at seven is one thing; wanting to be a boy at an age when it means wanting to kiss girls, is quite another. Participants' life-stories bear witness to the fact that, however early girls became aware of same-sex desire, such awareness was inevitably accompanied by a sense that it was 'wrong'. That sense of wrongness could be inculcated in very early childhood. Julia was to reach her mid-20s before she even considered the possibility of a lesbian relationship, but now remembers that:

I had very close friendships with girls. I mean it sounds a bit ridiculous, but if you go back to the age of five, which sounds really crazy, I had quite intense friendships with girls then, on a one-to-one basis - and I can remember saying, albeit on a child-like basis, saying to friends, 'Oh, why can't we go to a land where girls can marry girls?' And I remember my friends sort of looking a bit perplexed at that, as though they didn't quite understand it. But I didn't mean anything sexual by it at all. [...] I remember saying it, I think, because of their response to me (Julia, born 1948).

Judy's first rebuff for gender-inappropriate behaviour happened at the same age:

I was five, or five-ish, or maybe we went [to school] early then, I don't know – one of the big girls, who I suppose would have been nine or ten, was helping me

put my coat on, and I kissed her hand, and she laughed at me. And I've always remembered that, it's the only thing I remember about my days at [that school...]. And I think her name was Celia, this girl. [laughs] Isn't it amazing? It's ridiculous! [...] She laughed at me, and that is why I remember it (Judy, born 1942).

Milly remembered an occasion at secondary school:

...because we were all getting a bit carried away with our 'heroines' and these crushes, you know, we got a lecture. I can remember one of the teachers coming into our room; she wasn't our teacher, but she came and gave us a lecture about this 'sort of thing.' That this was not what we should be doing; and it could lead to... things. I don't think she actually used words, but I got the impression that this was not an acceptable thing, there was something very... dirty? about it, something not right about it (Milly, born 1948).

This awareness of something unnameable but wrong could be, as Jen remembers, 'scary':

I did know that there was this side of me that was – it wasn't secret, but... My mum [...] would come to the netball rallies, and there was one particular rally, and I was there supporting our team, and my Mum said when we got home, 'I didn't like the Jennifer I saw today.' She said, 'You were really silly.' And I knew what I was like, I was absolutely in love with all these girls on the team, and my Mum had seen that me, and I knew it was the real me, and that was very scary (Jen, born 1942).

One way to cope with these feelings was to deny them:

I think I probably knew deep down from a very early age that I... I would have said in those days that there was something not quite right, or normal. [...] So I remember really liking a girl... Just a girl – I never knew who she was but I liked the look of her, this was when I was about twelve or thirteen ... but I immediately suppressed any kind of thoughts. There was no outlet in those days, was there? So I [...] just put it away... I was just intrigued by this girl, but

I didn't do anything about it, nor could I have imagine myself doing anything.
(Maureen, born 1945).

Life writer Mary was fourteen when she became aware of her own pleasure in seeing two girls kissing and, simultaneously, of her mother's distaste for it:

[W]e were one of the first families to get [a television]. I remember particularly watching a pantomime. In those days the principal boy was always a girl and when they kissed my mum said, 'Oh God, bread on bread,' and I remember thinking how much I liked to watch it (Mary, born 1939).

Brenda also fantasised about kissing girls:

[W]e got to the stage where people had parties for their birthdays. [...] But they always ended up, from very early on, from when we were about eleven or twelve, with snogging sessions, right? Where the boys would stay where they were round the room, and the girls would sort of move about [laughs] - ten minutes of a snog with this one, and round you'd go, see? And I used to have these fantasies, when I was around thirteen or fourteen, that I was going to be a much better lover than some of these boys because, bloody hell, I could kiss a whole lot better than they could (Brenda, born 1948).

Adelman (1991) has suggested that those who self-defined as homosexual at such an early age, before they had fully developed their affective and social skills, had the hardest time achieving successful identity resolution. Given the difficulties, it is all the more remarkable that, in spite of parental disapproval and social opprobrium, a handful of the interviewees were able to develop consciously lesbian identities while still at school. From their stories it appears that this was the result of having both available role models and like-minded school friends. Crunchy (born 1939) says she was 'always' attracted to other women:

I even fancied my Sunday School teacher, when I was very, very young. I know I used to blush when she came near – I think I must have been seven or eight.

She had her first girlfriends at grammar school and was part of a group of friends who consciously identified as lesbians ('the reason that we knew we were lesbians, we just

thought we should have been *boys*, really’) and developed their own small lesbian subculture:

...we all had our little girlfriends then, at school, and it was amazing really, because I remember there was one of my girlfriends, and she would run up to me and [...] ‘Crunchy, [so-and-so] tried to kiss me!’
 I’d say, ‘I’ll sort her out in a minute!’ [laughing]
 It was terrible really, and we used to laugh about it of course, the three of us.
 I’d say, ‘D--- says you tried to kiss her!’
 ‘I did, she wouldn’t let me though!’ she’d say.
 And it was just stuff like that.

Unusually, Crunchy and her friends also had older role-models. One of the sixth formers was in a visible same-sex relationship:

[She] came to school every day with this very manly-looking woman in a mac, and she used to stride along in her mac... and they wrote their life histories, and lent it to us. And [...] that’s how we first knew what lesbians were, you see.

Their behavior, and their public use of the term ‘lez’ to describe each other, clearly worried their teachers:

...when we were playing hockey – there was three of us, one of us was in goal, and the other was the left inner I think, I was on the left wing – we’d yell out things, because we didn’t think anybody else knew anything: ‘Hey, Lez, here! Pass it over!’ And one day the gym mistress, or PTI as she was then, she came and got us all and said, ‘You’re not to use those words, it’s not very nice. You’re not to use it on the hockey field!’

In spite of this, and in spite of her mother’s anger, Crunchy’s lesbian schooldays seem to have been a happy, affirming time, with like-minded friends and numerous hero-worshipping younger girls:

[O]ne of them knitted me a pair of gloves for Christmas, because we went carol singing and she said my hand was cold when she was holding it! I was not a bad looking kid actually, I had dark curly hair, and I was cheeky, and I got on well. I

was very good at sport, you see, I was in all the school teams, I was school Games Captain and stuff like that, and it was happy! (Crunchy, born 1939)

Sport and competitive games form a recurring trope in these life-narratives. Jennings (2007:20) has described the concern, common at this period, that ‘participation in sport might result in masculine and potentially lesbian tendencies.’ The interview data suggest that girls who already had developing lesbian identities chose to participate in games and physical activity because they offered a welcome release from the stifling requirements of ‘lady-like’ behaviour. As a result, sport is often coded as lesbian in their narratives.¹⁷

Merle’s story shows very clearly how sport, sex and shame could intersect. Born in 1945, she began to be attracted to women when she was ‘about thirteen;’ her lesbian education began when at sixteen she started a relationship with a girl in the athletics club of which she was a member. ‘But it was only kissing and that, nothing really. And she knew a little bit about it.’ They both joined the same London school for their sixth form studies, and soon both had younger girlfriends, ‘Much to the horror of the school, because they were not very happy about it at all!’ However a warning from her teacher about her choice of friends did nothing to discourage Merle. One of the girls at school had a lesbian sister:

And she used to go to the Gateways,¹⁸ and so we knew about that. And so M. and I went and stayed at [her] place, and that’s where we had our first sexual relationship.

¹⁷ Survey results showed that three out of ten women were still involved in some form of active sport and the large majority had remained physically active: 70 per cent named walking as a regular feature of their leisure time, and 78 per cent said they took vigorous exercise (such as a long walk, heavy gardening, or going to the gym) at least once a week, which is much higher than figures for older people generally (Age UK, 20013).

¹⁸ The Gateways Club in Chelsea, London, was one of the few places in the UK where lesbians could meet openly in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. See Gardiner (2003).

Merle's school, like Sandy's, took a tough line on same-sex sexual behaviour. When one of the girls had her bag searched, and photographs of her kissing another girl were found:

...they were expelled, or 'asked to leave'. And M and I, of course they had no evidence against us, so I stayed on.

She may have escaped expulsion, but she could not escape the stigma:

Interviewer: So how did you feel about being 'that way' yourself?

Merle: Very, very anxious. Extremely anxious. And the thing was, [friend] and I were both quite good athletes: she was a half-miler and I was a discus-thrower at our club, and also for the County. So what happened was, we did have this slight hero-worship from some of the other girls at the school, which made it even worse. The whole thing was a nightmare for the school! And when they were appointing new officers in the school – Head Girl and whatever – and it was the Games Captain's turn, and I was sitting there, they said 'The Games Captain of the School is going to be – ' and I could hear them all going [draws in breath]. And they all went, '*What?*' Because I should have been Games Captain of the school! And they deprived me of that...

Interviewer: And did you know it was because of this?

Merle: Yes, I do know. Because somehow or other I managed to be in a place where I overheard some of the voting, and a member of staff said, 'Don't vote for Merle.' I heard that – and it didn't happen.

There was worse to come, however:

I decided that I wanted to become a teacher – well I knew, from the end of school, that that was what I wanted to be – and I think they were trying to stop me from going to become a teacher, because I had to go and have a medical. Not just an ordinary medical, but a full medical [laughs] [...] So I had to go to this other school, and there was a doctor there [...] So she asked me to take my clothes off, you see. She said, 'You take all your clothes off.' So I took all my

clothes off and she was examining me - nothing abusive, just an examination – and that was that. Anyway, no more was said about it, and I got into College, and then when I was in College, I said ‘Wasn’t that medical awful that we had before we came here?’ So they said, ‘What medical?’ [laughs] And then I realised that I’d actually been subjected to something to try to find out – I don’t know what – whether they thought I was a hermaphrodite or something like that, or what.

Interviewer: So she examined you sexually?

Merle: Yes, just to see – because I was completely naked, Yeah. So anyway, in I went, into this college (Merle, born 1945).

This story from the early 1960s strikingly illustrates the persistence of the medicalised model of homosexuality. Same-sex desire and sexuality have long been subject to a discourse of illness and contagion: the discursive construction of lesbianism as an ‘unnatural and infectious mode of sexuality’ can be traced back two or three hundred years (Sharrock, 1997:364). Merle’s account recalls not only the ‘illness-oriented approach’ of the sexologists, originating in the 1860s (Bullough, 1994:38), but an even older discourse about the lesbian body: the myth of the lesbian as ‘female hermaphrodite’ (Donoghue, 1993). Was the school doctor looking for the penis-like ‘giant clitoris’ that 18th-century popular medicine attributed to the lesbian subject?

In most of the participants’ school stories, teachers feature as the disapproving enemy to be outwitted, but Andrea, who had two same-sex relationships while she was at secondary school, remembers:

[T]here were teachers who seemed to understand and have a sort of knowing look about what was happening with me, and particularly the longer-term relationship that I had...

Interviewer: But they never spoke...?

Andrea: They never spoke of it, but they were aware of it (Andrea, born 1946).

Two participants, interviewee Philippa and life writer Kate, both born in 1938, had relationships with teachers. They are the same age; they both attracted the attentions of their English teachers: but their contrasting narratives demonstrate how differently class and family values can determine the way in which otherwise similar events are experienced.

Philippa's liberal upper-middle-class background meant that she had a good deal of freedom and independence, even when quite small. Her tomboy identity was indulged, particularly by her landowner father, who later bought her her first motorbike; she remembers that a female cousin taught her to masturbate when she was seven. Aged 'about 14,' at boarding school, she managed to get hold of an illegally-imported copy of *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall, 1928) – which was then banned in the UK – and says that her reaction was, 'Yes, that's about right!' She took no part in the 'crush' culture at her school because:

I rather thought they were silly; because I knew even then that they weren't the real thing. I never had a crush on a girl of my own age, because I knew that... They were playing at it, was what I thought.

Tall, dark and androgynously handsome, Philippa regularly took male parts in school plays, which she loved doing 'because I could drag up'. However her love scenes were always rather stilted because, although she enjoyed them, she says she 'didn't know how far to go' and was hesitant to appear too eager. Eventually the English mistress offered to rehearse her privately, 'and I found out how far to go'. Their affair was brief – the teacher left a term later – but Philippa says:

I think I always knew it wasn't going to last, and I wasn't in love with her... but it was the traditional nice introduction by an older woman (Philippa, born 1938).

There are, as Foucault pointed out, 'class sexualities' and if, as he asserts,

...sexuality is the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology, one has to admit that this deployment does not operate in symmetrical fashion with respect to the social classes, and consequently, that it does not produce the same effects in them (Foucault, 1979, p.127).

More specifically, McDermott (2010) argues that preliminary sexual identification and its mental health consequences are both shaped by the social, economic and cultural resources of class. The differences between Philippa's and Kate's stories bear this out.

Adopted at birth by a working-class couple from north London, Kate's childhood was spent in 'two and a bit rooms in a semi; [...] no sink, no water but a geyser over the bath for our weekly baths and a copper downstairs in the landlady's kitchen in which to do the weekly wash'. Ethnicity and religion present further intersections in this story: Kate's Irish father had been brought up Roman Catholic, and from the age of eleven she attended a convent school. She writes:

I was very slow to fall in to the implications of my own emotional and much disguised sexual proclivities. For example, my friend at school and ever after, is also a lesbian but neither of us found out about the other until we were both twenty six, despite the fact that the nuns used forever to be telling us that our friendship wasn't quite 'healthy'. (Could a girl today live in such ignorance? I hope not. Although I don't know quite what I would have done with the information had it found its way through my thick layers of denial.)

So, when her English teacher fell in love with her, Kate had only the vaguest idea what was happening, 'although somewhere an uneasy and familiar twinge indicated that it must be to do with the forbidden and unspoken world of sex'. She remembers that:

Every day there was a love letter and often a poem, mostly containing 'sweet peas' or 'butterflies'. Every day we walked together two miles after school, along the petrol stinking North Circular, until I turned into my street and she caught her bus to the posher [suburb where she lived]. In the holidays letters came by post, which was later to prove our undoing.

This deep emotional relationship between a working-class girl and her middle-class teacher never became physical. One day Kate came home from school and:

[I] immediately picked up an atmosphere of icy silence. My mother said nothing to me, less than nothing. I slipped out to the kitchen and opened her bag, hung on the doorknob. Inside, a sheaf of [the teacher's] letters.

Sex and emotions were not talked about in this family:

And nothing was ever said, but the freezing effect of that shock caused me to 'see,' as if I had suddenly put on a different pair of spectacles, what it was my mother saw, a woman of 37 doing what? to a 13 year old girl. Never mind that there was no sex, it was my first and most powerful indication that what I had felt was 'wrong' and antithetical to 'the way things are' (Kate, born 1938).

Unsurprisingly, it was a long time before Kate could accept that, in her words, 'my love was always going to go out to other women.' Memories of such experiences 'linger heavily in the thoughts' and the shame engendered in such moments can 'become embedded in the self like a succubus' (Munt, 2007:2). For women whose first same-sex affair was in their teens, parental disapproval and the shame of knowing that what they felt was 'wrong' had long-lasting effects.

6.5 Stigma, Shame, Secrecy

Several narratives show that religious teaching could be an additional – and powerful – source of both ignorance and shame. Silva, the restless daughter of strict French and Italian Catholic parents, persuaded them to let her leave her convent school at 16 to learn shorthand and typing. Even for a girl of the late 1950s, she was unusually ignorant about sexual matters:

[I]t was a very strict Catholic upbringing, very, very strict, and I just did not meet boys. I mean, we were never allowed out. Kids nowadays are allowed out of the school, but we were never allowed out. When I came home it was the same. [...] It's really strange when I think about it, with the kind of knowledge that young people have today, but we knew nothing! We used to kind of speculate – but we didn't know anything about... I didn't know about willies, I didn't know I had a vagina! I knew nothing! We did 'O' Level in Biology, and every single girl in the school failed 'O' Level in Biology because the nun who was teaching us would not take us through the last chapter, and the whole of the [exam] was about that! And we kind of looked at the drawings, but it just didn't make any sense.

She was equally ignorant of the existence of same-sex attraction; but soon after leaving school, she met another teenage girl in a pub, and:

[W]e just took one look at one another and – well. And I didn't even know the word lesbian! [...] And I can't remember whether she phoned me up or whether I phoned her up, but it was within a couple of days! And she lived with her parents, like we all did. [...] I asked permission to stay at her house, and was given permission; her parents were there and that was all okay. And that was my first sexual relationship! We just went to bed, and we'd never said a word about it; we didn't speak and say, 'Let's do this.' We went to bed, and just did it!

Interviewer: And you're smiling now, as you remember it...

Silva: Yes! [laughter] [...] It was amazing. It was absolutely amazing! And that relationship carried on for about six months. We never spoke about it, and we never held hands or anything, it was only just in bed, and I kept it very secret, even I didn't tell [my best friend] that I was seeing her. Nobody.[...] *Absolutely* secret. [...] And we carried on this relationship until one day she phoned me up and said, 'Oh, we're in terrible trouble! I didn't tell you, but I've been keeping a diary.' And she said, 'My mother found it – she's going to ring up your mother. We must stop.' And I never saw her again. [...] And I lived in absolute terror! Absolute terror. For me it was a big secret, all of that, it had to be kept secret. And after that I didn't go out with any women, I was so scared that I would be found out (Silva, born 1947).

For Silva, as for other interviewees quoted in this chapter, sex, shame and secrecy were intertwined from the beginning.

Judy (born 1942) was 21 before what she 'sort of vaguely knew' about herself could no longer be ignored. On holiday with a friend:

[W]e both got very drunk. I insisted on sleeping in her bed with her, which she didn't mind – and that's where it all happened for the first time. [...] It didn't bother me in the slightest, but she was beside herself, upset and saying it was awful and it shouldn't have happened, and all that. Nevertheless, it did happen again the next night!

[...] It didn't – wrong is not the word, I was going to say it didn't feel wrong ...
 But of course it didn't feel wrong, but it did. It felt right in as much as what was
 happening, but it felt wrong as a happening – do you understand what I mean?
 (Judy, born 1942)

The affair ended abruptly when Judy's mother read her diary, and the two girls were promptly separated. Not long afterwards Judy received a letter from the girl, saying she never wanted to meet again and that she was engaged to be married. It was a hard lesson; Judy knew now who she was but, like Monica a generation earlier (Chapter 4), she was sure that it meant she must be on her own for the rest of her life. Judy was to be nearly 30 before she found another, lasting relationship with a woman.

It is impossible to know how many teenagers' first lesbian relationships were punitively ended by shocked and worried parents, leading to shame and isolation. The long-lasting emotional and psychological damage from such events – Munt's (2007) 'succubus' of shame – could not be quickly shaken off. As Adelman (1991:28) observes, 'Successfully coping with stigma is not accomplished by a simple act of attitudinal change, but, rather, is an active lifelong process.'

6.6 Gender, sexuality, identity

As the stories told in this chapter show, the early adoption of a lesbian identity was often associated with gender nonconformity, sometimes with what would now be called gender dysphoria. (As Crunchy says, 'the reason that we knew we were lesbians, we just thought we should have been boys, really.') Many of these women's stories conform to a model which Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000:297-8) have called the 'master-narrative' of minority sexual identity development. It is characterised by:

...early 'precursors' such as gender atypicality or feelings of differentness, late childhood and early adolescent same-sex attractions, lack of sexual interest in the other sex, subsequent same-sex attraction, and finally adolescent self-labeling as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

However they argue that, as most models of sexual development are based on male

experience, they may be ‘entirely foreign’ to many women; indeed they suggest that the ‘developmental trajectories’ of most sexual-minority women violate this ‘master-narrative’ in one or more ways. For instance, such women may have no childhood or adolescent recollections of same-sex attractions at all; may assert that their same-sex attractions were triggered in adulthood by exposure to non-heterosexual individuals; or may report abrupt changes to their sexual attractions over time. Although such cases ‘run counter to the conventional view of sexual orientation as a stable, early-appearing trait’ (2000:298), Diamond and Savin-Williams argue that variability in the emergence and expression of female same-sex desire during the life-course is normative rather than exceptional. Faderman (1984) has argued that the traditional developmental model is not applicable to women who came to lesbianism through the radical feminist movement. Robinson (1999:xx, cited in Jolly, 2001:480) sees this variation in identity-formation as a major difference between the life-narratives of lesbians and gay men:

In the male autobiographies homosexual desire announces itself early and unambiguously: the compulsion is first felt at adolescence or before, and, with rare exceptions [...] it stays fixed. In the female autobiographies, by contrast, attraction to other women often begins later and it doesn’t necessarily put an end to the author’s heterosexual life.

My data strongly support these observations. The masculine-identified women described in this chapter represent a recognisable, authentic strand of lesbian history, but they are a minority within a minority. For the large majority of the women in the study, the pathways to lesbian identity were less direct; some were very long roads and had many turnings. In the next chapter I explore some of those alternative developmental trajectories and some of the social and political contexts that fostered women’s development of a lesbian identity.

CHAPTER 7

SPACES OF LIBERATION

7.1 Sexual orienteering

Although all the women in the study identify as lesbian now, not all of them claimed that identity as early in their life course as the women described in the previous chapter. While most of the participants were in their teens or 20s when they had their first sexual relationship with a woman, for others the experience occurred in their 30s, 40s or 50s, and a few were over 60 (Figure 34). In this chapter I trace some of those diverse narratives and in particular explore the spaces and places that made room for their lesbian identities to grow.

As notions of space and place have become increasingly important to social and cultural theorists, some writers have sought to explore the relationship between place and sexuality; particularly the way in which heterosexual social relations define everyday environments. Bell and Valentine (1995a), Valentine, (1989, 1993, 1996), Munt (1995) and Duncan (1996), among others, have discussed the ways in which public spaces are both gendered and heterosexual, and how lesbians might ‘queer’ those spaces for themselves. Taylor (2012) has unpicked the knotty intersections of class, race and gender in women’s experiences of social and geographical belonging and ‘fitting into place’. Meanwhile, Sara Ahmed (2006) has drawn attention to the ‘spatiality’ of sexual orientation itself, noting that: ‘Within sexuality studies there has been surprisingly little discussion on the spatiality of the term “orientation”’ (2006:69). She goes on to consider ways in which being ‘orientated’ might mean feeling at home or knowing where one stands. Her observations led me to consider the extent to which the development of my participants’ sexual ‘orientation’ was determined by the physical and cultural spaces they inhabited at different times of their lives, and particularly by certain spaces (whether physical/ geographical or metaphorical/ discursive) which enabled (or directed) that orientation. This in turn led me to recognise certain ‘spaces of liberation’ described in the qualitative data: places in space or time within that these women were free to (re)orient themselves and their desires. Those spaces could

sometimes be simultaneously repressive and liberating: school, for instance, as shown in the last chapter, could offer the freedom to develop a sexual identity while loading that identity with stigma.

This chapter considers two such ‘spaces of liberation’: the world of the women’s Armed Forces, and the world opened up by the politics of liberation, especially second wave feminism. These two environments, which appear at first sight to have very little in common, both emerge from the data as important cultural / discursive spaces in which women in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s could develop their sexual identities. The first is literally about moving away, entering a new physical and geographical space; the second has more to do with opening up new cultural and intellectual spaces in which new figurative directions can be taken.

7.2 ‘Joining the Foreign Legion’

For roughly half of the interviewees and life writers, the freedom to discover and explore their sexual identities was gained by moving away from their family and the place where they had grown up: not an easy thing to do at a time when leaving home before marriage was far less common for girls than it is now. As Carol (born 1944) says, ‘In those days girls did not leave home, unless to go into the forces or nursing, where accommodation came with the job.’ Nursing was the escape route chosen by Kate (born 1938), who left home to start her training ‘as soon as possible and much against my parents’ wishes’. Crunchy’s parents were equally against the idea of her joining the Army:

It’s the worst thing I could have done, like, you see? So I waited till I was nineteen, when I wouldn’t have to get their signature, and then I went down and signed on!

But she is absolutely clear that it saved her from a life of unhappy conformity:

And they could have kept on to it. If I hadn’t gone away, who knows, I might have got married because I thought it was the done thing to do. But I went and

joined the Foreign Legion, didn't I? [laughs] Got away! So that was alright (Crunchy, born 1939).

McDermott (2010) has recognised the importance to initial sexual identification of the ability to move away from home and create a lesbian identity in a different geographical place. She found that the unequal class distribution of resources and discourses meant this mobility was not available to most working-class women in her study, while the middle-class women were able to move 'through social spaces such as universities and employment [...] securing the freedom to "become" lesbian' (2010:204). For a number of working-class women in my study, however, the Armed Forces offered exactly that opportunity, giving them the freedom to acknowledge and explore their sexuality.

Interviewee Chris had always 'felt more like one of the boys [...], hated skirts, hated dressing up for anything, felt awkward', though she had noticed that:

I seemed to get on with girls, in a different way than one would expect, considering I couldn't stand all the fancy bits and pieces. I suppose... I didn't know what the heck was going on.

It wasn't until her first night in the WRAC that she realised, suddenly and life-changingly, 'what was going on'.

Chris: Anyway, that night we went to the NAAFI, and there were two women dancing together. And I took one look, and said, 'Ah. Now I know!' [laughs]

Interviewer: As clear as that?

Chris: It hit me like a ton of bricks. And I never looked back (Chris, born 1946).

Jennings (2007:61) has identified the uniformed services as offering 'a rare opportunity' for women in the immediate post-war period, by combining physically active roles and independent careers in a single-sex working environment. These careers provided 'a rare public forum in which they could articulate a certain type of lesbian identity'.

[S]o I looked down, and I saw 'Physical Training Instructor', and I thought, 'How lovely! I'll do that!' And I had to have a second choice, so I thought,

‘Well, I’ll be a vehicle mechanic as well. Very butch! [laughs] I’ll be a vehicle mechanic, that’ll be alright!’ (Crunchy, born 1939)

Women had different reasons for joining up. Pauline had always been ‘dead set on being a Wren.’ She had been working on a market garden (the only girl there) but as soon as she was old enough she joined the Navy as an aircraft mechanic:

I’d already grasped the rather romantic – well it *was* a romantic idea – of joining the Navy, on the basis of just the glamour of sailors in the War, of the Navy as the ‘Silent Service’, and all that (Pauline, born 1934).

JJ, on the other hand, was ‘fed up’ both with hairdressing and with life at home with her drunken and violent father. She had already had relationships with both boys and girls, and was dating a man eight years her senior:

He was a really decent fella. I thought the world of him. [...] So he said, ‘Well, don’t stop going into the Army. You go in, and we’ll see where we end up.’ So I went in the Army, and I thought, ‘Well, this’ll prove whether I am or not!’ Well, I was only in a fortnight, and I was having an affair with a woman! And then I had several. Several, several affairs... (JJ, born 1949).

Sandy joined the Merchant Navy after her first long-term lesbian relationship ended:

And that was, wow! That was wonderful [laughs]. There is something that happens to women at sea. I don’t know what it is, but they lose their inhibitions! And I mean, about half the crew were gay as well, both men and women, so it was just a riot (Sandy, born 1943).

Not all the interviewees who ‘joined up’ felt able to seize these lesbian opportunities, however. Irene was engaged to be married to a boy she loved and (although she had always been attracted women as well as men, and would later have relationships with both) decided to be faithful:

I got to know a lot of lesbians; how ironic that I couldn’t be fully part of their lives – they were so available! [...] Even though the lesbian element was

important to me, I could never deny it, it had to be submerged, somehow (Irene, born 1929).

Philippa's barrier, on the other hand, was one of rank: as a physiotherapist attached to the British Forces in Germany, she was technically a civilian but had honorary officer status:

I was an officer-lady, you see, and the Other Ranks were beyond touching; I would have been sent home. [...] I remember going to Dusseldorf, which was just up the road, trying desperately to find the red light district, I was so frustrated, and I couldn't bloody find it! [...] Two years! It was hard (Philippa, born 1938).

Only one interviewee saw no lesbians at all during her time in uniform, but she puts this down to her own innocence:

So then, when I was eighteen I joined the Wrens. But I have to say that I saw no evidence of lesbianism in the Wrens. [...] But I still hadn't got an idea... We're talking nineteen-fifties, you know? (Fran, born 1935)

For those who did find lesbian partners, service life made long-term relationships difficult:

I don't think there was anybody in those days that got together and stayed together... because you'd usually get posted; and it was against their thing, then, and it was very undercover (Chris, born 1946).

It had to be 'undercover' because homosexuality was still an offence under the Army and Air Force Acts (1955) and the Naval Discipline Act (1957).¹⁹ Even though lesbianism had never been illegal in the UK, the absolute ban on homosexuality in the armed forces applied equally to women and men. Some servicewomen, like JJ, were lucky:

¹⁹ When the Sexual Offences Act (1967) decriminalised sexual acts between consenting males in private, the Armed Forces were specifically excluded from this reform.

I never got stopped. I don't know why, really, because a lot of my friends got marched out of bed in the middle of the night, and they'd check all their stuff... It happened to me once, they woke me up in the middle of the night and they searched my wardrobe because somebody had told them I was gay ... but obviously they didn't find anything (JJ, born 1949).

Crunchy (born 1939) had two brushes with authority. She was still in training when she was put on a charge for 'riding a motorbike around the camp in mixed uniform' (an Army shirt and her own trousers), and the Commanding Officer made it very clear to her that 'tomboys' were not welcome in the WRAC. The second occasion was more serious: as part of the investigation of another lesbian on the base, her room was searched and some letters found. Only some quick thinking, and the willingness of a gay man in the Military Police to pose as her fiancé, saved Crunchy from a dishonourable discharge.

Other participants were less fortunate. Carol, who had had her first sexual relationship with a girl at the age of 15, joined the RAF as soon as she was old enough, to get away from home. She writes:

I loved the RAF. [...] I knew that I would have to keep my sexual orientation hidden from the hierarchy but we girls soon found each other and formed our own little cliques.

Unfortunately I was discovered in someone else's bed, double bunking we called it. There was no official term for it because it did not exist as far as the upper ranks were concerned. They did not want anyone discharged for being gay because that would have led to the belief that the Forces were a hot-bed of such practices. They were, but not to be acknowledged. I was discharged as 'medically unfit for Air Force Service' (Carol, born 1944).

The phrase 'medically unfit' is a further example of the persistence throughout the 20th century of discourses positioning homosexuality as a physical / psychological illness (see previous chapter). The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), which provides criteria for the diagnosis of mental disorders, did not remove homosexuality from its list until 1973. In

the UK, the ban on homosexuals serving in the Armed Forces was not lifted until 2000. Forty years ago, a 'dishonourable discharge' was a brutal business, which Carol still remembers vividly. She writes:

I was not allowed to return to my own barracks to get my belongings, I was told that they would be sent to me when I sent my uniform back to them. I was left wearing my working blues, battledress and beetle-crushers. I had one week's wages £4 and a ticket to London. How I was supposed to obtain civilian clothes I had no idea, even my knickers were Air Force issue.

I got on the train to London and spent some time there. I was 18 years old, and I had lost everything, my job, my friends, my home, and I swam in a sea of despair, keeping out of serious trouble only because of women I met on the gay scene who were very kind to me (Carol, born 1944).

Carol was not only deprived of job, friends and home, but exiled from that cultural space where she could act out and own her same-sex desire. Her salvation was to find herself an equivalent space: the 'gay scene' in London.

The crucial importance of that home-like space is underlined by the stories of women who did not find it. Leaving Forces life was even more traumatic for JJ than it was for Carol, because JJ did not immediately find another 'home'. After numerous brief affairs in the Army, she had met a woman she loved 'very deeply,' so when JJ was posted to Germany and her girlfriend to Cyprus, they decided it was time to leave the Army so that they could be together. The way to do this, JJ thought, was to admit to being a lesbian:

JJ: So I wrote a thing saying what I was, and I took it to the Commandant. And she said, 'Well, don't you think we know this?' And I said, 'Well...'
She said, 'We've left you alone because you've always behaved quite respectably.'

Interviewer: Do you think she was... [lesbian]?

JJ: Oh yes, she was. I'm sure she was. Because she said to me, 'This isn't

going to work, you know. It won't stay with you. You might be deeply in love now, but I've seen all this before.' And she said, 'You'll ruin your career, and you're a good soldier [...]. Don't do this.'

But JJ was determined, and was duly discharged from the Army. Like Carol, she was deprived of job, friends and home in one blow; unlike Carol, she did not find the support of other lesbians. Homeless in a strange city while she waited for her girlfriend to join her, she says:

I got really ill. I don't remember much about those few weeks because I was really gone... [...] I had some foul factory jobs, because I'd got no money, I didn't even have the money to get home. I didn't want to tell my parents... so that was a really rough time (JJ, born 1949).

And as her commanding officer had predicted, the relationship did not last. Totally isolated, and rejected by her mother, JJ tried to cut her wrists. As a result, she was admitted to a psychiatric hospital, where she received electric shock therapy until 'they discovered I had a faulty heart valve, so they couldn't give me any more'. Remembering that time, she says 'I came out of there, still totally lost.' She found her direction again only slowly, as she re-connected with lesbian friends from the Army and then eventually became active in gay politics, eventually finding a place where she could belong, as she helped to set up a local branch of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality²⁰ and worked on the Gay Switchboard in her home town.

As Jennings (2007:60) has shown, the Armed Forces enabled the articulation of 'a certain type of lesbian identity', one that was associated with masculinity and physical activity. The young women described above were largely those who could recognise and express their same-sex desire through that type of lesbian identity (with the exception of Irene, they have all identified as butch for all or part of their lives). A much larger number of my participants found their 'space of liberation' in a very different milieu, offering different constructions of what it might be to be a woman and a lesbian: this was the cultural and discursive space of second wave feminism. Although this

²⁰ The Campaign for Homosexual Equality (known as the Committee for Homosexual Equality until 1971) was formed in 1969. It is a UK voluntary organisation campaigning for social and legal equality, irrespective of sexuality.

experience, too, was sometimes associated with a physical move away from home, it was more often, and more importantly, an intellectual journey.

7.3 Becoming feminist, becoming lesbian

Bonnie Zimmerman (1997:158) speaks for many women of her generation when she says:

My subjectivity, then, is the effect of my experiences, which are themselves the interaction between my individual being and the second half of the twentieth century. For me, and probably for many other lesbians of my generation and location, those experiences were shaped powerfully by both lesbianism and feminism. It is not possible to separate these out. I came to understand myself as a lesbian through feminism and as a feminist through lesbianism.

The majority of the women described in the remainder of this chapter would agree with her; their feminism and their sexual orientation were inextricably linked, though the balance of the two was different for each woman. A minority, however, did not make that connection and this chapter concludes with a consideration of why some lesbians do not claim a feminist identity.

The relationship between feminism and lesbianism in the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s was complicated and sometimes antagonistic. The political issues and theoretical positions involved in these debates ranged from the radical lesbians who saw exclusively female relationships as the only proper expression of feminism to those feminists who remained in relationships with men and resented this point of view as a slur on their feminist credentials (Koedt, 1971). However, this chapter is less concerned with the battles of the past than with the way in which, in spite of political differences, the influence of feminism has remained so strong for these older women throughout their life course and up to the present. In answer to the survey question, 'Would you call yourself a feminist?' eight out of ten (78 per cent) respondents said that they would. This is so much higher than estimates of the number of feminists in mainstream populations (e.g. Robison, 2002; Alfano, 2009) that it requires some further exploration. Cross-tabulating this question with data from other parts of the questionnaire reveals

both the importance and the complexity of the relationship between lesbianism and feminism for these generations of women.

For Diana Chapman, one of the founders of the lesbian magazine *Arena Three*,²¹ that relationship was simple:

I honestly don't see how you can be a lesbian and not be in favour of the women's movement... if you're going to live with another woman and spit in the eye of society, and reject the concept that you have to be part of a man, then you have to be a feminist (Diana Chapman, in Neild and Pearson, 1992:103).

Like Zimmerman's assertion that 'It is not possible to separate these out,' Chapman's statement could lead to the assumption that the women in the study are feminists simply because they are lesbians, but that does not account for the 20 per cent who are lesbians but not feminists.

The majority of the survey respondents are now in their 60s, and were young women in the heady days of second wave feminism. Their politics could therefore be seen as generational, and the identity careers of their age-cohort as still being shaped by their experiences of the Women's Liberation Movement. This supposition is supported to some extent by the data (Figure 32):

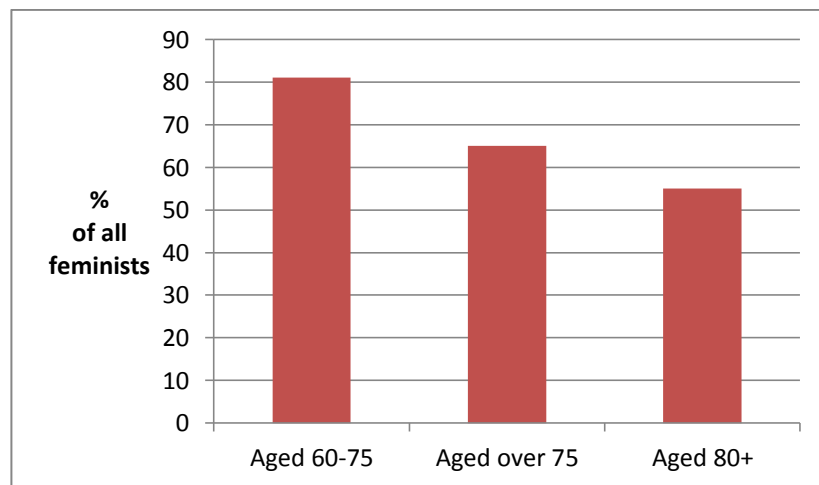


Figure 32: Feminist identity by age groups

²¹ *Arena Three*, founded in 1963 and published by the Minorities Research Group, was the first lesbian magazine in the UK. and was published monthly until 1972.

The percentage of those identifying as feminist drops progressively with increasing age. Just over 80 per cent of the women in their 60s and early 70s call themselves feminists: over the age of 75, the figure drops to 65 per cent, and over the age of 80 it drops to 55 per cent.

Rosenfeld (2003:160) posits that:

How people experience their later years [...] is strongly influenced by the period in which they came of age. This bears especially on their sense in later life of who and what they have become.

In her research with 50 lesbian and gay elders in California, Rosenfeld was struck by the extent to which the emergence of gay liberation in the late 1960s and 1970s affected their recollections of sexual experiences and the identity issues that flowed from them. She concludes (2003:161) that:

[T]hese subjects were [...] now constructing narratives of life experiences that reflected just how much their identity careers were still being shaped by these events, even later in life.

This idea, of the nexus of a cultural-political moment with the on-going formation of identity, is clearly relevant to the women in this study too, and I was interested to discover whether the process could be traced in relation to political identities as well as sexual ones. Could Rosenfeld's theory of identity careers shaped in early adulthood by the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1960s and '70s also account for the feminism of those women, now in their 60s, who were 'coming of age' in the 1960s and '70s?

Perhaps; but this would not account for the fact that respondents who are now in their eighties, whose young adulthood pre-dated the 1960s and '70s, are still much more likely than mainstream populations to claim a feminist identity. Other factors must be also be at work in the relationship between their sexual and political identities.

Here Rosenfeld's emphasis on 'identity cohorts' rather than age cohorts is useful. From that perspective it becomes necessary to distinguish between two phrases used apparently interchangeably in the passages quoted above: 'coming of age' and 'forming sexual identity.' For older women who now identify as lesbians, those two processes did

not necessarily happen at the same time. The responses to the questions, ‘At what age did you first become aware of your attraction to women?’ and ‘At what age did you have your first lesbian relationship?’ (Figures 33 and 34) show a wide variation:

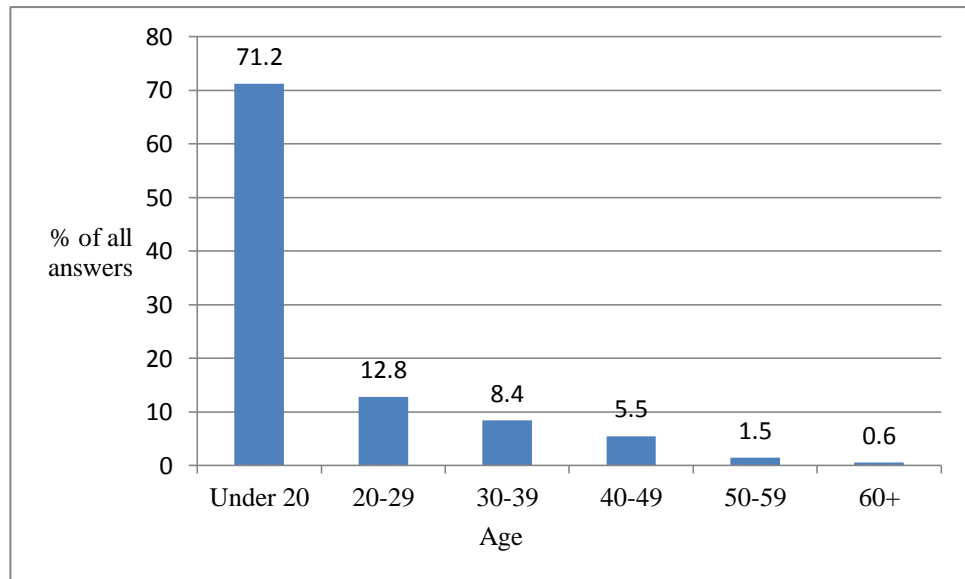


Figure 33: When did you first become aware of your attraction to women?

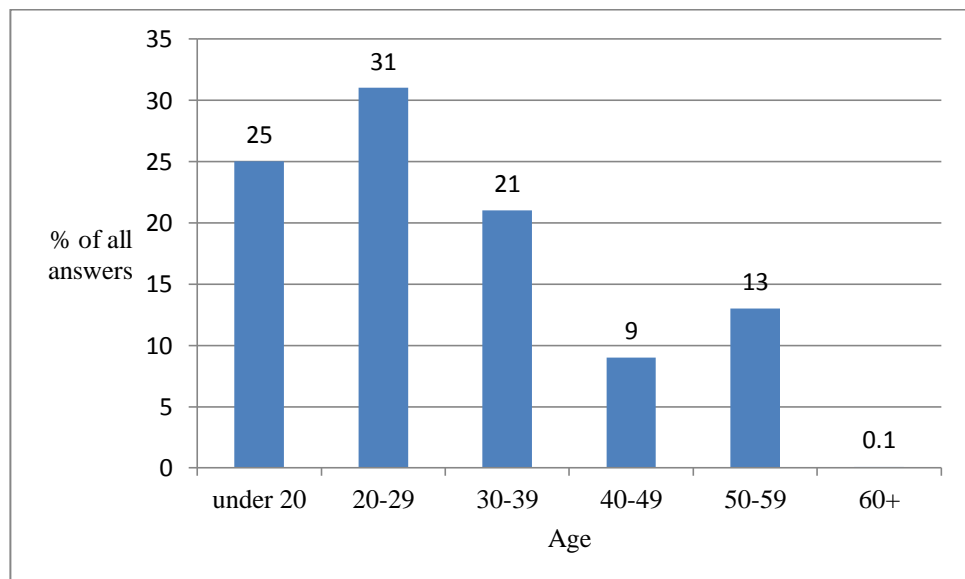


Figure 34: Age at start of first same-sex relationship

When these trajectories of sexual identity-formation, rather than simply chronological age, are mapped on to historical movements, a much more complex picture emerges in which the link between politics and sexual identity is more closely connected to age at ‘coming out’ than to chronological age.

The answers given by the oldest respondents illustrate this complexity well. Twenty women in the survey were born between 1920 and 1935 (i.e. they were aged between 75 and 90 at the time of completing the questionnaire). Of these 20, 13 describe themselves as feminists. However two-thirds of those (69 per cent) did not have their first relationship with a woman until after 1960. Of the seven non-feminists in this age group, on the other hand, all but one had their first lesbian relationship between 1941 and 1951, well before the advent of the Women's Movement. These results suggest that, while feminism helped some women to recognise and accept their same-sex desires, those who had already identified as gay were less likely to adopt feminist politics.

Comparing feminists and non-feminists of *all* ages in the survey supports this hypothesis. Women who formed a lesbian identity from the mid-1960s onwards, *regardless of their age at the time*, are more likely to identify as feminists now. Those who formed their lesbian identities *before* the coming of the Women's Movement are less likely to have embraced feminism as part of their identity later. For my participants, therefore, Rosenfeld's theory of 'identity careers' can work for the influence of feminism if their 'generation' is defined not by birth-cohort, but by age at coming out.

Even that is not the whole story. The relationship between sexual orientation and feminist politics was also influenced by social class and education. The feminists in the survey are slightly more likely to have come from working-class backgrounds. Some interviewees from working-class families imbibed a kind of proto-feminism from their mothers: when interviewee Brenda won a place at grammar school, for instance:

[M]y mother went home and told my father, and he said 'You don't educate girls, what's the point? It'll cost us money.' [...] But my mother fought him, and said, 'Indeed we will, and I will go back to work to pay for the uniform and stuff.' So that's what happened (Brenda, born 1948).

However, the link between feminism and class is not as strong as the correlation between feminism and educational achievement. That said, it is difficult to separate social class and education in the UK, and this is particularly true in any consideration of the generations born just before and just after the Second World War. These were the

‘11-plus’²² children, for whom free secondary education (and for some, grant-aided higher education) provided a level of social mobility unthinkable for their parents. The interplay of state education policy and socio-economic status in this period was a crucial influence on the lives of most people who grew up in Britain in the second half of the 20th century; and the survey data show that it also had a strong influence on whether girls became feminists.

As Alison Oram (1996) has pointed out, women teachers were key players in 20th century feminism. During and after the Second World War, girls’ schools were still partly staffed almost exclusively by women, some of whom would have been old enough to remember the suffrage movement, and who provided particularly strong role models. As interviewee Lynn recalls:

All my teachers were female, I think, except one; and it might have been a traditional sort of grammar school, where they argued with us about the length of our skirts, but they did also teach us to think...

She remembers her school as crucially important to her self-worth as a young woman:

Grammar school made ... a huge difference in terms of who I was, and gave me the confidence to say, ‘All right, I’m going to do something else!’ It also gave us a sense of our own worth, our abilities, our potential; and I think that made a huge difference’ (Lynn, born 1948).

For Andrea, that self-confidence was helpful as she became aware of her sexual orientation:

I think it made me aware of the fact that I could earn my own living, as something, that I was going to be able to get a decent job, and I think if we’re

²² The Education Act 1944 provided free secondary education for the first time for all pupils up to the age of 15. The test in the last year of primary school, which became known as the ‘11-plus examination’, was originally intended to determine which of three kinds of secondary school a child would attend from the age of 11. In practice it soon came to be regarded as a pass/fail entrance examination to grammar school. One of the ground-breaking results of the 1944 Act was to open secondary education to children (in particular girls and the working class) whose parents would not previously have been able to afford to educate them. As a result, a far higher percentage of women and working-class students went on to higher education than in previous generations.

thinking about the emerging role and awareness of being a woman on my own, and a lesbian who knew that she didn't want to get married... (Andrea, born 1946).

The survey data also show that the further women progressed in their education the more likely they were to develop a feminist identity. Those who now identify as feminists are twice as likely as the non-feminists to have a degree; the non-feminists are three times more likely than the feminists to have no educational qualifications beyond their school-leaving examinations.

The ways in which the journey to feminist politics intersects with social expectation, class and education are well illustrated by the stories of two interviewees, Elaine and Marguerite. Elaine was born during the war and grew up in northwest England. As a teenager, she had had crushes on girls at school, but says she didn't think of it as being anything to do with sexual orientation:

I knew that I probably should be having a boyfriend, but I didn't particularly want one, except in terms of that's what you did socially. A bit like smoking, really: 'Eugh!' – you know? – but you've got to do it, because that's what everyone else does. [...] There was intense social pressure to find yourself someone to marry and have children with at that time: you know, it was right at the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s, and also the pressure on me to do that was intensified as well by having an elder sister, and trying to do the things that she did, and she'd got married and she'd got two children, and that's what I should do... so I did that and, you know, of course, wasn't very happy.

It has been suggested (Levine, 1990:16, Oram 1996:7) that women become politicised when they experience contradictions between the dominant ideology and the realities of their own experience. Such cognitive dissonance occurs particularly strongly in the narratives of interviewees who were unhappily married. As an isolated housewife and stay-at-home mother of two small children in the Surrey suburbs, Elaine became depressed and eventually had a nervous breakdown. Looking back she sees the breakdown as a necessary step to leaving her marriage:

[I]t seemed that I had to do that, in order to make the big shift in my life that I needed, which was saying that this was not for me, and that I'd got to go somewhere else. Unfortunately, the somewhere else I went wasn't to women! [...] Because I hooked up with a guy who was a serious problem.

Finally finding the strength to escape and set up home on her own, 'out of reach of after-the-pub potential violence', she also found feminism:

I just blossomed there, really, became much more independent-feeling, and crucially got into – it was what, 1977 – so after a year or two there I discovered the Women's Movement, and consciousness-raising groups and all that kind of thing, and that in the end made so many pennies drop for me that I became a really strong feminist.

As a result, in her late 30s, she went back to university, 'because I was really getting myself together, in terms of, I've got to have a proper career-type job'. It was the 1970s; the university had just started its Master's programme in Women's Studies:

...and it was *so exciting*. And of course, I met lots of women, and lots of lesbians. And I went over to the States – because a couple of women who described themselves as political lesbians had come and stayed with me – this was through the consciousness-raising groups – and I wanted to go over there, and I know now, of course, with the 20/20 hindsight, that what I wanted to do was, you know, explore stuff... and I went over there for three months one summer, and did explore stuff, and then started my first relationship with a woman, which was heady stuff! [...] and at the same time, I was starting to be attracted, very strongly, to someone in the Women's Studies course.

For Elaine, the sex and the politics were inextricably linked:

Interviewer: You said it was 'heady stuff' – can you tell me a bit more about how it felt?

Elaine: Well, just on Cloud Nine, really! You know, I just felt that I was where I wanted to be. And the sex was fantastic, and it never had been as a heterosexual, so I found out a lot of things really... But it was also terrifically

heady because I was for three months in the company of *only* radical lesbian feminists! And, you know, it was pretty fantastic really.

Interviewer: And have you kept those politics?

Elaine: Yes. Yes, I have. [...] I still absolutely – yes. I haven't shifted.

She sees her story as a journey to her 'real' self:

It was about finding out who I was, definitely. That was the crux of it really. I remember sitting around one of their camp fires, at one of the camps we went to, and we were going round saying who we were, and I just stood up and said, 'I'm a lesbian.' And that was the first time I'd said it, and it just felt so good (Elaine, born 1941).

Marguerite is five years younger, born just after the war into a church-going Christian family. She was the elder of two sisters, and from the age of five to 18 attended an Anglican convent girls' boarding school. She had had no contact with boys, and was entirely ignorant of sex; also, she says,

being in an all-female environment, I thought that everybody felt the way I did about females! I never knew... and of course, I never knew the word, either.

She read theology at university, where she found that:

...everybody was getting boyfriends, and all the rest of it, so I thought I'd better do the same. [...] it's like going down a plughole, you know, you do. And then, *big* mistake: partly because I wanted to get away from home [...] I decided to get married. Which is really where things went badly wrong, because the chap I got married to, we were good friends, you know, and I totally mistook that for what actually was going to happen; still very dim. And we got married.

They had two children, though as Marguerite explains:

My relationship with my husband – I don't know whether you'll believe this or not – was never sexual, except when we wanted to have children. [...] Luckily I turned out to be very fertile.

She was, she says, 'extremely unhappy', but did not know why:

I think in the first, well, the second year, I had very, very bad depression. I couldn't again get to grips with why it could be [...] I didn't know why I just did not feel right, and I didn't feel fulfilled. Still not equating it with what was up with *me*!

The turning point came after she gave up teaching to have her first child:

And that was truly terrible, because I was at home in a small village all day with no transport, a bus once every so often, and I really knew that I was going to have to do something about myself. So I joined a WEA class. [laughs] That was it! Out of that, I began to work with the WEA, but also I joined a women's consciousness-raising group, and in a way it sort of fell into place. So then I met the first woman I had a relationship with.

[...] Joining the consciousness-raising group [...] I met women who were very, very into feminism, which interested me in feminism, which later on meant that for the WEA I taught feminist theology. Because I was opened up to ideas that I hadn't got, and this woman who taught the WEA class, she was the tutor-organiser for the area, was deeply into feminist history, I think that's what her PhD was in... and it just interested me hugely, and opened up my reading, and my ideas, to all those sorts of new things...

In this narrative, education, feminist politics and same-sex desire are interwoven with spiritual growth: it was while teaching a feminist theology class, some years later, that Marguerite was to meet the woman who has now been her partner for some 20 years.

Like Elaine, Marguerite feels she was 'always' a lesbian. Although she knows that some of her fellow-Christians would not approve of her sexual orientation, she has never felt any conflict herself between her sexuality and her faith, because:

I do feel that I was lesbian from the start, so it somehow wasn't any kind of choice, if you see what I mean. It's a bit sort of vague... So [...] I can feel a sense of sin about a lot of other things, but not that (Marguerite, born 1946).

Faith is a key part of identity for a significant number of LGB people (Knocker, 2012:10) and there is some evidence (Wagner et al., 1994) that those who manage to integrate their religious faith and their homosexuality suffer lower levels of internalised homophobia. Marguerite is open about her sexual identity (see her story in chapter 8) and is still an active member of the Church of England.

‘I could be myself and be a lesbian’

Not all the interviewees who found their lesbian salvation in the Women’s Movement were as unaware of their sexual orientation for as long as Elaine and Marguerite. Silva, for instance (born 1947), had already had two relationships with women by the time she was in her early 20s. After the forcible ending of her teenage first affair (see Chapter 6), Silva ‘didn’t go out with any women, I was so scared that I would be found out’ and says she ‘lived in absolute terror.’ Shortly afterwards she was raped by her brother-in-law:

And again, that was a big guilt trip, because it was ‘all my fault,’ and that had to be kept hidden. And then I left home. I ran away from home [...] with about ten quid or something... Somebody helped me find a bedsit, I got myself a job...

She was seventeen. In the pubs of west London she ‘became aware of lesbians’ again:

They were women about the same age as me, maybe a few years older, in their early twenties... and I fell in love with a woman, but it was totally unrequited. [...] And I used to follow her like a little puppy, but she never looked at me, or anything like that [...]. And at that point I was going out with men, having sex with men, usually one night stands, and usually when I was drunk. And that carried on ‘till I was about nineteen, twenty, that kind of age. I was very poor, I was earning ten quid a week, and four-pound-fifty went on my rent ...

Telling her story, Silva distinguishes between ‘those few gay women [...] who I fancied, who were on the scene’, and what she calls ‘the *then* traditional gay scene, you know, the butch dykes’. Her next relationship was with one of these ‘very traditional’ butch women:

...and she expected you to be femme, you know. And one drank such a lot in those days, you know, there was so much alcohol, and I used to drink... One didn't drink wine or beer, it was spirits. So there was a lot of drinking... and I ended up with this woman, and I thought, 'This is it'. And I wasn't happy. And I didn't like the sex with her either; the sex was really [laughing] not very good. She was, I feel now looking back on it, very repressed herself... you know, it wasn't that wonderful, sensual experience. It was very – like with a man, really. But this was the gay scene, and I kind of thought, 'Well, this is what it's about.' So I carried on going out with her [...]. And I was just this little kind of girl... [laughter] I was very pretty, I was kind of this little girl in high heels and mini-skirts... and I lived like this, with this woman, just waiting to go out with her every Friday. And we had nothing in common. And then one day I decided, I thought, 'No, that's it, I'm not a lesbian, I can't be a lesbian, I hate it.' Because it was also so old-fashioned. Because alongside all of this, you had Swinging London, and all that.

She was vaguely aware that there was 'something else,' personified by the 'trendy set' of young women she admired from a distance, but it was a world to which she had no access.

So I kind of said, That's it. And I finished with [her], and she wasn't really bothered. And I thought, Well, I'm obviously not a lesbian! And it was very disappointing. And I kind of carried on with my life, I had affairs with men, nothing ever lasted, it was only mostly one-night stands.

It was, as she says, the 'Swinging London' of the early 1960s, and although she was still going out with men:

A lot of the women were sleeping with one another. Whenever there weren't any men around, we used to have sex. And I had a whole period of a few years, when one used to sleep with one's friends. And again, the 'L' word was never mentioned...

[...] The sex with women was always so gorgeous, to enthralling, so sensual. It's what, you know, you love doing. The sex with men was... I remember many

years later saying it was like rape. But for me it was only ever when I was very drunk, anyway; I could only ever relax and do it properly when I was drunk. Or, in those days, stoned, I suppose... we were smoking dope and taking pills, and then doing all that kind of thing... No, the sex with women was absolutely gorgeous! It was just like, as soon as the men were out, we all used to... [laughs] But then, although the environment was fairly kind of liberal, it was still kept very quiet. [...] We never spoke about it; never spoke about it; it never had the 'L' label on it, you never told your friends, women who disapproved.... [...] It was completely secret; in those days of sexual liberation, supposedly, for women, you could just do anything you wanted; except that. So that was my life, my sexual life, until feminism happened. In 1973, '74, I think...

She was eventually to find feminism and lesbianism through political activism. But before that happened, she 'got slightly hung up on drugs', including heroin, and was only 'just about managing to hold myself together'. In an attempt to get away from the drugs scene in London, which had already killed several of her friends, she went abroad for a couple of years. When she returned to London:

I didn't have a job, didn't have any money, didn't have anywhere to live [...] so I ended up squatting. You know, somebody said, there's a squat. I didn't know what squatting was. I ended up claiming benefits and I'd never claimed benefits in my life; I didn't know they existed! But I got into that life, and I got into the radical movement – and all of a sudden it all changed, I got politicised; as part of that there was the campaign for homes. I was squatting in Central London. The Campaign for Homes in Central London, Save Covent Garden, feminism, lesbianism – all the '-isms' were there: anti-racism, the abortion campaign, all of that was all there. And I came across lesbians who were *out*, and they were women like me! It was joyous!

In her interview, Silva laughed with pleasure as she remembered her liberation:

[T]here were lesbians everywhere, you know, you could be what you wanted! And I was friendly with this woman [...], and she didn't look like a lesbian – and I don't know what it was, we were talking about something, and I said, 'You're a lesbian aren't you?' And she said, 'Yeah.' She said, 'I don't like

labels, but that's what I am.' And I thought, 'Ah! God, so can I, I can be a lesbian! I can be a lesbian.' And of course, there was opportunity – they were everywhere, at conferences, it was just like being in a sweet shop! [laughs]
After all of these years! I've never looked back really... [laughs]

For Silva, finding feminism meant that she could finally be both the kind of woman, and the kind of lesbian, she really wanted to be:

I could be myself; I could be myself *and* be a lesbian. I didn't have to look like that [...] I didn't wear makeup then, I didn't wear high heels – because I'd been a very femme girl, you know, very pretty, totally into clothes ... And for me it was also part of that, because men used to always go for me because I was such a pretty girl. And for me, not to have to look like that, and still be a sexual being, was really important. I could cast all of this away, you know, and still be sexual. And there were other women like me (Silva, born 1947).

These feelings are echoed by another interviewee, Julia (born 1948), who first came across lesbians and gay men when, as the divorced mother of a young son, she went to college to train as a teacher. She describes herself then as 'to all intents and purposes still a straight woman,' although she had always been 'a little bit fascinated by the idea' of lesbians:

But not really feeling that it applied to me, until I met this crowd of people, and knew that they were just like anybody else, and I could really get on with them and be open with them. I didn't have to role-play with them, I liked that. I didn't have to role-play.

Like Silva, she relished this new freedom from the restrictions of heterosexual femininity:

Well, at that time, I'm sure it's not the same now, but at that time there was the thing about if you were straight, it was the chap that rang you, and if you were interested you had to look immaculate and have your makeup on, and your high heels and whatever – whereas with them, I could say what I wanted, I could wear what I wanted...

So Julia launched herself enthusiastically into the lesbian-feminist world, and found it different in more ways than she expected. Her first encounter with the women's group where she was to meet her first partner was disconcerting:

I walked into the house and there was a poster on the wall with a big pair of garden shears hanging beside it. And on it, it said, 'Free Castration on Demand!' [...] That was the only point where I wondered what I'd walked into! [...] Also I think they would examine their vaginas with speculums,²³ there was all that sort of thing, and there's me thinking, 'I don't know, is that quite...? That sounds a bit odd!' Because if you've not... and you've just been catapulted straight into it, you've walked into someone's house, and the front door has closed, and you think, 'What the hell have I walked into? [laughs] It was a bit odd...

She found lesbian behaviour equally surprising:

... And it came to the point where we were going out one night [...] and it was going to be quite difficult for both of us to get home, because neither of us drove – so she said, 'Well, you can stay at my place for the night.' So, me coming from a straight background, I thought, 'Oh, this is it!' Because no way would a man ask you to stay the night unless that was going to be the start of the sexual relationship. Because that's what a straight woman would think: you stay the night with someone, that's it! But her coming from a sort of lesbian feminist perspective, it was just, 'Oh no, I really like you, but I'm just offering you somewhere to sleep for the night.' And basically, what happened next turned into a bit of a farce, because she said, 'Well, here's the bed, I'll sleep on the couch,' and I was absolutely horrified, you see, because I'd been building this up, this was going to be my first big experience, and I said to her, 'Come over here and get in this bed with me!' So in the end, I more or less seduced her, which was really strange, because I was expecting it to be the other way round.

It was a step she wanted to take, however, and she has identified as both lesbian and feminist ever since. Remembering that first night, she says:

²³ The idea that women should know their own bodies and take responsibility for their own health and sexuality was an important strand in feminist thinking. Its most influential expression was the Boston Women's Health Book Collective's *Our Bodies, Our Selves* (1971)

It was fun! It was just fun. And I was sexually turned on by it, and so I thought – I can't remember exactly what I thought – but I must have thought, 'Well, it works! I can be gay! There's part of me that is gay!'

Interviewer: Can I just ask you about that? Because at one point in your story you said, 'I was at that point a straight woman,' and then you said to your tutor, 'I think I might be gay' – how do you think of yourself? Do you think of yourself as gay, or bisexual?

Julia: No, I never think of myself as bisexual, I think of myself as gay totally. But having said that, were circumstances different, I could probably have lived a straight life all my life. But I would never want to swing both ways. For me I know that wouldn't work, I'm one or the other. And once I took that step, at 25 or 26, I never looked back.

Interviewer: So it's been relationships with women since then?

Julia: All the time, yes. I think once or twice I've met a man and I've thought, 'Oh, yes, I could be sexually attracted to you,' but I would have to go all the way the other way again. I don't – it might sound a bit prudish, but I don't somehow think it's – it would just confuse me too much, to sort of do one thing one year and something else another.

Julia's description of her sexuality raises a topic that featured both in the questionnaire data and during the interviews: the question of whether sexual orientation is a choice or an innate condition. Current research suggests that women's sexual orientation is potentially fluid (Golden, 1987; Garnets and Peplau, 2000, 2006; Rust, 2000; Diamond, 2008; Moran, 2008), but not all the participants would agree. Asked, 'Do you feel that being homosexual / lesbian is your choice?' 21 per cent of survey respondents said that, for them, it was not a choice at all; but 29 per cent said they felt there was some element of choice involved, and nearly half (46 per cent) said it was entirely their choice (Figure 35).

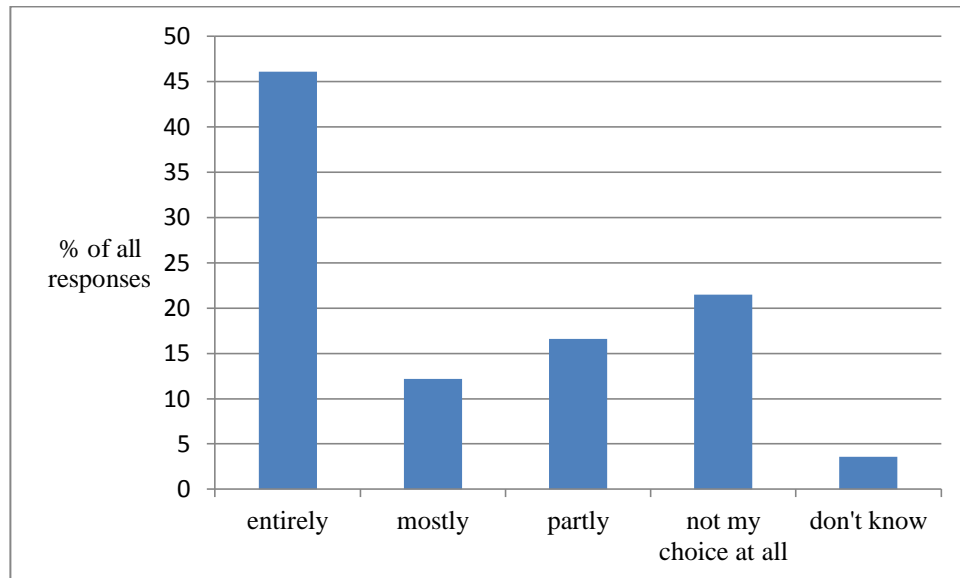


Figure35: Homosexual / lesbian identity as choice

This is yet another way in which the identity ‘older lesbian’ refuses to be single or static. Women like Elaine and Marguerite, whose lives might appear to illustrate what Peplau and Garnets (2000) have called ‘erotic plasticity’, believe that they were ‘always gay’ and either suppressed the knowledge or took time to understand it. Others, like Julia, do see their sexuality as potentially fluid, and feel they have chosen one path over another.

The most consciously ‘chosen’ of lesbian feminist identities is that of the ‘political lesbian’, for whom lesbianism was the ‘*solution* to heterosexuality’ (Wilson 1996:142). Radical lesbians believed that all feminists could and should be lesbians (Onlywomen Press Collective, 1981; Bindel, 2009) and although many political lesbians were women whose primary sexual attraction was to men, their political conviction inspired them to create primary relationships with women instead of men (Ault, 2008:516). Three of the interviewees identify in this way. For Lynn, feminism came before lesbianism:

One of the reasons I tend to do these interviews if I’m asked, is that I do define myself as a political lesbian, and I think that’s quite rare these days. [...] I was kind of *born* a feminist, rather than born a lesbian... It would never have occurred to me that women weren’t at least as good as men, I don’t remember ever thinking otherwise; and that’s why I went looking for the women’s

movement, [...] and that helped me to redefine my sexuality in a way that felt better for me...

In her teens and early 20s she had relationships with men; turning to women was a conscious political choice:

Although I'd had one or two relationships with women, I wouldn't say that they were very well-developed sexually in some ways, in terms of a mature sexuality. [...] But it wasn't as though I'd never fallen in love with a man; and it was a long time, it was about seven years before my dreams and things really changed, and I started to have erotic dreams about women, started to have orgasms, all kinds of stuff. So it was partly a very conscious choice, that the life I wanted to live, the kind of relationships I wanted to have, I felt that I could probably have with women, and it was not at all likely with men. So it was a mixture of those kinds of things, really, rather than being driven by a sexuality that said, 'This is the only way I can be' (Lynn, born 1948).

Jen describes a similar progression, though for her it happened much later, after years of marriage and bringing up children:

I began to think that men weren't a very good option; not because I didn't like sex with them, but because... I thought most men were a waste of time. [pause] And I did think, well, I do know a few really nice men, but of course they're married, they're bagged! If you were lucky enough in the '60s to find someone that did turn out to be a decent person, you're going to hold onto them! I did know a few of these. So I thought, it would be so much more sensible to opt for women; and I'd always had loads of women friends, I'd always loved women, but I never thought about it in any other way apart from friends. So I – and this is the part of my story that some other people find difficult – I'm pretty sure that I thought to myself, I'm going to switch to lesbian, because it just makes more sense, and I know I'll find a lovely woman... and I didn't have to do very much, really; I just started observing women more carefully, so if I was in a place where there were women I would look at their bodies more carefully, more... I don't remember ever looking that much at men's bodies, actually, but I guess it was similar. And I could feel it beginning to work.

She is aware that this is not a position which everyone can accept:

I think a lot of people seem to think that you're supposed to be born one way or the other, and the idea that you can say, 'Oh, I've decided that I'm going to be the other way' makes people upset. [...] I think I've always been... I could be either way. It's to do with the person, and I wanted a lovely person, a companion, and I decided that women were a much, much better bet (Jen, born 1942).

Not all the participants were either as radical or as actively involved in the Women's Movement as the women described here; not all saw such a close correlation between lesbianism and feminism; some came to feminism much more slowly. Life writer Kate remembers the 1960s and early '70s as a 'heady time [...] to be venturing into the lesbian world', but says:

[A]lthough my partner, always the more intellectually adventurous, was fired up by this, I was far more conventional and cautious. I liked to swagger a bit in my bell-bottoms, to dance at the Gateways, to enjoy the thrill of being 'outside' what I still thought of as the norm, but I was not prepared – yet – to turn the world upside down and adopt the root and branch critique of a male directed world which was gradually emerging from the maelstrom of new feminist writing.

So what changed? Here I am in my seventies, profoundly committed to the vision of those early feminists [...] I wish, very much, that I had woken up sooner (Kate, born 1938).

Leo remembers that she and her partner were intellectually convinced by feminism – 'we were absolutely heart and soul feminists' – but, in terms of activism, 'never made a success of it':

Well, we went to feminist meetings, when we discovered them... but we were both employed, which meant that we wore proper clothes and not dungarees, we weren't free ever to do pregnancy testing on Tuesdays and things like that, which other people were doing. [laughs] And by the end of the evening we

couldn't hang around to go to the pub, because we had jobs to go to the following morning... so we never quite fitted.

And it was rather the same with, sort of, pockets of lesbians. I remember we tried to go to a meeting of lesbians – which just goes to show how terribly timid we were, and perhaps we weren't all that keen anyway – but we decided to go to a meeting that was supposed to be lesbians, and we were hanging around opposite where the place was, and a whole crowd of people turned up on motorbikes with skid-lids, at which point we decided to go and have a drink and go home [laughs]. Because we just had a feeling that we weren't going to fit, for one reason or another.

Sexual orientation, social class and education clearly play a part in this story, as does the fact that Leo and her partner, as teachers at a well-known girls' public school, were very much in the closet. But also, Leo says:

Probably we just weren't activists, of any kind. [...] In theory we've been activists for all sorts of causes, but we've never been very good at *doing* it. I suspect it's because we were never very good at joining things. [...] But we were for the cause, and we had all the right books and knew all that sort of things, and taught the right sort of things, but we weren't leading lights, I'm afraid (Leo, born 1932).

Whatever their level of active involvement in the past, the majority of participants have retained their adherence to feminism and still see it as a crucial part of their identity. Indeed for women like Lynn, as they reach old age, feminism overtakes lesbianism as the most important thread. Shortly before our interview, Lynn had co-ordinated a reunion of her contemporaries in the movement, and reflected that:

That coming-together of the feminists – that's my real tribe. That's my tribe, and I absolutely knew that (Lynn, born 1948).

In this she echoes Margaret Cruikshank's (2008:151) conclusion about the complexities of being old and lesbian: "“Woman” remains my core identity.'

For feminists like Lynn, ‘woman’ is a positive identity. For others, including those who have a more complicated relationship with sex and gender, the idea of being a ‘woman-identified woman’ can be problematic, as I will go on to show.

‘I never got hooked in’

This exploration of feminism in the lives of my participants would not be complete without some account of the non-feminists. They are a significant group (20 per cent of the sample) and they have much in common with the majority described above; so what are the cultural factors that have restrained them, as lesbians, from claiming a feminist identity?

As I have already shown, they are likely to be in the older age groups (as Philippa, born 1938, put it, ‘I was pre- that, and never got hooked in!’) and likely to have had a less extended formal education. The data show that they are also slightly more likely than the feminists to have been born into upper-middle or middle-class families; to have a religious affiliation; to be politically conservative; and to hold negative views about such issues as lesbian motherhood and adoption. However one of the most significant factors (yet again) is timing: not chronological age but the point in their identity careers at which lesbianism and feminism met. The large majority (90 per cent) of these non-feminists identified their lesbianism in their teens or earlier, and two-thirds had their first same-sex relationship before they were 25. This means that, in most cases, they were identifying as gay very young, and well before the advent of the Women’s Movement.

They are also significantly more likely than the feminists to have identified as butch or femme (41 per cent compared with 27 per cent). The relationship with feminism could be problematic for such women, at a time when butch/femme identities were being condemned by radical feminists as heterosexist ‘role-playing’ (Jeffreys, 1989) and as politically incorrect (Ainley, 1995). Philippa (born 1938) explains:

[T]he feminists have done a lot, and I thank them for it, but they’ve also not been very understanding about a lot of the lesbian community. They’re very judgmental, and I think this is wrong. [...] I find it deeply unpleasant that some members of the lesbian society are disapproved of so strongly by other

members. I think it's uncaring and cruel.[...] It's like saying you don't like certain people because they're not in the same parcel, or don't have the same educational standard or something like that.

So there is a significant minority for whom feminism clearly didn't 'take.'

Three conclusions can be drawn from these diverse accounts. The first is that, *whether women accepted or rejected it*, feminism has impacted in some way on the identity careers of all older women who now identify as lesbians, *and continues to do so*.

Second, although the majority of these older lesbians identify as feminists, the meanings of that identification are legion. The relationship between sexual identity and politics is complex; it varies from woman to woman and is intersected by other social factors such as class and religion. Third, because the relationship between lesbianism and feminism remains an important element in older lesbian identity, it is one of the most significant ways in which the experience of older lesbians has differed from the experience of older gay men.

7.4 'Liberated,' but still not free?

In this chapter I have focussed on the cultural and psychological spaces that, in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, offered young women a variety of models through which to grow into a variety of lesbian identities. The uniformed services offered some women the opportunity to undertake physically active roles and to develop a type of lesbian identity associated with masculinity and physical activity. Women whose gender expression was more traditionally feminine, or who enjoyed relationships with men, or who were attracted to women but simply didn't recognise themselves as either butch or femme, often took longer to recognise their same-sex desires and to form a lesbian identity. For many of these, feminism offered alternative models of how to be both lesbian and woman.

Finding a place – whether sexual or political – where a woman could 'fit in' or belong was a complex and multi-faceted process, affected by the intersection of many social and emotional factors. But whatever type of lesbian identity a woman in these generations adopted, and however long it took, one outcome of that self-identification

was the same for all of them: they became part of a stigmatised minority. Having claimed a lesbian identity at whatever age, women had to live with the consequences: as women and lesbians, they were subject not only to sexism but also to homophobia. This everyday experience of social stigma is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

‘SUFFERING, SURVIVING AND SURPASSING’

In his analysis of the way in which sexual stories are told, Plummer (1995) locates the lesbian and gay ‘coming out story’ within a genre which he describes as ‘stories of suffering, surviving and surpassing’. This is a useful starting point for a consideration of the stories older lesbians tell about living with a stigmatised identity. Taking Plummer’s three-part description as a framework, this chapter describes the kinds of hostility and discrimination to which the participants have been subjected during their lives (‘suffering’); how they chose to deal with those experiences, whether by concealing their sexual identities or by revealing them (two contrasting strategies for ‘surviving’); and, finally, some stories of standing up to and challenging homophobia, ‘surpassing’ the oppression of a lifetime.

8.1 Suffering

One survey respondent, who returned her questionnaire by post, also enclosed a sheet of lined paper cut from an exercise book, on which she had written the following:

Most Gay Women of my generation were not out at work in case they lost their Jobs or were ridiculed

Professional women Teachers etc would be frighten to go into Pub’s etc in city centres in case they bumped into any of their colleagues They socialized mainly in each others Homes & met through mag advert’s, such as Sappho and Arena 3. (‘M’) Her mother would have preferred her to be a PROSTITUTE rather than GAY.

(A) She called on her sister for some family photos, her Husband chased her down the path, both he and her sister shouted, Dont come here again.

(Phil) Thrown out of the R.A.F. because she use to look and talk to women (No affair)

(P) Her sister would not have her in the house if she wore Trousers, she died

recently at the Funeral none of the Family would speak to 'P' (cold shoulder)
MM lost her PARTNER (died) the family ostracised her from the funeral & she
hasn't a clue where she is buried.

J&K Local youths found out they were Gay, had Brick thrown at their
window's, car tyres ripped etc; they packed up & went to live in another district
& kept a very low profile

I know of Two older women who have still not told their Family they are GAY
(Comments submitted with questionnaire, 2010).

The writer remains anonymous (and has painstakingly anonymised everyone she mentions). Her questionnaire responses reveal that she is a white working-class woman, born in 1940, living on a low income in the north west of England with her partner of 35 years; that she had her first same-sex relationship in her early 20s and never married; and that she has spent many years in the closet, though now she says 'most' of her family and friends know about her sexuality. This carefully-compiled list of sufferings represents what one older lesbian wanted a researcher – and, through the researcher, some wider audience – to understand about her life and that of her friends. It also catalogues very neatly the types of stories that have shaped community and identity for generations of lesbians. The experiences she lists – rejection by family, discrimination at work, hostility from strangers – are replicated over and over again in the qualitative data, a vivid reminder of the price participants have paid for adopting a stigmatised identity.

Seventy-nine per cent of survey respondents said they had at some time felt personally discriminated against because of being lesbian; 68 per cent believed that lesbians generally suffer from discrimination. (These results correlate closely with the findings of Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003), 71 per cent of whose participants broadly shared the view that non-heterosexuals are discriminated against in society.) The most common response to that stigma was self-concealment. The survey shows that 30 years ago, nearly half (44 per cent) of respondents who then identified as lesbian were not out to their families; a quarter (23 per cent) were not out to any friends either (Figure 22). There has been considerable movement in their positions over time but, even in 2010, seven per cent of those who still had living family were not out to any of them, and two per cent had told none of their friends (Figure 23). The qualitative data flesh out the

bare bones of these statistics, offering ways of understanding why so many older lesbians still remain resistant to self-disclosure, and why coming out is still an act of courage.

Rejection by family

The most painful stories are accounts of rejection by parents and family. Interviewee JJ, for instance, was still a teenager when she told her mother about her attraction to other girls:

She was vile. Which was [...] really upsetting, because I'd always been very close to my mother. She'd been my best friend. [...] She called me a dirty slut. And lots of other hard things, really... No, that wasn't a pleasant time. And you did feel totally isolated, that you couldn't talk to anybody (JJ, born 1949).

Voice-centred relational analysis (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998; Byrne et al., 2009) was not part of the methodology for this study, but such an approach would highlight the way in which JJ's shift from 'I' to 'you,' and her use of understatement ('that wasn't a pleasant time') show her need to protect herself from the remembered emotions, more than forty years later. Sandy's experience was even more traumatic, and her narrative was even balder. She was still in her teens when her first woman lover left her, and she 'took a load of sleeping tablets'. After that she decided to try to conform to her parents' expectations, becoming engaged to a 'really nice guy [...] even though I couldn't bear him near me sexually.' Shortly before the wedding she realized she couldn't go through with it, but must remain true to what she knew about herself. She broke off the engagement:

My mother was distraught; we had a huge row. And on the morning of my birthday, we had this huge row in the morning, and I went off to work; and when I came back from work she'd had a cerebral haemorrhage, and she'd died without ever regaining consciousness. So you can imagine what that did to me (Sandy, born 1943).

Unlike some of the narratives illustrated later in this chapter, these stories of maternal rejection did not have the ring of having been told and retold for an audience. They

seemed (to the interviewer) freshly re-visited as they were remembered; the emotion felt still raw.

Discrimination at work

Sylvia (born 1942) writes that she and her partner ‘have lost jobs and homes because of our sexuality and our refusal to conceal it’. Job security emerges from the life stories as a real fear for many; survey respondents were less likely to be out to work colleagues than either family or friends (Figures 22 and 23). Kathryn (born 1949) writes:

When I first became a Lesbian I had to hide it, as [...] in the Civil Service it would not have gone down well. There were rules; I could probably have been dismissed as we could be blackmailed for our Secrets. (What secrets did I know?) [...] I had to stay in the closet at work, even though things were improving with equality over the years.

Maureen says that ‘horror’ stories of discrimination at work circulated in the lesbian community:

I was more frightened in those days, because economic security was important, also professional standing and so on. And the horrors that had been visited on other people (Maureen, born 1945).

Being sacked was a daunting prospect for a woman without a husband’s income to fall back on. Some jobs and professions were more risky in this respect than others. Philippa was a physiotherapist, and says that there was never any possibility of coming out at work, because:

...physios, until relatively recently, would have been dismissed instantly had there been any knowledge. They seemed to think that all lesbians can’t control their sexual urges! (Philippa, born 1938)

Julia, who never spoke about her sexuality at work, once took her partner to a party at a colleague’s home:

So we attended this function, and I held hands with her when we danced, we danced together, so what I did was coming out by action.

And that went down extremely badly where I worked, extremely badly. [...] I was called in, and I was interviewed, and I was told that this wasn't really thought to be decent behaviour, or appropriate behaviour.

It wasn't a function at the workplace itself, it was a function at a colleague's home. It was somebody else's 21st birthday party. And she complained to the management [...]. And subsequently, over the next six months or a year, it became too difficult for me to work there, so I actually left in the end (Julia, born 1948).

There was no redress in law at that time: discrimination at work was not made illegal until the Equalities Act 2010, although the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations were introduced in 2003.

One of the most difficult places to be gay was in school teaching (Ainley, 1995:188). In the 1950s a lesbian teacher might very well not be out even to her lesbian and gay colleagues:

When you teach in a prestigious girls' school, you have to be a bit careful!
[laughs] Although I'm sure one of my Headmistresses was gay... (Frieda, born 1928).

Twenty years later, there was at least some chance of lesbian camaraderie, even though the secret had to be kept from the rest of the world:

Interviewer: But did people know at school about you? Were you out, there?

Marguerite: No. Well, only to the other lesbians on the staff.

Interviewer: So there were other lesbians on the staff?

Marguerite: Well [laughs], I always find solace in the PE Department!

(Marguerite, born 1946)

Fran says that neither she nor her partner ever came out while they were teaching, explaining:

It was just too risky really. Because I think teachers are on the whole quite liberal, and it would have been all right in the staff room, but it's about parents, and their perception of what gay people are. So I didn't (Fran, born 1935).

Life writer Kathryn, who had stayed in the closet at work because she feared the condemnation of her Civil Service colleagues, saw her partner's teaching career come to an abrupt end, and is convinced that it was because of her sexuality, though that reason was never given:

My partner who was a Head teacher at a big Comprehensive School was dismissed over certain allegations (which were not true). We ended up in Court losing all our savings fighting the case, which we did not win. The real reason she got dismissed was because they (the Governors) found out she was a Lesbian, but we never could prove it.

The court case led to Kathryn herself coming out at work:

I went to my Boss, who was also the Equal Opportunities Officer [...] and had to tell her about myself as I needed time off to attend Court, and I was aware it could be affecting my performance. She treated me differently from that day onwards until I took voluntary retirement (Kathryn, born 1949).

Such stories, told and re-told within lesbian and gay communities, have kept generations of lesbians and gay men in the closet, in spite of the legal and social changes of the early 21st century.

8.2 Surviving: life in the closet

While I was recruiting participants for this research, several women declined to be interviewed on the grounds that, even though things seem relatively safe now, there could at any moment be a backlash in social attitudes, so it would be unwise to become visible. Eighty per cent of those who agreed to be interviewed did so on the condition that they would not be identified by their real names. Interviewee Anna, for instance, does not believe that attitudes have really changed, or that it is safe to declare herself:

There is a lot of homophobia around here. I mean, for instance, my cleaner... well, not just my cleaner, anybody! I mean, if I'm at a dinner party or anything, people are fascinated by homosexuality and repulsed by it as well. And they will

mention it, and I want to stand up and be counted, but I don't want to hear it. I don't want to let people say things. [...] it's supposed to be 2011, and everything's supposed to be hunky-dory, but I don't think it is (Anna, born 1945).

Life writer Sylvia, whose more recent experience of homophobic bullying led her and her partner to leave the sheltered housing complex where they had hoped to spend their retirement, thinks that homophobic prejudice has never really gone away:

There may be laws in place and positive publicity, but I believe that there is a deep, untapped core of fear about sexuality that resides in the majority of the population (Sylvia, born 1942).

Sylvia and her partner have been together 30 years; although they are now registered civil partners, they still do not reveal their lesbian identity beyond the circle of their friends. They believe that the bullying they suffered was because their secret became known to their neighbours; the experience has deepened their distrust of the 'majority of the population.' Sylvia says that they 'both feel damaged and very angry' and are 'very nervous that such a thing might happen again'.

Given the amount of courage that self-revelation has always demanded, and the punishment that has sometimes been the result, it is easy to see why so many lesbians decided to stay hidden. DiPlacido (1998) has noted that although coming out can reduce the stresses associated with self-concealment, it can increase potential stress from negative life-events. For women like Julia, Kathryn and Sylvia, coming out was neither liberating nor heroic. Consequently self-revelation is not necessarily seen as the best option by older lesbians; many of them, as I noted in Chapter 6, occupy a carefully-negotiated position between 'in the closet' and 'out' that they find the most comfortable and emotionally healthy for them.

Nonetheless, what participants have to say about their experience of stigma lends much support to the idea of the closet as a site of isolation and damage. Analysing the way that stigma works, Goffman (1963) describes how people who feel that they are failing to meet other people's standards protect their identities by concealing facts about themselves, out of fear that they will be judged. He sees this continued awareness of

stigma as bringing about damage to the self, which he describes as the ‘spoiling’ of identity. Concealing one’s sexual orientation, however assiduously, does not guarantee freedom from the effects of homophobia (Grossman, 1997; Seidman, 2002) or minority stress (DiPlacido, 1998). Lesbians may be particularly prone to this internalised form of psychological stress (Lewis, Kholodkov and Derlega, 2012).

For Seidman (2002:30), one of the specific harms arising from self-concealment is social isolation; both the survey and the interview data suggest that one of the most stressful aspects of such isolation can be lack of support at times of grief and stress. Edith experienced this when the woman she loved found another partner. Edith was married and a mother: there was no one she could tell. Deeply distressed, she turned to the Samaritans:²⁴

I mean, they didn’t know me and I didn’t know them, it didn’t matter... And the woman, she was sort of laughing... She said, ‘Oh, what do you do when you’re with your husband? Do you just lie back and think of England?’
And I put the phone down (Edith, born 1919).

After that, Edith spoke to no one of her feelings for many years.

The questionnaire data provide numerous instances of this loneliness at times of grief. One in six (17 per cent) of survey respondents had experienced the death of a lesbian partner. With only two exceptions, these bereavements took place before the existence of civil partnerships, when the relationship had been kept secret from friends, family and work colleagues. In nearly half (45 per cent) of these cases, respondents reported that their experience of the death had been made more stressful because they were lesbians. Doka (1989:4) has described ‘disenfranchised grief’ as ‘the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported’. A handful of supplementary comments to the questionnaire responses clearly express the pain of this ‘disenfranchised grief’:

²⁴ Samaritans, founded in 1953 by the Rev. Chad Varah, is a registered charity aimed at providing support to anyone in emotional distress or at risk of suicide, usually through a telephone helpline.

She died when I was on holiday and the relatives arranged the funeral to take place before I returned.

Her family contested the will... tried to pretend we weren't lovers...

She died just before civil partnerships were recognized. Legally, it was the fact that I was not next of kin; financially, her pensions died with her; emotionally, there were any number of people who thought I'd just lost a friend.

Other comments make it clearer that the additional suffering was a direct result of the relationship having been secret:

Could not disclose our relationship, as her family were unaware of it, so the grieving was lonely.

Could not talk to my closest friends about my grief as they did not know I was gay.

A less tangible but equally damaging effect of the closet is internalised homophobia (Seidman, 2002:30). People who present 'virtual' identities to the world suffer from shame about their 'actual' identities (Grossman, 1997), and experience a 'shattering of the self' (Munt, 1998). The survey data support this idea: 40 per cent of survey respondents said that they had experienced shame about their sexuality at some time; those who said they had 'always' or 'often' experienced such shame were more likely than others to be concealing their sexual identities from friends, family and work colleagues, and much more likely to have done so in the past.

Internalised homophobia 'presents a major roadblock to well-being' (DiPlacido, 1998:147). Several interviewees recognised and described this effect. Interviewee Jude made a link between shame and mental health in her past. In the late 1960s she was a closeted young teacher in her first job, living alone in a strange town. She had revealed her sexual orientation to no one when she had what she described as 'a bit of a breakdown.'

Jude: I was so lonely, you know? There was no-one, no-one at all. [...] There was no-one I could tell anything to, about how I felt.

Interviewer: Did you still think at that stage that it was wrong, what you felt?

Jude: Yes. I thought it was terrible. Why God picked me to be like that. [...]

I did go to the doctor eventually, and he said to me – because I did tell him, and I said, ‘Please don’t write it down in the notes!’ – I told him that I thought I was gay – and he said, ‘Look it doesn’t matter!’

I said, ‘It does to me!’ (Jude, born 1944).

Maureen described a more conscious struggle to overcome the social conditioning that told her she was ‘bad’:

But the biggest battle was, before I took that first step [...] I do remember thinking, and really forcing myself to think through very clearly, that I am not a bad person; I know that, I’m quite a good person; and if I’m one of these people, then they can’t all be awful; and so on. But it really took some working out (Maureen, born 1945).

Joyce’s interview demonstrated how difficult it is to root out that deep-seated internalised homophobia, even after years of apparent self-acceptance. During her interview she talked about how her children had reacted when she started her first same-sex relationship:

Interviewer: So you didn’t talk to the children about it?

Joyce: No! I don’t know whether I should have done or not... [begins to cry] Nowadays people would, wouldn’t they? But I was ashamed, you see [weeping]. This awful, shaming thing... and if I was a different person, I wouldn’t have done any of it... I’d have wanted myself happily married, to a lovely man, and stay faithful forever. Because it’s wrecked my life!

Interviewer: It’s wrecked your life? In what way? [pause; Joyce crying] Is this alright? Do you want us to stop?

Joyce: No, it’s fine... I need to do this. [...] I’m ashamed of it, even though I’m out, even though my neighbours have accepted me, I still can’t cope with it, at all!

Joyce is unusually aware of the residue of shame she still carries; although she has only met with acceptance and affection from her neighbours since she came out, she still cannot find real acceptance within herself.

8.3 Surviving: Coming out

Interviewees who did choose to come out told stories that reveal the enormous emotional effort it took to make a public declaration of their lesbianism, especially for the first time. Marion (born 1942) told how, as a closeted young feminine lesbian in the early 1970s, she was aware of prejudice, but for a long time felt unable to challenge it:

You hear a lot more than if you're really obvious, and it used to freak me out, what people really thought. [Butch colleague] might walk in and out of the office, and people would talk about her afterwards, and I'd be sitting there thinking, 'Shit...'

She told a story of being at a party:

One of those parties where everyone's lounging about smoking. And, you know, it was quite a nice atmosphere and stuff. It was straight – well, I assume it was straight – and some guy walked in and said, 'Oh god, I just got propositioned by some faggot!' And the woman who was next to me – we were kind of lounging about, we were smoking spliffs, and she was kind of half leaning on me – she said, 'Oh God, I hate that, I really, really hate that! But it's the same for us women. If someone walked in here and they were –' (I can't remember what word she used, 'queer' I think it was) 'and they were queer, I'd know it straight away!' And she turned to me and went, 'Wouldn't you, Mal?' And it was a perfect time for me to say something, and I couldn't. I chickened out.

She adds, 'I did feel ashamed of it by that point, of not saying anything,' and not long afterwards she did come out, by joining the Gay Liberation Front:

It was the perfect thing for me. I think it was the perfect thing for the type of woman I was. You know, I didn't fit stereotypes, whatever they might be... and

it brought together various other strands of your life; you didn't have to lead this double life.

Nonetheless, it was still terrifying:

I remember the first march through Oxford Street. I mean, a lot of us were shaking while we were walking along. [...] I remember that the first thing that I did, I had to force myself to do it, I can't remember who the hell first bloody well suggested this, but it was to wear our [GLF] badges when we were travelling on our own on the tube! [laughs] And I hated it so much, I really had to psych myself up to do it. (You remember the original GLF logo, with the fist?) And it was alright when we were all together marching along Oxford Street – although we were less than two hundred people on that first march, and people looked so totally horrified and disgusted. That's the worst thing, isn't it, disgust? [...] But the thing I hated most was travelling on my own on the Tube, and the worst of it was, you know when you're in those scrums with everyone pushing, the guys would kind of move slightly closer and look and leer, and obviously would be thinking, Well, what you need is a good fuck; but far worse than that was the women, suddenly realising you'd got this badge on, and trying to move away! [laughs] That was so awful – I just remember the sweat running down my back [...] It's terrible! I can't believe we lived through all that! [laughs] (Marion, born 1942).

In the early 21st century, after 40-odd years of being out, Marion finds her memory of the sheer terror of coming out hard to believe, but other participants remember the fear, too. Sally (born 1950) writes:

Coming out was perhaps the hardest thing I had ever done up to that point in my life. I felt very frightened of the potential consequences particularly at work where I was employed as the senior court welfare officer supervising staff who were mediating family disputes over custody of children. Nevertheless I felt a great urge to tell people the 'truth' about myself, having spent 40 years living what seemed to have been a pretence; an unreal life. I went to see the Chief Probation Officer to tell her of my identity prior to coming out to other staff. She seemed to be reasonably accepting of this although advised me not to tell

the Judges at the County Court as she felt they would be prejudiced. I then came out to the entire staff group by putting my name to a leaflet along with a small group of other Lesbian and Gay staff in which we announced the establishment of a Lesbian and Gay staff group and invited others to join us. Whilst I felt very fearful, in reality only one member of staff was hostile that I was aware of, and many others expressed positive comments about my 'courage' and a heterosexual colleague organised a 'coming out' party for me! I found that it strengthened a number of my relationships; with some people telling me quite personal things about themselves that they had not previously felt able to share (Sally, born 1950).

Angela, who was 'horrified' to find herself 'outed' in the Sunday newspaper *News of the World*, was pleasantly surprised by the reaction of her boss:

I was absolutely horrified, because he [the reporter] didn't tell me that he was actually doing an interview on me, and it was very, very sneaky what he'd done. Anyway, there was no going back, and I was the secretary to the General Manager of [a large department store], and I thought, Oh my God! What have I done? What have I done? It's all going to come out now, everybody will know in the store! So the next morning, the Monday morning, I went in to see my boss and told him, and he was wonderful about it. He put his arms round me and hugged me, and said, If you have any problems with anybody in the store, I want to know about it. And he was absolutely super (Angela, born 1939).

Other participants came out later in life. Barbara, a social worker, was forty before she felt able to come out at work,

I worked in a social work team, in an area office, and somebody was going round with this petition about a health visitor who'd been sacked because she was gay. And [laughs] *eight* of us said to the person with the petition, 'Yes, I'll sign that, because I am!' (Barbara, born 1936)

She says that life at work was much easier afterwards: 'You know, just feeling more relaxed.'

In the late 1980s, political feeling in the teaching profession against ‘Section 28’²⁵ emboldened Fran and some other lesbian and gay teachers to tell their colleagues. For Fran it was a political choice:

And people did know I was gay towards the end, it was all right, because attitudes had changed so much, and the NUT [National Union of Teachers] were good. And as I say, I came out. I stood up in an NUT meeting about Section 28, and said, ‘What this does is, it decries my existence!’ Yeah. I thought, I’m not going to have that. So by then, you know, people were standing up to be counted. But a lot depended on the staff, and the Head, as well (Fran, born 1935).

Around the same time, Merle also came out in a London school staff room:

I was teaching at a primary school, and there were some gay men on the staff, and one of them was saying something, and he said, ‘Well, Merle’s butch, aren’t you Merle?’ So I said, ‘Yes.’ And nobody batted an eyelid, because they probably knew. And I think that is it. All this time people probably knew, and it was just accepted. [...] It was at the time of Section 28, actually (Merle, born 1945).

Merle’s comment raises questions about just how ‘invisible’ closeted lesbian and gay people actually are, and who can see them, as society becomes more aware of sexual diversity. Visibility / invisibility is a recurring theme in the women’s narratives, and is worth further illustration before moving on to a consideration of stories of ‘surpassing’.

8.4 Visibility / vulnerability

To ‘come out’ is to become culturally visible (Munt, 1998) and therefore vulnerable to discrimination (DiPlacido, 1998). Sometimes invisibility was not even an option: for

²⁵ Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 stated that a local authority ‘shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality’ or ‘promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’. It provoked widespread political protest. Section 28 was not repealed in the majority of the UK until 2003 (2000 in Scotland).

women whose gender presentation was masculine, their very appearance was likely to provoke hostility (Levitt and Horne, 2002). Chris, for instance, remembers:

... trying to find somewhere to live, and them looking at you and saying 'No, sorry.' I used to get a lot of that (Chris, born 1946).

Brenda says:

Oh... the number of times I've been challenged in female loos, about 'You're in the wrong place!' (Brenda, born 1948)

These comments underline the importance of space and place in lesbian visibility (Munt 1998; Valentine 1993 and 1996), and how lesbians might or might not 'fit into place' (Taylor 2012).

As a young woman, Sandy (born 1943) avoided such confrontations much of the time, because her gender presentation and choice of 'male' jobs meant she was often taken for a boy; but that was always a precarious kind of safety, as it located her in 'male' spaces, such as HGV driving or manual craftwork:

There was a job I saw in the paper, for [...] hardwood joinery, which is what I'd been trained in, so I applied for that job and got it, and they thought I was a lad. Until of course I started, and I gave them my P45, and they realised that the person they'd employed was actually female. And the foreman – that's the only time I've really had homophobic bullying and nastiness, because the foreman really, really didn't like me (Sandy, born 1943).

Femme lesbians, or those who could pass as heterosexual women, have always had more flexibility about being 'seen,' but become vulnerable to discrimination when they become visibly lesbian. When Marguerite's future son-in-law explained to his parents that he was going to marry a girl with two mothers, his own mother announced, 'Well, you'll have deformed children! [...]' And the daughters will turn out to be just like them' (Marguerite, born 1946).

Lynn (born 1948) reflected on these issues of visibility and prejudice, space and place, when she drew a contrast between her experiences of urban and rural life in the 1970s. Living in London in a lesbian squat, she had already experienced some homophobia:

There were always incidents. [...] Sometimes the pubs would kick us all out, and that kind of thing, or people would harass you in the street because of your badges ... but nothing too serious.

Then she and a partner went to live in rural Scotland, where they found themselves both more and less visible. The older generation, Lynn remembers, were ‘very sweet people and very accepting’, but she thinks that was probably because they had no idea about lesbians and so did not ‘see’ them. The woman Lynn was living with had previously had another partner,

... and she was very sort of – well, she wasn’t masculine exactly, but she had virtually no breasts, and she was very straight up and down [...]. And the rumour that went around in the villages was that she was a man, but she was pretending to be a woman in order to live with another woman, [laughs] because they weren’t married! This was the kind of fantasy that built up, rather than thinking, Oh, here’s two lesbians living together. They couldn’t, kind of, get there at all.

The younger men, on the other hand, could ‘see’ them, and were openly hostile:

There was one night when a whole bunch of men came round and they killed our pet goat, and they took our car and turned it upside down; it was horrendous. It was quite scary as well. We had some visitors at the time, we had some dykes visiting us, so the next day we went and confronted some of them, and indeed they’d all been drunk, and we got a sort of apology. But it was scary, and it wasn’t nice at all (Lynn born 1948).

As Taylor (2012) has shown, both geographies and temporalities contribute to whether people can or cannot ‘fit’ into place. These factors also determine how visible they are. Although rural spaces ‘tend to be understood as sites of LGBT oppression and absence’ (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010:105), issues of gender and class, and of urban outsiders in small rural communities, are at least as important in Lynn’s story as is sexual

orientation. The impact of middle-class incomers in rural areas is often unwelcome (Pahl, 1965 and 1970); the relationship between these ‘incomers’ and ‘outsiders’ is often conflictual and in many cases antagonistic.

Some forty years after Lynn’s experiences in the Shetlands, Elaine, a Northerner by birth, returned to the north of England and settled with her partner in a white working-class area which she described as ‘a bit of a BNP hotspot’. She thinks they were always visible as lesbians, and her partner was Black, but nonetheless she says that they faced no homophobia:

... we haven’t had any examples of anybody even raising an eyebrow! You know, completely unreconstructed Yorkshire plumbers and people like that – no problem! [...] We haven’t had any – none of that, no (Elaine, born 1941).

Their life was not entirely free of persecution, however:

[Partner] would get abuse in the road, when she was trying to get into her car, from people driving through... But that was to do with her being a black woman. And a very, very large black woman as well. It wasn’t to do with her being a lesbian.

Visibility, like ‘belonging,’ is multi-faceted.

8.5 Surpassing: lesbian heroes

As the stories told earlier in this chapter demonstrate, coming out is a ‘major developmental transition’ (Reid 1995:219) that can have life-changing consequences. Plummer’s (1995:50) description of coming-out stories emphasises the transformative power of this self-revelation, in terms of self-acceptance and ‘recovery’:

The stories [...] show the speaker moving out of this world of shadows, secrecy and silence – where feelings and pains had to be kept to self and where tremendous guilt, shame, and hidden pathology was omnipresent – into a world which is more positive, public and supportive. There is a coming out, a shift in consciousness, a recovery through which a negative experience is turned into a

positive identity and a private pain becomes part of a political or a therapeutic language.

All the life histories in this study are 'coming out stories' of one kind or another but, as the examples in this chapter have shown, not all of them achieve the therapeutic 'recovery' of the model outlined by Plummer. During much of the lifetimes of these women, the consequences of coming out might be life-affirming and liberating, but were equally likely to be devastating and destructive. For women like Barbara, Sally, Fran and Merle, the courage which it took to reveal their sexual identity had a good outcome, leading to the development of a 'positive identity.' For others, like JJ, Sandy, Julia and Sylvia, the results of becoming visible could be deeply painful and leave lasting scars.

However there is one kind of story, told by several participants, where 'negative experience is turned into a positive identity' to powerful effect. These stories of true 'surpassing' are the anecdotes about standing up to and challenging discrimination and harassment, in which the narrator becomes the hero of her own story. Theorists of lesbian heroism (Zimmerman, 1990; Farwell, 1996; Munt, 1998) have usually been concerned with fictional hero(in)es, but the protagonists of these autobiographical stories share many of the qualities identified by those writers. In their battles with homophobia, they journey through patriarchy to the point of exit (Zimmerman, 1990); their acts of daring 'perform a simultaneous function of escape and transformation' (Munt, 1998:11); and in re-telling their stories they mirror the returning hero 'bringing his [sic] wisdom back to his original community, for their benefit and restoration' (Munt, 1998:12). In the remainder of this chapter I consider some of these anecdotes of everyday heroism.

'We were sitting in the pub together'

When Elaine (born 1941) commented that she and her partner had not experienced homophobic discrimination in the town where they lived, she added, 'But we're not pub users or anything.' Public space is always gendered (Valentine, 1989) and frequently coded as heterosexual (Valentine, 1993; Chouinard and Grant, 1996; Duncan, 1996): in terms of social geography, then, a public house is potentially a doubly dangerous location for visible lesbians, since it can be seen as both a heterosexual and a male

space. Lewis, Kholodkov and Derlega (2012) have shown how the discrimination suffered by lesbian and bisexual women is characterised by both sexism and heterosexism: a combination associated with high levels of psychological stress. It was not surprising, therefore, that interviewees told stories about overt hostility and discrimination experienced in pubs. Shaz, a working-class woman from the Midlands, recounted two stories of homophobic harassment set in public houses. The first took place in her 'local':

Well there was one time me and [partner] was in the pub, and these lads came over, and because we were sitting in the pub together, and we both wore trousers, they automatically said, 'Are you gay? Are you lesbians?'

So my reply was to them: 'Why, are *you* gay?' Straight out. And I don't think he liked it. So I said to him, 'Well, why come over and interrupt me and my friend talking?'

He said, 'Well, you're two women together.'

I said, 'Excuse me, but you've just walked in with your mates, and I assume they're men that you've walked in with?'

So he says, 'Yeah.'

So I says, 'You've walked in with your four mates. Are they gay?' I said, 'Don't be stupid and ask us a stupid question.' I said, 'Go back to your mates, and if they want to know if we're gay, just give them the answer, and then if they've got anything to say tell them to come over and I'll give them some more answers!'

And they didn't like it.

[...] But you get some who're just a bit ... just because you're wearing a shirt and trousers, automatically you're gay. And like I said to 'em, straight out, I said, 'Look, there's plenty of women in here who're wearing shirts and trousers! Or they're wearing a blouse and trousers.' I said, 'It doesn't mean that those people who come in here dressed like that are automatically gay.'

So he says, 'Well, what do you mean?'

I said, 'Well I wear trousers, I've got a poorly leg. But that doesn't mean because I'm wearing trousers I'm automatically gay. I said, You could have offended me, I could have been with my sister!'

Her second story was about a day trip to the seaside:

Which I was once, I was with my sister. We went to Skeggy [Skegness] once, Mablethorpe, and we went in this pub. Now my sister, she was very bonny. And it [the pub] was part gay, part straight – and my sister, she was straight as a damn, you know, but she loved me, because we're sisters.

And this bloke happened to say, not to me but to my sister, 'Oi, you lesbian get, what you doing in here?'

And the landlord heard him. (Now, he were gay.)

And I went over to him, and I says, 'Excuse me, are you referring to me? or my friend?'

(Now, it was my sister, you could tell we were sisters, we were very alike.)

So he said, 'We don't like lesbians in this pub.'

I said, 'Excuse me, love, how do you know we're gay?' I said, 'If you can't tell that that's my sister, get yourself some glasses!' [laughs]

So he turned round, and he says, 'Oh yes, you look alike, don't you?'

I said, 'We do, love. That happens to be my sister. And you don't think I'd go with my sister, do you? I said, 'I may be gay, but she's definitely not. She's got a husband.'

So he was on and on, and on. So I'd had enough, I went up to him and I said, 'Either leave this pub, or you're gonna wear that pint!'

So the landlord looked at me.

I said, 'I've had enough!'

So he says, 'You and whose army?'

I just picked his pint up, I said, 'Here you are, wear it! Now bugger off.'

[laughs]. I said, 'Now I'm off. Back over there.'

And his missus, she was gob-smacked, because she daren't say nowt to him.

She wouldn't say boo to a goose to him. Well, she just busted out laughing.

And he said to her, 'I don't find that funny!' He said, 'She has soaked me!'

I said, 'Don't worry, it'll be another two pints over your head in a minute, mate!

And you'll end up paying for 'em!'

So the landlord just went up to him and asked him to leave, because he was really bugging me (Shaz, born 1945).

Like most of the women who told such stories, Shaz frames her narrative according to a discourse of heroism and resistance that focuses more on her success in countering the prejudice than on the pain and embarrassment of being subjected to it. She is the 'hero' of her story. Milly and Heather tell a story that, although it differs strikingly in details of place and class, shares a similar structure and emphasis. Living in a picturesque part of rural southern England ('You can't get quainter than where we were'), they decided, with another lesbian friend, to take an American visitor to the 'typical English country pub' in their village, even though they had already experienced prejudice from the landlord:

Milly: And as we walked in, there was a group of people at the bar, and one of them turned round and said something about 'Here come the queers!'

Heather: 'Here come the lezzies.'

Milly: 'Here come the lezzies.' That was it. [...] And there was silence at the bar.

[...] and there was this tall young man there, and a couple of other men whom I didn't know. So it was obvious that this young man had been told by some of the others, or they had said, 'Eh up, here come the lezzies,' or that they'd been talking about 'the lezzies.'

And we all walked in and sat down in the corner.

He said, 'Oh, I didn't know they served lezzies in here!' That was what he said. And we sat for a while, and somebody wanted to get up and duff him up, and nothing was said, and we just sat for a while...

Heather: We were all livid.

Milly: And then he made to go, to leave, and I got up and followed him into the porch-way. And I said, 'Do you realise –'

Heather: You had him up against the wall!

Milly: I had him up against the wall, yes. Because I was absolutely clear that if I was going to kill him, it was not going to be on the premises, where I could get thrown out. I was not going to create a fracas in the pub. But I had him up against the wall, and I just said, 'Do you realise how offensive that stuff is?'

And he said [mimes his struggle], 'What, what, what?'

And I said, 'What you said in there.'

And he said, 'Well, it's true, isn't it? It's true, it's true!'

And I was really cold with my anger. I knew exactly where he was coming from, and I said, 'No, it's not true.'

And his face fell, and he said, 'But they said –'

And I said, 'It is not true that they do not serve lesbians in there. They do serve lesbians in there, and that's us, and we're having a drink in there.'

Because he thought I was going to deny being a lesbian, you see. Well, you were behind me, which I had no consciousness of at all –

Heather: I came out in case you hit him. I was going to stop you doing it.

Milly: And the other side of him there was an older man, which I wasn't conscious of either, I was just with this one here...

Heather: I tried to get her to back off, because she does have a slight temper, and if she'd hit him, he would have stayed hit, do you know what I mean?

Milly: But I was just cold furious about this, and I just told him how offensive this was, and how I was not going to put up with that, and no it wasn't true, they did serve lesbians in this bar. And then I went back and sat down.

Heather: No you didn't. I dragged you in, and then you sat down!

Milly: Anyway, there was a few minutes stunned silence, because everybody in the bar knew what had happened out there. And the next thing, this young man appeared.

Heather: The man standing beside him was his father!

Milly: And he said, 'My father's asked me to come and apologise to you.'

Heather: His father was beside himself. He was a gentleman...

Interviewer: So he was beside himself with what, embarrassment?

Heather: Yes. His father said, 'You do not behave like that under any circumstances.' And so he had to go in and he had to apologise to the bar staff, and he came across to you –

Milly: Oh yes, he apologised to the bar staff first, and [the landlord] was saying 'Oh, it's no offence to me, at all, no, no, no!'

Heather: And then he had to walk over in front of everybody, and stand in front of us and apologise.

Milly: And I just said to him, 'You won't do that again, will you?'

And he said, 'No', and left.

(Milly, born 1948, and Heather, born 1943)

In these stories, Shaz and Milly both show courage, not only by standing up to their attackers but also by their openness about being lesbian. In these stories of public persecution, the final moral victory marks the 'recovery' noted by Plummer, and serves as compensation for the shame and rejection meted out by homophobic strangers, as well as a reward for bravery and resilience in the face of discrimination. The experiences related here must have been both painful and frightening, but the point of the story is the way in which the protagonist emerges triumphant and (apparently) unscathed.

Scicluna (2010), studying the narratives of a group of older lesbians in Brighton, observed a similar phenomenon. She was struck by her participants' ability to create a coherent and pain-free narration from stories that were 'pierced with pain and suffering,' and asked herself why, given these damaging life events, the narrators persistently described themselves as 'lucky' and 'fortunate'. Narrative theory offers a variety of answers to her question. A functional perspective such as Bruner's (2002) would focus on the work particular stories do in individuals' lives, while the sociological approach to stories advocated by Plummer (1983, 1995, 2001) and Stanley (2013) would emphasise the cultural, historical and political context in which particular stories are (or can be) told, by whom and to whom. Both approaches are useful in suggesting 'meanings' for the interviewees' stories quoted here. First, these tales of valour in the face of (male, heterosexual) persecution and potential public humiliation are clearly important for the repair of personal self-esteem. Second, as both Plummer (1995) and Munt (1998) maintain, they have a function in building community. Alongside the stories of parental rejection, lost jobs and lost custody of children (stories that honour and keep alive the historical sufferings of the lesbian community, but also serve as a deterrent to coming out, keeping people in the closet), there is a collective need for these tales of heroism and resilience, stories with 'an heroic aesthetic, one that provokes a "pride" response in order to rebut the shame produced by homophobia' (Munt, 1998:7). The narrator / protagonist achieves a transformation from victim to hero; or, in Plummer's (1995: 50) words, 'the negative experience is turned into a positive identity'.

Marguerite (born 1946) tells a story of standing up to homophobia that has many of the same features as the stories told by Shaz and Milly, but differs from them in its less-expected setting: it took place in a registry office in the Home Counties, in 2005.

I said, 'I've come to book a civil partnership ceremony.'

And she said, 'Oh, we're not doing those!'

I said, 'What do you mean? [...] We want to book a civil partnership ceremony!'

Luckily this was in a reasonably open office, there were a couple of other people there... And she said 'No, we're not doing those, you have to go to [nearby town]!'

I said, 'We can't [...], because the law is you have to go to your local office.'

So I'm thinking to myself, This is very weird; I didn't think there was going to be any problem...

She said, 'No. Anyway, the law hasn't been passed.'

I said, 'Yes it has.'

She said, 'No, we're waiting for the Queen to sign it.'

I said, 'She's signed it.' I'm getting quite angry by this time.

She said, 'Anyway, we haven't had the training.'

I said, 'What training do you need? It's exactly the same as when anybody else comes in here!' And I was going to go, because I don't like making fusses, but I thought, 'This is outrageous!' I said, 'Has anybody else been in here to ask you about this?'

She said, 'Oh yes, we've had a lot of enquiries!'

[...] I thought, Well, this is the living end! Because I do know that there's been people in our area who've lived together for 40-odd years, and this is like – people just don't seem to understand what it means to them! I said, 'Would you get your appointment book out now! I want to book it.'

And another woman came across, and got the appointment book out, and booked it for me.

This story ends with a double victory, because as well as achieving the booking by sheer persistence, Marguerite was further vindicated:

Later on in the day, I had a phone call from the Chief Registrar, deeply apologetic, and she said, 'Did I want to make a complaint?'

And I said that I felt I had made my feelings clear when I was in there, but I would like to make a complaint.

And she said, 'I would like to book another appointment to see what you want,' and all the rest of it...

And when I went back, that woman wasn't there, so I don't know whether she'd been transferred or binned off, or what, but anyway, she wasn't there.

The Chief Registrar turned out to be a really nice person [...]. And she performed the ceremony herself for us. She cried; we cried; the whole assembly cried...

And afterwards she said to us that she had actually conducted all the ceremonies up until that point, and the first one she did was for two old guys who'd lived together for 50 years, they couldn't get over that they could be united in this way... She said it was deeply emotional for everybody. And she said that to be quite honest, up until that time, all the civil partnership ceremonies she had done, she knew that it was all the real thing, and lasting relationships, and she felt that it was a better experience than all the ones she did on Saturdays for heterosexuals who were only going to be married five minutes and that was that! (Marguerite, born 1946)

Marguerite's story has an additional significance as a reminder that, even in the 21st century, with equalities legislation in place, the old battles still have to be fought on a personal and individual level.

Sometimes the point of a story is simply the courage of the lesbian who challenges prejudice, even when it is not overtly directed at her. 'To live as a lesbian today, even after twenty-five years of attempted liberation, is still an heroic act' (Munt 1998:2). Interviewee Heather recalled a day out in the country with a couple of heterosexual friends whom, at that point, she didn't know very well:

And on the way back we said, 'Oh look, strawberry fields, we'll go and pick some strawberries, fantastic!'

So we all picked our own strawberries, and I picked a pile of them, and we go up

to the till, and right at the back of the till it's 'The Gay Plague', it's all to do with 'God's Wrath,' 'That's what happens when you're gay, you get Aids.' On the gate, it was all written up! It was the time when it was the beginning of the Aids thing...

So I said, with my strawberries in my hand, not paid for – I mean the other two had bought and paid for theirs, and I was third in line – and I said, 'What on earth is that?'

And they said, 'Well it is, it's God's wrath, he's sent Aids because people are gay.'

And I said, 'You cannot possibly believe that?'

And they said, 'Yes.'

And I said, 'Well, would you like to have your strawberries back? And they've been picked by somebody who's gay, so I don't know what you're going to do with them! And I tell you what, if that's who your God is, I don't want to know!'

And [friend] was rigid [with embarrassment]! As I say, it was the first time she's ever been out with me, and I'm jumping up and down in front of a till... [laughs] (Heather, born 1943)

This story moves the 'coming out in the face of prejudice' narrative into a different gear; the attack was symbolic and discursive rather than directed at Heather personally, so there was no absolute imperative to defend or reveal herself, but she chose to do so. She offers the story as an illustration of the visibility in the local community that she and her partner have chosen and attained; not only did the homophobic trader need challenging, but the new friends needed to be shown the parameters of their friendship. As Munt (1998:4) has observed, 'Claiming a lesbian self remains an heroic performance for all who inhabit an intransigently homophobic culture.'

These stories of 'surpassing' oppression also play a role in defining and perpetuating a sense of community among tellers and listeners. As Plummer (1995:174) points out, 'stories need communities to be heard, but communities themselves are also built through story tellings.' Munt (1998:4) makes a similar point:

Social life is full of stories, and people are located, and locate themselves, in response to a repertoire of stories. They then construct their 'experience' according to certain plot-lines, which are always contextualized through time and in space. Narrative is thus ontological: it provides us with a sense of being, and also, through shared stories, a concept of relationality.

Frank (1995:xii-xiii) makes a slightly different point when he talks about the way a story-teller can speak for others as well as herself:

In stories, the teller not only recovers her voice; she becomes a witness to the conditions that rob others of their voices. When any person recovers his [sic] voice, many people begin to speak through that story.

The narratives quoted at length here are economical in their structure, effectively shaped and dramatically narrated, as if they have been polished by being told before, fulfilling these personal and communal needs. These stories, of suffering, surviving and (sometimes) surpassing, belong not only to the individual narrators but to the communities of older lesbians that the stories have helped to build, and on whose behalf they speak.

8.6 Surpassing: developing resilience

Some participants, as shown above, have found positive ways of dealing with the effects of stigma, by challenging discrimination or by processing it through narratives of survival and resistance; but all the participants in this research have nonetheless been affected in some way by the shame, fear and loneliness that a stigmatised lifestyle can impose. The quantitative data show that no fewer than one in three (35 per cent) of survey respondents had at some point been in therapy or counselling to do with being a lesbian, or with issues caused by being a lesbian; four per cent were undergoing such counselling at the time of completing the questionnaire.

It is striking, then, that the large majority now describe themselves as happy (Figure 36):

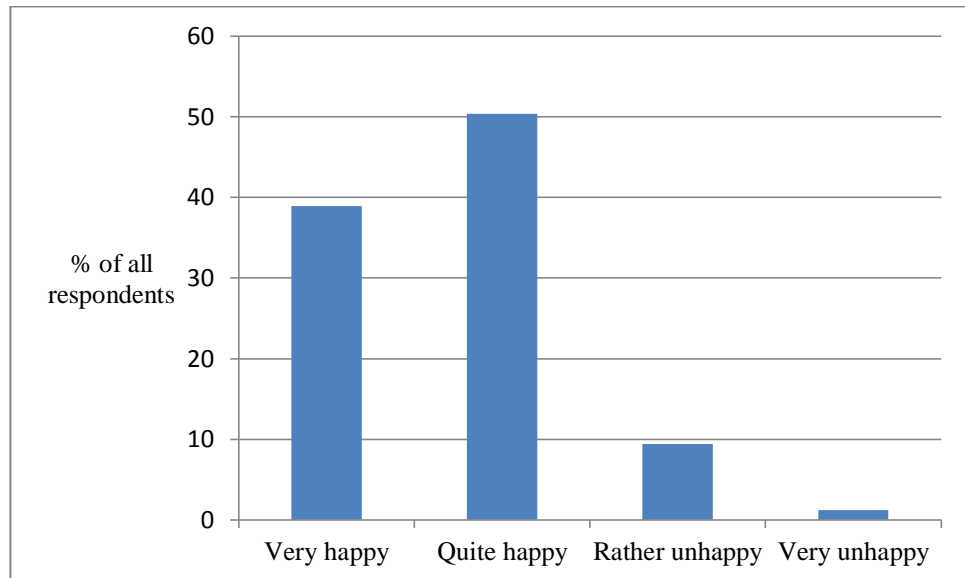


Figure 36: Respondents' assessment of own happiness

and in good emotional health (Figure 37):

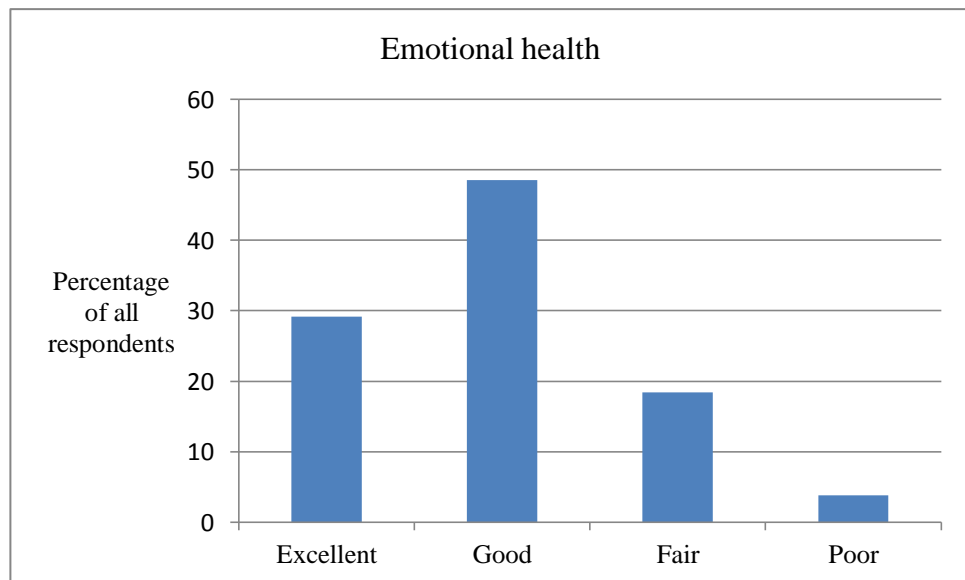


Fig 37 Respondents' assessment of own emotional health

Kehoe (1988) also found that eight out of ten of older lesbians rated their mental health as good or excellent. These figures point to the mental and emotional resilience (Kimmel, 1978; Reid, 1995) many older lesbians have developed over the years in spite of the social stigma with which they have had to contend. The life story data suggest that, for some participants, their sense of well-being stems at least in part from being

able to be more open about their lesbian identity than they were earlier in their lives. Interviewee Brenda contrasts her closeted past with her present:

[I]t felt like the whole of my lesbian identity was a dark, cut-off place, not only in my real world but also in my head. It was 'over there', it wasn't real, and it was something that I did in my spare time [laughs]. Whereas this is me, you know, what you see now is what you get, and I'm out. [...] I'm happier now than I've ever been. Happy as Larry. Whoever Larry was. I hope she was a woman... (Brenda, born 1948)

But Monica, one of the oldest participants and one of the most closeted, reflected on the damage that, looking back, she feels she has suffered:

I have failed to make a great success of my emotional life [...] though I have had several relationships, some with very wonderful people; but the lasting and deep commitment from another has evaded me and I do feel that this could be due to the fact that the social pressures of the 1940s and 50s made it difficult for me, as a rather shy and diffident personality, to express my sexuality in what was, for me, a normal way, at the time of life when you should be learning from your experiences the real and lasting values in emotional and sexual encounters (Monica, born 1922).

Working in the theatre and in broadcasting, she moved in a more liberal milieu than many women of her generation; nevertheless she sees herself as damaged by the prevailing social mores of the time. As another interviewee, Maureen, observed, living with discrimination has lasting negative consequences, even for those who have later made a successful adjustment:

We all must have been wounded to some extent by our early experiences of rejection, or having to keep things secret, and we do carry those wounds, and sometimes we do drink too much, smoke too much, and all those things – probably more, statistically, I've a feeling, greater than the ordinary population, or people of our class and education and so on – precisely because of those pressures and concealments, and hurts, and wounding of the soul ... wounding

of the integrity of the person, of the personality; and we carry those wounds with us (Maureen, born 1945).

Those who formed a lesbian identity early in life have perhaps suffered most; but the stigma that came with that identity has left none of the participants entirely untouched.

8.7 Living with stigma

This chapter has shown how older lesbians have coped with the hostility and discrimination arising from their stigmatised identity; how they talk about those experiences; and the role played by their story-telling in repairing self-esteem and building community. I have also illustrated the different forms of adjustment older lesbians have made over the life-course in order to achieve a state of relative well-being, in spite of their stigmatised identity. Women like Fran, Merle and Barbara have felt strengthened by the steady growth in legal rights and social freedoms over the course of their lives to live more openly now. Others, like Monica, Kathryn, Sylvia and Anna, after a life-time of fear and persecution, remain closeted and unwilling to trust what they feel might be only transitory changes.

One of the key themes of this thesis is that our past determines our present; the memories and experiences explored in this and the preceding two chapters can, I suggest, help to explain the current lifestyle choices of older lesbians. The experiences of discrimination and loss described here help to explain the attitudes of those who have remained either wholly or partially in the closet throughout their lives; the fear, shame and stigma described in the participants' stories also help to account for the importance to older lesbians of the lesbian communities and friendship/social groups discussed in chapter 6. In these ways the data support Dana Rosenfeld's (2003) argument that events in the past continue to shape the identities of older lesbians and gay men in the present. In the next chapter, I go on to demonstrate that past experience has not only conditioned the participants' present identities, but has shaped (and continues to shape) their hopes and fears about the future.

SECTION IV

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

CHAPTER 9

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

9.1 Looking ahead: hopes and fears

What do older lesbians see when they look into the future? The earliest writers on non-heterosexual old age (Berger, 1982; Dunker, 1987; Kehoe, 1988) were at pains to combat the stereotype of the ageing homosexual as ‘old, sad and alone’ (Dorfman et al., 1995) by showing older lesbians and gay men as resourceful, resilient and positive about their own ageing. Later writers such as Giddens (1992) and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (1999, 2001) have returned to this theme, arguing for non-heterosexuals as ‘prime everyday experimenters,’ leaders of social change who set new examples for every-day relationships (Giddens, 1992: 135) and are supported by ‘flexible but often strong and supportive networks [...] which provide the framework for mutual care’ (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 1999: 44).

By contrast, the most recent studies of LGBT ageing in the UK (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003; Stonewall, 2011), prompted by policy concerns about the health and social care of an ageing population, have laid emphasis on the fact that older LGBT people are more likely than their heterosexual peers to be childless, to live alone and to lack family support, so that they are also more likely to make use of health and care services later in life. While it is important for these issues to be brought to public attention, an unrelieved focus on the older LGBT population as helpless and needy risks reviving the ‘old, sad and alone’ stereotype, in which the older lesbian, gay or bisexual person, lacking agency, becomes an object of pity.

These two conflicting models of non-heterosexual old age will remain unreconciled as long as ‘older LGBT people’ are treated as if they all belong to a single, monolithic identity category. Cronin and King (2010: 887) have argued for ‘a more fine-grained analysis of difference’, recognising that ‘LGB adults are positioned at the intersection of multiple identifications, the effects of which will change depending on context.’ Once this intersectionality is recognised, the apparently conflicting models become just two of many futures created by the complexities of gender, class, ethnicity, ability/disability,

socio-economic status and education. Such an approach usefully complicates issues, reinterpreting the stereotypes as points on a spectrum of differences, as well as revealing important commonalities.

Older LGBT people's thoughts and concerns about their old age are in many ways the same as those of heterosexual older people (Reid, 1995; Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010; Stonewall, 2011; Knocker, 2012). They worry about mortality, loneliness, and failing health:

I worry about what will happen to either of us when the other one dies because we are so interdependent. I do not think that growing older is any different for a heterosexual person (Helen, born 1936).

I have my dogs until... I don't have my dogs; and then I don't know, I might feel differently, and it will depend very much on my own health as well. And if I was diagnosed with something that was going to be progressive, I think I'd probably toddle off to Switzerland, and go that way, because I have no family and a lot of my friends have died now anyway, and when you're older you don't replace friends as quickly. It's very, very difficult (Angela, born 1939).

Older lesbians share some of their worries with other older women; and it is not surprising, since older women tend to have smaller pensions and lower incomes than men (Sykes, 1994), that money is one of them. Although so many of the participants have had working lives uninterrupted by child-bearing, a fifth of survey respondents (19 per cent) had an annual income of less than £10,000; and two thirds (65 per cent) had less than £20,000 a year (Figure 6). However while 41 per cent said that they worried about their future finances, only 15 per cent of survey respondents named money as the issue they expected to be their biggest problem in the future.

When asked which potential future problem worried them most, the largest proportion of respondents (26 per cent) named physical disability, and almost as many (20 per cent) named health or health care. Taking these figures together, almost half of respondents put worries about their physical health and ability above other concerns for the future. It was clear from the qualitative data that this concern is closely allied to issues of independence. Two thirds of those who worried about these health issues

already had a physical disability or long-term illness, like interviewee Mumtaz, and fear the consequences of their condition deteriorating:

When you are single and disabled, as I am, without close family or friends to look out for you, thinking about the future can be frightening. To me, ending up in a care home of some kind is a frightening thought [...]. Because I would totally lose my independence and I wouldn't be able to do what I want. Whatever has happened to me so far, I've kept myself going independently as best I can and, despite the physical isolation, I've been able to remain connected and communicate through the internet [...]. So I'm concerned that if I went into a home I'd lose my independence and my ability to freely do the things I want to do (Mumtaz, born 1950).

Although there are likely to be many parallels between heterosexual and LGBT experiences of growing old, there are also issues that are specific to the lesbian, gay and bisexual and transgender population (Almack, Seymour and Bellamy 2010; Orel, 2014). The concerns of older LGBT people are set against a background of long-term discrimination (Reid, 1995) and, perhaps for this reason, Stonewall (2011:3) reports that 'the level of anxiety felt by lesbian, gay and bisexual people across a range of issues is consistently greater than that of their heterosexual peers'. Mumtaz's worries about retaining her independence, and the importance of remaining 'connected' to her friends and community, touch on a major source of anxiety for women in this study: the loss of independence and with it, in Mumtaz's words, 'the ability to freely do the things I want to do'.

9.2 Independence

This concern about loss of independence arises over and over again in the qualitative data. Healey (1994:110-111) sees it as connected to the independence of women who have not been dependent on men:

We *do now*, and *have in the past*, placed a high premium on our own independence and self-reliance. We therefore have developed a high level of skills which many heterosexual women, to keep the peace, usually turn over to

their men. We, and our spinster foremothers, have worked at all sorts of traditional women's jobs, the sales clerks, waitresses and office workers of the world, as well as in a variety of non-traditional occupations, extending the limits for all women to take their place as mechanics and construction workers, veterinarians and professionals. This also means that in our old age we may have considerable resistance to giving up any of our hard won independence.

Interviewees' comments suggest that this 'resistance' is also closely associated with the fear of losing lesbian community and identity. Life writer Janet and her partner, for instance, would rather face the challenges of physical and geographical isolation than be 'stuck' with only heterosexual company in their old age:

[Partner] is seven years older than me and we often discuss 'what if' situations such as not being able to drive any more or cope with the house and garden [...]
[W]e both agree we would hate to be 'stuck' in an old folks' home amongst heterosexuals. Rather stick it out here even if we are a danger to ourselves!
'Here' is a cottage just over three miles from the nearest village in rural Scotland (Janet, born 1943).

Sylvia, too, makes it clear that she sees her present independence as a protection from a heterosexual world which she envisages as hostile and homophobic:

My fears [are] of being dependent and at the mercy of people who find me disgusting and dirty (Sylvia, born 1942).

Their fears are not unfounded. Half of the women in the survey were living alone; more than half (58 per cent) had no children. As already shown in Chapter 4, older lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are statistically more likely to live alone than their heterosexual contemporaries (Ward et al., 2008; Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010; Stonewall, 2011), and to have diminished support networks in comparison with their heterosexual peers. As they age they are nearly twice as likely as their heterosexual peers to expect to rely on external services such as GPs, health and social care services and paid help (Stonewall, 2011). Older lesbians are more likely to live alone than either older gay men or older heterosexual women; they are also more likely to live longer than men (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2003), and to be less well off in later life. For

all these reasons they are likely to make greater use of health and social care services than other groups (Archibald, 2010).

Although many lesbian, gay and bisexual people have been adept at organizing their personal networks in ways that minimize any vulnerability to homophobia and heterosexism (Almack, 2007; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001), this may change in old age, as personal networks shrink (Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010:918). At that point they may become more dependent on formal care services, and perhaps more vulnerable to homophobia. This is the fear that older lesbians are expressing when they talk about losing their independence: the fear of being relocated against their will into a potentially hostile, heteronormative world, with a concomitant loss of lesbian culture and identity. They worry that not being able to retain their independence could mean not being able to hold on to identity or safety, and this is a frightening prospect. There is a real tension, then, between the fiercely independent mind-set of many older lesbians and the fact that, as a population, they are more likely than most to require some form of long-term care.

9.3 Care in the home

Loss of independence can begin at home: needing carers to visit, for instance, will bring older lesbians into contact with ‘a whole new range of people [...], not necessarily of their choosing, with attendant concerns about discriminatory or negative responses’ (Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010:918). For someone who is still closeted, this can be a particular source of stress. Angela, for example, describes her life now:

[When] I have visitors, or people come that aren't gay, then I have to make sure that magazines like *Diva* are out of the way, gay films are under lock and key, and that sort of thing, and of course I have to be careful that I don't land myself in it! (Angela, born 1939)

In the future, visits by home carers would mean either that she had to hide these things all the time, or that she had to reveal her sexual orientation to strangers. Help and Care Development (2006:28) noted that ‘cultural visibility’ – photos, books and art, for instance – are ‘crucial to identity, and therefore self esteem.’ They found that older

lesbian and gay people felt strongly about being accepted as lesbian or gay by carers in their own homes (2006:63). It is important therefore that carers should understand and respect the sexuality and identity of clients as expressed in the personal space of their intimate surroundings. However Barrett (2008) found that older LGBTI people expected the opposite to happen, fearing that if their sexuality was known by home carers, standards of care would diminish, their relationship with their carers would deteriorate and valued carers might resign. Barrett's participants also believed that 'many aged-care service-providers do not understand what GLBTI or GBLTI culture means and therefore how to meet the needs of GLBTI seniors' (2008:14). Interviewee Crunchy shares those fears:

It'd be bad enough, you know, if I had someone coming in here to care for me, if I had someone from Social Services who'd be fussing around me and stuff like that, and I couldn't have a decent conversation with them, and say, 'Oh, my friends are coming round.'

'Oh, they're not married, then?'

I don't need it! I certainly didn't like it when I was younger, and I certainly don't want to have to lie now about my sexuality (Crunchy, born 1939).

Archibald (2010) suggests that older lesbians will 'differ from younger lesbian women and from their heterosexual peers' in the way that they approach health and care services. My data indicate that that approach will be characterised by a deep distrust of what they see as the heterosexist assumptions and attitudes of services for older people.

9.4 Sheltered accommodation

If receiving care services at home poses a threat to identity and independence, older lesbians view the need to move out of their homes (whether into sheltered accommodation or into residential care) as even more threatening. The widespread concern about these issues became clear when I was recruiting participants for this research. As soon I explained that I was studying older lesbians, the most frequent first response was, 'Oh, are you looking at where we can go when we're old?'

Although just as many lesbian, gay and bisexual people as heterosexuals find sheltered housing or retirement communities attractive options for the future (Stonewall 2011:27), they are more fearful of what they might find there. Life writer Kathryn speaks for many women in the study when she says:

I am not afraid of getting older, not at the moment when I can live in my own house independently, with or without a partner. However to get to the stage when I might need help or have to let my house go, then if I had to go into sheltered accommodation, I would like to be able to have the company of other Lesbians. I am afraid of that future (Kathryn, born 1949).

The survey data show that her fears are shared by the majority of respondents. One question asked for responses to four possible types of retirement community (not all of which currently exist in the UK): lesbian-only; lesbian and gay; women-only; and (the current norm) a mixed / heterosexual community. 'Lesbian-only' and 'women-only' were both given positive or very positive ratings by three-quarters of respondents (72 and 75 per cent respectively), while 'lesbian and gay' had positive ratings from 62 per cent. However the mainstream, hetero-normative scenario produced only 22 per cent positive ratings, and a negative or very negative response from 78 per cent of respondents.

Help and Care Development (2006) also found that, when thinking about sheltered housing, the majority of their lesbian and gay respondents (almost 85 per cent) wanted their sexuality to be taken into account, and three-quarters wanted gay friendly housing. Whether they find it remains very much a matter of luck, rather than choice: first, because it is not always possible to tell whether a place is gay-friendly before committing to it, and second, because not all women have the luxury of choice. Shaz, for instance, who became destitute and homeless after her partner died, did not choose where she lives now: her sheltered flat was provided by a housing charity. For her, the outcome was favourable, because she has found both the housing association staff and volunteers accept her sexuality:

I go out with [...] the voluntary worker over there, I go out with her, sometimes once or twice a week, we go to Bingo, and the rest of the time I mix with the other people in the place.

Interviewer: Do they know you're a lesbian?

Shaz: I think they've got an idea... I don't broadcast what I am, I don't turn round and broadcast it; but the staff know.

Interviewer: And they're all right about it, are they?

Shaz: Oh yeah (Shaz, born 1945).

'Sheltered accommodation' is an umbrella term for a very wide range of provision across both the public and private sectors. Edith (born 1919) also lives in 'sheltered accommodation', but in very different circumstances from Shaz: she owns a bungalow on a private housing development for older people. However Edith's relative privilege is not a guarantee of gay-friendly surroundings, and she is fearful about revealing her sexual identity to the other residents. Although she found strong practical and emotional support from the resident warden when she came out as a lesbian, that warden has now been replaced and Edith is back in the closet until she finds the courage to come out again. Sandy (born 1943) owned properties with previous partners, but now lives in rented accommodation: her flat is in a complex with a resident warden. Sandy is out to her neighbours, but they are heterosexual and she still needs to travel to other parts of the city to enjoy lesbian company. Although she describes the place where she lives as 'very good,' she would still prefer:

[...] somewhere where gay people could live together. You know, like you get these complexes, like here – it would be nice to have one which was gay...

Because all the people here know I'm gay, I make no secret of it, but it's still not the same as having people living around you, is it, who are gay? (Sandy, born 1943)

Two couples, Merle and Aine and Sylvia and her partner, have chosen to buy flats in purpose-built retirement developments. Merle and Aine are the only lesbians in their flats, and have not made a policy of being out to their neighbours, but they do not hide their sexuality when asked directly:

Merle: One woman did say to me, 'Are you related?'

And I said, 'Yes, we're civil partners.'

And she said ‘How wonderful!’ You see?

Aine: Yes. I think people accept it if you tell them, like my children did.

In an apparently similar environment, the experience of Sylvia (born 1942) and her partner was completely different, and distressing. The couple were eventually driven to leave their home by the bullying behaviour of their neighbours, and by what they saw as the unwillingness of the housing association’s staff to acknowledge or deal with it.

Sylvia writes:

We are convinced that the cause of the bullying was homophobia [...]. We know that the trouble started within weeks of completing a ‘Peace of Mind’ form – the only occasion where we declared that we are Civil Partners. Which leads us to the conclusion that there was a breach of confidentiality by a member of the Housing Association staff.

The two women have been unable to prove their suspicions; in spite of lengthy complaints and appeals procedures, none of the relevant authorities upheld their complaint. Now, Sylvia says:

Our plans for retirement have been thoroughly destroyed... We feel we can never live in sheltered accommodation again while both of us are alive, and [are] very nervous that such a thing might happen again (Sylvia, born 1942).

They are now deeply wary of any kind of communal living, and even more afraid than before of homophobic discrimination.

9.5 Residential care

Although their circumstances are so varied, all the women quoted in this chapter so far have one thing in common: they are still able to enjoy the support that comes from socialising with other lesbians. Angela can drive to the monthly lesbian and gay social in her local town; Shaz still occasionally gets the bus into the city and visits a long-established lesbian pub; Sandy belongs to the Older Lesbian Network, and Crunchy to her local Kenric group. Helen, Brenda, Julia and Silvia socialise with friends in their

homes. The ability to be part of the lesbian community is important to all of them, and they fear losing it if, at a later stage of their lives, they have to go into residential care.

As Stonewall (2011:27) has shown, the proportion of people who dislike the prospect of living in a residential care home is much the same, whether they are homosexual or heterosexual; but lesbian gay and bisexual people are more worried about maintaining a comfortable degree of privacy or being able to show affection to their partners in that setting. Although the fear of institutional living in old age is not confined to lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, that fear is exacerbated for them by the prospect of submersion in a predominantly heterosexual world. As interviewee Julia (born 1948) puts it, 'All the institutional things are set up for straight people,' Life writer Kathryn explains:

I think older straight people have similar fears of being in care, but at least they can still be the real person they are, and not have to pretend to be interested in straight people's conversations (Kathryn, born 1949).

The unthinking institutional heterosexism described by Julia and Kathryn was described more than two decades ago by the Pensioners' Link Lesbian Workers' Group (1989) and is still prevalent (River, 2011). Those who are not heterosexual fear that being in residential care would mean having to live in an unsympathetic culture, with the possibility of losing one's identity and of facing discrimination and prejudice. Julia and Marguerite both spoke about the institutionalised heterosexism they would expect to find in residential care:

Sometimes people do get married at that age, so that if men were in there they'd be expecting that perhaps you'd be interested in them. And there'd be that jovial joking among the staff, you know, 'Oh, look at old Harry over there, you two would be all right together!' (Julia, born 1948)

I don't want to be amongst people who don't understand. [...] It's this constant explaining yourself – you know, being an object of peculiarity – that I'm not particularly keen on, really... (Marguerite, born 1946)

The survey data indicate the strength of these attitudes. When respondents were asked to rate different types of residential care, the negative responses to a mixed / heterosexual environment were even more pronounced than in the questions about sheltered housing:

76 per cent gave positive ratings to the idea of a lesbian-only care home, and 73 per cent to a women-only home, while lesbian/gay homes were scored almost as favourably at 62 per cent. However, when asked to contemplate the only currently-available option – a mixed, heterosexual establishment – no fewer than 83 per cent responded negatively, half of these ‘very’ negatively.²⁶

Interviewee Crunchy imagines a residential care home as a patronising heteronormative environment, in which she would have to hide her identity or be subject to discrimination:

If I had to go into care... I wouldn't want to go on living, I don't think. [...] But what conversation would I have with anybody? And I certainly don't want to go where they're being really patronising: 'Oh, you never got married then?' or something like that, you know? I really don't want it. I'd want to say, 'No, perhaps I didn't get married! But I've had really nice relationships with women, and I don't regret a life like that.' But I won't be able to say that.

She also fears homophobic prejudice from the staff:

I would think that if I was in a residential care home and I came out with, 'I'm gay, you know, and I've had lots of girlfriends,' they would watch me! And think that I'd be pinching their bottoms, something like that, and then they'd have nasty talks about me, in the staff room. They'd say, 'Oh, that one, she's had a life! She used to sleep with women!' You know. I'm sure they would (Crunchy, born 1939).

Research into care provision for older LGBT people (Green and Grant, 2008; Rhondal et al., 2006, both cited in Almack, Seymour and Bellamy 2010; National Council for Palliative Care, 2012, among others) suggests that such fears are not without foundation: LGB people can receive ‘suboptimal care’ at end of life due to assumed heterosexuality, lack of awareness about same-sex relationships and homophobia. Mary

²⁶ Not all respondents were resistant to the idea of heterosexual company: 22 per cent were positive about a heterosexual retirement community, and 17 per cent about a heterosexual care home. Help and Care Development (2006: 66) suggests that this is because ‘they would prefer not to be “ghettoised”.’

Birch, Project Co-ordinator of the Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Trans Association (OLGA),²⁷ attributes this partly to the fact that:

[...] the olgbt [sic] support system is not joined up nationally. So, we hear of pockets of good practice in a few isolated areas, eg. 'Opening Doors' in Camden, 'Equity Partnership' in Bradford, Lancashire's 'Older & Out', and 'OLGA' in Scarborough. We should be co-ordinated (Birch, 2013).

Lindsay River, the founder of Age of Diversity²⁸ and previously director of Polari,²⁹ speaking about her organisation's recent research (River, 2011) into the needs of older LGBT people in London, saw lack of appropriate staff training as a contributory factor:

[W]e are not finding services that are at all adequately prepared. Staff are not trained on sexual orientation at all adequately, if at all - we're finding that if you have to share facilities with other older people, like in a Day Centre or residential care, people feel they can't come out, or if they do they experience discrimination, and some of it may be from staff, and some of it from users. When it's from users, the staff, even if they're well disposed, don't know how to handle it; they have no training on how to handle that - they may have no training on how to handle racism for all I know, but they certainly don't seem to know how to handle homophobia. There seems to be a huge amount of confusion in the care industry, and in the NHS, about what is the right course of action when the rights of LGBT people appear to be being challenged by people of faith, who say they have their own rights [...] So I'm concerned about all of those things for people who need to use care (Lindsay River, interviewed 24 November 2011).

²⁷ A community network campaigning for the rights of older LGBT people, based in Scarborough, Yorkshire.

²⁸ A user-led campaigning organisation founded in 2011, run by older LGBT people, aiming to give them a national voice on issues and policy-making around ageing.

²⁹ This organisation, which closed in 2009, carried out ground-breaking research into the needs of older LGBT people, and campaigned for more inclusive services for them.

Until the situation improves, life writer Sally thinks that the best that can be done is to attempt to find a gay-friendly establishment, but she recognises that this might not be possible:

I have written a living will in which I've made the request of my nephews that should I need to go into residential care, that they ask first about the home's approach to lesbian residents. Ideally I would hope to continue to live in my own home but should I need residential care I would like to be in a Lesbian care home. I realise, however, that this is unlikely. Unless I make plans now for some form of shared accommodation with people of my choice, the reality is I will end up in whatever home has a vacancy (Sally, born 1950).

Sally's idea of 'some form of shared accommodation with people of my choice' was expressed by a number of participants (Kathryn, born 1949, asks, 'Will someone please open a retirement home for old lesbians?') and appears to be a notion dear to the hearts of many LGBT people. For instance, Browne and Lim (2009:16), in a study of the needs of LGBT people in Brighton, showed that even in a city with a high LGBT population, nearly 63 per cent of their older respondents would be interested in residential care specifically for the LGBT community.

9.6 Lesbian / feminist utopias

The lesbian retirement community remains a favourite fantasy for many older lesbians, but it is an ideal that (at least in the UK) has not yet been achieved. While there is evidence that some LGB people are beginning to respond to service marginalisation by exploring ways of doing things for themselves, this tends so far to be confined to younger people (Carr and Ross, 2013). Innovations in accommodation arrangements for older LGB people are beginning to emerge in various countries such as Australia, US and in Europe (Carr and Ross, 2013:17), but the difficulties of 'progressing from an

‘imagined community’ to its concrete realisation are considerable (Ross, 2012), and there are as yet no examples in the UK.³⁰ As interviewee Julia (born 1948) remarked:

People have been talking about it for years, haven’t they? And nobody so far seems to have cracked it.

One solution, she suggests, is to organise the ‘queering’ of existing facilities:

I’ve heard, in Florida there are these [...] retirement places, but what the [lesbian] women have done there, is that they’ve picked a unit, say it was like a retirement village here, they’ve picked a unit and then they’ve got into it gradually ... One person buys there, and then another person buys there ... and they’ve almost taken it over by stealth. That’s another way of doing it. Sort of a takeover [laughs]. And I know at this stage we haven’t done anything like this, but one or two of us have said, ‘Well maybe we should be looking out for decent private retirement complexes in the UK, one that maybe a dozen or half a dozen of us can agree on, and then when it’s time for the first one to go in, get a place there, and know that five, six people are going to come and join you afterwards (Julia, born 1948).

Marion (born 1942) is unusual in having made a serious practical attempt to create older lesbian accommodation. In her interview she recalled a time when all her lesbian friends, ‘even in their 40s,’ seemed to be asking, ‘What happens when we get old?’ So she and some others decided to do some research into what lesbians wanted for their old age:

What transpired [...] were things like [...] that the majority of people envisaged something like sheltered accommodation. Although people were willing to downsize – that didn’t seem to be a problem – people couldn’t see themselves in a position of being dependent, so they all wanted their own front doors! They didn’t mind the idea of some communal space to have parties, and things like that [laughter]. But it became obvious that that was the way to go. And we started looking into it.

³⁰ The nearest approximation to a lesbian retirement community in the UK is the ground-breaking, all-women OWCH project in London (www.owch.org.uk), involving both lesbian and heterosexual women.

They bought a very large Victorian house in need of complete renovation, with a large plot of land, and employed an architect to design a complex of 22 one-bedroom flats. It was a visionary plan, but, in spite of some initial interest from the local council, the impediments were too great and ultimately they failed to get the necessary funding. In the end they divided the existing house into four flats for themselves, joking that, ‘Well, if we live long enough we’re going to end up as the original project anyway!’ (Marion, born 1942)

As the questionnaire responses show, an all-women environment is almost as attractive to participants as an all-lesbian one, and this may reflect the continuing adherence of the majority to feminism (see Chapter 7). For Lynn (born 1948), the ideal future is framed on feminist principles. Not long before our interview, she had organised a re-union of women with whom she had been active in the Women’s Movement in the 1970s, with the specific intention of thinking about future ageing:

I thought to myself, I don’t want to do this phase of my life alone, I want to do it with other women, with other lesbians. Let’s see if we can, you know, raise the dragon. [...] And it was just like re-convening the Sisterhood! And it worked!

At this gathering she and the other women looked at ways of facing the future:

And I did a workshop called ‘Ageing, Death and C[onsciousness] R[aising],’ in which I said that what I wanted to do was to take on this phase of my life in the way that we’d taken on things in our youth, and that I wanted to try CR techniques, to look at ageing and to look at death, and to do that with a committed group of other women, and that whatever my life was like, I knew it would be better if I did it with other women. So there were about 20 of us at that workshop, and we’re going to meet again [...] So we’re going to come together and I’m going to actively pursue CR techniques for this, because I think if we apply the same kind of intense scrutiny to it, in a supportive way, that we did to all the other aspects of our lives, we will create again strong networks that will help us...

Lynn is very clear that this support is ‘not just [to] go through the bad things; I don’t want to think about whether we will have to set up nursing homes and things,’ but is about personal growth and sisterhood:

I really want this to be an explosion of creativity and joy, and participation in life in a different way, you know, a re-valuing of who we are, and I’m getting really excited about that! So I’ve gone from feeling completely depressed about my situation to feeling that this is a hugely exciting part of my life. But I need to do it with other women. On my own, I’m miserable, but if I do things collectively with other women, I just feel so much more positive about it.

[...] So just to say, that I don’t think our needs are obvious, and they’re not just about setting up old dykes’ homes. You know, that might be what we need at the end of the day, but there’s a way to go yet! (Lynn, born 1948)

9.7 Past into future

As T.S. Eliot’s much-quoted lines from *Burnt Norton* (1936) warn the reader, ‘Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.’ The past experiences and present lives of the participants in this research will result in futures as varied as their lives have been so far. As Cronin and King (2010: 887) remark, intersecting differences between older LBG people can sometimes result in disempowerment, while ‘sometimes ageing, sexuality and socio-economic (financial) status intersect to empower’. Such intersections, well-illustrated by the older lesbians in this study, will both affect their expectations for the future, and shape that future in different ways. As Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2004:899) have observed,

For non-heterosexuals, ageing and old age create both possibilities for living in connected, supported and empowering environments, and for others less creative, unsupported and disempowered situations.

Neither the ‘old, sad and alone’ stereotype (Dorfman et al., 1995) nor the positive image promoted supported by strong friendship networks will therefore suffice to summarise

the futures of older lesbians. Some, like Monica (born 1922), are financially secure and can make choices that prolong the time when they can go on living in their own homes (see Chapter 5), but may become increasingly lonely. Others, like Shaz (born 1945), are already dependent on social services and will have fewer options about their future care, but might still have a lesbian social life. Those who find themselves in sheltered housing will vary in the extent to which they meet with acceptance or discrimination, and the extent to which they choose to share their lesbian identities with others. A few (educated, middle-class) feminists like Marion and Lynn are actively challenging the circumscribed choices offered to them and are demanding, or even planning for, a different kind of context for their old age. Having fought for agency as women and lesbians through a life of political activism, they strive now for agency as old women, and for the right to alternative ways of living.

Although the futures of these older lesbians will be as diverse as their lives have been so far, they do show a remarkable degree of commonality in one thing: their fear that the future will make them more vulnerable to homophobic mistreatment. This concern is not only based on the reality of current provision, but reflects deep-seated fears, rooted in past experience. Older lesbians share many of the concerns about old age of their heterosexual counterparts but, because their lives have all, to a greater or less extent, been lived out against a backdrop of discrimination and prejudice, they also fear the return of that discrimination and prejudice when they can no longer protect themselves against it.

Older lesbians have relied on supportive networks of lesbian friends for community and for the reinforcement of identity over the life course. For those who have remained closeted, this has been a particularly important resource. Whatever their social or economic circumstances, older lesbians worry about losing independence in old age, because they see increasing physical frailty, particularly when it involves moving out of their homes, as leading to a loss of that lesbian community and identity, making them vulnerable once again to the homophobia that has pursued them throughout their lives.

SECTION V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

10.1 Older lesbians in the UK

Older lesbians are an ‘invisible’ population, under-represented not only in popular culture and the media but also in academic research, especially in the UK.

Women are generally under-represented in ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender’ research. There has been only limited research into the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender older people, and older lesbians have been under-represented in most of it. In particular there is hardly any data at all on lesbians over 70. This imbalance can lead to assumptions about older lesbian lives based largely on the experiences of gay men and younger lesbian women.

The emphasis of recent LGBT ageing research has been on the least advantaged, particularly those who will require health and social care services in the future. While such work is much needed, there is a lack of broader-based empirical data that would make the representation of older LGBT people in Britain more diverse and balanced. This thesis puts back the ‘missing sisters’ of non-heterosexual ageing research, by providing an overview of older lesbian life in the UK based on an unprecedentedly large sample of women over 60. The data are detailed and wide-ranging, and offer a more comprehensive view of the older lesbian community in the UK than has been available to previous researchers.

Forming a lesbian identity

Although all the women in the study identify as lesbians, this is not in any way an homogenous category. What their older lesbian identity means to them, in terms of gender, sexuality and experience over the life course, is widely varied. Their developmental narratives and the cultural contexts that fostered the development of their lesbian identities are equally diverse. For some women, lesbian identity formation took place early in life; for others it came much later. Most of the participants were in their

teens or 20s when they had their first sexual relationship with a woman, but for others the experience occurred in their 30s, 40s or 50s; a few were over 60. Most of the participants now regard their sexual orientation as, partly or entirely, a matter of choice; they see their sexuality as potentially fluid, and feel they have chosen one path over another. Fewer than a third believe that they had no choice, that they were ‘always gay’ and either suppressed the knowledge or took time to understand it.

The early adoption of a lesbian identity was often associated with gender-nonconformity and matched what Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) have called the ‘master-narrative’ of minority sexual identity development, characterised by late childhood and early adolescent same-sex attractions, lack of sexual interest in the other sex, subsequent same-sex attraction, and adolescent self-labelling as lesbian. Some women resisted gender stereotypes from an early age. A significant minority have at some time wished they could change their sex. In early childhood, that wish was often a reaction to male privilege and freedoms, but for those who reported having such a wish in their adolescence or early adulthood, their gender non-conformity was more clearly connected to a sense of their sexual orientation. In a period when cultural narratives of transsexual identity were not available, some women who might now see themselves as transgender identified as butch lesbians.

The majority of older lesbians, however, have very different developmental histories which can include opposite-sex attraction and relationships, heterosexual marriage and motherhood. These narratives run counter to the conventional view of sexual orientation as a stable, early-appearing trait and demonstrate the ‘erotic plasticity’ (Peplau and Garnets, 2000) of female sexuality.

When growing up, most of the participants in this study had no concepts available for understanding their own developing sexuality. Very often a girl’s ignorance extended to sexuality of any kind: many participants report having had little or no sex education. For women in these generations, the recognition of their same-sex desire was often hindered by ignorance; by the absence of role models for alternative sexuality, and by the lack of any language to describe it. This ignorance often continued into young womanhood.

At whatever age girls became aware of same-sex desire, that awareness was inevitably accompanied by a sense that it was ‘wrong’. Whatever type of lesbian identity a woman

adopted, the outcome of such self-identification was that she became aware of being part of a stigmatised minority. For those women whose first same-sex affair was in their teens, parental disapproval and the shame associated with social stigma could have long-lasting negative effects. Women who formed lesbian identities later in life, and had more positive role models, for instance through feminist politics, were less likely to experience shame.

Marriage and motherhood

Slightly over half the women in the survey had been married (sometimes more than once); two per cent still were. The oldest were the most likely to have married: the proportion rose to nearly two-thirds in those over 80. Most of these marriages did not last; many (but not all) were ended by the woman's formation of a lesbian identity. But some marriages did last for many years: a handful of respondents reported marriages lasting 30 or 40 years or more.

However this 'once-married / 'never-married' distinction between lesbians is shown by the data to be an over-simplification of women's experience, which says more about the power of binaries than about lesbian identity across the lifespan. Older lesbians have been happily married and unhappily married; some have had significant and loving relationships with men, while others have had unimportant or bad relationships with men. Some older lesbians have only ever had relationships with other women, and a handful of those who claim a lesbian identity have never had sexual relations with anyone. There are women who married when they were identifying as heterosexual, and women who married although they knew they were not. Every story is different.

Only 42 per cent of women in the survey have had children, compared with almost nine in ten of heterosexual women (Stonewall 2011). Those who had children conceived them while married or in relationships with men. For most of those who formed their lesbian identities early in life, and never married or entered into heterosexual partnerships, having children was not an option. Childlessness is a stigmatised identity for women. Nearly six out of ten older lesbians (58 per cent) have not had children – three times more than in the female population at large (Rendall and Smallwood, 2003; Stonewall, 2011), and this is an important social difference between the majority of older lesbians and the majority of older heterosexual women.

Lesbian relationships

The sexuality of older lesbians presents a number of challenges to prevailing cultural assumptions, since there still 'huge cultural roadblocks' (Barker, 2004: 53) to the idea of any older people, even heterosexual ones, as sexually active. Well over half (55 per cent) the women in the survey were currently involved in a sexual relationship with another woman. The percentage decreased with age, but four out of ten women over 70 and three out of ten of those over 80 reported being in such relationships. More than half of my survey respondents (53 per cent) had been sexually active in the previous year.

These relationships vary greatly in the length of time partners have been together. One in ten participants had been with her present partner for more than 25 years; the longest current relationship reported was 43 years. However one in ten of the intimate relationships reported in the survey were two years old or less, and some were less than a year old, showing that lesbians go on finding new sexual partners well into their 60s and even their 70s. These shorter – and therefore newer – relationships are in some ways more remarkable than the long-term ones, because of the way in which they challenge prevailing stereotypes of the sexless older woman.

Although over half the women in the survey were currently in a relationship with another woman, fewer than half of these had formed civil partnerships. Some rejected civil partnership as a step on the road to a normalising assimilation of lesbian and gay people. Feminists may have reservations about the institution of marriage and hence of anything that approximates to it; others, having lived without public affirmation of their relationships for so long, feel it is unnecessary. Those who had registered their partnerships were often those who saw their relationship as a marriage in all but name, and had taken the step as a way of claiming that equality. Tax and inheritance issues, and the ability to be recognised as each other's 'next of kin', were also important.

Older lesbians and gay men are more likely than heterosexual people to live separately from their partners. Although five out of ten women in the survey had partners, only four out of ten lived with them. This was sometimes because they felt they needed to conceal the nature of their relationship, but was just as often a matter of preserving their freedom and independence. These alternative living arrangements are ways in which

older lesbians can be seen as ‘everyday experimenters’ (Giddens 1992:135), whose lifestyle choices are contributing to wider changes in ‘the staging of everyday life’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, cited in Almack, 2010).

10.2 Hidden or hiding?

The lesbian identity of older women is obscured by a nexus of ageist, sexist and heterosexist cultural assumptions (Traies, 2009, 2012) but also by the fact that many still conceal their sexual orientation. The data reveal the extent to which they feel able to respond to the more liberal legal and social climate of the early 21st century by ‘coming out of the closet’ now.

Most older lesbians still conceal their sexual identity from other people to some extent. They are more likely to be out to their friends than to their families, and less likely to be out to their neighbours, health professionals or social services. A life course perspective reveals that participants’ identity careers are still being shaped by the ideas and values of the time at which they formed their sexual identities. In general the data suggest that women who adopted their lesbian identity early in life are the most likely still to be in the closet. Women who formed a lesbian identity later, particularly if it was during the social and legal changes of the 1970s, tend to feel less pressure to hide their sexual identities.

Many older lesbians have relied on supportive networks of lesbian friends for protection, community and the reinforcement of identity. For those who have remained closeted, this has been a particularly important resource and they may worry most about losing independence in old age, because they see increasing physical frailty, particularly when it involves moving out of their homes, as leading to a loss of that community of identity, and making them vulnerable once again to the homophobia that has pursued them throughout their lives.

Very few of the participants were as closeted as they had been in the past; on the other hand, very few were out to everybody all the time. Most had developed a carefully-negotiated position between ‘in the closet’ and ‘out’ that enabled them to live comfortably. Nonetheless, what participants had to say about their experience of stigma

lends support to the idea of self-concealment as a source of isolation and loneliness, disenfranchised grief and internalised homophobia.

10.3 ‘Old, sad and alone?’

LGBT ageing research has tended to polarise two views of the older non-heterosexual: the ‘old, sad and alone’ stereotype (Dorfman et al., 1995), and the contrasting view that LGBT elders have built strong support networks for their old age (Kehoe, 1988) and can offer positive alternative models of ageing to mainstream society (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan, 2001). This binary opposition fails take into account the many intersecting social and cultural forces other than sexual orientation that shape people’s lives.

Older lesbians share the experiences of loneliness and isolation common to other old people and, because they are more likely to be childless and to live alone than heterosexuals, may be more vulnerable to such feelings. However there is also much evidence in the data for the existence of strong social and support networks, and of a wider inter-connected older lesbian community.

Families of choice

Groups of friends emerge as crucially important support structures in the lives of many older lesbians. They appear in two overlapping forms – personal friendship networks or ‘families of choice’, and organised or semi-organised lesbian social groups. An older lesbian’s ‘chosen family’ will sometimes consist entirely of other lesbians and gay men; more often it will be ‘a mix of social and biological family links, friendships and inter-generational connections’ (Almack, Seymour and Bellamy, 2010:916). In the case of many older lesbians, ex-partners and the relatives of partners and ex-partners may be members of the family of choice. Often a lesbian’s previous partners are among her closest friends, reflecting the strength of bonds formed within a ‘hidden’ and stigmatised community.

One of the times at which chosen family can be most important for a lesbian is during the ending of a relationship and its aftermath, because other lesbian and gay people can

understand and validate her personal experiences in a way that her heterosexual friends and family might not be able to do.

Lesbian social groups

Eight out of ten survey respondents (82 per cent) had belonged to a lesbian social group at some time; more than four out of ten (45 per cent) still did. Many of these groups started at a time when lesbians led deeply closeted lives and there were limited opportunities to meet other women. Many still exercise a good deal of secrecy around their existence and the identities of their members. The groups helped build communities where a woman could develop and maintain a lesbian identity and lifestyle. These social networks continue to play an important part in the lives of older lesbians.

Groups operate mainly at a local level. They are often highly organised, through newsletters, email groups, social media and so on. Many women belong to more than one group, so that the lines of communication, both formal and informal, between individuals and groups make up a far-reaching web of connections. The response to the survey suggested that such networks are not only numerous and widespread but also interconnected, so that older lesbian knowledge can be quickly and efficiently shared. The extent of this networking is an important finding that has not been discussed elsewhere. It challenges the assertion of Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003) that few organised networks exist for lesbians (as opposed to gay men).

Resilience

In spite of the persecution and oppression they have experienced, most older lesbians describe themselves as happy and in good emotional health. The adjustments they have made over the life-course in order to achieve this state of relative well-being have given them a resilience that enables them to tell their stories with fortitude and humour. This story-telling has two contrasting functions, acting both as a reminder of the dangers of visibility and as part of the emotional work of overcoming shame and stigma. While stories of pain and suffering have encouraged some women to stay in the closet, there are also stories of heroism and resistance that help to repair self-esteem and build

community, celebrating the strength and courage of older lesbians in the face of homophobic oppression.

10.4 Lesbian specificities

Older lesbians, like everyone else, have multiple identities based on such things as age-cohort, race, class, ability/disability, education and socio-economic status. In later life some of these identities – single or divorced woman, mother, grandmother – bond them more closely to other women than to gay men.

The data suggest two important ways in which older lesbians experience life differently from older gay men. The first is in their relationships with their biological families, particularly their children. Although recent research suggests that older lesbian, gay and bisexual people are much less likely than heterosexuals to see their biological family on a regular basis (Stonewall, 2011), or to receive support from them (Dorfman, 1995), the data in this project suggest that most older lesbians who are mothers have maintained satisfactory contact with their children. While a small number (fewer than one in ten) did say that they ‘seldom or never’ saw their sons or daughters, over 80 per cent say that they see them ‘regularly’. Participants were also more likely to say they would turn to family members than to friends if they were ill or needed care, again hinting at better levels of family support than is suggested by data that includes gay men as well as lesbians (Help and Care Development, 2006; Stonewall, 2011).

The second difference is that the large majority of older lesbians identify as feminists. They see lesbian identity as involving not just a sexual but also a social and emotional life that is woman-centred. Feminist politics offered many women in the second half of the 20th century new constructions of how to be both a woman and a lesbian. Whether they accepted or rejected feminism, it remains an important part of older lesbians’ history and identity, and one of the most significant ways in which their experience has been different from that of gay men. As lesbians, they have been vulnerable to sexism as well as to homophobia during their lives. When considering options for their advanced old age, most older lesbians would prefer to spend that future with heterosexual women than with gay men.

10.5 A meaningful category?

Given the wide social, political and economic diversity of the research sample and the variety of their life experiences as revealed by the data, is the term ‘older lesbian’ useful as an identity category? Do older lesbians have anything in common other than their sexual orientation? This research suggests that they do. In spite of their great diversity, older lesbians clearly recognise a common bond based on their lesbian identity, and describe the sense they have of being collectively different from heterosexual people (and, sometimes, from gay men). This sense of community, which can transcend other differences, comes from the experience of being a stigmatised minority: it is the solidarity of an oppressed group who have faced danger and discrimination together.

During the course of their lives older lesbians have faced the double oppression of sexist and homophobic discrimination, and have heard stories of such things happening to other people. These events include rejection by family, homophobic bullying and harassment, discrimination at work, loss of jobs and loss of custody of children. Older lesbians’ caution about revealing their sexual orientation, and their reliance on other lesbians for support, through friendship networks and social groups, derive from that experience of being a stigmatised and hidden minority. This recognition of the shared experience of stigma binds them together and remains a defining element of older lesbian identity.

In providing new empirical data about a community frequently described as ‘invisible’, this thesis has called into question the category ‘older lesbian’, drawing attention to the multiple intersecting differences and overlapping identities within that community, and the variety in older lesbian experience according to such things as class, education and social status. But at the same time as it troubles and disaggregates the single category ‘older lesbian,’ it also identifies the unifying experience of living with stigma, which still draws these women together and gives them a sense of sisterhood with other old lesbians.

The data presented here do not demand the overturn of existing theory about non-heterosexual ageing, but rather its adjustment to take account of the experiences of

women – whose voices have not until now been sufficiently heard. There are many ways in which the older lesbian experience has paralleled that of gay men (and, indeed, of heterosexual women) but there are also, as these data show, ways in which their experience is unique.

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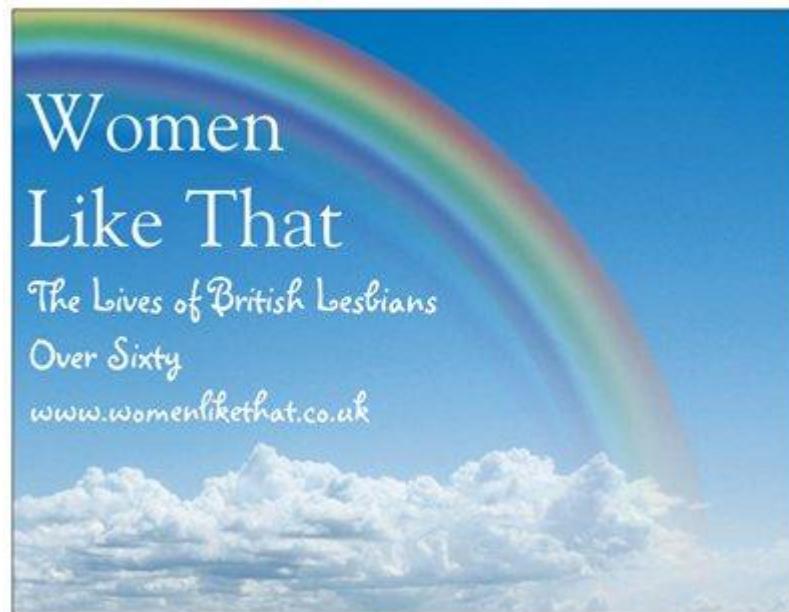
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
PUBLICITY MATERIALS

Postcard (front)



Postcard (reverse)



***Woman over sixty?
Lesbian / gay?
Please take part!***

‘Women Like That’ - The Lives of Older Lesbians

Older lesbians have been called the ‘triple invisible’ minority – unnoticed in our society because of their gender, their sexual orientation and their age. The aim of this research project is to bring to light the ‘hidden’ lives, experiences and opinions of older lesbians in 21st century Britain, and to make our voices heard.

The research is in two parts:

- a) a national survey of lesbians over 60, through an anonymous questionnaire.
- b) An oral history project, recording the life-stories of older lesbians.

The information collected in both parts of the project will be confidential. The questionnaire answers are anonymous, and real names will not be used in the transcripts of interviews or in writing up the project.

Want to be part of it?

For further information please contact Jane Traies at
Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies, Silverstone Building,
University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 RG

or jt222@sussex.ac.uk

or telephone **07824 719 215** (confidential research line)

or visit the website – www.womenlikethat.co.uk - where you can fill in the
questionnaire online

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONNAIRE



The Lives of British Lesbians Over Sixty

Thank you very much for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire.

Your answers will help to build the first comprehensive picture of older lesbian life in Britain.

The questionnaire is intended to be anonymous. Please don't write your name anywhere on the paper. If you would like to make any comments, or to write longer answers to any of the questions, feel free to do so on a separate sheet of paper – but please do not put your name on that, either.

If you prefer, you can fill in the questionnaire on line, at <https://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/sussex/lbl60plus>. If you do so, please pass this copy on to a friend.

Information from questionnaires and interviews will be collected until the end of 2010. After that, the results will be analysed and written up. If you would like to

- hear about the progress of the research,
- make any comments on it,
- ask for a large print version of the questionnaire, or
- help further, by being interviewed about your life story,

then please use the contact details below. The telephone number is only used by the researcher. Please leave a message giving your phone number, address or email address, whichever you prefer, and she will contact you.

LBL Project
Silverstone Building 222 (School Office)
University of Sussex
Falmer
Brighton
BN1 9RG jt222@sussex.ac.uk 07824 719 215

1: LESBIAN IDENTITY

This first section asks you about your attitude to being lesbian, and to some words that are commonly used to describe the lesbian lifestyle

1. How do you feel about the following words?

	Very positive	Quite positive	Quite negative	Very negative
Lesbian	[]	[]	[]	[]
Gay	[]	[]	[]	[]
Homosexual	[]	[]	[]	[]
Dyke	[]	[]	[]	[]
Queer	[]	[]	[]	[]
Butch	[]	[]	[]	[]
Femme	[]	[]	[]	[]
Bisexual	[]	[]	[]	[]
Transgender	[]	[]	[]	[]

2. Which of these words do you prefer to use to describe yourself?

Lesbian [] Gay woman [] Homosexual []
 Bisexual [] Queer [] Dyke []
 Other (please specify)

3. Have you ever identified as [tick for Yes]:

Butch? []
 Femme? []

4. Do you feel that being homosexual / lesbian is your choice?

Entirely my choice [] Mostly my choice [] Partly my choice []
 Not my choice at all [] Don't know []

5. How do you feel about being a lesbian?

Very positive [] Quite positive [] Quite negative [] Very negative []

6. Have you ever felt you were discriminated against because of being a lesbian?

Never [] Occasionally [] Often [] All the time []

7. Do you feel that lesbians generally suffer from discrimination?

Yes [] No [] Don't know []

8. Would you say that being a lesbian has enriched your life?

Yes [] No [] Neutral [] Don't know []

9. Overall, would you say your sexual orientation has had a positive or negative effect on your life?

Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Neutral ☐ Don't know ☐

2: SOCIAL LIFE

This section is about how you choose to spend your social / leisure time, and about your social relationships with friends and family.

10. Please tick any of the following leisure activities that you do at least once a month:

Active sports <input type="checkbox"/>	Spectator sports <input type="checkbox"/>	Television <input type="checkbox"/>
Radio <input type="checkbox"/>	Cinema visits <input type="checkbox"/>	Gardening <input type="checkbox"/>
Going to the pub <input type="checkbox"/>	Reading <input type="checkbox"/>	Walking <input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)		

11. Do you regularly read a lesbian / gay magazine or newspaper (for instance Diva magazine, the Pink Paper)?

Yes ☐ No ☐

12. Do you regularly use a computer? Yes ☐ No ☐

12a. If yes, please tick the things you regularly use it for

Emailing family <input type="checkbox"/>	Films/ video/ tv programmes <input type="checkbox"/>
Emailing friends <input type="checkbox"/>	Shopping online <input type="checkbox"/>
Writing / word processing <input type="checkbox"/>	Playing music <input type="checkbox"/>
Storing photos <input type="checkbox"/>	Online dating <input type="checkbox"/>
Social networking (e.g. Facebook) <input type="checkbox"/>	

13. On average, how often do you see your closest friends?

Every day ☐
 Once or twice a week ☐
 Once or twice a month ☐
 A few times a year ☐
 Rarely ☐

14. What word best describes the sexual orientation of MOST of your closest friends?

Lesbian ☐ ☐
 Gay man ☐ ☐
 Heterosexual woman ☐ ☐
 Heterosexual man ☐ ☐
 Other (please specify)

15. What are the ages of most of your closest lesbian friends?

More than ten years younger than myself ☐ ☐
 Within ten years of my age ☐ ☐
 More than ten years older ☐ ☐
 I have no lesbian friends ☐ ☐
 Other (please specify)

16. Where do you meet other lesbians? (tick all that apply)

In pubs or bars ☐ ☐ In organised social group(s) ☐ ☐
 At work ☐ ☐ Through friends ☐ ☐
 Internet ☐ ☐
 Other (please specify)

17. At the time of filling in this form, who knows you are a lesbian?

	Most	Some	None	N/a
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Family	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Neighbours	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Co-workers	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Employer (s)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Health professionals	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Social services	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Religious or spiritual organisation	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

18. Thirty years ago, who knew you were a lesbian?

	Most	Some	None	N/a
Friends	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Family	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Neighbours	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Co-workers	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Employer(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

Health professionals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religious or spiritual organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not applicable	<input type="checkbox"/>			

19. Thinking about your answers to the above questions, would you like to be *more* or *less* visible as a lesbian than you are now?

More visible	<input type="checkbox"/>
Happy with current situation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Less visible	<input type="checkbox"/>

3: FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

This section asks about family, marriage and children

20. How often are you in contact with each of the following?

	Regularly	Occasionally	Seldom	Never	N/a
Mother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sister	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brother	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spouse / ex-spouse	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Daughter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Son	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Granddaughter / son	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Niece / nephew	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

21. How many sisters did you have?

22. How many brothers did you have?

23. Where did you fit in the birth order in your family of origin?

Only child { }
 Eldest child []
 Middle child []
 Youngest child []
 Other (please specify)

24. Have you ever been married? Yes [] No []

24a. If yes, what were your reasons for marrying? (tick all that apply)

In love with the person I married []
 It was the expected thing []
 Thought it would make me heterosexual []
 Wanted children []
 Other reason (please specify)

.....

24b. If yes, how long did your marriage(s) last?

.....

25. Have you ever had any children? Yes [] No []

25a. If yes, how many daughters? sons?.....

26. Are any other members of your family of origin lesbian or gay?

Yes [] No [] Don't know []

26a. If yes, what relation are they to you?.....

27. Do / did any of your family know you are a lesbian?

Yes [] No [] Don't know []

27a. If yes, please describe the person's attitude / feelings about your being a lesbian:

28. What is your present legal status?

Single	[]
Married	[]
Registered Civil Partner	[]
Divorced	[]
Widowed	[]

Other (please specify)

29. How do you feel about lesbian couples having babies?

Very positive	[]
Quite positive	[]
Quite negative	[]
Very negative	[]

30. How do you feel about lesbian couples adopting children?

Very positive	[]
Quite positive	[]
Quite negative	[]
Very negative	[]

4: INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

*In this section, 'relationship' means one that is both emotional and physical / sexual.
If you wish to write longer answers please do so on a separate sheet of paper.*

31. At what age did you first recognise your emotional and physical / sexual attraction to women?

.....years old

32. Have you ever had a sexual relationship with a woman? [If No, go straight to Section E]

Yes [] No []

33. How old were you when you had your first sexual relationship with a woman?

..... years old

34. Are you currently involved in an intimate or sexual relationship with a woman

Yes [] No []

34a. If yes, how long have you been in this relationship?.....

35. What is the longest time you have spent in such a relationship with a woman?.....

36. What has been the greatest age difference between you and a woman partner/ lover?

..... years.

36a. In that relationship, are / were you:

the younger partner? [] the older partner? []

37. Has a woman partner/ lover of yours ever died while you were together?

Yes [] No []

37a. If you answered yes, did you experience any additional worries or stresses in dealing with this death (eg legal, emotional, financial) because of being a lesbian?

Yes [] No []

37b. If so, please describe what the difficulties were: [please use an extra page if you wish]

38. Since age 60, have your relationships with women differed in any way from those you had before?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Not applicable ☐

38a. If yes, please say in what ways your relationships are different now:

39. Have 'traditional' gender roles (eg butch-femme, 'husband-wife,') been part of your relationships?

Always ☐ Frequently ☐ Occasionally ☐
Never ☐

5: SEX

(Remember that this questionnaire is totally confidential, and does not have your name on it!

Please answer as many questions as you can.)

40. What was your gender at birth?

Female ☐ Male ☐ Intersex ☐
Other (please specify).....

41. How would you describe your gender now?

Female ☐ Male ☐ Intersex ☐
Transgendered ☐ Transexual ☐ Other (please specify).....

42. Have you ever wished you could change your sex? Yes ☐ No ☐
☐

42a. If yes, at what age was this true for you? years

43. Over the last year, how often were you physically sexual with another woman?

Never ☐
A few times ☐
About once a month ☐
About once a week ☐
Daily ☐
Other (please specify) ☐

43a. If you are currently celibate (not having a sex life), is this by your choice?

Yes ☐ No ☐ Not applicable ☐

44. What is your attitude to monogamy (not having other partners or affairs) in a lesbian relationship?

Very positive	<input type="checkbox"/>	Quite positive	<input type="checkbox"/>
Quite negative	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very negative	<input type="checkbox"/>

45. Over all, how satisfied have you been with your sex life over the past year?

Very satisfied	<input type="checkbox"/>	Fairly satisfied	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not very satisfied	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not at all satisfied	<input type="checkbox"/>

46. Before you were 60, how important was sex to you in a lesbian relationship?

Sex was the main part	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sex was one important part	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sex was not an important part	<input type="checkbox"/>

47. Since age 60, how important is sex to you in a lesbian relationship?

Sex is the main part	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sex is one important part	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sex is not an important part	<input type="checkbox"/>

48. Have you ever had difficulty talking about sexual matters with a partner?

Always	<input type="checkbox"/>	Often	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>
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49. Do you feel able to discuss sexual matters with health professionals?

Always	<input type="checkbox"/>	Often	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>
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50. Have you ever experienced shame about your sexuality?

Always	<input type="checkbox"/>	Often	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Never	<input type="checkbox"/>
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6: WORK AND MONEY

The questions in this section cover past, present and future

51. Are you currently:

- Employed full time ☐
- Employed part-time ☐
- Self-employed ☐
- Unemployed ☐
- Retired ☐
- Other (please specify)

52. What is /was your main occupation when working?.....

53. What is your average yearly income now?

- Less than £10,000 ☐
- £10,001 – £20,000 ☐
- £20,001 - £30,000 ☐
- £30,001 - £40,000 ☐
- More than £40,000 ☐

54. What was your highest yearly income during your working life (if applicable)?

- Less than £10,000 ☐
- £10,001 – £20,000 ☐
- £20,001 - £30,000 ☐
- £30,001 - £40,000 ☐
- £40,001 - £50,000 ☐
- More than £50,000 ☐

55. Do you worry about your future finances?

- Yes ☐ No ☐

56. Have you made financial plans for your old age?

- Yes ☐ No ☐

57. Who do you turn to for advice on money matters?

- Financial adviser ☐
- Partner / lover ☐
- Family member ☐
- Friend ☐
- Neighbour ☐
- No-one, I manage on my own ☐
- Other (please specify) ☐

58. Who would you turn for help if you were in financial trouble?

- Social Services ☐
- Bank or building society ☐
- Partner / lover ☐

Family member ☐ ☐
 Friend ☐ ☐
 No-one, I would cope on my own ☐ ☐
 Don't know ☐ ☐
 Other (please specify) ☐ ☐

7: HEALTH

This section asks about your physical and emotional health now.

59. Right now, how would you rate your

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
General physical health	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
General emotional health	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Eyesight (with glasses if worn)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Hearing (without aids)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
Mobility (walking without help)	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

60. Do you have any physical problems or illnesses that seriously affect your health or restrict your activity?

Yes ☐ ☐ No ☐ ☐

60a. If yes, Please specify the physical problems or illness.....

60b. Do you have a disability allowance, attendance allowance or blue badge?

Yes ☐ ☐ No ☐ ☐

61. Does your doctor know you are a lesbian?

Yes ☐ ☐ No ☐ ☐

62. How often do you drink alcohol?

Never ☐ ☐
 Occasionally ☐ ☐
 On one or two days a week ☐ ☐
 Most days ☐ ☐

63. Are you, or have you ever been, a member of an alcoholic recovery programme (eg Alcoholics Anonymous?)

Yes ☐ No ☐

64. Do you smoke cigarettes?

Yes ☐ No ☐

64a. If yes, how many cigarettes a day do you smoke?

65. Do you use any other recreational drugs (e.g. marijuana, cocaine)?

Yes ☐ No ☐

65a. If yes, which drug(s) do you use?

.....

66. Do you consider yourself

Overweight	<input type="checkbox"/>
A little overweight	<input type="checkbox"/>
Just the right weight	<input type="checkbox"/>
A bit too thin	<input type="checkbox"/>
Too thin	<input type="checkbox"/>

67. How often do you take vigorous exercise (e.g. long walk, heavy gardening, going to the gym)?

Never	<input type="checkbox"/>
A few times a year	<input type="checkbox"/>
About once a month	<input type="checkbox"/>
About once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>
More than once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

68. Who would you turn to, to help and look after you if you were very sick or disabled?

Partner / lover	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family member	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friend	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neighbour	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health or social services	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

69. Who would you turn to, for help with emotional / mental health problems?

Mental health professional	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doctor	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religious counsellor	<input type="checkbox"/>
Partner / lover	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family member	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friend	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

70. Are you now, or have you been in the past, in therapy or counselling to do with being a lesbian or with issues caused by being a lesbian?

Yes, I am now []
 Yes, I was in the past []
 No []

71. Overall, would you say that these days you are

Very happy []
 Quite happy []
 Rather unhappy []
 Very unhappy []

*[Remember there is always someone to talk to about things that worry you:
 Lesbian And Gay Foundation (North-west England): 0845 3 30 30 30
 London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard: 020 7837 6768.
 Samaritans: 08457 90 90 90
 or Google 'LGBT helpline.']*

8: COMMUNITY AND POLITICS

This section explores the connection between 'personal' and 'political.'

72. Have you ever attended a gay pride festival?

Never [] Occasionally [] Often []

73. Have you ever taken part in a gay pride march?

Never [] Occasionally [] Often []

74. Have you ever belonged to a lesbian social or community group?

Yes I am now [] Yes, in the past, but not now []
 No, never []

75 Have you ever been active in a lesbian political group?

Yes, I am now [] Yes, in the past, but not now [] No, never []

76. Have you ever campaigned on a lesbian / gay issue (e.g. attending a march or rally writing to your MP, etc.)?

Yes ☐No ☐**77. Have you ever been active in Women's Liberation / feminism?**Yes, I am now ☐Yes, in the past, but not now ☐No, never ☐**78. Would you describe yourself as a feminist?**Yes ☐No ☐**79. Which of the following political parties best represents your views?**Conservative ☐Green ☐Labour ☐Liberal Democrat ☐Socialist ☐UKIP ☐

Other (please specify)

.....

80. How far do you agree with the following statements?

	Agree strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disag strong
"My sexual orientation is no-one's business but my own."	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
"If you are a lesbian you must be a feminist!"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
"I want to know a political party's policies on lesbian /gay issues before I vote for them."	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9: GROWING OLDER

This section asks you about being an older person, both now and in the future

81. How do you feel about your own ageing?

Very positive []
 Quite positive []
 Quite negative []
 Very negative []

82. Have you ever felt you were discriminated against because of your age?

Yes [] No []

83. Have you ever felt discriminated against within the lesbian community because of your age?

Yes [] No []

84. How do you / would you feel about living in each of the following?

	Very positive	Quite positive	Quite negative	Very negative
Lesbian-only retirement community	[]	[]	[]	[]
Lesbian /Gay retirement community	[]	[]	[]	[]
Women-only retirement community	[]	[]	[]	[]
Heterosexual retirement community	[]	[]	[]	[]
Lesbian-only nursing home	[]	[]	[]	[]
Lesbian / Gay nursing home	[]	[]	[]	[]
Women only nursing home	[]	[]	[]	[]
Heterosexual nursing home	[]	[]	[]	[]

85. How would you feel about participating in each of the following?

	Very positive	Quite positive	Quite negative	Very negative
Social organisation for older lesbians only	[]	[]	[]	[]
Social organisation for older lesbians and gay men	[]	[]	[]	[]

Social organisation for older women	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social organisation for older women and men	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

86. Below is a list of things which can be problems for older adults. Please mark any / all that are problems for you:

Physical disability	<input type="checkbox"/>
Money	<input type="checkbox"/>
Housing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health Care	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transport	<input type="checkbox"/>
Employment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Age discrimination	<input type="checkbox"/>
Crime	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loneliness	<input type="checkbox"/>
Safety	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sex	<input type="checkbox"/>

87. Which would you say is the most serious for you now?

88. Which do you worry might become a problem in the future?

10: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

89. What year were you born?

90. Which area of Britain do you live in?

Scotland	<input type="checkbox"/>
Northwest England	<input type="checkbox"/>
Northeast England	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wales	<input type="checkbox"/>
West Midlands	<input type="checkbox"/>
East Midlands	<input type="checkbox"/>
Southern England	<input type="checkbox"/>
Southwest England	<input type="checkbox"/>
Southeast England	<input type="checkbox"/>

91. Do you live in

A town or city	<input type="checkbox"/>
The suburbs	<input type="checkbox"/>
The country	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)	

92. Would you describe the family you grew up in as:

Working class	<input type="checkbox"/>	Middle class	<input type="checkbox"/>	Upper class
	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Other (please specify)				

93. Would you describe yourself now as:

Working class	<input type="checkbox"/>	Middle class	<input type="checkbox"/>	Upper class
	<input type="checkbox"/>			
Other (please specify)				

94. Is the accommodation you live in now

Owned (or mortgaged) by you	<input type="checkbox"/>	Owned (or mortgaged) by	
someone else	<input type="checkbox"/>	Rented by you	<input type="checkbox"/>
			Other
			<input type="checkbox"/>

95. Please tick the highest level of education you have reached

No educational qualifications	<input type="checkbox"/>
O level / CSE / GCSE	<input type="checkbox"/>
A level	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vocational qualification	<input type="checkbox"/>
University first degree	<input type="checkbox"/>
Higher degree	<input type="checkbox"/>

96. Do you currently attend college or continuing education?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
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96a. If yes, what course(s) you are following?

97. Do you now live with:

Woman partner []
 Husband []
 Children []
 Other family members []
 No-one, I live alone []
 Other (please specify)

98. Do you keep any pets? Yes [] No []

98a. If yes:

Number of cats?
 Number of dogs?
 Other animals (please specify type and number)

99. How would you describe your ethnic group/ cultural background?

Asian (Indian heritage) []
 Asian (Pakistani heritage) []
 Asian (other than the above) []
 Black (African heritage) []
 Black (Caribbean heritage) []
 Black (other than the above) []
 Chinese heritage []
 White (British heritage) []
 White (Irish heritage) []
 White (other than the above) []
 Mixed Heritage (please specify)
 Other ethnic/ cultural group (please specify)
 Prefer not to say []

100. What is your religious affiliation?

Buddhist []
 Christian []
 Hindu []
 Jewish []
 Muslim []
 No religion []

Other (please specify)

101. Do you regularly attend religious or spiritual services/ acts of worship?

Yes [] No []

102. How did you learn about this study?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

**Please post your completed form to: LBL Project, Silverstone Building 222
(School Office), University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RG**

APPENDIX C

CHECKLIST FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

- 1 Talk through project – questions? – sign consent form.
- 2 Test recorder
- 3 Interview topics:
 - Please start by describing where and when you were born, and what kind of home and family you grew up in.
 - School and growing up: boyfriends / girlfriends?
 - When and how did you first become aware of the possibility of women loving women? How did you feel about that?
 - First lesbian experience(s) – how old? How did it happen? How did you feel?
 - Hiding or being ‘out.’ who knew / knows you are a lesbian? If you are / were ‘in the closet’, what effect has that had on you and your life?
 - Times have changed (civil partnership, legal protections for lesbians and gay men etc.) Has this changed the way you behave? Do you feel freer now to reveal your lesbian identity? If not, why do you think that is?
 - Looking back, would your life have been different if you had not become a lesbian? In what way(s)?
 - Feelings about growing older. Do you think your experience of old age is different in any way from that of ‘straight’ older people? If so, in what ways?
 - Hopes and fears for the future.
 - Anything you want to add/ would have liked me to ask about?

APPENDIX D
GUIDANCE FOR LIFE WRITERS



Jane Traies
Silverstone Building
University of Sussex
Falmer
Brighton
BN1 9RG

THE LIVES OF BRITISH LESBIANS OVER SIXTY

Thank you for offering to be a life-writer on this project. This is how it works:

- To make sure that your story is only used in accordance with your wishes, you are asked to sign an agreement about how I can use your words.
- You will have a 'prompt sheet' with suggestions about things to write about. You can follow these guidelines or not, and/or write about anything else that you want to say.
- You can write your story by hand, or word-process it, or speak it into a voice recorder. You can send it to me by email or by post. (Obviously a word-processed document is easiest for me as I do not then have to type it up myself – but please do whatever is most comfortable for you.)
- Before using your words, I will make the material anonymous, by changing your name and the names of people and places in your story, if you wish. I will show you these alterations for your approval before using any of your words in my writing.
- The deadline is 31 December 2010.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any other questions.

Thank you again.

Jane Traies

J.traies@sussex.ac.uk

07824 719 215



Jane Traies
 Silverstone Building
 University of Sussex
 Falmer
 Brighton
 BN1 9RG

THE LIVES OF BRITISH LESBIANS OVER SIXTY

LIFE-WRITING PROMPT SHEET

1. Please start with your name, address and other contact details, so that I can be in touch with you in the future.
2. Then tell me the story of your lesbian life. Begin your story by describing where and when you were born, with a brief description of the kind of home and family you grew up in, school etc.
3. Tell your story / memories in your own way. Remember to include not just facts, but how you felt about what happened. It would be helpful if you included all or some of the following as you go along:
 - When and how you first became aware of the possibility of women loving women – and what you felt about that.
 - The story of your personal relationships.
 - First lesbian experience(s) – how old? how did it happen? etc.
 - Looking back, would your life have been different if you had not become a lesbian? In what way(s)?
 - Hiding or being 'out' – if you are/ were 'in the closet', what effect do you think that has had on you and your life?
 - Times have changed (civil partnership, legal protections for lesbians and gay men etc.) Has this changed the way you behave? Do you feel more free to reveal your 'true' self? If not, why do you think that is?
 - How do you feel about growing older? Do you think your experience of old age is different in any way from that of 'straight' older people? If so, in what ways?
 - What are your hopes and fears for the future?

Email your story to j.traies@sussex.ac.uk, or post it to the address above

APPENDIX E

LIFE WRITERS' NARRATIVES

As an illustration of the diversity of the narratives collected during the research, I reproduce here the written (or, in one case, recorded) autobiographies sent in by some participants. Two of the writers, Monica and Irene, were also subsequently interviewed. The accounts are arranged in order of date of birth, with the oldest women's stories first.

Monica (born 1922)

I was aware of my attraction to women early in my teens, but was merely disturbed and frightened by it, being a member of a very conservative middle-class family whose parents were born in the Edwardian era; I was brought up to expect to be married at the latest by my early twenties. My best friend (to whom I was never sexually attracted) was precociously and extremely attractive to men and my fears and perplexities were compounded by her not understanding why I held back from what were, to her, delightful adventures with boys. I couldn't tell her what I feared and probably hoped it would go away and some special boy would come along to whom I would feel attracted. As it was, my teen-age emotions were entirely taken up with distant and total adoration of Lawrence Olivier!

I did try with the boys, but it never worked and always felt wrong. At 23 I finally fell desperately in love – with a beautiful girl who was having a hectic wartime affair with my brother. She loved me dearly, but was totally straight. I wrote to her constantly, what I now remember to be love letters, but she did not want to see them as such and accepted them as letters from a highly emotional dear friend. I finally told her my real feelings and she was quite shattered – “I do love you, but not like that” was how she put it. I was desperate and sure I was doomed to that sort of rejection. I only told my doctor, who didn't really understand, and my mother, who thought it was a “crush” I would get over.

Then I met a chap in romantic circumstances with whom I shared an absorbing interest in our profession, the theatre. He fell in love with me and I imagined myself in love with him – got pregnant, had an abortion, married him; four years later I met my first real lover. After a year of not daring to tell each other how we felt, we finally got around to it. I was 30 when I finally found out what sex and passion was all about. It was wonderful, but had to be kept secret from

our families – it was still only the 1950s. I never discussed the situation with my husband; he was not a deep personal communicator; we eventually separated, but not primarily because of my affair; I discovered subsequently that he did know.

I began to feel the need of some sort of social life with other homosexual women and foolishly left my lover to look for the experiences and adventures I should have had when young. I have failed to make a great success of my emotional life since, though I have had several relationships, some with very wonderful people; but the lasting and deep commitment from another has evaded me and I do feel that this could be due to the fact that the social pressures of the 1940's and 50's made it difficult for me, as a rather shy and diffident personality, to express my sexuality in in what was, for me, a normal way, at the time of life when you should be learning from your experiences the real and lasting values in emotional and sexual encounters.

Irene (born 1929)

Between the age of 18 months and three-and-a-half I lived with my parents aboard a very old and dirty 'tramp steamer' anchored in the estuary of the River Torridge in North Devon. It would have been about 1931 to 1933. It was a very rough, not to say dangerous, life for me as a very active toddler and it was certainly a difficult and demanding life for my mother. Because of my surroundings: oil, grease, dirt everywhere, open hatchways for me to fall into, rats in the engine room, ventilators to climb into and complex arrangements of spars, masts, rigging, bits of machinery and tools lying about, I had to be dressed in strictly practical clothing. No frilly dresses for me, but very short shorts or knickers, a dark jersey, a brown 'tammy' over my curls, and sandals and dark socks - anything that didn't show the dirt. I turned from a self-willed baby into a difficult and frustrated toddler, and even when I went to school, back home, at five years old, I was regarded as a very odd child indeed, because I wanted, always, to be with the boys. I think this early life style, of which I have many memories, must have contributed to my feeling of 'butch-ness' later on.

Although brought up as an only child, I discovered when I was 13 that I had 2 half-brothers and 2 half-sisters. I rarely saw them, though my eldest sister visited us occasionally. [...] It causes me some sadness that circumstances prevented me from being able to relate to these 4 individuals as part of a family. I realised eventually that both my parents were not easy people and that they played their part in preventing me from doing so, but I had to accept it.

Rightly or wrongly, I remain convinced that my mother was a latent lesbian. I have many photographs of her with a friend she knew for many years and regularly went on holiday with,

and there is just something about the way they were, together, that in my opinion, points to it. Mother broke with this lady shortly before she married and never kept up with her afterwards; her own home circumstances, I think, must have made her want a home of her own and child, and my father's offer of marriage must have been very tempting. My parents were first cousins so it wasn't as if she was marrying a stranger.

I would not think that there was any sexual element in the relationship of my mother and her friend – but who knows – one can be wildly mistaken in such judgments. All I know is that my mama, when young, was beautiful, while her friend seemed, from the photographs to have been very slightly butch in a graceful and dignified way. To me, looking at the old sepia photographs, they make a true lesbian couple. Even as a child, when I heard mother speak of Ellen, I sensed that she loved her, and I remember her being distressed over Ellen's death. I know, also, that my mother was a feminist, without her knowing what a feminist was – like lesbianism, it was not publicly discussed; she often protested, loud and long, about the raw deal women had, workwise, and how little freedom within marriage, and she hated it when my father opened her letters – she really gave him hell for that. Most of all she hated having to walk 2 or 3 paces behind him when they were out – forgetting perhaps that he was an extremely fast walker and that she was usually encumbered by tight fashionable shoes. She thought my father's attitudes were absolutely Victorian, especially where I was concerned. Some of my mother's criticisms and opinions must have rubbed off on me – I have certainly had them since childhood and long before I reached adulthood they had become eradicable.

I had a cousin, Reggie, a few years older than myself, who liked boys and later in life he was up in court for some trouble with a boy. His portrait was turned to the wall for a long time. [...] He was a difficult boy with a strange sense of humour, not much liked by the rest of the family, but then, he had a frightful father who was very cruel to him. When my younger son was in his teens he used to stay on Reggie's narrow boat and thoroughly enjoyed himself, without anything 'happening' (so he says!) Reggie liked boys – not little ones, but teenagers, so I would guess he would not be considered 'gay' only paedophile. At the time I was sorry for the way he was – but I liked him because he had his own standards and stuck with them and, like myself, he was 'different.'

I would like to put on record at this point, that I had a happy childhood, and that, in retrospect, I feel I was a much-wanted, much-loved and fairly indulged child. My mother having helped to bring up several younger siblings was knowledgeable and sensible (although she was sorely tested in the early 30s by having to cope with family life aboard ship for 2 years during the depression). My father, however, was often impatient with me and did not understand my need

to do things my own way and make my own small decisions independently; he was a real Victorian and my mother often took him to task for expecting too much of me. She said once to him, 'Ernest, you are not on board ship, and we are not the crew!' [...] Nevertheless, I miss my father more than anyone I have ever known, and I tell him so whenever he comes to mind.

I was about 12 when I first recognised as a *fact* where my emotional attraction to women and other girls, even though I did not really know what it meant in physical terms and certainly not in sexual terms. Apart from liking to be close to my mother, and certain other ladies and girls of my acquaintance, because they were nice and soft and smelled nice, I did not analyse *anything* at 12 years old. Sexuality meant nothing to me; the word was never used in any context. In the early 1940s children were expected to be children – not little adults.

During the war we kids contributed to the war effort by going to fruit-picking camps and then scout and guide camps under canvas; these were hugely adventurous for us & greatly enjoyed. Silly games after dark sometimes led to innocent exploration of our bodies and as a result of this I found out in practical ways about my own sexuality and that of the other girls. It was play, and never having been inhibited by prohibitions on the subject from parents or teachers I just went ahead and enjoyed myself. I saw nothing wrong in it – nor do I now. Boys did not come into it; something told me that was wrong although I could not have said why. I had got past the stage of thinking that you could go to a shop and choose a baby, but it was still a mystery which I wasn't interested to try and solve.

When I was 17 I went to art school, and met my future husband and everything changed. I entered another dimension of physical and emotional behaviour, although sexually I remained almost as superficial and careless as I had been at 12 years old! It was still just a game to me but now a rather more dangerous one. I had never been pretty but I had some charm and a generous and fun-loving nature so I found myself popular for the first time in my life; I also found a boy friend, Michael, one of many male students who had been in the forces and had come to study art on a grant. He seemed very serious, rather old (he was only 23!) and extremely good-looking. I suppose I was attracted to him because he was 'different' – he had been born and brought up in Spain and his father was a scenic designer working at the old Ealing Film Studios near the art school. It was not long before I was madly in love with him and his family and his unconventional home. Life was plus-perfect. Despite Mike's 3 years in the navy he didn't seem very experienced, and I seemed to be the initiator in everything we did, not only love-making.

Sex-games with girls went completely out of my life from then on; I thought about it and was still attracted to girls, and particularly to older women but not as a viable alternative to what

Mike offered: I wanted to live with him and have his children. It was a silly, romantic dream – we were like kids ourselves with no practical abilities to ever make it work satisfactorily. Mike had been as spoilt as I had been and one aspect of this was our mutual tendency to walk away from things as soon as they got difficult – we both did it with disastrous consequences for ourselves, our children and our families. I left art school before the end of my course as my parents insisted that I got a job. I hated the travelling to London (still a bomb-scarred, grubby city with few attractions). I found the job un-congenial and my colleagues unhelpful. Nobody had ever taught me how to ‘fit in’ and to try to learn the ropes; no wonder I was unhappy. Mike was still at art school so it was difficult for us to meet, when we did I got the impression he was happy with new friends and slipping away from me. I decided on a completely new plan to keep his attention and make him miss me: I joined the RAF.

Looking back, of course it was a mad decision, although it did have the desired effect. It causes me, now, to go hot and cold with embarrassment at my foolishness and to regret bitterly my youthful selfishness. I disappointed my parents grievously; they had made sacrifices so that I could have some further education and here I was throwing it all away. I suppose I needed to get away from home and stand on my own two feet but, with hindsight, this was really not the best way of doing it. Yet, in a strange way it was good for me in some respects, although my decision was a disappointment, not only to my parents, but to Mike as well. I missed him terribly as we were miles apart, although he kept faith and came to see me often, which I didn’t deserve.

[...] It was a hard year, with a lot of discomfort, cold – even hunger, but I learned to ‘take it on the chin’. I got to know a lot of lesbians; how ironic that I couldn’t be fully part of their lives – they were so available! I rapidly became aware and accepting of lesbian activities and laws and I was aware that some of the women wanted me as much as a friend and supporter as a lover, but my commitment to Mike made it impossible. I was however continually attracted on a superficial level but was learning to be selective and discriminating. It was an intellectual as well as a social barrier.

[...] My marriage lasted 5 years and the only good thing about it (apart from my two sons) was that the whole experience made me a better lesbian and feminist. I lost home, security (of a kind) and children, for several years until I was strong enough to build things up again for all of us, although it was only part-time family living for a long time. But gradually things got better and better and circumstances worked together for our individual good, as they do if you genuinely do the right thing, instead of just running away. I owe an enormous debt to many people (not least my parents) who helped me over this period, & encouraged and believed in

me. They changed my perception of myself and gave me a more serious and responsible turn of mind. There was a lot of sadness and very hard work, as I had no support from my husband, but there was a great deal of happiness and positive things like self-discovery and gradual achievement of things that were worth having. It was during this period that I became a Roman Catholic, after many doubts and heart-searching, and my faith helped me through many difficult situations which I don't think I would have coped with otherwise.

I divorced my husband for desertion in the late 1950s; at that time I wanted to marry again, as I felt my sons needed a father. Thank God it didn't come off! Given the right circumstances – mainly one's own personal financial circumstances – fathers are not essential; I managed to both mother and father my sons fairly successfully, although there was considerable help from 'father figures' who are a bonus. My elder son kept in touch with his father intermittently and was able to be with him when he suffered a stroke and died. I was glad about that. I was also glad I never set my sons against their father; I just told them what had happened between us and let them make their own judgments.

[...] My sons, as they have matured, progressed in their careers, married and had families of their own, have been incredibly loving and supportive to me. In the success they have both made in their respective (and very contrasting) working lives I think they are real credit to me; I am proud of them and of having been enabled to do my best for them. I strongly disagree with the modern political ideology which decrees that one parent families are suspect and doomed to social failure; it is simply not true.

I tried to ensure, during the many, rather lonely years on my own, that I did not enter into any destructive relationships (although this was difficult to achieve). I lived for a year with a much older woman who I worked for and with whom I was deeply in love; it was only partially sexual and mostly on my part – not very satisfactory. My children were in no way affected by this as they were away at school or with my parents, but this affair had no future and could not have been considered as 'lifestyle'. My need for independence drove me to escape from my own possessive behaviour – and hers. In those days (mid-60s) one had to be very careful; a lesbian relationship could lose you your children, and I was terrified of that, having already lost them once, although in reality there was no-one close to me to object to anything I did, my husband had decamped as far away as he possibly could – to New Zealand, and no-one else knew anything anyway. I was still at this time a practising and believing Catholic, which kept me on a straight, but increasingly narrow and restrictive path; I often lapsed but returned through sheer homesickness and the need for spiritual discipline.

I kept up with a small group of lesbians and gays and through them I became aware of what was socially and politically available for 'people like us.' I stored up this knowledge for some future time when I might be able to live more freely. I had bought a house with my mother (a mistake!) and often fretted at being treated like a child, even though I was able to care for her in her last days. After my mother died and my sons were pursuing their own lives and careers I felt able to change tack completely; I wanted desperately the 'real me' to emerge into the light of day and no longer be hidden. I wanted to be visible and active in the gay and lesbian community.

I joined KENRIC, made many friends, got myself on the committee, went to parties and organised outside events. Within a year I had met my partner-to-be, and knew almost at once that we had to be together. I was then 45 and she was 30 and I suppose both of us thought that was too much age difference, but at that time it really didn't matter. For the first seven years we commuted to and from each other's pads before it all got too much and we decided to live together. The house we bought together (which I still live in) was large enough for us not to get in each other's way and to be able to entertain as we wanted to, and I was able to have a proper studio which gave me great pleasure. My partner and I settled into a pleasing and satisfying routine and over the 32 years we were together we gave friends and family – and ourselves a really good time. We fostered cats, fed and watered the homeless, organised charity fairs, church sales and prayer groups and for 9 years ran a group for Catholic (and other) lesbians. But somewhere, somehow, something got out of gear and matters between us began to deteriorate – very slightly and very slowly we had begun to drift apart while still retaining a genuine personal affection and a deep need for each other as lovers, companions and members of a 'team' which concentrated on doing things for others. In my case, I suppose it was the impulse which dogged every relationship I've ever had: the need for real independence and for time and space to call my own; no commitment and no ties. I just wanted my life to myself. It was an unspoken need, and it did not take into account what my partner wanted and needed. This was, probably, as I reached my 70s, and although extremely active felt less and less like travelling as my partner wanted to, and sex had become rather routine, she wanted other friends and different things to do outside the home. I ought to have seen it, and we ought to have talked about it – but we didn't. We began to go our separate ways, without ever separating, we loved our home and both of us wanted to stay together in it.

It was at this time, some 6 or 7 years ago, that my partner's mother died (her father was already dead) and she became dominated by the memory of how she felt her mother had let her down, her mother had always shown her preference for her son, and my partner felt that she herself was very second best. In addition, the mother made a suicide attempt, I think deliberately timing

it so that my partner found her rather than her brother. This scenario was the root cause of immense resentment which my partner felt compelled her to seek therapy for. [...] Her therapy lasted over 3 years and at the end of it she was a totally changed person. She became, in fact, a stranger to me, and someone who I felt, gradually, unable to like or respect, although I still, deep down in the well of my emotions, loved and wanted to help. A great deal of the resentment my partner had felt for so many years against her mother was now transferred to me, quite unjustifiably, I felt.

The widening gap between us led my partner to turn to the woman (for convenience I will call her 'Miss H') who recommended her to the therapist. In my opinion, 'Miss H' had planned for this to happen all along. To cut a long and somewhat novelettish story short, my partner and 'Miss H' developed a deep friendship and spend much time on a regular basis together. I felt completely shut out of my partner's emotional life and was forced to recognise, without anything ever being said in plain terms, that they were in love with each other and determined to do what they wanted without reference to me. Neither of these 2 women made the slightest effort to understand my feelings of anger and betrayal at what they were doing. We all ought, I knew then, to have discussed it in a civilised manner, what was to be done about the situation, but my partner and I, although we shared views on many important topics, had never been able to discuss our own relationship. I resolutely refused to discuss *anything* with Miss H because I felt that by doing so I would have accorded her rights to which she was absolutely not entitled to, with regard to my partner.

By the time matters had got to this stage my partner was in the first stages of cancer and we both knew that she had only a few months to live. I made the decision to allow 'Miss H' to visit any time she wanted (within reason) which she accepted, but soon began to abuse. I felt deeply saddened by my partner's suffering, and wanted to do all I could to spare her pain and emotional trauma; it seemed best to accept this nightmarish situation as best I could in order to keep the peace. I had no intention of leaving our 'marital' home – where could I go? And I did not want to add to my partner's pain by deserting her. I was all too aware though that this was exactly what 'Miss H' wanted, and that by being as unkind and disrespectful as she could to me, she was trying to effect that very result. All this made me deeply unhappy and very angry and frustrated. Fortunately I was greatly helped and supported by my family, who listened and gave me good advice. I don't know how I would have coped without them. They lived too far away to be of any practical help, but they had known my partner almost as long as I had, and they were distressed at the change in her and the awfulness of the current situation.

After my partner's death, her executors, who were close friends of ours, told me that they thought her will was very unfair and that it was essential that I should consult a solicitor and institute a claim, as our relationship had been not just a friendship, but in every respect a marriage and that I was legally entitled to more of her estate than was initially apparent. After a lot of heart-searching I agreed and started the legal claim. These matters always take a long time and they have, over the last year, been extended unnecessarily by the efforts of 'Miss H' to prove that the relationship between me and my partner was in no way that of a marriage and that I was claiming money under false pretences. I have sometimes felt, over the last year, that I have been treated rather like a criminal, having to reiterate so much painful evidence time after time. This has left me in a state of bewilderment that someone I certainly did not wish to make an enemy of has proved to be such a bitter and spiteful one. My situation should be a warning to all lesbians considering setting up home together – 'put it in writing' – legally, even if you don't have a Civil Partnership, and keep every shred of it for evidence - you may need it one day.

My great consolation, though, is that my partner and I, during the last 3 months of her life, regained something of the love and respect we once had in abundance for each other, even though the pathologically possessive 'Miss H' saw to it that we were never alone together. Of course I miss my partner and think of her every day, but the anguish is slow in abating; only time will solve that problem, aided by the love of friends and family, in which, thank God, I am rich.

Helen, born 1936

I was born in a small industrial town in Lancashire. My parents were middle class. My father owned an iron foundry and my mother was an English teacher. I lived in a large detached house surrounded by its own grounds.

When I was 11 I went to boarding school which was a co-educational Quaker school in Yorkshire. My brother who was 3 years older than myself also went to this school. We were not Quakers but my father also attended this school so it was a family tradition.

I was aware from the age of 9 that I was attracted to women, including sixth formers who my mother was tutoring and later on female members of school staff. While at school I had a close relationship with a member of staff which was not sexual but more of a mother/daughter relationship. I was quite upset when she got married.

I was brought up to think that men and women were equal and it never occurred to me that they weren't until I met chauvinism as demonstrated by my brother who resented me from birth.

I had my first lesbian experience at agricultural college when I was 19. It was quite a revelation but seemed very right. We were lucky not to be expelled! My partner then went on to be a lecturer at the same college and at that time denied her sexuality until many years later. She now has a life partner and we are still friends.

I continued on to a teaching career where I had my next relationship with a married woman. This came to an end when I moved schools where I met yet another married woman with whom I formed a sexual relationship. Eventually, she, her husband and myself travelled overland to Australia. I had to return from Australia as my mother had terminal cancer. After the death of my mother I returned to Australia to find their relationship was breaking up so she and I came home. We then lived together for 20 years, her husband occasionally returning, and she had a girl child due to one such occasion! I helped to raise the daughter and got much pleasure from this and we still have a strong loving relationship.

Her mother began to deny being gay (if she ever was) and resented any other relationships that I had which tended in this direction. She was by this time headmistress of a private school which her daughter attended and was terrified that any whiff of lesbianism would taint her reputation.

Life at home had become increasingly difficult and unhappy as all my movements were monitored and I felt increasingly trapped, and was denied my true identity.

When I was 44 I met a lesbian couple and fell in love with one of them. Shirley and I were both attracted but she felt unable to leave her partner at this point. Four years later we met again and this time our mutual attraction was too strong to deny. We have lived together ever since. We are very well matched and very happy.

I did not come out at work until I met Shirley and found a mutual friend of ours taught at the same school. He was quite open about being gay and I saw no reason not to follow suit. Previous to this because I was in the teaching profession I felt unable to be open about my sexuality. As I have got older I care less and less about what people think. They can like it or lump it!

As I grow older I resent the fact that I am not as physically strong as I was and that one day I shall die. I worry about what will happen to either of us when the other one dies because we are so interdependent. I do not think that growing older is any different for a heterosexual person.

At the moment I live in a beautiful place surrounded by my garden, our pets and we have no financial worries. We are both relatively healthy and are planning a trip to Cape Town for our 25th anniversary. What more could one hope for? I have never regretted being gay and feel I have had a happier, more interesting and varied life than if I had been straight.

Kate, born 1938

‘So how *did* you come to be living in Amsterdam?’ called the shopkeeper cheerfully in a crowded village shop. By now I was almost out of the door. ‘I married a Dutchwoman’ I called back. Nobody turned a hair. Suffolk phlegm or a genuine change of attitude to what once would have created closed faces if not downright hostility?

Since I’ve chosen to live in a city renowned for its liberality I’m perhaps not the person best suited to measure changes in attitude towards British lesbians but I did spend the first 60 years of my life in UK, I am a very frequent returner and I notice a new and pleasing indifference to diversity – so long, of course, as it doesn’t rock the boat and has nothing to do with immigration or equal pay for women.

In 1938 I was born to a ‘respectable’ but single mother who was stowed in a convent in Kensington for the duration of her pregnancy. Her father refused to allow her to stay at home in case her younger brothers discovered she was pregnant – a good catholic family you might say. This led to my having a very posh postcode on my birth certificate. Neasden was a definite come down from St Mary Abbott, not that I knew it, when my [adoptive] parents carried me and my ‘small bundle’ – the adoption society’s words – on to the tube train, to be proudly displayed to one of my aunts in Stonebridge. She took one look, I’m told, and said ‘Good God Elsie, you don’t want that! Take it back.’

My poor mother, who had transgressed class and family boundaries to adopt, had this to put up with for the rest of her life and so, I suppose, did I, although I couldn’t articulate, even to myself, the effect of conversations broken off when I came into the room and some very odd looks when some of my eccentricities, like being a persistent reader for example, came into view.

My [adoptive] mother was one of fourteen children born in Shropshire to my railway worker grandfather. Her mother, who bore the first seven children, was turned out of their council house when my mother was seven. She had become pregnant by another man when my grandfather was away at the western front. He drank and had a foul temper and a lively sense of what was

due to him. Much later he became an alderman. My mother very soon acquired a pregnant eighteen year old step-mother – no goose and gander equation in this story. Soon, too, the first of her seven half siblings was born and she quickly became child-minder in chief. All she wanted, when she married my carpenter, ex-soldier father (one of four from an Irish immigrant family with an absentee father) was to have babies. She lost seven before persuading my father that they must adopt.

So there we were as the second world war was looming, squashed into two and a bit rooms in a semi, which as we know from Monty Python, should have been populated by a bank clerk, his wife and 2.5 children. My mother used to wash up in an enamel bowl in the slip room kitchen – no sink, no water but a geyser over the bath for our weekly baths and a copper downstairs in the landlady's kitchen in which to do the weekly wash. We slept in one room but as the sky began to light up at night with fire and searchlights, we often slept in the back garden shelter.

Do I remember it? Yes, I think I do although I'm aware that at this distance traces of memory are overlaid by the memories of memory, and the constant re-telling of the story. Was I afraid? Not often. I was far more scared of my mother's sharp tongue and constant anxiety. She told me later, long after we'd resolved our differences, and I had begun to understand what a huge step she'd taken outside her comfort zone, that never a day passed without worry in case I 'found out.'

And find out I did. No one had expected, or wanted me to pass the scholarship but just in case, my father had 'put me down' for the convent. (His religion was lapsed catholic.) When I was fourteen one of the nuns told me that I was adopted in the hope that knowing would mitigate my rather freakish behaviour – I was addicted, with my best friend Hilary, to carrying out pranks like tying up the angelus bell rope, or smuggling a small wind-up gramophone into the mezzanine over the assembly hall and playing jazz after 'Daily Daily Sing to Mary.' My first act after finding out was to rifle my mother's chest of drawers and find the adoption certificate, which gave me the huge relief of *knowing* for sure that I was indeed 'different' and why. It didn't even occur to me then to wonder who I *was*.

If I seem to be a long time in getting round to my lesbian development it is indeed because I was very slow to fall in to the implications of my own emotional and much disguised sexual proclivities. For example, my friend at school and ever after, is also a lesbian but neither of us found out about the other until we were both twenty six, despite the fact that the nuns used forever to be telling us that our friendship wasn't quite 'healthy.' (Could a girl today live in such ignorance? I hope not. Although I don't know quite what I would have done with the information had it found its way through my thick layers of denial.)

As a small child I was deeply muddled over both sex and gender. At some level I ‘knew’ what was happening in my parent’s bed but it was shrouded in such secrecy and surrounded by so much punishment for me should I be awake, or if in the waking world I showed any interest in ‘doctors and nurses’ with my cousins, that I couldn’t even begin to articulate to myself what this feverishly exciting and dangerous activity was about.

I longed to metamorphose into a boy, to wear grey flannel shorts and long grey socks, to play football and cowboys and ‘indybums’, to pee standing up. I remember undressing before my weekly bath and being terrified that since the last time I looked, I had sprouted a willy, so much did I want one. Why? Was it the perception that boys were somehow more free both of restraint and entanglement? Or had I picked up at some subliminal level that my mother’s last baby was a boy who actually breathed before she lost him?

So it was by no means clear to me what was happening, when at the convent my lay English teacher fell in love with me, although somewhere an uneasy and familiar twinge indicated that it must be to do with the forbidden and unspoken world of sex. Every day, DA as I was allowed to call her, swept down the corridor in her black academic gown, fished out an envelope and thrust it at me, or into the hands of the trustworthy Hilary. Every day there was a love letter and often a poem, mostly containing ‘sweet peas’ or ‘butterflies’. Every day we walked together two miles after school, along the petrol stinking North Circular, until I turned into my street and she caught her bus to the posher Golders Green. In the holidays letters came by post, which was later to prove our undoing.

Apart from the excitement of the illicit – we both knew we mustn’t be caught – there were some very substantial gains for me. Someone recognized that I was clever and a writer. Someone loved me, it seemed unconditionally and for the first time my love constellated itself round a woman. Although after the inevitable crash, it took me a long time to accept that my love was always going to go out to other women, I still can’t be wholly judgemental about that time when innocence and ignorance exploited innocence and ignorance.

One day I came home from school and immediately picked up an atmosphere of icy silence. My mother said nothing to me, *less* than nothing. I slipped out to the kitchen and opened her bag, hung on the doorknob. Inside, a sheaf of DA’s letters. And nothing was ever said but the freezing effect of that shock caused me to ‘see’, as if I had suddenly put on a different pair of spectacles, what it was my mother saw, a woman of 37 doing what? to a 13 year old girl. Never mind that there was no sex, it was my first and most powerful indication that what I had felt was ‘wrong’ and antithetical to ‘the way things are.’

What a heady brew sex – or its absence – and religion are. Nobody could fault me for being the most pious girl in the school, could they? That was my next ploy to gain the approval of the nuns, god and myself but it didn't work. At the end of my 15th year the nuns had decided that I would never make a 6th former or be 'university material' so I had to leave. To my mother's credit, when the exam results came out and I had failed everything but English (which I didn't know how to fail) she negotiated a further term's grace for me to re-take my GCE's and belatedly, I woke up and passed. By then it was very clear to me and to some of the nuns, though not to my mother, that I was sick. 'I think you have TB' said Mother Stanislaus 'but don't worry, St Theresa died of it.' But to my mother, who had seen her favourite sister Bella die and several of the small cousins from next door to Bella, go into a sanatorium, it was a step too far to contemplate. 'Thank God for your good health' she said, and refused to let me see a doctor.

Fortunately, on my first day at my short lived clerking job with the Westminster Council, everyone in the office went for a mass x-ray and within three weeks I was in hospital. I won't dwell on the rather primitive routines that were current then in the treatment of tuberculosis but I was very lucky because streptomycin had recently been developed so my stay was relatively short – eight months and a time at home on bed rest, with another year of artificially induced lung collapse.

What a liberal education hospital was! The minute Sister went off duty up we got from our strict bed rest to 'frat' with the men in the next door ward and with each other. Many were the parties on smuggled gin and the hilarious stories, raucous and sexual – but more importantly I got a sense of how difficult life was for these women, many of whom had been in and out of hospital for decades and how tough, resilient, funny and brave they were. Alas, nobody ever mentioned the kind of behaviour I would have been most interested to hear about. Had people really never heard of homosexuality? Or had I just got a very efficient filter in my ears?

As soon as possible and much against my parents wishes, I left home to start nursing at St Helier Hospital in Carshalton Surrey. We worked a basic 48 hour week but invariably much longer – but the bliss of going to my own bedroom in the nurses home more than made up for that. Then began a time of much confusion. I still day-dreamed about marriage and children. I had 'boyfriends' – not many, and none who persuaded me beyond the bounds of my convent puritanism. At the same time I was developing passionate attachments to a number of women – some of whom became friends for life – but none of whom was able to tempt me into any sexual activity, even if they'd known what and how to do it. (My old school friend still says I should write a memoir entitled *Bosoms I Have Been Clasped To*.)

I'm sorry to say that at this time of my life religion really was a substitute for sex. I flexed the muscles of my intellect a little by thinking my way out of the Catholic church and into the Anglican communion. That may not seem very adventurous but to an underdeveloped 20 year old, brought up on hell-fire and infallibility, it was adventure enough. Also, I was surrounded by 'unlit lamps' which suited me very well.

However, by the time I began my midwifery training and incidentally had fallen deeply in love with midwifery, I had also met a Major in the RAMC, and woken up with some shock and horror to the possibility that I might be a lesbian. Once again, my friend, a fascinating and complex woman, whose marriage to a well-known poet had failed, insisted that of course she had no such transgressive desires. The pain of that bewildering chapter is still a very sharp memory but I began to wake up.

Not only was I increasingly aware that I loved women but I also became conscious of the fact that I was barely educated and badly needed to use my brain and my nascent skill with words but instead of taking the risk of getting A levels and going for a thoroughgoing university education, I took the easier route of teacher training. At least we had an excellent English department, although by now back in the bosom of Mother Church – what a cave in! – there were yet more nuns.

There, too, against all the odds and rather against my own desires, I met my partner of the next 33 years. Here I'm going to sound rather narcissistic and self-absorbed because I am very unwilling to provide any details that will identify my former partner so whatever I say is going to be partial and one-sided. I'm also unwilling to dissect our relationship and where it eventually went wrong, for much the same reasons.

Our early days together, at a catholic teacher training college, were both a deep revelation of what had been missing in my life and understanding but also excruciatingly painful. My emerging sexuality crashed head on into my guilt at being a sexual being at all. I was physically sick after sex, I had to scrub myself clean, I was haunted by a profound sense of what I can only describe as 'wrongness' and it wasn't until the founder of the Samaritan's, Chad Varah, began the process of getting me sorted out, that we could begin any sort of life together. That we could and did is a tribute to my former partner's patience and to courage on both sides.

It's worth mentioning that I looked for psychiatric help and was told by a 'christian' psychiatrist 'I suspect you know that what you are doing is gravely wrong but I can give you medication to reduce your libido, if you like.' Another – I was nothing if not persistent – told me that God had

sent him a vision of me, married to a doctor and with several children. It's only now that I realize how brave the Samaritans, led by Chad were, and how much they swam against the mainstream.

And what a heady time it was to be venturing into the lesbian world. There was Kenric, as I recollect a rather middle class outfit which provided genuine support and new friends, although it was far from radical. During and after the Flower Power 60's came the first – to me – intimations of a far more radical feminism.

However, although my partner, always the more intellectually, adventurous, was fired up by this, I was far more conventional and cautious. I liked to swagger a bit in my bell-bottoms, to dance at the Gateways, to enjoy the thrill of being 'outside' what I still thought of as the norm but I was not prepared – yet – to turn the world upside down and adopt the root and branch critique of a male directed world which was gradually emerging from the maelstrom of new feminist writing.

So what changed? Here I am in my seventies profoundly committed to the vision of those early feminists who could not have known then how deeply the world will need to change if the earth and her creatures are to survive climate change and the current lethal brands of fundamentalist and consumerist politics. I wish, very much, that I had woken up sooner.

But that is getting ahead of myself. First there were long years in London and in Lincolnshire, making a home with my partner, going twice, late, to university to acquire a qualification and profession in the conservation of antiquities, beginning to write...

Even in deepest Lincolnshire we were not totally immune from the activism of people who wanted to improve the lot and perception of gays and lesbians. We had a close man friend who ran the local CHE group. At a conference in Nottingham we encountered for the first time a rather angry group of women who wanted to set up NOW, a lesbian only organization. (I think that was the acronym but I'm afraid that as usual, work, study, writing superseded activism for me and I have forgotten the details. I did however meet one of that group again in the Gay's the Word bookshop. In Nottingham she'd been called Pat and worn dungarees. Now she was wearing a long, floaty skirt. 'Pat?' I said. 'Call me Juno' she replied.)

Slowly, slowly I became comfortable enough in my own skin to be 'out' all the time – though not to my mother. Is somebody who assumes her mother 'knows', as I'm sure mine did, ever

truly 'out'? Friends, yes, co-religionists, yes, employers, yes, but the acid test is surely your mother?

However, by the time my partner and I returned to London both of my parents had died of lung cancer. I was free to begin my last and biggest job as Head of English Heritage's research laboratories with my lesbian identity plainly identified. I became the person of resort for people who had suffered any kind of sexual harassment or gender discrimination – not a difficult task, as EH was on the whole a civilised place. With hindsight though, I now see that gender definitely influenced management styles and decisions. The guys positively enjoyed ranting and verbally rough housing each other. It was difficult, even at senior management level to make a quieter more nuanced voice heard or taken seriously. The temptation was to out-shout them – something that is still an unsolved dilemma for those relatively few women who make it to senior levels.

In 1993 I met Tonnie, my Dutch wife, at a conference in Washington. It took us until 1997 to realize that we loved each other – mainly because, as one of the tortoise persuasion, I had inched my way towards facing the fact that I wanted to leave my long-term relationship and indeed, that I was capable of doing it. It was a grievous decision. Not only the abandoned suffer loss, grief and anguish over what should have been and wasn't. I, along with so many other women that it's almost a lesbian cliché, have the poet Adrienne Rich to thank for helping me to face the truth. In 1997 I came to Amsterdam to live with Tonnie. In 2000 we were married – the same year that I discovered that I had a biological mother alive in America (she was then 86 and died a year later) – and a brother in UK. He is perfectly accepting of our marriage but he's not quite so keen on my being a poet!

I realise, coming to the end of this account, that I have said very little about poetry, the quiet but perhaps most formative impulse of my life. I have written it since I was 11 years old but in common with so many women never thought my work 'worth' publishing. I have Lilian Mohin of the justly famous Onlywomen Press to thank for instantly recognizing my work, after a chance encounter, and publishing a collection in 1999. What a risk taker she is. It was Lilian who pointed out that much of my poetry is about and for women and my 4th collection *The Silver Rembrandt* (Shoestring Press) has a lesbian as main character in the long poem that forms the core of the book – better late than never!

So here I am, barrelling along now, as one does towards age – no more time for tortoise-ing – and I hope, more connection with other women who care, more friendship, more insight, more love, and more poetry that might make a difference. I have been immensely lucky in my life especially with the women I've known and who've helped me come to terms with my own

identity as a lesbian and a woman. I thank them all, living and dead – and especially the very much alive and loving Tonnie.

Because this is going into an archive and because poetry matters, I attach a poem to remind us that in this year – 2011 – we were still fighting to protect women from being stoned to death.

A SHORT CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF STONE

Balance is a game small girls play in the shadow of mud brick walls.

A pile of jackstones to flip from grubby palm
to bony knuckle.

Dreaming, sorting stone babies.

Some have gold flecks
like the sun in a pail of water.

Stone in a first pair of grown-up
shoes. His parents. Yours. You kick off
the hot, constraining shoe under your robe.

Your brother burns flags. Throws unerring stones
at embassy cars. Skips home
like a young goat.

Your first child is a girl.

You make a leaf bracelet
for her chubby wrist.

Not very old yourself
you try to soften the stony disregard
of your not very old husband

who will never believe
his sperm chooses. Two
baby girls.

One furious father. One tearful wife,
runs from the compound leaving a smell
of scorch in the air,

holds her swollen cheek, trips on a stone,
falls in the gravelly dust, is lifted
by a friend of her brother,

who runs his thumb gently under her eyelid
and the rest will soon be history
written by stone.

Kate Foley.

Angela, born 1939

[Angela made a voice recording of her life story, completed over several days: this is a shortened version of the transcript.]

I was born in the Midlands, into a family of mother, father and three brothers. We were quite well-off, actually, for the times. My brothers went to a private college until they were eighteen, I went to a private school from four and a half to eleven, I passed the Eleven Plus and then I went to High School. And I left when I was fifteen, because I wasn't very good in school and I was unhappy there, so I finally managed to persuade my parents to let me leave.

Two of my brothers are dead for sure, I don't know about the third and I don't really care. We didn't have a good relationship as we were growing up, I was quite frightened of him because he was a big, big tease and he would take this teasing to a quite serious level, so I was very nervous of him. Also I think he was my father's favourite – if my father had a favourite – I certainly wasn't, because my mother apparently always wanted a girl, and she had three boys, and when she had me, eight years after the third boy, she was apparently absolutely delighted, but my father said, 'Well you've got what you wanted now, you can get on with it,' and from that moment I never experienced any fatherly love whatsoever - no cuddling, no sitting on his knee, no doing things together, nothing, it was almost as if I was invisible.

I didn't have a good childhood. I had lots of things that *were* good about it in a material way, I had riding lessons, ballet lessons, elocution, private school; but I didn't have any friends, because where we lived there weren't any young children around there, only one, which was the gamekeeper's daughter, who I became friendly with... Not an easy childhood, because my mother was my world, and she had to be very careful how much affection she showed me, and that was obvious from the beginning, because of upsetting my father. [...] I had no feelings for my father; my feelings as I grew older, round about twelve or thirteen, grew to dislike, and wondering why on earth my mother had married him.

[...] But they had a strong sexual relationship, and it was something that I was aware of at a very young age, and I really didn't like my father touching my mother. Not that they did it in front of me, but I could hear sometimes in the bedroom, and particularly when I was around twelve, and my bedroom was next to theirs, and it was quite a thin wall. And I really, really hated it, and it made me feel sick, and I felt as if my mother was being abused. So maybe in that respect there was something that manifested itself in my starting to become aware of women being the underdog, and women having to put up with this sort of thing within marriage,

I suppose, as I saw it then. I didn't realise that some women actually want that sort of thing. But I've always felt physically sick about a physical relationship, a sexual relationship, between a man and a woman. I don't feel that way obviously about a sexual relationship between a woman and a woman, and I'm totally okay with a relationship between a man and a man, it's just a man and a woman that I really can't get my head round at all.

I didn't know anything at all about the possibility of women loving women for a long, long time. I grew up feeling... not masculine – certainly not masculine – but not feminine either; I didn't know what I was at all. In fact I started to feel really mixed up. I really loved film stars, and when I was nine, I think, I fell in love with Doris Day in her first movie, and she remained a firm favourite of mine. I didn't have any feelings for boys whatsoever, I didn't even think about them. Didn't want to find out about them, wasn't interested in them at all. Not one little bit. My sexual stirrings began when I was at work - I worked as a secretary for a quantity surveyor – and I started to have these sort of sexual stirrings if you like, of a mental kind, I think, more than of a physical kind, about another girl who worked in the office, but they became quite strong. [...] It didn't come to anything, and I don't to this day know whether she was straight or gay or what she was, but... It was all in my mind; but the feelings were very strong, and it was very enlightening, because my emotional feelings were switched on for the first time.

But I didn't realise I was gay. [...] I tried to go out with men a little, to please my mother, who'd got this fantasy of seeing me coming down a big staircase dressed in white, and I really wanted to try to achieve this for her. I forced myself to go to dances on a Saturday, and each time I'd come back and my mother and father would be in bed but my mother would call me in and ask me if I'd met anybody, and of course I'd got to this point now where I had to lie about things, started a lifetime of deceit really, which is still carrying on to this day in certain areas, which is a great shame I think.

[My mother] died at the age of sixty-two, when I was twenty-five, and her death absolutely devastated both my father, who was seventy-two, and myself. And this episode brought me, and I suppose him to a certain extent, to a new era of our lives. I was twenty-five, I knew that I was gay by this time, and I also knew that my mother would have been devastated, devastated if I'd told her that I was, if she'd got an inkling. She had this vision I think of lesbians being absolute dykes, with short hair, cropped hair, suits, shirts, ties and that sort of thing. And she did catch me - I don't know how I got this, but I'd got a magazine from MRG, Minorities Research Group, in London, and I was reading this magazine, and she apparently had opened the envelope by mistake and so knew what it was about, and when she saw me reading it she

was very, very scathing about it, so I knew that I couldn't do anything at all. And my father I thought would kill me if he knew.

However, when she died my father and I were living in this house which I had taken a mortgage on, to release some capital for my father who was now short of money due to some failed business ventures, so it was actually my house. And we were so lonely in it, and so rattling around in it [...]. So we discussed what to do about it, and we decided to have a lodger, to at least fill the house up, so I advertised, and one of the people that came, and which we eventually chose, was a young girl [...]. And she and I got on really, really, really well together; she was awfully nice. And she had her own bedroom, and she was out at work, I was out at work, and we shared the cooking and the housework, and we ate together of course. Then she decided that it was very cold, and that it would be a good idea if we shared the same bed, if we slept together. So I went along with this, and she came and slept in my bedroom, she slept in my bed. And this was very, very difficult for me, because I found her very, very attractive. She was very attractive. And eventually, after about, I don't know, maybe three months or so – oh, she was going out with boys, and I was trying again to go out with boys, or men I should say, because I was twenty-five. And I found that I was getting really, really jealous when they pulled up outside in his car, whichever boyfriend it was, and they'd be about an hour there saying goodnight, and it really churned me up. And it was very, very difficult for me because she also was very tactile to me, and very... I don't know really, she was giving me mixed messages, sending me really nice cards with lovely words in them, and sort of *lovey* things really.

Anyway, one evening or one night, we went to bed – and before this she was always okay, she never said anything and when we slept together we slept like spoons, and my arms were around her, and my one hand was on her breast, on her naked breast, and she never said anything. And we were fine; but this particular night, we went to bed, and sort of – things happened, actually, and I still don't know to this day whether she knew about it or not, but she was to all intents and purposes asleep, and I moved away from her to turn over, but she moved with me, and I moved away again, and she moved again, and the third time it happened she was almost on top of, her back was on my tummy. So I thought, Oh, I don't know what to do here, but I couldn't stop myself any more, and I did touch her, and I did enter her. And when I was inside her I thought, My God, what am I doing? If she wakes up and I'm in this situation with her, I mean, it would be just awful! So I stopped it, and I came out, and I turned over.

And of course I didn't get any sleep that night, because I thought, I wonder if she'll say anything in the morning? She didn't, but I just couldn't get over the fact that I'd crossed that

line with her. And I worried and I worried and I worried about it, and I finally decided to tell my father what was going on. So I told him, and surprisingly, he was absolutely fine about it! And he said that he'd always thought that maybe I was going to be gay. But it was okay, he didn't mind it at all.

[...] And I said, 'Well, what am I going to do about it? I can't go on like this.'

And he said, 'Well, you'd better tell her.'

So when she came home from work a few days later, I said... I think at this point, she'd said that she would go back to her own room, I think that's what happened – and anyway, she was in her own room, and I went in, and I said to her, 'You know we get on very well, we're very fond of each other, I'm very fond of you, I said, but unfortunately for me I have feelings for you that aren't like a sister.'

And I didn't go into detail, but I did suggest that she'd better leave and find somewhere else to live, which in effect was what she did.

And I wrote her a letter, and I gave her a piece of Doulton, which she loved, and I said how sorry I was, but things were out of my control really, I couldn't help being the way I was. I didn't get a reply from that, I didn't see her again until about six months later, I think. And she came in where I worked, I was the secretary to the General Manager of a department store, and she was there with a boyfriend, and we just sort of had a conversation, of 'How are you?' and that sort of thing. And I haven't seen her from that day to this, which was 1965, I think or 1966. [...] So that really started me on the way to my gay life.

I was stuck with my father for the next eighteen years. As I say, he was seventy-two when my mother died, I was twenty five, and he was incapable of looking after himself, he couldn't make a cup of tea, he couldn't do anything at all really around the house, all he could do was wash himself and dress himself and that sort of thing, and he became one hundred percent dependent on me. And I just couldn't say, as I think I was probably entitled to, bearing in mind the sort of upbringing that I'd had, but I just couldn't tell a seventy-two year old man to sort himself out and get his own home, it was not really an option for me. I wanted to, but I just found I couldn't. But the good side was that my father and I did become closer because of the fact that I was gay, and when I did start to get some gay friends - due to the fact that I contacted the Samaritans, and they helped me, and I helped their other clients who were gay – one of whom was a chap called Paul, and he and I tried to start a group for sexual equality. And being a man I think he probably went cottaging, being a gay man it was easier to find other gay men I think, which was what he did, and then he got to know the places to go locally, and so I started to have

a social life! A gay social life, which suited me down to the ground, and I felt I'd come home at last, and it was a wonderful feeling, you know. And I had this misconception that once I'd found another gay person that I could fall in love with, and they'd fall in love with me, that we would all live happily ever after. And of course that didn't happen.

My father was very good - because he was very clingy as well, socially, he also came into my gay life as well, in that he'd go to parties with me, and we had a little toy poodle called Marilyn, and Marilyn and my father would go to nightclubs, we'd go to parties, and we were quite well known because it was quite an unusual sight! And I didn't have a problem at all bringing gay people in for parties, or - I can't say sleeping, or starting to sleep with women, because that would give the wrong impression, because I didn't do that... My first, what shall I say, the first time I had sex was with an Italian girl who came over to meet me, we'd been sort of pen friends from a gay magazine, and that was my first experience, which was about maybe a year or two years after my mother died. And she stayed for a week I think, and I had my first experience of sex with her, which wasn't very successful, she was far more experienced than I was. Well, I had no experience at all, so that wouldn't be difficult, but it wasn't very good, it wasn't very nice even. But she seemed okay about it. And anyway, she went back to Italy, and I continued with my quest to find The One, by going to lots of places, gay places, parties, night clubs and so on. I also had another pen friend, from San Francisco, who came over to see me, and I didn't find her attractive at all. But she expected to sleep with me, although we'd never met before, and never even exchanged photographs! And that really freaked me out, so that was a no-no.

The first real emotional relationship I had was with a journalist, Chris. And she came into my life because Paul and I, with this sexual equality group, I can't remember how, but we came into the local paper, they did an article on us, and then we were contacted by the *News of the World*, this chap in the *News of the World* contacted me and asked me to give an interview with Paul, and he would meet us in a hotel. And I went with my little dog. And the article that came out of it was more about me actually than about Paul or about the group we were trying to form, and I was absolutely horrified, because he didn't tell me that he was actually doing an interview on me, and it was very, very sneaky, what he'd done. Anyway, there was no going back, and I was the secretary to the General Manager, and I thought Oh my God, what have I done, what have I done, it's all going to come out now, everybody will know in the store! So the next morning, the Monday morning, I went in to see my boss and told him, and he was wonderful about it. He put his arms round me and hugged me, and said, 'If you have any problems with anybody in the store, I want to know about it.' And he was absolutely super.

But Chris and I, it was a very, very complicated relationship. She was in love with a married woman [...], but there was no sexual relationship there, and that's where I came in. And I took Chris on, knowing this, and I had to just put up with Chris just coming late at night, after she'd been to the pictures maybe with this woman, spending the night together, and Chris would go at eleven o'clock, I wouldn't see her again until the middle of the week, and that was it, that was the whole thing. I had many, many opportunities to be unfaithful to her - women seem to find me attractive, and I could have been unfaithful many a time, but I wasn't interested. I am definitely a one-woman woman, and I've never been unfaithful in my life. I've had five relationships, and I've never been unfaithful in my life.

So I stuck to Chris, and put up with it, until she met somebody called Sandra. And Sandra was a real floozie, she was a tart, but she sort of got charmed by her, and she wanted both of us. And I wasn't going to put up with another person in our life. So I said No, it's either me or it's Sandra, and you have to decide, and I'll give you six months. Anyway, within six months I'd [...] met Rita, and we hit it off, and she was a schoolteacher, and we decided yes, it would be okay. Funnily enough, Rita was the one that I wasn't really in love with. I was fond of her, but I think I went from Chris to Rita much too quickly. But I ended up seven years with Rita, within a few months we were living together in my flat, with my father, and oh.... She was okay with my father to begin with, but when he went to America on a visit and was away six or seven weeks, she just changed, and she caused a lot of trouble, not so much between my father and herself, but between herself and myself. [...] She] caused so much trouble, so many problems, and it was very, very unhappy after the first eighteen months. But we lived together because I couldn't afford to leave, because we had a joint mortgage, and neither could she, but we rubbed along. I wasn't unfaithful, she wasn't unfaithful, we rubbed along until one day she decided to say that she was going to bring a terrible, terrible aunt of hers to live with us, in another spare room. [...] And I couldn't stand the thought of this aunt coming, and she was totally disliked by the family as well, so I said, No, that's it, the house goes up for sale. And to cut a long story short, we parted. I was *so* glad to get out of that relationship, it was really a very unhappy one.

[...] And there followed some quite really fallow years, because I was busy working, I'd got a new job, and looking after my father, and I had two dogs then, and that really took all of my time; and I suppose the relationship with Rita had influenced my outlook on relationships, it had kind of put me off quite a bit from looking for somebody else. And I didn't do anything about finding somebody else for about four years, I think.

However, now we come to Helga, who was a German girl. I think she was twenty-five when I met her, and I was sixteen years older. I met her at a party, given by a friend of mine who's Austrian, and Helga was a friend of this friend. And she was very, very charismatic - tall, blonde, sexy, very liberating, and I fell for her like a ton of bricks. And she was very, very romantic, she loved romantic things. And the next day after we met, I think, she flew back to Germany, she was only on holiday here for six days. And so we had to continue, or start, a relationship going, by telephone and by letters, and we certainly did that. I would get as many as five letters a day from her, and parcels, and it was all very, very intense, very romantic! And I suppose because she was in a different country, and she was a different type of person, it was all sort of very exciting. So I fell one hundred percent for her.

The next time we met was in January of '82 - that's right, we'd met in the October '81 - and she flew in for six days in January '82, in the middle of most awful weather, snowed up and everything, but we had a very nice week together. My father thought she was absolutely super, and they got on very, very well together. [...] She went back, we continued the letter writing and everything else, the telephone calls ... Easter came, and she came over again, and that was fine, and we arranged to go on holiday in June with a couple of other friends. But she dumped me a few days before the holiday, to say that she was going back to her ex, who she'd never really got over.

[...] and I tried to pick up the pieces as best I could, but started to drink a little bit. I didn't really even like what I was drinking, but the pain was awful, the rejection was awful. And it was... I don't know, it was... really, really dreadful, the rejection, and it brought a lot of negative feelings up as well, feelings of failure - that I was a nonentity, and couldn't really succeed at anything, and nobody really cared about me, and blah blah blah ... and I think that was the reason that I was drinking.

I started to go with a friend to some clubs, not to meet anybody but just to go somewhere, really, and I met this person, Frances, who was a businesswoman, very well off. But I was suffering very badly with my blood pressure at this time, it was something that I'd inherited from my mother and her sisters, and I'd had it since I was thirty-six, I'd had problems, and anything of course like stress, or anything like that, was very, very bad for it. And it was at its worst at this point, and I was actually passing out with it, [...] And because I was so ill, and I had to have complete rest with no stress or anything like that, the doctor came and said that I couldn't go on like this, and that it was either my father or me, because my life was in danger. To cut a long story short, my father went into a home, and I took about six months I think to get round, and during that time I was retired through ill health from my job, and I was forty-three.

Frances and I had an affair, but it didn't last very long, about six months, and I finished it because there was no commitment there really, on either side. So I went to clubs again - my father was still in a home, but I was visiting him every day, and on Wednesdays and Sundays he came home, so... he actually was in a very, very nice home for twelve months before he died, at eighty, in October 1983.

I met my next, and most important relationship, I think - Julie - the week after my father became ill, with meningitis, and when he died I'd only known Julie a week. That's right. And then he died. So that left me at last on my own in my own place, and Julie and I started a relationship, which was difficult, because I had a cat as well as two dogs, and I couldn't really leave her very much at all, because I lived on a main road, and I didn't want to leave her on her own So five weeks later, I moved, lock stock and barrel and animals, to her home. And this was a big, big mistake. I didn't know Julie very well at all, but I was so bowled over with her, it was instant love, love at first sight, as soon as I saw her walk in the club with her friends, she just knocked me for six, she really rocked my world.

I spent Pop's money - he'd only got five hundred pounds - on his funeral, and a holiday abroad for Julie and myself; a friend had my animals. Julie stipulated no sex on this 'honeymoon,' as she called it, and a couple of months later Julie and Frances slept together, which really, really brought home to me again these awful feelings of rejection, and it was very, very difficult to deal with, the betrayal and the rejection, and I had to go away for a week on my own, and it was a terrible time. The return was really bad, because Julie and I were living in the flat by then, and she had got these love bites on her neck; but she said she would finish it with Frances, and we'd try again. But within a year, she was unfaithful again, and I think she was doing her best to destroy the relationship. [...] And I had five car accidents in the two years that I was with her, and I was also in therapy, I was very, very vulnerable indeed. And the last accident could have killed me. I ended up in hospital with seventeen stitches in my head, and a broken elbow, and lots and lots and lots of bruising, and some broken ribs. But she didn't even visit me. [...] So I was preparing to leave, before the accident, and I found a cottage, but by this time she'd already moved out anyway. And she was hoping I think to have this relationship with a fellow social worker. But she took everything we had, I just had this sofa to sleep on, and the television set, and of course my animals, and I also kept her cat because she didn't particularly want it, she wasn't a big animal lover. So then I had two dogs and two cats. But when it didn't work out with the social worker, she kept ringing me for help, and I always gave it. So... I was very, very much in love with her still, for the next four years or so, even though she had several affairs, and one was a live-in, for about three years, I think. So I was into therapy again, I had

nightmarish symbolic dreams all the time, which continued every week, about twice a week, until fairly recently, about nine months ago.

We've tried friendship twice, instigated by Julie, but she seriously abused it again, and destroyed it, and then there was no contact for eight years, until a Christmas card – and then we tried again last year, and I was feeling okay now, I wasn't in love with her, I could handle it, but she really, really screwed it up again, and also at the time finished her sixteen-year-old relationship, because she wanted another one, who was in a twenty-year relationship, and they are now together. So I don't have any contact with her now, and I just think she's a really, really sick person, and very twisted, as well as being a supremely selfish and self-obsessed person, like indeed Helga is. So I'm so glad it's over.

I've been celibate since 1985 when Julie left, not by choice – I've tried ads, and replied to adverts as well, and the results were absolutely awful. So when I came here in 1997, and I was fifty-six then I think, I just closed the door on everything to do with an emotional life, and the scene, and what have you, and I had a new puppy because my two dogs had gone by now, and my cats, so I had a new puppy, and I decided to make a new life for myself. And then I had another rescue dog, and then another, so I had three rescue dogs again. And at the moment, this is how it is; I've been here thirteen years.

Are they happy years? In some ways yes, because I've really grown as a person, I've come to terms with everything in my life, I'm much more at peace with myself, my blood pressure is stable, although I'm on medication for it I don't have any problems with it. I had breast cancer with I was forty-nine, that was in 1989, I've had three operations to do with hip replacements, so I haven't had it easy at all, but I appreciate the good things in my life very, very much, and I do know that there are so many people worse off than myself, so I'm not unhappy. I have my dogs until... I don't have my dogs, and then I don't know, I might feel differently, and it will depend very much on my own health as well. And if I was diagnosed with something that was going to be progressive, I think I'd probably toddle off to Switzerland, and go that way, because I have no family and a lot of my friends have died now anyway, and when you're older you don't replace friends as quickly, it's very, very difficult. And I have one or two straight friends, and one or two old gay friends.

I feel isolated here - I mean, I always wanted to live in a village, which is fine, but village life can be insular, and very narrow-minded and gossipy, and I would never, never come out here, at all, there have been one or two very nasty incidents about that sort of thing, and I would never ever come out, because village people, they're not very well educated in the ways of the world. So it's difficult on one's own. I live a distance away from my gay friends anyway. So I don't

know what the future holds. I'm looking after my dogs who have all got medical problems; that takes a lot of time, and a lot of money, but I'm committed to them, and I do the very, very best I can, I want them to live a long time. So life isn't great, but it's certainly not unbearable, I get a great amount of pleasure from my artwork, I enjoy my own company, I don't look for other people to solve my problems or to lean on, because I've learnt that I have to stand on my own two feet and do the best I can.

So I don't know about the future, like anybody I don't know what's in store, but I feel strong about it, I'm sure I'll be able to cope – if I can't, well I'll just have to deal with it the best way I can. But that's what my life has taught me, through all the things that I've been through, that's what it's taught me, that I have to look to myself, there's nobody to help me, nobody to lean on. Whether that's a good thing or not, I don't know, but for me it's very good to have reached that level of independence.

I would like some more gay friends of course, I really feel very... annoyed sometimes, that I have to keep up this pretence all the time of being somebody I'm not in my life, to the point where if I have people or I have visitors, or people come that aren't gay, then I have to make sure that magazines like *Diva* are out of the way, gay films are under lock and key, and that sort of thing, and of course I have to be careful that I don't land myself in it! So yes, I would like more gay friends certainly, but a little bit closer, so that we could perhaps have a coffee occasionally, or lunch, and just keep in touch, and just chill out as it were. So that's where I am at the moment anyway – not unhappy, reasonably contented, and that's it, really.

Sylvia, born 1942

I was born at High Beech in Epping Forest on 14th May 1942. It was wartime, my father was in the Merchant Navy and my mother had been working as a Barmaid. It was because my father was in the services that my mother was taken to a Nursing Home rather than the Maternity Home nearest to her, where she lived, in East London. Born to a champagne taste with a lemonade pocket!

I was an only child – my mother impressed on me at an early age that she could “never go through that again”. She was Church of England, working class with aspirations, my dad was Catholic Liverpool Irish, without aspirations. When it came to schooling friends impressed on my mother that the Catholic school in the district was far superior to the others. So at the age of seven, having been registered at a Catholic School, I was baptised with a couple of other “loose marbles”.

I suffered primary school, passed the Eleven-plus and was transferred to an Ursuline Convent School. I thought this place was marvellous. The orderly atmosphere, the smell of floor polish, it all felt safe and civilised, and it was OK to have crushes, on nuns as well as other girls. I am ashamed to say that I did not take full advantage of a grammar-school education, but just worked at the bits I enjoyed and coasted through the rest. I left at sixteen to become a junior in a Solicitor's office in the Strand, London.

At seven years of age my aunt had taken me to see Margaret Lockwood in "The Wicked Lady" – I was absolutely bowled over when she put on men's clothes. It was the first time I had seen this. I fell in love with her immediately and faithfully. At fifteen I began to realise that I did not relate to the boys as my friends did, I liked being with girls, I thought they were much softer and nicer. Realising that this was perhaps a little odd, I tried to make myself like my friends, and pretended to like male filmstars and a boy I picked out, particularly for his red hair, he was easy to identify!

My mother at this time began her own campaign to "get you settled". Settled meant married and staying at home as she had done. At first I resisted. My dad had spoken about a book called "The Well of Loneliness", which I read, avidly. I confided to a friend that I thought that I was like this person. My friend was horrified and said "you must never say that" – so I didn't, in fact I didn't even dare think it anymore. So I gave in and joined Mum's campaign.

I met a man at a dancehall in London who had been married before, who seemed very taken with me and after a two-year courtship we married. I couldn't understand how I was unable to enjoy love-making as much as he. The desire was there, but the fulfilment never materialised. The other big disappointment was the lack of companionship. As an only-child I had missed the friendship that I believed existed between brothers and sisters. I had expected that my husband would be a friend as well as lover, provider and protector. Big mistake. We were on different wavelengths entirely.

Our first child, a boy, was born eighteen months after the marriage. I love my son but I found motherhood really difficult. I would say it took about three years to overcome some of the resentment and disappointment I felt about marriage and motherhood. At this time we had been living on a new estate in Essex, but as my husband travelled away with his work, I became very isolated and lonely, and it was decided that we should sell the house and move back to East London, nearer to my parents.

I suggested that I should stay at Mum's and go into London to raise the deposit for the next house. This I did taking temporary work. Suddenly, after three years in the wilderness I was

alive. I bought a mini-skirt, bounced my way to the station each morning, kissing baby-boy goodbye and moved into a different non-domestic world. I made friends with a young woman, my age, who was living the swinging sixties in a big way. Over six months the friendship developed and I found that I was dreading the weekends with baby, husband and responsibilities, but longing for Monday morning.

These feelings frightened me. I tried to talk to my mother about my predicament, and started by saying that there was someone at work I had become fond of – I didn't get any further. She exploded, shouted at me about my responsibilities as a wife and mother, continued in the vein that I would not be allowed to bring scandal into the family.

Anyway, that was it. I decided that I had to pull myself together and "get real". I left the job, we now had enough money for the deposit. I closed myself down. I think it took about a year to get over it. I spoke to no-one.

I had a second baby about two years later. I had gone into domesticity seriously. I now had two children, a nice house, a husband who loved me and respectability. I joined the school PTA, took the children to Mass every Sunday and became a model wife and mother.

My mother had always been a significant factor in my life. She visited every morning and afternoon, helping with the children and filling her life with mine. When my daughter reached school age I realised that I was moving into a seriously "vegetative" state, and decided that I would take a job. As my husband worked unsociable hours the only recourse was to work school hours to fit in with the children and domestic duties. I applied for and got a job as a library assistant in a comprehensive school.

I loved it. I love the work in the library, I loved listening and talking with the teachers and the pupils. My boss was friendly and grateful for my work and input. Of course, the inevitable happened. I became too fond of the boss.

In the three years that I worked at the school my mother had descended into senile dementia, and had been hospitalised. My father's health had worsened. He died first, then six weeks later my mother died. This was a stunning event for me. I felt like a small boat that had been towed along by a huge liner – and now the liner was gone. I was afloat, on my own for the first time.

My boss became even more friendly, she invited me to her home, we went to the theatre and the friendship became a little more intense. Then came the day when I could no longer contain my feelings and I declared myself. It was a disaster. I drove home in tears, sobbing uncontrollably only to meet my husband, painting the kitchen ceiling, when I arrived. His first concern about

my state was had I smashed the car. The next question was I pregnant, the third was I having an affair.

For the first time in my life I spoke "I'm gay" – this was quickly amended to bi-sexual as I realised that this was more acceptable, to him as well as me.

Once the Genie was out of the bottle she couldn't be put back. I realised that I had to do something. I went to a meeting at the Chepstow pub, run by the wonderful Jackie Forster. For the first time I was seeing other women like me, it was exciting, terrifying and totally liberating.

I realised that I needed to seek out women whose experiences were similar to my own. I was married, with two children, a Catholic, working-class woman. Through Gay Switchboard I was given the name and contact number for a Catholic Lesbian group with whom I made contact.

This group was my salvation. I met women who were challenging the church, women who were bold and courageous. I also met my partner, at the time of writing we have been together for thirty years.

Would my life have been different if I had not come out? Oh, yes. I think I would have descended into a life of depression, anger, concealment and infirmity. My soul would have shrivelled. I feel I have lived my life authentically – whatever the cost, and it has been high. I have little contact with my two children or grandchildren, my partner and I have lost jobs and homes because of our sexuality and our refusal to conceal it.

Yes, times have changed. Civil Partnerships were in the realms of fantasy when I came out. There are laws about equality which we can use, if you dare. Do I feel more free about revealing my sexuality – the answer has to be no, definitely not. There may be laws in place and positive publicity, but I believe that there is a deep, untapped core of fear about sexuality that resides in the majority of the population.

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After being together 26 years, in 2007 my partner and I became legally Civil Partners. At the same time we made plans for our retirement and decided to look for Sheltered Housing for the over 60s. We chose a small town on the Welsh border that we knew and loved. We purchased a two-bedroomed flat on a small complex, bade farewell to friends in Kent and moved in October 2007.

The other residents welcomed us and appeared friendly, particularly our nearest neighbours, a married couple who waylaid us almost on a daily basis. They persuaded us to join the

Residents' Association and their community group, which met in the foyer each afternoon. This couple seemed to hold an important position in the complex, he was chair of the residents' association, also managing the gardens and appeared to be the first point of call for any information about the complex. They persuaded us to join the committee of the residents' association and we were told by other residents that they were highly delighted with us.

We never discussed our relationship, and were never asked to define ourselves. It was not a subject for discussion and we lived discreetly. All went well for three months, then we noticed that our neighbours, Mr and Mrs Bully, were ignoring and avoiding us. We became aware that they were making a big issue of this, and involving other residents in their behaviour. The small group that they ran each afternoon, in the lobby, became hostile and residents were avoiding us. Other residents who were friendly began to speak to us in whispers, afraid of being seen or heard talking to us.

This went on for five months. Our health suffered and we began to creep about the building trying to be invisible [...]. We made an informal approach to the Community Development Officer of the Housing Association, who we knew was a particular friend to Mr and Mrs Bully, and made private visits to their flat. He agreed to set up a meeting which took place between one of us and Mr Bully. At that meeting Mr Bully was asked on four occasions what it was that we had done to upset him. He prevaricated, saying "what do you think you have done" and used other tactics to avoid answering. He was offered an apology for whatever it was that was upsetting him, which he refused until the fourth time. He would not agree to further meetings.

Living in Sheltered Housing is unlike other accommodation. It has an intensity because of the close proximity and nature of the buildings. Because life was becoming intolerable one of us finally spoke to the Scheme Manager, who was very supportive and understanding, having experience over a number of years of Sheltered Housing and its difficulties. We said that as we could get no explanation for the behaviour we concluded reluctantly that only thing left was homophobia. The Scheme Manager contacted a senior member of staff at the Housing Association immediately. We waited to see what would happen. We waited for a week, and when spoken to her again she informed us that we would have to put any complaint in writing to our Housing Officer, which we did.

The Housing Officer responded and came with the Head of Housing to see us in our flat. They listened to us, but refused to accept that the behaviour was due to homophobia. The Head of Housing wrote to us and said that he would be interviewing Mr and Mrs Bully, but in his opinion the behaviour was not motivated by "sexual discrimination".

We waited, and waited. After four weeks silence we approached Victim Support who advised us to write and say that it would be “beneficial” for us to hear from them. After five weeks, the Housing Officer and Head of Housing returned to see us. We watched them arrive. We watched while Mrs Bully approached their car and while she laughed and joked with them, and while they laughed and joked with her.

They finally arrived at our flat ten minutes late. The interview was hostile. We were accused of “playing the homophobic card/game” – twice. We said that we were not satisfied with this. We tried to explain that homophobia is in the perception of the victim, and that we should be believed. The HO said that she would take the complaint back to the office. The HM was particularly hostile and stormed out of the flat leaving us feeling desperate. As on their first visit, we agreed eagerly to take part in mediation.

There followed a visit by a Director and Deputy Director. It was agreed that, although Mr and Mrs Bully were reluctant, mediation would take place. [...] The shuttle mediation seemed to be going well – then we realised that [...] they no longer wished to continue. We realised from this that the Bullys had no intention of resolving the situation, and that they were possibly enjoying all the excitement. At this point we had spoken to eight members of the Housing Association staff, who maintained that the behaviour was not motivated by homophobia, but who never seemed to apply themselves to stopping the behaviour.

In desperation we wrote a letter of complaint to [...] the Chief Executive. A Complaints Officer finally wrote to us implying in the letter that not only could she not find any basis for homophobia, but that there was little evidence for bullying. This was the final straw. We decided to leave the flat and rent privately in the town. After we left the Sheltered complex, and had begun to recuperate a little, we approached the Ombudsman to investigate our complaint, which he did.

We are convinced that the cause of the bullying was homophobia – Mr Bully had said “it’s your gender I don’t like!” What we have been unable to find out is who told them about us, as we certainly did not. We know that the trouble started within weeks of completing a “Peace of Mind” form – the only occasion where we declared that we are Civil Partners. Which leads us to the conclusion that there was a breach of confidentiality by a member of the HA staff.

So far as our plans for retirement are concerned, they have been thoroughly destroyed. We are now living back in England, knowing that we can never live in sheltered accommodation again while both of us are alive, and very nervous that such a thing might happen again.

So far as age is concerned, I really believed that the issue of being Lesbian would diminish with age. I do not believe this now. It seems that people think we might “grow out of it”, apart from the fact that sexuality is a sensitive issue with all older people, particularly women. Men are always expected to be sexual, women are always expected to conceal their sexuality. As we age we seem to become subjects of ridicule.

My hopes and fears for the future? My hopes are that we will both remain reasonably fit and active as possible, with the ability to make decisions and take responsibility for our own lives. My fears, of being dependent and at the mercy of people who find me disgusting and dirty.

We are very content at this present time – we live our lives discreetly but not fearfully, we are active and interested, not so much in outside matters, but with the gifts of age.

Janet, born 1943

I was born in suburban north London of middle class parents (mother a teacher and father a civil servant) in 1943. I have one brother 6 years my senior. My parents owned their own home, a detached house on an estate. They were very private people who did not readily invite relatives or friends to visit.

I failed the 11+ so my parents paid for a convent education (despite not being Catholic). I did not particularly like school apart from art and pottery lessons. Later I obtained a B.Sc Hons. degree in behavioural sciences as a mature student. I continued my interest in pottery throughout my life and now run a little pottery business from home.

My best friend lived just across the road and although we did not go to the same school we have been friends for ever. Her mother was very well read and used to recommend books for us. One such was *The Well of Loneliness* which ‘alerted’ me to women like us. The other was *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir and I remember thinking thank goodness there is someone else who feels like me. But I didn’t take that thought one stage further and think there must be lots of women reading this who think likewise.

I did not at that time identify myself as being gay. I wanted to love and be loved (who doesn’t) but I couldn’t see myself walking down the aisle.

I found home life claustrophobic because of my domineering mother so I obtained work which meant moving away from London and over my life I have gradually moved further and further north!

Despite my feelings of ambivalence about walking down the aisle, when working in Leicester I met my husband – my job as Young Conservative Organiser was heterosexuality par excellence – and we married (against my parents' wishes because they thought he wasn't good enough for me) in 1968 when I was 25. It was just what you did at the time! The marriage lasted 6 years during which time I had a boy child.

I began to feel trapped in the marriage and unsatisfied in some deep but unspecified way. I remember wanting to bring home books from the library about divorce but thinking he would see them. Then he began an affair with another woman and I became more alienated from my situation. Just at that time I met a woman through friends and we began a passionate affair. I left my husband and went to live with her (parents shocked again). A long and protracted and harrowing court battle ensued during which I lost custody of my son. This was quite the worst outcome for us both and a tragedy in my life. My relationship with her lasted 13 years. Unfortunately she was a big drinker and also had several affairs during our relationship which upset me greatly.

During the time we were together we met Helen, my present partner. Helen and I liked each other a lot but I wasn't keen to have an affair with her since I was badly affected by my partner's infidelity. Eventually my partner, perhaps to assuage her own guilt, encouraged us to do so! That resulted in my leaving my partner for Helen and we have now been together for 23 years. We really complement each other with interests in common as well as different ones.

I have always been 'out' to friends and relations but at work I have found it difficult to come out. I was for many years a charity fund raiser and latterly I worked in a tourist information centre. I would certainly not refute being gay but no one ever asked – I don't suppose anyone ever does! It has been isolating but I always felt these particular work colleagues would rather not know.

Helen is 7 years older than me and we often discuss 'what if' situations such as not being able to drive any more or cope with the house and garden. I suppose we postpone decisions whilst these things are not an immediate problem. Worry about it when it happens. But we both agree we would hate to be 'stuck' in an old folks' home amongst heterosexuals. Rather stick it out here even if we are a danger to ourselves! 'Here' is a cottage just over three miles from the nearest village in rural Scotland.

Apart from custody issues I wouldn't change anything about my life in particular reference to being gay. I am sure I have had a far more varied and interesting life than had I stuck it out in the marriage.

Pip, born 1946

I was born into an air force family a year after the end of WW2. At the time we were living at my great uncle's house in Gloucester as my dad was posted nearby. After the birth of my brother, in 1948, my Dad was posted to Singapore and we went with my mother to join him there for a year to eighteen months. On returning to the UK, my twin brother and sister were born in 1950. We had a fairly typical forces children education - lots of moving and changing schools. We were educated in local state primary schools wherever we went, these were all rural schools with a mix of local and air force kids. I was quite a bright child and mostly enjoyed primary school, I was 'big sister' and had to do a bit of protecting my younger siblings particularly in Norfolk where 'posh kids' and 'foreigners' were not very welcome amongst local kids. We lived sometimes on RAF stations – all rural – and occasionally in RAF 'hirings' – houses acquired by the RAF for families to live in, usually in villages. Because my Dad was a senior officer we lived in large very pleasant houses with gardens. My mother was a teacher and tended to get jobs wherever my Dad's career took us. She worked fairly continuously from the time we were all at school.

In some respects my childhood up to the age of 11 was pretty free. We roamed the countryside on our bikes and had plenty of kids to play with and as long as we turned up at mealtimes, we were left pretty much to our own devices. My mother was very creative and made loads of toys and costumes for us to play with, she was also remarkably free about gender roles and was happy to make me a cowboy outfit and to let me wear trousers and shorts and let me have a penknife and toy guns and so on. My favourite 'girls' clothing at the time was a kilt with a proper pin which I used to wear with a little brown leather bag wrapped around my waist as a sporran! I was the classic 'tomboy' and most of my friends were gangs of boys but I did have a few particular girls who were my best friends.

Everything changed when secondary school loomed up over the horizon. I passed my 11+ and as we were on the move again (to Nottingham, Rutland and North Yorkshire in the next 5 years), I was given a place at a co-ed, state boarding grammar school in Norfolk. My parents both thought that it would give me stability for my secondary schooling. I was initially quite excited at the prospect...after all, I'd read the 'school' stories and fancied the idea of midnight feasts and jolly japes! Little did I know what the reality would turn out to be.

In those days (1957) the school was based in an old American army hospital, rows of black painted, corrugated iron nissen huts, linked by concrete walkways, in which we slept and were taught. New buildings were gradually constructed over the 7 years I was there, when I left in 1964, all pupils lived in fairly comfortable boarding houses, there was a brand new gym,

swimming pool, sports hall complex but the classrooms were still the old, black huts. Imagine my horror, aged 11 years, one month and 2 days arriving in my first dormitory, a nissen hut with 32 iron bedsteads, 32 lockers and 16 wardrobes arranged in sets of four on the patchy lino, with 32 complete strangers aged from 11 to 15 who all seemed very confident and cool. I cried for two weeks, got lost, lost my PE kit, found it difficult to manage my clothes, made the mistake of asking whether we shared bath water... there was a rota, two baths a week at specified times; and perhaps worst of all, didn't have the confidence to say that I never used my real name, Rosamond, but was always called Pip.

The school had pretensions, based its existence on the model of a public school, but in fact was a total institution, a prison. [...] There were no telephones and our outgoing letters were read over by staff before they were posted. No visits were allowed. Discipline was harsh, the boys were beaten and all of us had to develop a hard carapace pretty fast, in order to survive. Just before I arrived, I was aware that I was starting to have romantic feelings for other girls and crushes on them, but nothing more. At school the situation we all found ourselves in led to all sorts of strange conventions which we constructed for ourselves, to have some sort of 'family' and comfort within this harsh environment. Older girls unofficially 'adopted' younger girls as their 'daughters' and whole strings of these relationships were set up. I don't remember really being a part of this. Although I got on with most people, I developed a role as clown to be acceptable but also maintain some distance. As I was 'clever' and good at games, I was reasonably accepted, although I do remember being criticised for using long words!!

[...] It was during my first couple of years here that I felt completely sure of my sexuality as a lesbian, it freaked me out but I was sure of it. I was very afraid that I would somehow give myself away or that it would somehow be visible to others - I was very tall and somewhat androgynous looking and a late developer in terms of periods, breast growth and so on. I was obsessed with my body and used to inspect it regularly to see if I was turning into a man. I used to join in with everybody else telling jokes against lesbians and gay men to try to cover my tracks. I can remember dreading anything concerning homosexuals appearing in the news in case I was somehow spotted. Yet we all used to 'practise' kissing with each other for hours - something I joined in with some enthusiasm!! I had crushes on older girls but wasn't exceptional in that.

I went into the Sixth form very young, I was just 15, and we were 'house prefects', having some responsibility for younger children, getting them up in the morning, making sure they were in bed and quiet for lights out and so on, it was then that some of the younger girls had crushes on me which I found rather difficult to handle. There was one girl Susan, who although the same

age as me, was three years behind in terms of classes. We had a passionate obsession with each other although it was no more physical than holding hands sometimes... but we wrote notes and used to gaze out of the window at each other and tried to do various after school activities together, like learning lifesaving in the swimming pool. Her friend Sharon also had a crush on me and was very jealous, sensing there was something reciprocal between Susan and I. It got rather dangerous because she was quite vocal about it. It all ended very badly for me because some of my notes to S ended up in my house mistress's hands (I never discovered how) and I was called in for a very uncomfortable interview. I don't know why I wasn't expelled on the spot, I suspect it was to do with maintaining the school's reputation, but I was demoted from being a prefect and Susan and I never communicated again.

The only person I had come out to at this time was my younger brother, with whom I was very close. He was entirely supportive of me and always has been.

In terms of my school life, particularly in secondary school, being a lesbian definitely affected my academic achievement - I was obsessed about not being discovered, could not concentrate on my studies in spite of being in the A stream and just more or less gave up and escaped to the Library and read and read. I managed to scrape together 8 O levels and a couple of A levels, but by no means fulfilled my potential. Being in what we regarded as a prison for 7 years made me independent but alienated and with no self esteem at all.

Because I was a good sportswoman, I decided to become a PE teacher (didn't know about the stereotypes then!!) and got a place at Chelsea college of PE which was based in Eastbourne. It was more boarding school but only young women! We were worked pretty hard and I suspect quite a few of the lecturers were lesbians but they were all very aloof and formal. There were one or two lesbian couples (students) who everyone knew and talked about but it was all negative and very much frowned on - so lots of double standards and hypocrisy. I was, in retrospect, extremely depressed and self hating at this time. I hated the way I looked and was constantly afraid of people thinking I was a man, I was constantly checking the mirror and shop windows, wherever I could catch my reflection, although in fact I was a perfectly presentable young woman. I didn't achieve very well at college but managed to get a reasonable teaching certificate ultimately. I was not out at all and had difficulty making any more than casual friendships.

In my second year at college, (I was 19) I was the captain of the table tennis club, we played and had coaching twice a week. I met another young woman, to whom I was very attracted. She was the year below me, but we met at the table tennis and one evening I asked if she would like to stay on after the coaching session and have a game - we were both about the same standard

and quite competitive. She agreed and we stayed a couple of hours and played and walked back to our residences together. This happened a few times and it became clear that we were both really into each other. We hatched a plan to see each other at the approaching half term whereby we would go to Leicester (where she lived) and I would visit my cousin who also lived there. We decided to go up together on the Saturday so we could have Friday night at my digs when all my housemates had gone away.

We spent most of the night listening to Dusty Springfield and snogging each other's faces off! It felt too scary for her to actually stay the night, so we met up next day and went on the train up to Leicester. We arranged to meet up nearly everyday and came back down to Eastbourne together at the end of the break. Back at College, it wasn't possible to see much of each other, like school, there was no reason for the years to mix, but thank God for the table tennis! Finally the Easter holidays came round and we spent the whole time together, staying first at my parents' house and then at her Mum's. We spent a great deal of time having great sex. Considering it was my first real sexual experience, it felt very easy and fantastic. I remember thinking for the first time, how could something so fantastic be wrong! Going back to College was tough, no table tennis in the summer, but summer holidays came round and we again spent most of that summer together and had a great time. The next year was my final year and that meant a long teaching practice away in Wiltshire, Sue and I had devised various ways to spend time together with other friends, male and female so that our cover wasn't blown, but it became clear towards the middle of the year that Sue was cooling off. She was aware that I wouldn't be there the next year and she was running for president so had to be seen to be squeaky clean and basically dumped me. I was heartbroken because I had really loved her and it was so great to have a wonderfully uncomplicated initiation into sex.

I got my first job at a co-ed grammar school in rural Somerset teaching PE and English. The school was about to turn comprehensive and I had a really interesting time there for 4 years. The most important thing that happened to me was realising that I could do it...I had the makings of quite a good teacher. I really enjoyed the kids, the other staff really liked me and for the first time for ages, I started to get some self esteem together. There were a few younger staff, mostly married, and we socialised together and as the school had a tradition of camping (tents!!) I got involved with that and made some really good friends and had fun. It was also brilliant to have some money for the first time in my life! My first pay cheque for a month's work was £48, but it felt like a fortune. It meant being able to buy clothes (had to dress in skirts and dresses at school when I wasn't teaching PE), music and being able to go to the theatre and films. I also learned to drive and bought a second-hand mini after a couple of years.

My social life was almost exclusively with the staff at school, and mainly married blokes. I had no idea about how to go about finding other lesbians in deepest Somerset. And then... during my third year at this school, I was invited to play on the staff tennis team. This was a social event where we played tennis with the staff of other local schools. I thought, 'Why not?' and trudged up to school one summer evening to get a lift over to the other school. It was great fun but unfortunately (or not, as it happened) it started to rain. I was aware that Dave, one of my colleagues, had been having an hilarious time on one of the other courts and when the rain stopped was introduced to the source of the hilarity... a very camp gay guy and his partner, J, an attractive woman about my age. We all got chatting. At some point I was talking just to J and she said, pity I didn't meet you sooner, we could have watched the world cup together. I felt a slight frisson and said maybe next time. She then told me she was about to emigrate to Canada the following September... oh no... hopes dashed. Meanwhile the men had arranged for all 4 of us to meet up for a drink which we duly did. During the course of a fairly alcohol fuelled evening, it became clear that something was happening between J and I. We arranged another evening with the men but in fact met several times between the two dates and started a sexual relationship. Summer was approaching and we spent the whole of the summer together, staying briefly at both our parents houses and camping in Cornwall and in Brittany. This was a happy time in some respects although J was even more firmly in the closet than I, and I always felt there was some secret or distress in her life, she was often withdrawn, but it was also tinged with sadness because Canada loomed ever larger. It is strange looking at those days from the perspective of the 21st century where communications technology abounds, but neither of us had 'phones in our digs and I remember once when J was in Canada, I was desperate to talk to her and had to break into school at the dead of night and ring her on the staff room phone. I owned up to the call and paid for it, but it seems absurd to have to go to such lengths. We communicated by letter and reel to reel tapes and gradually the ones from her dwindled to nothing. I was frantic and couldn't talk to anyone about what was going on. I got on well with both her parents but couldn't really explain the strength of my concern. I heard nothing for months and then received a very garbled tape from her. She had had a breakdown and possibly tried to commit suicide, tho' this was never clear. I tried to persuade her to come home and get a job near me and we could set up together. However she had decided to go on a long trip around Canada in a camper van with a friend, who I later realised was her new lover. We maintained some sort of irregular correspondence and I always hoped that sooner or later she would return.

A year later (1971) I got a new job on the Isle of Sheppey (J's parents lived nearby in Rochester). I did think that if she did come home, I would be near. The new school was a

hotbed of radical educational thinking and an exceptionally exciting and demanding place to work. There were a lot of youngish single teachers and we all worked and played really hard. I decided I would give being heterosexual a shot and had a few relationships with some of the young men but really couldn't hack it. [...]

Another young PE student, Is, had come to school on her teaching practice and we got on extremely well and eventually we persuaded her to come and teach full time at the school when she qualified. This she did. We had several places we rented together and we had an on-off sexual relationship, I was increasingly fed up with being in the closet and decided to start telling other people where I was at. Some of the students at school knew and were amazingly supportive (a theme that has recurred throughout my 40-odd years in education) I told some people that I was bi-sexual... a bit of a cop-out but it was the bravest I could be at the time.

I did return to the UK in 1972 and we resumed our relationship but it was extremely fraught, and she was constantly running away and finally decided to get a job in Oxfordshire. There was lots of to-ing and fro-ing - mainly me! She was quite depressed and was desperate to have children. I argued that it wasn't necessary to be married or even in a relationship with a bloke for this to happen but she was quite straight and wanted her parents' approval. In fact she was having a string of relationships with blokes that I didn't know about. It was really only when I went to Lancaster that I was able to say to her, enough. Years later she would still get in touch from time to time, wanting me but not wanting me. She had married and had 2 children, divorced and ended up living as a lesbian but didn't seem any happier and still playing push me, pull you.

I remember seeing an advert for CHE (Campaign for Homosexual Equality) which I cut out and had on my desk for about a year before I plucked up the courage to do anything about it but one day decided to act on it. I went by myself to a particular pub in the Medway Towns and took a deep breath and dived in. Imagine my horror when it was full of blokes! Very friendly and welcoming but blokes! Eventually 4 women came in, in couples and were very suspicious and unfriendly and I was a bit alienated by their obvious role playing. I left feeling even more isolated and depressed and decided I would rather be alone.

I gave the pub one more try and met a bunch of women who were a bit more friendly, they were all soldiers or police women who were based locally and we didn't have much in common. One evening they invited me round to someone's house and we were all hanging out and chatting when one woman said, right the men are going down the pub and the 'girls' are doing (something else - can't remember what). There was a pause and to my horror I realised they were waiting to see which way I would jump...off with the 'boys' or stay with the girls!! I ran.

I did go to one other formal meeting mainly because a woman was the key speaker. Long story short, we did have a sexual relationship although she was bi-sexual and was in a long term relationship with a man, it was very open. The best thing about this liaison was meeting some of her friends who were lovely and not into roles and who reassured me that there were alternatives. This was also my first introduction into organised feminism which was very exciting. I can remember reading Sue Sharpe's book "Girls will be Girls" and being blown away by the fact that she only used the feminine pronoun - it was as if the earth had shifted on its axis.

It was about this time I made a decision to come out to my parents. It felt like the ultimate test of whether I was really secure and happy in my lesbian identity. I felt it would be easier for them, or more precisely, my mother, if I wrote and told her and gave her some time to absorb the news before coming up to see her. I left it up to her as to whether she told my Dad and my Gran, who lived with them at the time. It was a slightly nerve wracking few days waiting for a response, but in fact she rang me and was quite positive about it. She did say that she had always known, which was a lie, and I asked why she hadn't broached the subject with me. She told me that I always seemed so independent that she didn't want to interfere! In fact, although she was quite positive to my face, she said some pretty awful things behind my back. She did tell my Dad, who in true conservative fashion said, 'I don't mind what you do, but why do you have to make a fuss about it?!' My dear old Gran who was in her 80s at the time, said that she didn't really understand it, but if I was doing it, it must be alright! Quite right, Gran. My brother had volunteered to come up to see my parents with me after I had told them, and we spent the whole weekend not addressing it at all, until at the end of the weekend, my brother lost his cool on my behalf and said how could they just ignore my courage in telling them. It wasn't very satisfactory, but at least I had tried. In fact they were always charming to all my girlfriends and lovers when they came to stay and she, my mother, was quite fond of some of them.

At this time (1976) I was applying to university to do a degree and decided to go to Lancaster as it then had a reputation for being the gay university. I was successful and prepared to start out on a new life. History was repeating itself in some respects because I had started a relationship with A who I had known and really liked for several years - she was a friend of my brother - and had known for ages that I really liked her. She had been having a relationship with a much older man who was constantly away and I had the feeling that he was her defence against the rest of the world. She and my brother came down to a party we had and then A started to come down to Sheppey every now and then and finally admitted that she wanted to have a relationship with me. I was thrilled but the catch was she had to go to the States to qualify for citizenship.....anyway we had a glorious summer together and she said she would come up to

Lancaster with me until she had to leave in the October. I found some truly horrible digs in Morecambe a sort of flat above a garage, but that is where we settled for the time she was in England. We found out where the 'scene' was and plunged in.

In retrospect I look on this time as my adolescence. So many lovely women, a great social scene in the town and the uni, intense political awareness raising and activities - demos, conferences, workshops. A had to leave - we agreed to the orthodoxy of the times, not to be monogamous, but to stay loving friends and see what happened. After she left I was approached by the women who lived in two of the big lesbian houses with an offer to move in. I was really pleased and felt accepted by the community I was desperate to be a part of. I was bowled over by this group of 'normal' women, not role playing or aping heterosexual norms and to develop a political understanding to match what had just been gut feelings for so long was fantastic. I threw myself into everything wholeheartedly. A friend cut my hair for me - standard short, spiky, dyke cut, but for the first time in my life and at the grand old age of thirty, I actually looked good - how I had wanted to look for years!!

A continued to write to me, she was getting into all sorts of relationships, which was quite hard for me to deal with, but gave me permission to do the same. I did go over to the States to visit her about 2 years later, she was in a steady relationship the and I think they were worried I would upset their apple cart, but while it was great to see her and the USA, I didn't want to start anything up again.

In some ways I did bow to peer pressure in Lancaster and did some things that I now regret - starting smoking - drinking too much - developing a simple minded separatism, which although useful in some respects, was limiting in others. I wanted so much to be part of this group, that I was pretty ungrounded and did not behave in a way I would now. One issue was the potential to be lovers with every woman around rather than developing friendships - to be faced with choice was completely new to me!....when I say it was my adolescence...this is what I mean. There was also a big move to challenge orthodoxy in relationships - to challenge monogamy - although a lot of us went down this road, I think we caused each other quite a lot of pain. We created a sort of 'thought police' which was not really productive or helpful. There was also a kind of ranking, those women who had 'chosen' to be lesbians out of some sort of political correctness, and those of us who felt we had not had a choice. I found this deeply depressing. I had a lot of flak because I wanted to work again when I got my degree...only one of our number actually held down a steady job at the time, the rest of us were students or living on the dole. A few women had a go at me for 'wanting money' which wasn't really the point for me - and ironically they were the ones who had acquired their houses from ex-husbands!! By

the time I actually had a new job, nearly everyone else had gone down the same route!! My feelings were that it was fine being radical politically in a ghetto, but there was a whole world out there which needed changing and that is what I wanted to do. All this said, I had lots of sexual encounters and a few more meaningful relationships during these three years. I don't think I behaved particularly well.

In 1979, I had the choice of two potential jobs, one in Bristol and one in London. I opted for the London one as I had more friends there. I had three months paid training for the new job, working as a Media Resources Officer for the ILEA, and got a place in a lesbian household in Camberwell - arghh - those excruciating interviews for new housemates! I turned up on the first day of training to discover I was the only woman on the course - not what I had expected at all and certainly in at the deep end in terms of changing the world! I survived, and after three months got a job at a girls' comprehensive in Hackney. I also moved up to North London as I realised no-one from North London ever made the effort to visit anyone south of the river. I lived in another shared house with 3 other women. This was very nice as it immediately gave me access to a new group of lesbian friends.

The school I worked in had predominantly women staff, some were lesbians and I was out to everybody from the start. It took a while to be accepted but ultimately I had a really good time there. We had a lively women's group who did a lot of anti-sexist and anti-racist work and I was in an excellent position to support their work with the students. I believe that those of us who were 'out' were good role models for the lesbian students too. We also had a very active involvement in the Greenham Common protest and in the anti-racist campaigns of the time.

There was a local group for other people working as MRO's in east London and here I met my first women doing the job. It was very interesting how the men all talked about their equipment..."I've got a Canon 3523X..." etc and the women were much more into what we could produce with whatever equipment we had. Four of us set up a women's group within the MRO grade and ran a conference for other women in the grade and that developed into us developing training workshops on equalities - race, gender, sexuality, disability and class. We had a real fight to be taken seriously until the ILEA started to develop its own anti-racist and anti-sexist policies in the early '80s, when suddenly we were valuable to the powers that be and were integrated into the initial training of all MROs. It was an immensely productive and creative time and I felt incredibly lucky to be doing this sort of work. I had wanted to live a more integrated life since I lived in Lancaster, did not want to separate the different parts of me off into e.g work, sex life, politics and living in London and doing the work I was doing, it all became possible.

I spent 7 years at this school, completely out and enjoying every minute of it. I had several lovers but only one at a time! There was of course a lively 'scene' at the time and we all took advantage of it to the max! I enjoyed being part of a group and living life to the full. My relationships were slightly chaotic but one in particular, although it only lasted for a few years as a sexual relationship, ultimately lasted as my truest friendship for over 30 years and still going! I was a serial monogamist and seemed unable to sustain relationships for more than 2 or 3 years but have mainly sustained friendships with those women. I decided to go into therapy and try to sort myself out. It was through this work that I realised how cut off from my true feelings I was.

It was while I was working in East London that I started to look after my niece one day a week. My brother had left her Mum and while I had never wanted to have children myself, this was a contribution I could make. She was about 4 at the time and I picked her up from school and had her to stay overnight and took her back to school the next day, we did this throughout her school days and beyond. We also did lots of camping and other holidays and had a great time with each other. Even tho' she is over 30 now and has two boys of her own, we are still very close and see each other regularly and now her boys come and stay and enjoy holidays and the outdoor life where I live now. She was quite happy being brought up in lesbian households tho' wanted us all to be discreet around her friends! Her best friend at school had a gay Dad and it was positive for them to share their experiences.

I moved to a new job at a Further Education college in North London in 1987. This was a promotion and quite demanding as I hadn't worked in this kind of establishment before. It was a steep learning curve, but very rewarding. It was a very political place and had a large and very active Women's Group with a good proportion of other out lesbians too. We had a big presence in the college and were very active. This was around the time of the shameful Clause 28 - preventing Local Authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality (I wish!) and so on. In fact, what this pathetic and bigoted law did was galvanise the whole of the gay community, and radical men and women worked together for the first time since the seventies. Although our protest failed to prevent the clause becoming law, and although a lot of teachers thought it meant they could not teach about sexuality in a balanced and inclusive way, it also gave rise to a lot of excellent work with school and college governors and showed what a large and powerful group we are. Several 'famous' people came out of the closet and advanced the 'normalisation' of lesbians and gay men (Stonewall formed e.g.). While I think Stonewall has done good work, my sympathies are more with Outrage than the more establishment groups.

During all these ten years I was completely out at work and everywhere else. I made a point of selling myself as a role model in my applications and at interview and didn't have a problem getting the jobs I wanted. In some respects I may not have achieved as much as I might have professionally, I think I felt at the time that I would have had to make too many compromises, if I had gone for more senior jobs, not sure about that. But equally I am not a particularly ambitious person and was happy to work where I knew I could be effective and, without vanity, I know I changed the institutions I worked in, and hopefully helped a few students along the way. I also found incredible loyalty amongst the students I taught/had dealings with which is very gratifying.

During this time I had a major change in my life, from years of living in collective houses, either other people's or shared owned (3 of us bought a house together), I was actually able to buy my own flat and lived by myself. It was wonderful! Apart from my desire to live with J in the 60s or early 70s, I hadn't lived or particularly wanted to live just with my lover. I lived there for 18 years, by far the longest I had ever lived in one place. [...]

I had a few years when I didn't have a sexual relationship at this point. Work was demanding and my social life fell away somewhat. In retrospect I think I was quite depressed. I then met a woman quite a few years younger than me who had a young son (he was 6). It felt great to be in a relationship again, and great too to be sexual, and for a year or so it was wonderful, although her ex-husband was a real problem for all of us. I got on very well with her son and did a lot with him. (He still visits regularly.) She got a new job which made greater demands on her time, so I had her son after school, cooked his tea, did homework etc before she came home, then spent the evening de-briefing her day as she became more and more stressed and somewhat paranoid about situations she had got into at work. I don't want to go into all the reasons and happenings of this time because much of it is not my story to tell, but after five years of intense pressure and my ultimate realisation that my usual strategies of "Pip will fix it" which was my way of dealing with relationships, I realised that I could not fix anything. My partner would not/could not commit to me as her mental health was deteriorating seriously and I could not cope with the load I had taken on. I became very stressed and anxious, lost my sense of humour, felt angry and impatient, culminating in me going into school one day and bursting into tears and realising I could not stay there. In fact I had a very supportive GP who recognised the signs of stress and told me to take time off. In fact it took me nearly 5 months before I could go back to work. From being an easy going, happy, productive sociable, and energetic person, I was a frightened, timid, miserable wreck. I'm not sure quite how it all changed, but I did manage to get back to work and although I put some strategies into place to make life a bit easier, my previous years of enjoyment and enthusiasm for my work all but disappeared. I was exhausted

and my life consisted only of work and recovering enough to go to work again. I became a virtual recluse apart from work and saw very few people.

Then in 2003 I was diagnosed with anal cancer. I hadn't been feeling very well physically for quite some time and finally went to my GP. Although it was a great shock and I had many moments of utter fear, two really important things happened as a result of the diagnosis, one was I realised that I could not go through this alone, I would really need my friends and luckily for me, they were really brilliant to me, and I was able to open up to them and accept their help in a way I had never done previously. The second was that I made a decision that if I survived, I would give up work for good. [...] I had always known that when I retired I would move out of London, I am a passionate gardener and love to be outside as much as possible, swim in the sea and rivers and walk the countryside. While I was wondering where to go, a friend in Wivenhoe in Essex said, why not come here where you have friends? So I did.

It was important to have at least a couple of other lesbians living in the same place and to move to a place with some sort of cultural life going on. This is that place. In fact, I have 9 lesbian friends living here and have made several other straight friends and am involved in a lot of local activities. We (the lesbians) do not have any formal meetings, but see each other regularly and do things together and generally look out for each other. I would say we are all more or less well integrated into the life of the village. I live by myself quite happily still and find it hard, now, to imagine having another sexual relationship - although I still feel like a sexual being. In a way, forming and sustaining real friendships has become more important to me. The most important thing to me now is to be outside, roaming the coast and estuaries and countryside and tending my garden.

It has been a very interesting and thought provoking exercise thinking over 'my life as a lesbian' and I guess the major change has been from my younger days when I lived in constant fear of being discovered to now when I assume everyone must know who I am, and I celebrate and am completely secure in my identity. I remember realising at one point in the 80s that rather than being obsessed about being a lesbian, I now rarely thought about it. In fact I think it has given me an empathy and understanding, an extra dimension, as a human being which I cherish but I am not obsessed about it or fearful as I was in my youth! Mostly my experiences with the straight world have been positive and in any case, what other people think is mainly not my problem anymore.

I think that growing up without role models was difficult, so many of us grew up thinking we were the only ones, and I hope my generation of feminists and lesbians have done our bit to change that for those who follow, but there is something to be said for striking your own path

and I feel quite proud of that. I have mixed feelings about civil partnerships and 'gay' marriage in the same way that I do about straight marriage, it seems still to be to do with possession and/or money, but I do welcome the improvement in our rights such as naming next of kin and so on and I guess it is all part of 'normalising' lesbian and gay relationships in the wider society.

In wondering how different my life might have been had I not been a lesbian, I doubt if I would ever have moved to Lancaster or London...the call of the ghetto and all it had to offer was a very powerful one. I would probably have lived the kind of rural life I finally live now. [...] As for growing older, I really hope for good health for as long as possible, and most importantly hope to hang on to my independence, I absolutely dread being forced once more into institutional living - the shadow of boarding school still looms large. I am extremely lucky that my work has left me with a decent standard of living - ie a good pension. I am aware that my body is slower and creakier and that I sometimes sleep in the afternoon, but I do more now to maintain my health than I have done since my sporting years, swimming, gardening and walking, eating well, growing my own food and being outside as much as possible. This is the joy retirement brings.

It is difficult to work out how real old age as a lesbian might be different from one as a heterosexual woman. More heterosexuals have children, but that doesn't mean they will be looked after by them. My adopted family care for me freely without any feelings of 'should' - at least I hope so! I find the possibility of restricted independence a difficult one to face.

I think being over sixty makes you realise that one could die at any moment, and it makes me seize the day as often as possible. Several friends and colleagues have died and so many of us have had cancer, some surviving, some sadly not. So life is more precious. I do wonder how long I will live, could be years, might be much less, but no point in worrying about it. [...] Being a lesbian has underpinned a very great deal, but now it is just taken for granted.

Sally, born 1950

I was born in St. Albans, the middle child of a family of three children. I was the child of my mother's second marriage to my father (they married in 1948). Her first husband, a naval officer, was killed when the boat he was serving in was sunk by in 1944, six months after the birth of my sister in June 1944. My brother was born in 1959. My father had left school at 14 and worked in a builder's yard but had, through perseverance and determination built up a career in administration (including a period in the RAF) and later working for the Metropolitan College in St. Albans, a forerunner of the Open University, selling correspondence courses. My

mother also had no further education beyond 17 years, but came from a family with middle class aspirations (my grandfather was an engineer and became a manager).

I went to a local village school and was one of only four children in the year to pass the 11+ plus so went reluctantly to the St. Albans Girls Grammar School (my friends all went to the local secondary modern school), where I remained until the age of 18 taking GCEs and then A levels. My A level grades were insufficient to get me into the university of my choice so I remained at home and worked in a local hospital and then did voluntary work in London prior to going to Dundee University the following year to study social administration. I subsequently took a CQSW course at Leicester University and became a probation officer. In 1992 I moved to a lecturing post at De Montfort University.

I was aware, at the age of about 9 years, that I much preferred fighting with the boys on the local farm, wearing jeans (bought for me for the first time at the age of 9 by my grandmother), and a gun in a holster (another birthday present aged 9), climbing trees etc. to doing 'girly' things such as playing with dolls. At that age my aspiration was to be like the boys who I perceived to be having all the fun and adventure. My first real attraction to women came as I entered secondary school; 'falling for' a rather attractive gym teacher and spending a lot of time with a particular girl friend in outdoor activities. I was not aware of having particular sexual feelings towards either, but I was strongly drawn to them on an emotional level. I had no understanding of my sexuality, and any thought I gave to it led only to the assumption that one day I'd meet a boy I liked sufficiently well to 'go out with'. Many school friends were consumed with interest in boys, make-up, dancing etc – none of which interested me at all. As a child I played with teddy bears but never with dolls, actively rejecting them as too 'sissy' and uninteresting. At my request my mother agreed reluctantly to have my hair cut short at around 9 years old (plaits previously) but this did not last and I returned to long hair throughout my teens and 20's.

I had brief 'associations' with a couple of boys when I was at school but as soon as they moved towards being sexual with me, I fled, finding it distasteful and unpleasant. My mother had drummed into me that sex before marriage was a bad thing and in the process had I think, convinced me that sex in every sense was a bad thing. In a muddled sort of way I considered my fear of relationships with boys to be partly about my fear of getting involved in something that would bring great disapproval. I recall once trying to discuss this with my mother when, at age 18, I had had a more explicit sexual encounter with an adult man (although still not intercourse) and she expressed such shock and dismay that it silenced me. One or two more brief forays with men at university, none of which were satisfactory or enjoyable led eventually to my first

experience of intercourse with a fellow (male) student in a tent at the foot of Ben Nevis! He was delighted; I felt invaded and uncomfortable. I continued to assume that I was heterosexual in the absence of any information or examples of any other way of 'being' and continued to expect to find a man with whom I would fall in love and 'live happily ever after' with. After a couple more unsatisfactory and brief relationships I met P., via a mutual friend and did in fact fall in love with him; partly as a result of his very gentle parenting of his two young daughters following the departure of his wife (their mother) when J. was 14 months old and K. 2 ½ years old. I accompanied P. to Ecuador where he commenced a job as factory manager of a knitwear factory owned by a friend he had met whilst studying knitwear technology at Leicester Polytechnic. For the next two years I looked after the girls while P. worked and effectively took over the role of mother to them. I was not happy in Ecuador; being an instant mother was challenging, my relationship with P. was not good for a number of reasons and I missed my job, friends and family back in the UK. I eventually left P. after two years and returned to the UK picking up my old job and returning to my house. P. returned shortly afterwards with the girls and after a few months staying with his sister we were 'reconciled' and he moved down to Leicester to live with me. The girls attended school in Leicester and we lived as a family for another 11 years until, at the age of 40, I came out as a Lesbian and left P. and the girls to live on my own.

I became very low and depressed at age 38 feeling my life was 'wrong' and I was in the wrong place but not knowing what to do about it. I embarked on a co-counselling course during which for the first time I began to acknowledge my attraction for women and my unhappiness with my current relationship. This proved an immensely important period in my life and enabled me to begin to face some of the internalised homophobia that had led me to feel unable to even say the word 'lesbian' or to contemplate that I might be 'one of them'. Meeting other lesbian women through the co-counselling community was a revelation and enabled me to begin to recognise that it was an identity shared by many other quite 'normal' people. It took me a long time to shake off the negativity informed by upbringing and life experience and to begin to recognise that I could live a different life. My first Lesbian experience was at the age of 40 – with a woman I had met through a co-counselling relationship. Our relationship breached the rules of co-counselling and was, with hindsight, a misguided venture – but hard for me to resist at the time. It was brief and ended somewhat painfully when it was clear to me it was not an appropriate or 'healthy' relationship to continue with. I had begun to attend other lesbian events and socialise with other lesbian women and in 1992 I met Sue who was to become my life partner. We met through a walking group set up under the umbrella of the Kenric national organisation for lesbian women. I was 42 and Sue was only the second woman with whom I

had a relationship. We were very strongly drawn to one another and within three months of beginning our relationship I had moved in to live with her in her rented home in Coventry. After 6 months, during which time P. and I had sold our house in Leicester, Sue and I bought a house in Leicester and we lived there together until her sudden and unexpected death from a brain haemorrhage two days before Christmas 2007. I have lived on my own since then.

The years I spent with Sue were the happiest and most contented of my life. I felt fulfilled, secure and loved. Her death has left me bereft. I recognise the immense grief and sense of loss that all people must feel when losing a life partner, but for me Sue had also given me an identity and a sense of recognition that had been previously missing in my life. For all my sadness now I am very grateful for the 15 years we had together and feel it did show me that I could live as a lesbian and be both proud and contented with who I am. Sue had three grandchildren (now aged 15, 13 and 10 years) and although it was difficult in the early months after Sue's death I have managed to maintain my relationship with them and to see them quite regularly. Given that Sue and I regularly looked after them all from when they were babies they are very important to me.

I believe I have always been a Lesbian; that I was born this way – so the only way I could envisage 'not becoming a Lesbian' would be if I had continued to hide from myself and deny my identity. I may have stayed with P. although I think not as my sexuality was not the only reason for leaving him. I may have sought out another heterosexual relationship and found a man I could be close to but I would always have struggled and felt things were not 'right'. I would have missed the joy of my relationship with Sue and the great pleasure and fun I have gained from being a 'grandmother' to her three grandchildren. I would have remained unfulfilled as a person and I believe my mental health would have suffered. The struggles I have faced with living in a heterosexist world and facing some degree of prejudice, have been more than outweighed by the positives of being myself and having a loving and secure relationship with Sue.

Coming out was perhaps the hardest thing I had ever done up to that point in my life. I felt very frightened of the potential consequences particularly at work where I was employed as the senior court welfare officer supervising staff who were mediating family disputes over custody of children. Nevertheless I felt a great urge to tell people the 'truth' about myself, having spent 40 years living what seemed to have been a pretence; an unreal life. I went to see the Chief Probation Officer to tell her of my identity prior to coming out to other staff. She seemed to be reasonably accepting of this although advised me not to tell the Judges at the County Court as she felt they would be prejudiced. I then came out to the entire staff group by putting my name

to a leaflet along with a small group of other Lesbian and Gay staff in which we announced the establishment of a Lesbian and Gay staff group and invited others to join us. Whilst I felt very fearful, in reality only one member of staff was hostile that I was aware of, and many others expressed positive comments about my 'courage' and a heterosexual colleague organised a 'coming out' party for me! I found that it strengthened a number of my relationships; with some people telling me quite personal things about themselves that they had not previously felt able to share. I had told my family prior to coming out at work. My sister and brother were both very positive and supportive, if surprised. My mother was shocked and dismayed and told me she thought it was 'disgusting'. We never really talked about it again after that although she continued to be supportive of me in other ways and in fact I stayed with her for a month after leaving P. and prior to finding rented accommodation. My father had died by this point in my life and my mother expressed relief that he hadn't lived to know the truth about me. In fact I think my father would have been much more understanding and 'tolerant' of my sexuality than my mother was able to be. To be fair to her she was able to accept Sue as my life partner and built a good relationship with her; welcoming her to her home and to family events. P. was also, despite his distress at my leaving him, accepting of my sexuality and built a good relationship with Sue. I had told both the girls when I left P. about my sexuality and although they were distressed at my leaving they never expressed any prejudice towards me and I have been fortunate in being able to maintain good relationships with both of them and with P.

I have always felt relatively free to live my life as a lesbian since coming out although I continue to be selective about when and how I tell people in new situations. Sue and I had our civil partnership registration in February 2006 and although we convinced ourselves that this was primarily just for legal and financial reasons in reality it was a very significant day for us and I recall a real sense of legitimisation of us as a couple. The registry office is in the Town Hall in Leicester and we were so well treated by all the staff we encountered. Being civil partners did give me a stronger sense of confidence particularly in relation to such things as booking a double room in a hotel or in filling in official forms. The fact that we had a legal partnership made a much greater difference than I had anticipated on this sense of legitimacy and entitlement to things that heterosexual people take for granted.

Following Sue's death I was awarded a bereavement allowance for 12 months and a bereavement grant for the funeral. I also received three small pensions from her pension funds, none of which would have occurred without the civil partnership. Most of the people I dealt with through the probate process were straightforward with me about my situation although in some instances the forms and paperwork had not caught up with the new position for civil partners. I guess there had not been that many deaths of partners from civil partnerships in 2007

given that the law establishing civil partnerships only came into effect in December 2005. My employers were very straightforward about my situation; I had nearly four months on sick leave before returning on a phased return to work. At each stage I was treated with kindness and fairness both by the hierarchy of the university and by my immediate colleagues. One of the most difficult processes was managing the funeral with Sue's son, endeavouring to be open to his difficulties with regard to his mother's sexuality, but not wishing to deny the reality of Sue's life and our relationship. We were helped by an immensely kind and aware minister at the church that Sue attended who managed to convey a depth of understanding and compassion that was remarkable.

I don't welcome the thought of becoming increasingly less physically or mentally able, particularly now that I live on my own. Whilst Sue was alive I had no real concerns and had believed we would continue to enjoy life and support each other for many more years into our retirement. Now I tend not to look ahead; preferring to focus on the day in front of me. I have written a living will in which I've made the request of my nephews that should I need to go into residential care, that they ask first about the home's approach to lesbian residents. Ideally I would hope to continue to live in my own home but should I need residential care I would like to be in a Lesbian care home. I realise, however, that this is unlikely. Unless I make plans now for some form of shared accommodation with people of my choice; the reality is I will end up in whatever home has a vacancy. As I get older I believe the issue of my sexuality will become increasingly invisible again unless I continue to assert it. Older women in general are assumed to have no 'sexuality' so in order to protect my identity it does feel as though I will have to continue to 'come out' in a range of situations. Since Sue's death I have joined a number of organisations (choir, badminton, gym) as a means of getting out of the house and meeting people. This has felt hard; I find socialising difficult and particularly when people make assumptions about me. Most of them now know that I am a lesbian but only in one group do I feel I can really be open about this.

I hope that I retain my health, that I continue to be mentally active and able pursue my studies (I am currently studying for a PhD which I hope to complete within the next 12 months). I have applied for voluntary severance so may be retiring this year from the university. I am extremely fortunate in having a very loving sister who has stood by me every inch of the way since Sue has died. My brother died four years ago so she and her family are the only immediate family I have left although I count my 'step' daughters and Sue's grandchildren as family. I also have some good friends and hope I can continue to enjoy walking and socialising with them for a long time yet. My biggest fear would be to lose my mental faculties and I sometimes fear loneliness.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEWEES: BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The transcripts of the interviews run to many hundreds of pages and would make another whole volume, so cannot be included here. The following short biographies of the 34 interviewees provide some indication of the diversity of their life stories.

Sex and gender (alongside class, education, race and religion) are aspects of this diversity. In terms of biological sex, the interviewees do not represent quite the full spectrum of experience hinted at in the questionnaire survey, in that none of them was transexual; the life courses of the four survey respondents who were born male (see page 53) would have been different again from those described here. However, these stories do demonstrate a range of lesbian genders, from high femme Tamsin to passing woman Sandy, with many shades of gender expression in between.

As in the main text of the thesis, some of the names are pseudonyms and some actual names, according to the women's wishes. They are arranged in alphabetical order, to aid referencing from the main text.

Aine, born 1941

Aine's mother was an unmarried nurse from the north west of England. Her father was already married and was not part of their lives for very long. Aine remembers moving house many times when she was small, before she and her mother settled with Aine's maternal grandparents. A physically precocious child, she attracted unwanted attention from men while still at primary school, where she was already falling in love with women teachers and other girls. She went to a girls' grammar school and then to a teacher training college where she had her first sexual relationships with men; she says she 'didn't find it interesting' but wanted to conform. After teaching for a short time she decided, in her late 20s, to read for a degree in Theology. While studying she met her future husband; they married as soon as she graduated and settled in the south of England, where he worked for an insurance company. The marriage lasted 18 years and they had three daughters, but Aine never enjoyed sex and eventually sought psychiatric help because she felt that there 'must be something wrong with her'. Soon after, she fell in love with a woman and although they never became lovers began to reconsider her sexual orientation. When she discovered her husband was having an affair, they divorced. Eventually Aine moved away to another job, where she had her first lesbian relationship with a colleague. She began to

identify as a lesbian and joined Kenric, becoming part of several lesbian social groups and having relationships with women. She was 50 when she met Merle at a party; they have been together since 1991 and are registered civil partners. Although Aine now has severe mobility problems due to arthritis, she and Merle remain active and enjoy travelling.

Andrea, born 1946

Andrea was born in north London. She describes her parents as very loving and her childhood as happy, although they were far from 'well off'. Her father's family were Italian immigrants; her English mother was a permanent invalid and at primary school Andrea felt 'different' because of her responsibilities as a child carer. Being academically very bright also set her apart, so she was happier at her girls' grammar school, where it was 'all right to be clever'. By then she was already aware of her sexual orientation and had two lesbian relationships while in the sixth form. She says her education 'saved' her, because it gave her confidence in the possibility of leading a satisfying independent life as a single woman. She had always wanted to do non-traditional jobs and her unconventional life has involved breaking through one glass ceiling after another. After graduating from university she worked briefly as a research assistant but her real love was scuba diving; she became the first woman employee in a water sports firm, where she went on to become their wholesale and export director. At different times she ran a company manufacturing diving equipment, carried out marine salvage in the Indian Ocean and took a Master's degree in Electronic Communication and Publishing. Her 'proudest moment' was a voyage in a Russian submersible which descended three miles below the surface of the Arctic Ocean – the greatest depth ever reached by a woman. Andrea has never felt any shame about her sexual orientation and has long been an active campaigner for LGBT and women's rights. She has had several relationships but currently lives alone on a narrowboat in the Midlands.

Anna, born 1945

Anna was adopted at six weeks old; she knows nothing about her birth family. She was a lonely child and became an avid reader. At grammar school she formed two passionate but unrequited friendships with girls she 'fell for'. Always shy, she says she never met any boys until she left school at 18 and went to work as a librarian. She had several casual affairs before meeting her husband through a contact advertisement. They married on her 30th birthday. After her son and daughter were born, Anna gave up her job in the library and, using her bibliographic skills,

started to work from home as an indexer. The marriage was not very successful and after fifteen years Anna and her husband separated, largely because she was beginning to identify as lesbian. She had joined Kenric, but did not find the lesbian social scene to her taste. Then she fell in love with a teacher at her son's school. The woman did not reciprocate her feelings – as Anna says, 'They're always straight. I'm afraid I always fall for heterosexuals'. Two or three years before I interviewed her, Anna had fallen in love again, with a neighbour and friend who, when Anna revealed her feelings, reacted with horror and disgust. Anna's distress at this rejection led to depression and her doctor referred her to a psychiatrist. In her interview she said that she still hoped to renew contact with the woman, but so far had had no success. As well as finding social contacts difficult, Anna suffers from spinal problems which restrict her mobility, so she feels very isolated. She is one of the small minority of women in the project who identify as lesbian even though they have never had a sexual relationship with another woman.

Barbara, born 1936

Barbara was born in a suburb of north London. Her father, a First World War veteran, worked as a civil servant. When she was three, war was declared and her father joined the Home Guard, while Barbara and her mother were evacuated to West Yorkshire. She had two younger brothers. After the family's return to London Barbara attended a girls' grammar school where she had crushes on both teachers and fellow-pupils, and 'didn't know why they didn't go away in the sixth form'. She had no understanding of sexual orientation at that age and 'only became aware that there were such things as lesbians' in her mid-twenties. At Cambridge she had boyfriends, but the relationships were never sexual and she went on falling in love with women. After three years of postgraduate work and unrequited love, Barbara went to work in a local government social work team. At this time she began to suffer from acute anxiety. Life became much easier when, in the late 1970s, she finally came out at work. She had three brief affairs with women before meeting Joyce, who had been her partner for more than ten years when I interviewed them, though they did not live together. Barbara prefers to live alone. She is Secretary of a long-standing lesbian social group of which she was a founding member, and for which she produces a regular newsletter. Doing the newsletter is, she says, 'very much part of my lesbian life'.

Brenda, born 1948

Brenda was brought up in south London, living with her mother, father and brother in one room in her paternal grandparents' house until they were rehoused in a council flat. She grew up feeling that boys were more valued than girls: one of her earliest memories is of wanting to be a cowboy. Her father, who worked in a biscuit factory, thought girls didn't need educating but with her mother's support Brenda went to grammar school. She was attracted to girls from an early age, but tried to ignore these feelings and married soon after leaving university. She continued to suppress her fantasies about women but when, in her thirties, a woman in her local wives' group seduced her, she did not resist. Finally facing up to her own nature, she joined a lesbian and gay social group where she met her first lesbian partner. This relationship lasted five or six years, and Brenda's marriage foundered, but she and her husband and children remained together in the same house until Brenda met the woman who is now her partner, and they decided to set up home together. Brenda left her husband, came out to her children and moved in with her new lover. They have been together nearly twenty years, have managed to maintain good relationships both with Brenda's children and with her ex-husband, and Brenda says, 'I'm happier now than I've ever been'.

Chris, born 1946

Chris was the illegitimate daughter of an Italian prisoner of war and an English nurse, and was adopted at six months old. When she was about four her adoptive father, an accountant, found a job in Nigeria and the family moved to join him. Her childhood was spent in Nigeria and in Canada where her father also worked for a couple of years. When Chris was 13 they returned to England. She says her private girls' school in the Wirral was 'boring' after life in Africa, and it must have felt restrictive to a girl who had 'always felt like one of the boys'. Chris went on to secretarial college but soon realised she couldn't bear office work. After a spell as a bus conductress, she joined the Army. On her first night in the NAAFI she saw two women dancing together: the penny dropped and 'I never looked back'. She had several girlfriends in the Army; later she lived in London, doing a variety of casual jobs in clubs and nightspots and acting as a taxi service for working girls in Soho. There were hard times: life in 1960s London was fuelled by drink and drugs; butch lesbians like Chris were always prone to discrimination; and sometimes there was no money and no job. When Chris's mother found out she was gay, she didn't talk to her for several years. After a five-year relationship broke up, Chris decided to move out of London, settled on the south coast and found a steady job in the Post Office. A series of stormy relationships have taken their toll on her emotions and her finances since then,

but now she is contented to live alone, ride her motorbike occasionally, and enjoy the company of good friends on the gay scene.

Crunchy, born 1939

Born in the south west of England into a loving extended family, Crunchy enjoyed an active, happy childhood. She was always a tomboy and loved to help her father in his workshop. By the time she was at grammar school she was already identifying as a lesbian and had several girlfriends. At 19 she joined the Army as a physical training instructor. In spite of being suspected of lesbian affairs, she managed to avoid dishonourable discharge. After leaving the Army, she trained as a physiotherapist and worked in London, where she still lives. She has had several significant relationships and still has a lively lesbian social life, most of which centres on her local Kenric group. As she gets older, however, she worries about how she will maintain that community of identity if she has to go into care later in life.

Edith, born 1919

Edith was the fourth child of six in a working-class family in the Midlands. Her father worked in a butcher's shop and they had little money. Edith married in her early twenties, 'because that was what you did, then'. A few years later, she suddenly fell in love with another young mother at her children's infant school. When she revealed her feelings, the woman was shocked and did not want to know her. Some years later Edith fell in love again, this time with a woman who also loved her, but she felt unable to act on her feelings as she was a wife and mother and her duty was to her family. Heartbroken, she told no-one, and for the remainder of her 60-year marriage, she never spoke of her feelings for women, so frightened was she of her family's hostile reaction. Edith was 85 when her husband died; shortly afterwards she disclosed to the resident warden of her sheltered housing complex that she was a lesbian. With the help of the warden, Edith met other local lesbians and was supported by them as she came out to her daughter and the rest of her extended family. Now in her 90s, she has a small group of lesbian friends and occasionally attends lesbian social events in her area. However, since the friendly warden retired, Edith has gone back into the closet among her neighbours.

Elaine, born 1941

Elaine was born during the Second World War and her early years were spent moving about the country. Her father was in Air-Sea Rescue, and after the war managed sports grounds, so the family followed his jobs. As a teenager, Elaine had crushes on girls and didn't want a boyfriend, but knew it was 'what you did socially: a bit like smoking, really'. She married straight after university, but was not happy. As an isolated housewife and mother of two small children in the Surrey suburbs, she became depressed and eventually had a nervous breakdown which led to her leaving her husband. After another unhappy relationship with a violent man with whom she had her third child, she found the strength to leave and live on her own. She discovered the Women's Movement and became a committed feminist, took an MA course in Women's Studies and had her first lesbian relationship in her late thirties. In 1990 she decided to move back to the north of England with her son, and at around the same time formed a long-lasting relationship with the woman whose death she was mourning when I interviewed her. Elaine is a poet and runs a small press which showcases the poetry of older women.

Fran, born 1935

Fran describes her inner-city, working-class family as 'dirt-poor'. Her father was out of work when she was born. He joined the Army as soon as war was declared, so as a child Fran hardly knew him. She remembers the terror of the bombing in her Midlands city, the comfort of evacuation to her aunt in the country, and the wild rejoicings when peace came. She was one of the first children to take the 11-plus exam, but her parents never told her she had passed, as they could not afford the uniform or other expenses associated with sending her to grammar school. From an early age she knew she was 'different', but had no concept except the word 'tomboy' to describe her identity. She married, but very quickly realised it was a mistake and she and her husband soon parted. After that she concentrated her energies on her working life until, in her early thirties, she fell in love with a woman and they started an affair. Fran was devastated when the woman, a devout Catholic, suddenly ended the relationship, but she had now found her 'real' identity. She decided to further her education and trained as a teacher. Always passionately political, Fran was active in her union and also a member of the Communist Party, which is where she met her long-term partner. They had been together 20 years when I met them. Fran is now disabled by lung disease from a life of smoking, but determined not to let it limit her activities. Her left-wing and feminist convictions remain undimmed.

Frieda, born 1928

Frieda is one of the oldest interviewees and has clear memories of wartime, including taking her school leaving exams in an air-raid shelter. Hers was a middle-class childhood in the London suburbs: her father ran a successful wholesale fish business and had been a County cricketer. Frieda always loved sport, and her father encouraged her. She trained as a PE teacher; although she met lesbians at PE college, she felt no attraction to her own sex. She married her ex-Indian Army boyfriend, had two children and led an entirely normal suburban life until, to her great surprise, she was seduced by an ex-pupil and started a lesbian affair that lasted six or seven years and ended her marriage. Her second female partner was also an ex-pupil, very much younger than Frieda. Both relationships ended when these girls met new partners nearer their own age, but Frieda has remained close friends with them, as she has with her ex-husband. She says, 'When people have been that much part of your life... I hate the idea of them just vanishing. And I still love all of them.'

Heather, born 1943

Born 'in the middle of an air raid', Heather was the unplanned middle child of a 'quite poor' south London family. She left school at 14 and became a telephonist. Bright and intellectually curious, she had always felt the odd one out in her family, and married at 17 just to get away from home. The marriage quickly failed. Heather applied to an adult education college, where she studied Sociology and Psychology and says, 'It changed my life.' She married again and moved to the West Country but, as a young mother with a husband out at work all day, felt very isolated there. She joined a Women's Group, where she discovered not only feminism but lesbianism, and began her first relationship with a woman. In 1982 she met Milly, with whom she has lived ever since.

Irene, born 1929

Irene recognised her strong attraction to women when she was 12 and for much of her life had relationships with both men and women. At art school she fell in love with a young man whom she later married; they had two sons but the marriage was not a success and after five years she left him. A time of hardship ensued, in which the children lived with their grandparents or were away at school, and Irene took a series of residential jobs as housekeeper and nanny. She had affairs with both men and women during this time, but until her children were grown up did not

feel able to express the lesbian identity she increasingly felt was her ‘real self’. In her forties, when her children had left home and her mother had died, Irene felt able to socialise freely in the lesbian community. She joined Kenric and soon met the woman with whom she lived for the next thirty years, and who had died the year before I interviewed Irene.

Jen, born 1942

Jen was born in the north of England to educated intellectual parents who encouraged her to read and think, and sent her to a prestigious fee-paying school. She went on to Oxford and later gained a doctorate, had a successful career as an academic and is now a professor. Although she had had crushes on girls and on her teachers when she was younger, most of her adult life was entirely heterosexual. She had several boyfriends, then married and had children, but was unable to remain faithful to her husband, who finally left her. After a few more brief relationships with men, she realised that something in her life was not right, went into therapy and became celibate. During this time she took a conscious decision to explore her attraction to women and had a few short lesbian relationships before meeting her current partner. They do not live together but had been partners for more than ten years at the time of Jen’s interview.

Joan, born 1930

Born in London to parents who had migrated from north-east England during the Depression, Joan gained a scholarship to the County School and later became a secondary school teacher. She married a fellow-teacher more than 20 years her senior and was widowed when their children were still of school age. She went back to full-time work and, although she had many good friends, never met anyone else she wanted to marry. Her life was in many ways a conventional one. Her teaching career culminated in promotion to Deputy Headteacher; outside work she was active in the Guide movement and also in her local church, where she eventually became both a lay preacher and senior church steward. Nothing prepared her for what was to happen when a new woman minister was appointed to the church. Working together on committees and a major development project, Joan and the minister became good friends and eventually, to the surprise of both of them, lovers. Up to that point Joan would, if she had thought about it, have described herself as entirely heterosexual. She was 76 when she began this relationship; when I interviewed her just after her eightieth birthday, she described it as ‘something very beautiful for both of us’.

Joyce, born 1940

Joyce was the eldest of a family of three girls. She was educated at girls' schools in Surrey – a convent and a grammar school – and, after a short time working for the BBC, went to a women's teacher training college. So, although she had a couple of boyfriends, her young life was spent almost exclusively in all-female environments. She always had strong attachments to women, although she never thought of her feelings as lesbian. She married in her late twenties, had two children and also fostered a teenage girl for a time. It was through the fostering service that she became interested in Transactional Analysis and joined a TA group. Here she fell in love and started a relationship with another married woman in the group. It was a surprise to both of them; they knew of no other women like themselves and only later discovered the lesbian organisation Sappho in London. Joyce left this relationship when her partner had an affair with another woman, but they remained friends. Joyce and her husband parted, she went back to full time work and had several short affairs with women before meeting Barbara. When I interviewed Joyce and Barbara, they had been partners for over ten years, though they did not live together.

Judy, born 1942

An only child, Judy was born into a theatrical family: her mother was an actress and her father, after serving in the War, was a theatre manager. Judy was born in York because her mother was working there, but her earliest memories are of London. By the time she went to grammar school the family had moved out to suburban Middlesex. Although she was not interested in boys and did not see herself as ever marrying, Judy did not have her first lesbian experience until she was 21. After that affair was forcefully ended by the other girl's parents, Judy decided that she would have to be alone for the rest of her life, unable to reveal her feelings. Like her parents, Judy worked in the theatre, but as a stage manager; one day when she was clearing a dressing-room she found a copy of the lesbian magazine *Arena Three*. Through this magazine she met her first partner. They lived together for ten years and are still good friends. Judy described her second relationship as 'seven years of unadulterated misery' with a woman whose possessive, dominating behaviour alienated Judy's family and friends. By this time she was teaching drama in a secondary school, so was in the closet and very isolated. The abusive relationship ended when the woman decided to become a nun, and a few years later Judy met her present partner. They have been together twenty-five years.

Julia, born 1948

Julia was born into a working-class Irish family in London; her childhood was dominated by her father's alcoholism. The family was chronically short of money and Julia's childhood was deeply stressful. Desperate to leave home, she married within six months of leaving school. It was a mistake: her husband was possessive, domineering and physically abusive. The marriage lasted about three years, during which time Julia had one child. After the divorce, catching up on the youth she had never had, Julia had four or five boyfriends, none lasting more than a couple of years. Now a single mother, she decided to train as a teacher. At college she met lesbians and gay men for the first time and was drawn to them. She started going to gay clubs, but also to women's groups, and so met her first woman partner. She had three relationships before she met the woman with whom she was to live for fifteen years. Tragically this woman, who suffered from severe depression, took her own life. Julia received support and comfort from her lesbian friends and slowly recovered; after few years she met Philippa, her current partner.

Leo, born 1932

Leo describes her family as 'poor but honest' and very happy. She was born in a small seaside town on the north-east coast of England; for much of her childhood her father was away serving in the War. She was happy at school, where she did very well. She largely disregarded the fact that her feelings towards another girl made her 'not quite like other people' and that she felt she had more in common with the boys. It was the same at Cambridge, where once again Leo was quietly in love with her best friend. Although she never met any lesbians at university, she did get to know some gay men. After some short-term jobs in London she took up a teaching post in a well-known girls' public school. There, she and a fellow-teacher gradually formed a friendship which was to turn into a 44-year love affair. Although they had to be extremely secretive, the two women were determined to stay together. It became easier when they had both left teaching and were able to set up house in the small market town where Leo still lives, though they were always very discreet. Before her partner died in 2009, they were finally able to make a public statement about their relationship by registering their civil partnership.

Linda, born 1934

Linda was born on the south-east coast of England. She had two older brothers, one of whom sexually abused her as a child. Her attitude to sex was also influenced by her mother, who gave her to understand it was an unpleasant duty. Linda stayed at school until she was 17, then started work as a librarian. Never having felt particularly wanted by her parents, she left home as soon as she could afford it and lived in a bedsit. She had several affairs, the longest of which was with the man whom she later married. During this time she had an abortion, but never told her parents; she married the man, a graphic designer, a few years later. They lived in a pleasant part of south London, where she had two sons and eventually went back to work as a school librarian. The marriage failed after about fifteen years and they parted, with the younger son going to live with his father. Linda moved away and began to develop an independent single life, which included both going into therapy and becoming a Quaker. When she was in her fifties, she made friends with a woman who was in a lesbian relationship, and began to socialise with lesbians. She met her first woman partner at a Quaker college; it was a stormy relationship which didn't last long. Her next relationship was much more successful. This partner was over 20 years younger than Linda but they were together nine years and are still in touch. Looking back, Linda says, 'Having become a *bona fide* lesbian, I actually felt myself to be more of a woman than when I was living a heterosexual life.'

Lynn, born 1948

Lynn's family background was one of working-class poverty in the north-east of England, but her father valued education and her grammar school gave her confidence to make her own choices. From an early age she was rebellious and politically active, truanting from school to attend CND marches. At 18 she moved to London, got a job in publishing and 'went looking for the women's movement'. She found it in the Women's Liberation Workshop; and then found other causes too, joining the Gay Liberation Front, working for *Peace News* and the alternative bookshop 'Compendium', as well as helping to found the women's bookshop 'Sisterwrite'. After enjoying sexual relationships with both men and women, in her twenties she made a conscious choice to be with women, and still defines as a political lesbian. She and her ex-partner were one of the first lesbian couples to adopt a child, fighting a long legal battle to do so. Feminism is still her guiding principle: she says, 'I was kind of *born* a feminist, rather than born a lesbian.'

Marguerite, born 1946

The elder of two sisters, Marguerite was brought up in a middle-class, Christian family. She attended an Anglican girls' convent school from the age of five to eighteen. She had no contact with boys, was entirely ignorant of sex and assumed her attraction to girls was normal. She did a degree in Theology and then married, partly to get away from home and partly because it was 'what everyone did'. She had little idea of what marriage would involve, and consequently was very unhappy. After giving up teaching to have her first child, she became seriously depressed. Joining a WEA class led to her finding a women's consciousness-raising group; she began to understand her own feelings and soon met her first woman lover. She met her current partner of twenty-plus years while teaching a women's theology class. Marguerite is still active in the Church of England and says she has never felt any conflict between her sexuality and her faith.

Marion, born 1942

Marion describes her parents, who were from London's East End, as 'upwardly mobile working-class'. She was rebellious at school and although academically capable she left at 15 to go to secretarial college. She was already attracted to the Peace Movement, and soon went to work at *Peace News*. Her politics landed her in prison briefly; in Holloway she met a number of lesbians. Through them she was introduced to London's lesbian subculture and, although she had a long-term boyfriend of whom she was extremely fond, began to have relationships with women. Joining the Gay Liberation Front helped her to come out and put an end to what she calls her 'bisexual double life'. She continued to be active in a range of left-wing movements and remains a committed feminist. She now lives on the south coast, in a house which she and a friend bought with the idea of converting it into retirement flats for women.

Maureen, born 1945

Maureen's childhood was peripatetic as her father was an officer in the Navy who was posted to various locations. She was academically very able and went to university at 17. Looking back she says she 'always knew' she was different, but suppressed it because she so wanted to be 'normal'. She describes her life as 'a real journey of coming to terms with and embracing' that difference. After university, she did a postgraduate degree and got an academic job in North America. Both there and back in England she had relationships with men and tried hard to be entirely heterosexual, but by her late twenties the strain was too great to resist. It was through an

Open University women's group that Maureen met her first woman lover. It was a brief affair, but gave her the confidence to come out to her mother and friends although, as she was now working in education, she had to be discreet at work. She decided to move to London, and there met the woman with whom she was to spend the next 14 years. The ending of that long relationship was difficult for both of them, but after a period of time Maureen met her current partner. They live on the south-west coast and are active in the Society of Friends, Amnesty and various charities.

Merle, born 1945

Merle describes herself as a 'GI baby', born to an unmarried mother during the Second World War. Until she was nine she lived with her grandparents, but then her mother and stepfather re-entered her life and her childhood became unhappy and emotionally abusive. She was happier at school, where she excelled at sport and had her first lesbian relationship. She went on to train as a PE teacher and taught in various London schools. She had a series of relationships with women, some very traumatic, but had to remain closeted at work for most of her career. After tracing her biological father she discovered that she has a lesbian half-sister. Merle met Aine in 1991 and they have lived together ever since. In retirement they moved to the Welsh Borders, but do a lot of travelling both in England and abroad.

Milly, born 1948

Milly grew up in Cheshire, the youngest in a working-class family of six. Her earliest sense of difference came from being much brighter than her schoolmates, but at grammar school she flourished and was encouraged in her ambition to be a vet. At around thirteen she became aware of her sexual attraction to girls, but knew it must be kept secret. Her feelings for women never went away, but at 21 she fell in love with, and later married, a man twelve years her senior. They were happy for a time, but eventually Milly had an affair with another woman, and the marriage ended. Milly began to mix with other lesbians and in 1982 met Heather, with whom she has lived ever since. They live in the country and have had their share of homophobic prejudice but say that the neighbours where they live now are friendly and supportive. In the 1990s they took part in a television documentary about LGBT people living in rural communities.

Monica, born 1922

Monica was the youngest child of an affluent middle-class Jewish family in North London. Her early childhood was mostly spent in the nursery, and she remembers seeing more of her Nanny than of her mother. She became aware of her attraction to girls early in her teens, but was 'merely disturbed and frightened' by it. She says that her conservative, middle-class parents brought her up to expect to be married by her early 20s; nonetheless she had a good deal of freedom, working for the War Office during the War, living in a flat in London with a group of other young people, joining a theatre troupe. Then, at 23, she fell 'desperately in love – with a beautiful girl who was having a hectic wartime affair with my brother'. When Monica revealed her feelings, the girl was amazed, saying, 'Oh, darling, I do love you, but not like that!' Monica was 'desperate, and sure I was doomed to that sort of rejection.' Soon afterwards she married ('I imagined myself in love with him') and four years later met her first woman lover: 'So I was 30 when I finally found out what sex and passion was all about'. Her marriage soon ended; she had several lesbian relationships during her long life, remaining firmly in the closet all the time. Although she always kept her sexual orientation hidden from family and heterosexual friends, she moved in a supportive lesbian and gay subculture. In old age, however, she became increasingly isolated. She died just before her 92nd birthday.

Mumtaz, born 1950

Mumtaz was born into an Indian family which had been settled for several generations in East Africa; they were well-established, wealthy businessmen of the highest social standing in the African-Asian community. At eleven, she was sent to an English boarding school which catered for the daughters of the aristocracy. She describes herself then as having completely internalised British colonial attitudes: 'I am a child of the British Empire – I inherited that way of thinking.' Ethnicity, religion and above all colonial notions of class combined to keep Mumtaz ignorant of her own sexuality and of the ways of the world until she was a young woman. After living in both Germany and China she settled permanently in England, completed a degree course in German and Chinese and joined an Asian women's group – her first active involvement in the Women's Movement. As a photographer in the Black Arts movement she worked to change stereotypical views of Black and ethnic minority women. It was through the Women's Movement that Mumtaz first met lesbians and had relationships with women, though she says she 'identified as a lesbian more out of political reasons than for sexual ones'. Now she says she even wonders whether it's right to call herself a lesbian, because she hasn't been in an active sexual relationship with another woman for so long.

Patricia, born 1950

Patricia was born in Birmingham; her father was an engineer and her mother did clerical work. She had boyfriends as she grew up and was briefly engaged to one of them, but decided not to marry. After that she had no relationships at all for several years, concentrating on her work in social care. She had always been attracted to girls, but it was not until she was in her thirties that she felt ready to act on that attraction. A gay man friend introduced her to the lesbian and gay scene, she joined Kenric, and through a contact magazine met her first woman lover. It was a short relationship, but launched Patricia into a lesbian life. She has had two long relationships in which she has lived with her partners for several years: the most recent had ended about two years before I met her. At that point she was newly-retired, enjoying her independence and not looking for a new relationship. She has a well established lesbian social circle, and had just embarked on a course in horticulture.

Pauline, born 1934

Pauline was born in the East Midlands. Her father had a variety of jobs during the Depression and during the War worked as an aircraft mechanic. He died when Pauline was 14. Her parents' marriage had not been happy and Pauline's mother gave her children very negative messages about sex. Pauline does not remember being romantically interested in either boys or girls as a teenager. She left school at 16 – there was no encouragement to do otherwise, although she was bright – and went to work in an office, but couldn't bear it. Her ambition was to join the Wrens. Until she was old enough to do so, she worked on a market garden – the only girl there – and joined the WRNS when she was 18, becoming an aircraft mechanic. After the Navy, she trained for church social work, but she says, 'God and I soon parted' and she became a social worker for the local authority, leading to a successful career. She made friends with other young colleagues there, one of whom seduced her. This first lesbian relationship lasted seven years, until her partner suddenly decided to marry a man and have children. Pauline was devastated. A couple of years later she began another, less satisfactory relationship which ended when she met a woman who swept her off her feet. They lived together until this woman died. That was a terrible time for Pauline, who also lost her job during her partner's last illness. After this trauma she found both a new partner and a new career in academic life, becoming a researcher in social policy. She has now retired to the Cotswolds and lives alone. She reads, writes poetry, volunteers at her local primary school, sings in a choir and says she is content to be single now.

Philippa, born 1938

Philippa's father, an East Anglian landowner, married a factory worker. Philippa was their daughter, born on one of the farms her father owned. Her parents' unequal marriage was far from happy, and Philippa was relieved to be sent to boarding school at 11. She says she 'never really felt like a little girl', always preferring boys' clothes and toys. At fifteen she was seduced by her English teacher, and shortly after leaving school met her first woman partner. Their closeted relationship was discovered by a friend and Philippa was sent to a psychiatrist. The relationship ended and Philippa went abroad as a physiotherapist attached to the Army; there she met her future husband. It was not a love match, but both felt they needed to marry – she for the sake of social respectability and he for career reasons. He was an Army doctor and was soon posted to rural Canada, where Philippa was bored and missed the gay scene. After a year she left him and returned to London. Several relationships followed, often with married women, some more important than others. Philippa has lived with one or two of her partners, but really prefers the 'living apart together' arrangement which she has with her current partner, Julia.

Sandy, born 1943

Sandy was born to an unmarried mother during the Second World War and was adopted at six weeks old. She spent most of her childhood and teenage years in Yorkshire, where her adoptive parents ran the family grocery business. From an early age, Sandy had a strong masculine identification, and says, 'If I was young now, I would have the operation'. She hated school, having realised her outsider status at 11, when she had her first girlfriend. She trained to work with horses and her father helped her set up a riding school but, when she formed a passionate relationship with a woman sixteen years older than herself, she abandoned it all, moving to the south of England and planning to live with her new lover. When the woman ended the affair, Sandy took an overdose. After that she tried hard to conform and became engaged, but broke off the engagement when she realised she could not change. Her next lesbian relationship lasted several years – when it ended, she joined the Merchant Navy, where she met her next partner. She left the service, they set up home together and Sandy trained as an HGV driver. During this part of her life she passed as a man with workmates and neighbours. After a road accident ended her driving career, she re-trained in woodworking. Becoming involved with the animal rights movement changed Sandy's life and, when she was arrested for protest activities, led to the break-up of her relationship. With her next partner, she moved to Wales and set up a business making wooden toys. After that, she travelled for six months in south east Asia before another

relationship led her to move to the Midlands, where she still lives. She is single now and says she is happy to be so.

Shaz, born 1945

Born in 1945 into a struggling working-class home in an industrial city, Shaz was diagnosed with epilepsy at ten years old. She identified as gay from the age of twelve, and while still at school frequented gay bars with older friends. At seventeen she ran away from home, was brought back, and spent the next four years in a mental hospital. At twenty-one, she became pregnant. She married the baby's father, mainly to get away from her parents and despite the fact that 'I had that feeling every time he came near me, I just used to freeze up. I had to be drunk to get pregnant'. Two of her four children died in infancy. She had her first lesbian relationship a year after her marriage. Eventually she left her husband, and met her long-term lesbian partner; they stayed together for twelve years. This was a happy and comparatively stable period for Shaz, but when her partner died suddenly she suffered from another bout of mental illness and became homeless. She was referred to a local housing project and had been re-housed in a sheltered flat just before I met her. She neither hides nor advertises her sexuality to her neighbours, though she thinks they have probably guessed, but she is pleased that all the Housing Association staff know she is a lesbian and are so positive about it.

Silva, born 1947

Silva's French mother and Italian father worked hard to build up their business in London and had little time to spend with their restless and rather wayward daughter. She had a strict Catholic upbringing and was sent to a convent school, but persuaded them to let her leave at 16 to learn shorthand and typing. Even for a girl of the late 1950s she was unusually ignorant about sexual matters, but within months found herself in a sexual relationship with another teenage girl. Their affair was ended by the girl's mother and for a long time Silva 'didn't go out with any women, I was so scared that I would be found out' and says she 'lived in absolute terror.' Shortly afterwards she was raped by her brother-in-law and ran away from home, living in a bedsit in west London. Her next relationship was with an older, butch woman, but Silva was not happy in that kind of lesbian culture and in the end she left, thinking that perhaps she was not a lesbian after all. In the 'Swinging London' of the early 1960s she slept with both men and women, drank too much and took drugs until, in the early 1970s, she discovered feminism. Feminist politics offered her the chance to be both the kind of woman and the kind of lesbian

she really wanted to be. She has had two or three significant relationships, but is now single. She says that moving out of central London has made her feel more isolated and less part of the gay scene.

Tamsin, born 1947

Tamsin's family was middle class though not affluent, and she grew up in a London suburb. She was privately schooled from the age of four until she went to grammar school, where she had problems adjusting and was bullied. Her school career was also marked by two periods of serious illness. Although she had boyfriends, in the sixth form she fell for a school friend and became convinced she was a lesbian. She also became an evangelical Christian at around this time so she felt morally confused and guilty. She was still identifying as lesbian by the time she went to Cambridge, but heartbreak and religious conflict made her decide to try to be exclusively heterosexual. Looking back, she sees that she was bisexual at this period of her life; after she left university and moved to London, she had relationships with both men and women. In the 1970s she became involved in feminism, and for a while was a lesbian separatist. Since her early 40s she has only had relationships with women, and now identifies entirely as a femme lesbian. She has carried out pioneering research on lesbian and gay ageing, and actively campaigns for better services for older LGBT people.