# Unseen Lives, Silent Mourning:
# The Visibility of Lesbian Death in Materialised Words.

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**Abstract**

The Civil Partnership Act 2004 enabled the legal registration of same-sex partnerships; this recognised, and gave institutional approval to, lesbian and gay relationships which, in terms of the former, previously had no legal visibility. This study examines the thoughts of small groups of lesbians and funerary professionals as to why, despite the legal changes, there appear to be very few memorials in cemeteries that indicate lesbian identity or relationship. The lesbian group was also asked if visibility in the cemetery was something they would want, and in what circumstances might this be possible.

Four main themes are identified as to why respondents believe this situation still exists eight years after the approval of the Act. These are: unacknowledged or silenced relationships; disempowerment by family or church/faith; the language available, and dissonance between legal progress and social acceptance. Furthermore, lesbians wanted memorials that recognised all parts of their lives, and that might inspire and create a community for those lesbians who would follow.

The responses are discussed in two situations – a municipal cemetery and a natural burial ground. Significant paradoxes are identified which mean that wishes for visibility conflict with material impermanence and fears of homophobic violence. The discussion references Davies' (2002) theory of 'words against death' and Hertz's (1960) writing of differentiated grief responses in Indonesia, and the latter informs the concept of a visible society in the cemetery. Okely's (1996) notion of 'defiant moments' adds a sense of agency to counter-balance silence and oppression. This study can only be seen as representing the opinions of two small and inter-related groups; further research on a wider scale is needed to fully explore this subject.

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To

Dollar,

who has been

steadfast in her belief

consistent in her support

and generous with her wisdom.

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The women of the Lesbian Herstory Archive Collective, who first articulated the words that set me on this path and who continue to collect, restore and hold lesbian heritage in its many forms.

**Contents**

## 1. Introduction

In 2010 I undertook a short research project on the subject of social responses to the grieving of lesbian widows (Stevens 2010). I discovered that whilst researchers had been aware for some years that there was a dearth of work examining the experience of lesbian widows, there had been no real advance in exploration of this issue, nor any consensus in understanding why this was so. It was a logical progression to further this initial piece of research by investigating the acknowledgement of lesbian relationships in the cemetery. The overall focus of this research, therefore, is to examine whether there is evidence of lesbian identity and relationship in the words of epitaphs and inscriptions on gravemarkers in places of burial and interment, and to explore what factors might be influential in this.

There has been much has been written on the visibility of older lesbians (Traies 2009), bereaved lesbians (Whipple 2006, Clarke *et al* 2010, Green and Grant 2008) and lesbians nearing death (Manthorpe 2003). Others have examined the nature and form of inscriptions on gravestones (Thomson 2006) as well as analysing graveyards, cemeteries and memorials for what they can tell about attitudes to death and social structures (Mytum 2000). However, there is little, if any, published academic thought about the acknowledgement of lesbian identity in epitaphs, although records of inscriptions that imply lesbian love are found in archived information.[1] I believe, therefore, that this research, in combining these hitherto separate areas, is valid and, in its literal visibility, might contribute to the process of bringing lesbian relationship in the cemetery into view.

I start by examining the academic literature for work on the two parts of the area I plan to research – lesbian visibility and materialised words of death – and I will then explore how they might overlap and inform the direction of my research.

[1] Brighton Our Story (2006) newsletter records the following inscription from 1935: 'this stone is placed here by [woman's name] in grateful remembrance of forty years of steadfast friendship and of happy life together'.

## 2. A Review of the Literature

### 2.1 Lesbian in/visibility

The purpose of this part of the literature review is to examine whether the notion of an invisibility that specifically impacts on lesbians is supported by academic literature and if so, to examine the ways in which this may implicate on the presence of epitaphs acknowledging lesbian relationship. It is possible that lesbian invisibility in the cemetery is reinforced by a difficulty in formulating epitaphs for women who have, for so long, been viewed as "other" in terms of both their gender and their sexual identity. In this way the situation becomes circular, with a lack of explicit memorials reinforcing the invisibility of this group.

Often described as 'the sick products of disturbed upbringings' (Kitzinger and Coyle 2002: 1), lesbians and gay men have only relatively recently moved from the margins of Western society to a place where legal and psychiatric sanctions have been replaced with a qualified recognition and validation.[2] Hamer (1996: 2) discussed the influences of the Church and the medical and psychiatric professions in Britain in the early twentieth century who respectively pathologised lesbians as bad, sick or mentally ill. Historically, research into homosexuality used samples from prison populations, or from groups with mental ill-health, leading to a highly distorted picture of the health and well-being of lesbians and gay men. In 1952, homosexuality was included in the second edition of the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Clarke *et al* 2010: 12). This social, religious and medical context meant that same-sex relationships often took place in secrecy, where verbal and visual codes protected the identity of lesbians and gay men as well as safely identifying others (Baker 2002: 3). However, whilst homophobia and heterosexism have undoubtedly marginalised both lesbians and gay men, and sexism has constrained and confined the lives of women, there is also a set of dynamics that are specific to lesbians beyond those that undermine the valid presence of both gay men and women in general (Stevens 2010). These dynamics are particularly centred on women as sexual beings.

[2] As yet, however, there is still not a complete religious or cultural recognition, see Stonewall 2010; Stonewall 2012.

Records of sexual love between women have often been obscured by the more socially acceptable notion of romantic friendship. Everard (1986: 123) writes of the 'ennobling and worthwhile' friendships between women which flourished in the nineteenth century. Passionate and sensual, but apparently non-sexual, these liaisons were not only socially acceptable, but inevitable, given the sex-segregated society of the time. Weeks *et al* (2001: 53) describe romantic friendships as an effective training ground for later devotion to husbands. Whilst sexual love between women was metaphorically rewritten as the more socially acceptable 'romantic friendship', literal rewritings have been discussed by Faderman (1979: 74). She argues that evidence of lesbian love and desire has been 'written out' by biographers, who re-orientated the reader's attention to finding 'the hidden man who must have been the object of their subject's affection, even though a beloved woman was in plain view'.

Thus, whereas sexual activity between men was punished (Stonewall 2012), the idea of sexual activity between women was resisted and reframed; this is highlighted by studies on sex and sexuality at the turn of the twentieth century which positioned "lesbian" outside of "woman". Here, it was considered that a female could be either a woman or a lesbian, but not both (Calhoun 1995: 8). The existence of gay men can be largely charted by the legal sanctions against them, but it was not acknowledged in law until 1956 that lesbians could – and did – have sexual relationships.[3] This, and a general lack of information about sex, pleasure and the workings of the female body, meant that many women would have been unaware that the 'things that they were doing at home with the women they loved were the things that made one a "lesbian"' (Hamer 1996: 2). Whilst Hamer was referring to Britain early in the twentieth century, the impact of having no known and socially acknowledged vocabulary was still being felt in the late 1940s. This is described poignantly by Dickson-Barrow when talking about the impact on her when Radclyffe-Hall's book 'The Well of Loneliness' was republished in Britain in 1948: 'when you read that, it gave you some identity about what it was you were feeling. I really realised there was some labelling then, to who I was' (Neild and Pearson 1992: 127).[4]

[3] Lesbianism still remains outside of a criminal framework. Unlike gay men, lesbians can only be legally charged with indecent assault, even if their crime is sex without consent (The Site 2009).
[4] 'The Well of Loneliness', a lesbian novel by Radclyffe-Hall, was originally published in 1928, and banned after official medical advice that it would encourage female homosexuality and lead to 'a social and national disaster' (Smith 2005).

Discussing the term 'enforced invisibility', Moonwoman-Baird (1997: 202) defines it as: 'the dominant society's negative sanction on lesbian revelation and its general refusal to acknowledge lesbian existence'. Her study of the use of language by lesbians suggests that while lesbian practice is regarded as marked behaviour, it goes 'unremarked' much more than is true of gay men. Furthermore, lesbian language behaviour is particularly unexamined. This, together with Baker's (2002: 3) acknowledgement that the secret vocabulary he described had relevance mostly to gay men, suggests a situation where restricted linguistic behaviour (in terms of phonological or linguistic markers) and language (in terms of vocabulary) combine to make it more difficult not only to speak as lesbians, but also to be heard as lesbians. This had a particular impact on the forming of lesbian community:

> We are in a different place than gay men. Isolation and otherness make solidarity hard to maintain, and make something as simple as the establishment of common linguistic markers of identity difficult to accomplish and, I think, dangerous to display.
>
> (Moonwoman- Baird 1997: 205)

The impact of oppression and discrimination, so often within the experience of lesbians and gay men, is particularly pertinent in the case of older lesbians (Langley 2001: 920). Health and social care researchers argue that lesbians over sixty-five are 'hard to reach' (Hall 2012: 39); the triple discrimination of ageism, sexism and homophobia was first articulated by Kehoe (1986: 139) who referred to older lesbians as 'an unknown, mysterious minority'. Traies (2009: 79) has examined the continuing cultural invisibility of older lesbians who are, she contends, both 'unrepresentable and unseeable'. Additionally Copper, in exploring ageism between women, warned that negating the presence of old lesbians would damage the social presence of all lesbians:

> Unless old lesbians are re/membered as sexual, attractive, useful, integral parts of the woman-loving world, current lesbian identity is a temporary mirage, not a new social statement of female empowerment.
>
> (Copper 1988: 17)

Whilst considering 'hard to reach' lesbians, it would be a serious omission if lesbians who are also part of other minority groups (for example Black lesbians

and/or lesbians with a disability) were not acknowledged.[5] Brookes *et al* (2009: 41) discuss how descriptors such as race/ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation are often treated singly, as if they cannot co-exist. This echoes the earlier research that concluded that one could not be both woman and lesbian; here one can be either a lesbian, or Black or disabled, for example.

> As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self.
>
> (Lorde 1984: 120)

Whilst it is not in the remit of this piece to explore this further, it is important that this section on invisibility does not in itself render particular lesbian groups unseen and unacknowledged, particularly since it is likely to be older lesbians who more readily contemplate decisions concerning funerals and memorialisation.

Whipple (2006) has written of the particular situation of lesbian widows, whose grief is particularly sidelined, and who are sometimes excluded to such an extent that they are not acknowledged as the dead woman's partner in funeral services. Doka (1989: 4) framed this exclusion as 'disenfranchised grief'. Recognising that societies have a set of 'grieving rules' that specify who is entitled to grieve, for whom, how and for how long, Doka argued that one way in which grief is disenfranchised is when the relationship is not socially accepted as valid. The impact of AIDS and the work of gay activists in the 1990s in raising public awareness of the huge loss of life amongst gay communities has led to the grief of gay men being socially acknowledged, and therefore enfranchised in society's eyes (Green and Grant 2008: 286). It is possible that this social "legitimising" of gay relationships has a parallel in the actual legitimising of gay sex. Lesbian sex has never been illegal, and so lesbian relationships have not been legitimised through the same public process.[6]

The compromised visibility of lesbians in wider society is also reflected in family group settings. Naples (2001: 23) writes of attending her father's funeral in the company of her large, heterosexual family of origin. She was perceived as not

[5] In this context, Black is written with a capital B in order to acknowledge a cultural and political identity, and it is inclusive of lesbians with African, Asian and Native heritage.
[6] See Stonewall (2012) for a timeline of legal changes with regard to gay sex.

having a family of her own on the basis of not having a husband. Whilst her heterosexual family knew of her lesbian identity, there developed an unspoken contract between them that they would 'accept it' as long as she did not 'speak of it too much'. It is interesting here that not only is the notion of "inaudibility" again referenced, but also the use of 'it' objectifies sexuality, as though it is not part of the subjective 'I', again referencing the splitting of lesbian and woman. Ward (2005: 305) argues that having to negotiate heteronormativity in family, social or work lives by not disclosing the gender of partners has a negative effect on mental health. Although this is also in the experience of gay men, it can be argued that this carefully maintained incongruity is particularly damaging to lesbians who, as women, are more likely to be deemed mentally ill (Ussher 1991: 10, The Counselling Directory 2013). Naples' question 'how do we achieve visibility in our families?' (2001: 33), therefore, has a fundamental relevance to this research, particularly since the responsibility for funeral arrangements and the devising of epitaphs may well fall on family members.

Cowen and Valentine's survey of the presence of lesbians and gay men on television provides a concrete example of the specific invisibility of lesbians. During 186 monitored hours of broadcasting on the publicly funded BBC channels, they discovered that where gender was specified during a reference to gay sexuality, 82 per cent of references were about gay men, leading them to conclude that lesbians 'hardly exist on the BBC' (2006: 6). This metaphorical and literal representation of the particular invisibility of lesbians has resonance with my reading of the literature. I can therefore conclude that there are particular dynamics and forces that mean lesbians and their relationships have a specific invisibility to society over and above that influenced by homophobia and heterosexism with regard to lesbians and gay men, and sexism with reference to women generally.

### 2.2 Materialised words of death

I have confined my enquiry to words on gravestones and other memorials which are with reference to an individual who has died. I have not included memorials to specific groups or events (for example war memorials), obituaries, online memorialisation, wills nor endowment tablets.

The practice of identifying and remembering the dead is widespread. With the exception of mass death, every society has a traditional means of publicising individual deaths (Williams 2003: 694), and Kastenbaum (1995: 284) states that 'most societies under most conditions attempt to fix the deceased in memory'. However, in his work on secondary burials in Indonesia, Hertz (1960) suggested that community reactions to individual deaths were differentiated according to the social status of the deceased. Whilst the death of a chief could generate something approaching panic, 'the death of a stranger, a slave, or a child will go almost unnoticed; it will arouse no emotion, occasion no ritual' (1960:76); since children had not entered what Hertz described as the visible society, there was no need for rituals which facilitated the dead child's leave of it. This idea of the visible society is pertinent to the present discussion, particularly if notions of naming and remembering are considered alongside.

Hawkins (1993: 752), discussing the genesis of the AIDS quilt, considered that the name of the deceased offers a 'formula of identity' which counters anonymity and is central to the act of memory. Harris (1982: 51) has written about naming and memory of the dead in her study of the Laymi in Bolivia. In describing the preparation of a new grave she says: '… those whose memory lives on must rest undisturbed; only those whose mortal remains bear no name can be viewed dispassionately and shoved aside to make way for newcomers'. This use of the word 'shoved' highlights the community's lack of investment in deceased individuals who have no family to remember them by name.

Aries (1981: 293) describes how 'the desire to be oneself' led to tombstones emerging from anonymity and becoming commemorative monuments. Vanderstraeten (2009: 2.7) comments that the increase in biographical information parallels the decrease of religious symbols or words that suggest the future fate of the dead. This is echoed in movement away from the deceased's relationship with the Almighty and towards evidence of the relationships the dead had with the living. A particularly significant change in wording on gravemarkers, in terms of this discussion, is that the value of the deceased became expressed in social terms – survivors mourn a "loving mother", or a "true friend" for example (Vanderstraeten 2009: 3.11). This increase in relational information on epitaphs is congruent with the challenge to theories of bereavement in Western societies which have historically

maintained that the work of grief and mourning leads to a severing of connections with the dead and recovery from the loss (Francis *et al* 2001: 226). It is now considered that, far from being severed, relationships with the deceased are actively maintained and remain part of the relational lives of the living (Francis *et al* 2001: 234, Woodthorpe 2010: 128).

This sets the scene for an exploration of the differing relationships that are presented or evoked in cemeteries. Davies (2002: 208) suggests that 'written memorials afford the capacity to share with others who are themselves unknown', thereby implicitly acknowledging a personal impact on visitors in the public space of the cemetery, and this consideration of unknown others is also touched on by Tarlow (1999: 20) in her work on the archaeology of mortality. Tarlow argued that to understand the specific context of death, the emotions of the bereaved should be considered alongside issues of power and status. It is her extension of this thought that is particularly interesting in the context of this present study. She suggests that the existence of a monument, in most cases provided by the person/s who experienced the loss, is a testimony to bereavement which therefore evidences pre-mortem relational life. This gives the onlooker an empathic emotional experience. Interestingly, in Claydon *et al's* (2010: 157) exploration into attitudes towards natural burial sites, participants reported that the lack of biographical information on many of the markers obscured the 'story' of the deceased, indicating the importance of information about the deceased's life to the emotional connection of others.

It may be possible, therefore, to add a further level of relationship in the cemetery – firstly the primary importance of a religious relationship that facilitated the spiritual life ahead, then public evidence of ongoing relationships between mourners and the deceased, and now the felt relationship between the detached onlooker, the deceased, and those who loved the deceased in life and continue to do so post-mortem. It is perhaps not too big a leap to postulate that the onlooker does not feel this connection with the deceased when biographical information and evidence of relationship to the living are not present. I propose that the work of Tarlow, Clayden *et al* and Davies combine to form a powerful argument for the emotional communication to mourners and onlookers from words inscribed on commemorative monuments in the cemetery. It is important, however, to note that although Clayden *et al*'s work is informed by interviews, Tarlow's suggestions here were not based on interviews with mourners.

My plan to interview women who anticipate a continuing relationship with their partners post-mortem may provide more information about this aspect of communication in the cemetery.

### 2.3 The research questions

It is at this point that the two lines of enquiry – lesbian in/visibility and the words in epitaphs – meet and form questions that could be addressed by this research. In summary, it is clear from the literature that there is a dynamic of invisibility that surrounds lesbians over and above the influences of homophobia and heterosexism on lesbians and gay men, and of sexism on women. If a lesbian is old and/or Black and/or disabled, or has a belonging to another minority group, then the invisibility is heightened. Field *et al* (1997: 1) argued that inequalities in the world of the living persist into death; the question here, then, is what are the forces in life that specifically deny lesbians visibility in death? I conclude from the literature that there is an important triad of factors: biographical information, being remembered by the living, and evidence of relationship in life that is sustained by the survivors. The presence of these factors appears to facilitate an emotional connection between an onlooker – someone who is not connected to the dead person – and the individual in the cemetery who is identified, remembered and loved. Bearing in mind Hertz's (1960) work that raised the idea of the visible society, I suggest that this emotional or empathic connection is the process through which the deceased gains entry into what might be called the 'visible society' of the cemetery.

The obvious questions here are about the outcome if one or more of the factors are not present. Does the lack of personal or identifying information on a gravemarker or memorial make that person "invisible" – in other words, there is no impact on the emotional consciousness of an onlooker? Alternatively, does an untended grave, or other lack of evidence of current relationship with the living, fail to generate an emotional response in an onlooker? These more general questions might be important to answer in further research, but my specific focus is why, despite the majority of Britons saying, when surveyed, that they are 'comfortable' with lesbians and gay men (Cowen 2007: 6), lesbian identity still does not have a presence in the 'visible society' of the cemetery?

My consideration of the literature has led me to propose these questions for research:

- Given lesbian relationships in life now have a legal visibility, what forces are at play that maintain the invisibility of lesbian relationships in materialised words of death?
- Is a visible presence of lesbian relationship in the cemetery/graveyard something that lesbians would want, and in what circumstances might this take place?

## 3. Research Methodology

Literature research demonstrates that there has been little academic enquiry into the presence or absence of text on gravemarkers or memorials that make clear lesbian identity or lesbian relationship. This issue therefore warrants exploration. In this section, I will firstly discuss three key dynamics that have influenced or underpinned my approach to research activities. These are: the issue of designating research as 'sensitive' (since this will determine what ethical structures I would need to put in place), the impact of my present profession on the research process, and the overarching ethos of research carried out within feminist principles and politics. I will then discuss factors pertaining to an overall research strategy – how factors understood here have contributed to my decisions about a method of data collection and how I plan to analyse, understand and interpret the data collected. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of my research design and production.

### 3.1 Influential dynamics on the research design

#### A sensitive issue?

This research is about how particular dead women are remembered and memorialised. Some of the women who choose to participate may have lost partners and be grieving, other women may talk about a time when they or their partners will have died. That I need to be sensitive in the contacts I make and in how I behave in research relationships is a given – but does this automatically mean that I am researching a 'sensitive topic'? The outcome of this exploration impacts on my consideration of ethical factors.

Lee (1993: 3) suggested that the term 'sensitive topic', whilst appearing to be self-explanatory, was at his time of writing largely unexplored. He considered Sieber and Stanley's 1988 definition of socially sensitive research – ' ... studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research' – as helpful, although not specific enough in terms of what might be described as 'consequential' (Lee 1993: 3).[7] However, Lee considers Farberow's definition equating sensitive

[7] Interestingly, in my discussion of feminist research, I note resultant personal or social change is an integral part of feminist research (Kelly *et al*, 1990: 40), thereby defining feminist research as sensitive by default within this definition.

topics with those areas of social life surrounded by taboo, particularly those relating to sex and death, too narrow (Lee 1993: 3). Milne and Lloyd ( 2009: 222) discuss Lee and Renzetti's list of four categories of sensitive research. It is the fourth category that is pertinent here: research that intrudes into a deeply personal experience. Milne and Lloyd caution against too hastily identifying a research topic as 'sensitive'. By deciding a particular topic is sensitive, it overlays the issue with the researcher's frame of reference, and does not allow the participant to make their own judgement. Additionally, what is deemed 'sensitive' is not a constant:

> 'sensitivity can be seen as situated and constructed within the context of the cultural norms and taboos of the specific group with which an individual is identifying at that moment in time'
>
> (Milne and Lloyd 2009: 223).

Corbin and Morse (2003) discuss the issue of sensitive research from a different perspective. In challenging the caution with which risk assessments are made, they suggest that risks of emotional distress are needlessly equated with the potential for physical harm in biomedical research. They contend that in their experience, participants react positively to the research experience and demonstrate self-care in deciding whether to participate or not in the interview process (2003: 338). Furthermore, in interviews, particularly unstructured interviews, they experience participants as:

> 'retain[ing] considerable control over the process. To make the assumption that all interviews are potentially harmful takes away participant agency and control over what is said, how it is said, or if anything is said at all about a topic'
>
> Corbin and Morse (2003: 337).[8]

In this sense, the principles are very similar to counselling. As a lecturer in counselling for many years, I believed that the initial task for trainees was to let go of social introjects that prioritised "good" feelings (happy, optimistic) over "bad" feelings (anger, fear or sadness). The principle is that denying someone the opportunity to talk about something distressing is more likely to be psychologically harmful than facilitating a sensitive and boundaried space in which experiences and feelings are heard and validated. This belief, rooted as it is in a different professional

[8] Here, again, is a connection to feminist research. The study of women's lives – so often passed over in previous research – has a function of giving voice to what was previously unvoiced.

context, challenges the notion that emotional distress is inevitably harmful and must be guarded against. This implicitly re-orientates the discussion away from how to avoid causing distress, towards exploring researchers' relationships with their own feelings and whether this leads to a fear of expressions of distress in others. Whilst the discussion of this question is not in the remit of this dissertation, the posing of it does allow reflexive thought to be given to the influence of a researcher's emotional literacy on the research interview.[9]

I am clear that feeling sad, angry or frightened, or feeling grief and the effects of loss – in other words feeling distressed – is not in itself harmful. What could be harmful is if I as the researcher felt embarrassed by any show of emotion, or indicated covertly or overtly that emotional expression was not acceptable. I would also consider it harmful if I am party to opening up participants' emotions and give no thought to time or place so that the participant is not able to return to a calmer, less sensitised frame of mind; additionally, if I deny a distressed participant any agency over what is discussed or what is not discussed. I have therefore held back from designating my research area as sensitive *per se*. I am, however, aware that participants might be talking about issues that to them have a sensitive, or sensitising, impact, and I have aimed to respond with care in all contacts.

To this end, I have been mindful of the Association of Social Anthropologists Ethical Guidelines (1999), in particular section I. Here, responsibilities towards research participants are identified, and in terms of this research, paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 are particularly pertinent (protecting research participants and honouring trust, anticipating harms, and avoiding undue intrusion). I have paid particular attention to paragraph 1.3(b) (undue intrusion by, for example, having been caused to acquire self-knowledge which participants did not seek or want).[10] Here, I have given much thought to how "slippage" between my role as a researcher and my role as a counsellor might compromise the psychological safety of respondents. As a counsellor, I know that most insight (self-knowledge) is gained through contact with the client's inner emotional world; whilst insight in therapeutic settings is a desired outcome, it can bring to the fore experiences and feelings that are uncomfortable until processed. In order to mitigate the risk of undue intrusion whilst in the data

[9] I discuss this from a personal point of view in the section on feminist research.
[10] Please see appendix 1 for the relevant sections of the ASA Ethical Guidelines (1999).

gathering phase of my research, I have given much thought to the interface between my research role and my therapeutic role, and this I discuss in the next section.

**The 'Counsellor I' and the 'Researcher I'.**

The activities known as "a counselling session" and "a research interview" have some significant similarities. O'Toole and Were (2008: 616) describe the role of researchers as 'routinely prob[ing] beyond the explicit and the known to try to understand the worlds of research participants of which the participants themselves may be unconscious'. If the word 'probing' is exchanged for 'exploring', and the ownership of understanding is given to clients, then this description would equally well describe the therapeutic encounter. It is easy to see how a counselling session and a research interview could be confused if appropriate boundaries are not held.

Ortiz (2001) writes of how the interviews he conducted with wives of professional athletes took on a therapeutic tone, in which the women not only talked openly and deeply of their own lives, but also gained significant benefit from a cathartic release of feelings which facilitated personal growth. Ortiz (2001: 196) was clear that whilst he did not set out to present himself as a therapist, the beneficial effects of in-depth and numerous interviews held sequentially led the women to define the meetings as therapy. He subsequently defined his role as: 'field researcher and accidental therapist' (2001: 198). Exploring why people might choose to participate in research, Clark (2010: 407) is clear that a research encounter can be purposefully used 'by those who are engaging to promote some sort of internal well-being that was previously lacking'. Keeping a clear distinction between the role of a researcher and that of a qualified counsellor (Clark 2010: 408) will, to some extent, mitigate the potential for harm through blurred roles, although I would suggest that vigilance is still needed so as not to 'cause undue harm' to research participants (ASA, 1999 section I paragraph 2).

In my therapeutic role, the task is to provide an environment where the client can reflect on their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in order to come to their own meaningful understandings. In a research role, I see my task as providing an environment in which participants are able to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings which might enable me to find understanding and meaning that could translate from the individual to society. There is an ethical responsibility to hold a

clear boundary between the two activities; in other words to be mindful of the differences in intended outcome rather than the similarities in execution. It is therefore important to be aware of boundaries of purpose, time and place to ensure the research interview is always perceived as that.

The potential for role confusion is discussed thoughtfully by Rowling (2009). She describes how the clash between her previous career as a counsellor and her current role as a researcher initially inhibited the research process. Simplistically, this clash was articulated by two opposing questions: 'how much distance should I maintain from my participants?' with regard to her research role, and 'how could I care for my respondents?' which was reminiscent of her previous counselling role (2009: 33). These questions articulated Rowling's fear that she was abandoning the needs of her respondents – who were talking about grief and loss – by standing firm in a more distant researcher role. In realising that these opposing questions were actually a clash between her previous 'counsellor I' and her current 'researcher I', and by bringing both of these 'I's into the research interview, Rowling was able to re-contract with her respondents that she would provide sources of practical or emotional help should the need arise. This resolution freed up the research interview, and allowed an ethical care of the interviewees.

In my therapeutic role, I am familiar with experiencing feelings that have been generated by my client's material, and this allows me to both understand my client's situation more accurately and help them to do the same. I aimed to use this experience appropriately within the boundaries of the research interview. I used the skills of rapport-making and empathic understanding to facilitate the discussions, whilst being careful to overtly hold boundaries that contained the research interview. I was also, like Rowling (2009: 223), aware of a duty of care towards my research participants, and I made available a session with an experienced counsellor should any participant want or need a confidential space in which to de-brief. I have also followed Milne and Lloyd's (2009: 226) recommendation that consent and contracting should be an ongoing process rather than a one-off activity, which enables support structures to be responsive to each participant's unique experience. The notion of 'counsellor I' and 'researcher I' helped me smooth and make productive what had been an uneasy alliance of overlapping roles and responsibilities. My consideration of these issues has allowed me a clearer

understanding of the place of subjectivity in the research encounter, something that is a key element in feminist research.

**Feminist research**

Bryman (2008: 463) writes that feminist researchers advocate the establishment of: a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee; a high degree of reciprocity on the part of the interviewer; the perspectives of the women being interviewed, and a non-hierarchical relationship.[11] In this succinct description, there is no hint of the complexity and the longevity of debate that moved from a simplistic differentiation between research methods that were quantitative (hard and masculine) and those that were qualitative (soft and feminine) (Coffey 1999: 12) to a rich landscape of feminist thought, experience and politics that has allowed the notion of 'feminist research' to be articulated within a broad agreement of terms. What does come out of the intense discussion in these earlier years is that while the idea of a distinctive feminist method was dismissed (Stanley 1990: 12), qualitative methods – in particularly interviewing – were seen best to espouse the values of feminist research (Kelly *et al* 1990: 34, Maynard 1994: 21, Bryman 2008: 463). 'Feminist research', therefore, rather than being situated in a specific set of research practices, instead reflected a principled position from which to work. This position emphasised:

- an understanding and acknowledgement of the power of gender divisions on social life;
- the rejection of the inevitability of a power dynamic between researcher and researched and the importance of a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and research participants;
- countering a scientistic philosophy;
- a broad focus on women's experiences;
- validation of emotion as a research experience;

[11] It is interesting here that Bryman implies that feminist research is exclusively about researching women's lives; nearly twenty years earlier Layland wrote: 'the latent effect of seeing feminist research as exclusively about women's lives is that it allows things male to go uninvestigated, almost as though the idea of the male-as-norm were not being questioned any more' (1990: 129).

- an ethical approach which is consistent across the whole execution and production of research,
- an acknowledgment that feminist research is a political activity and should be directed towards social change

(Calloway 1992: 30; Maynard 1994: 14-23; Ryan 2006: 152).

Oakley (1988: 36-37), believing that the traditional social-research interview depersonalised both interviewer and the interviewee, emphasised the importance of subjectivity. Peshkin (1988: 17) contemporaneously argued that subjectivity should not be assumed to be an inevitable, stating that 'researchers should systematically seek out their subjectivity, not retrospectively when the data have been collected and the analysis is complete, but while their research is actively in progress'. I understand Peshkin here to be arguing for researchers to be connected to their feeling, responsive selves at all times during the research process and to be aware of any personal experiences that might impact on how they hear what their respondents are saying. If my research was to be a personally honest and productive undertaking, if I was to resist an implicit hierarchical dynamic, and if the women I researched and my researcher self were to have a genuine exchange – if, in other words, I am to be personally present in a mutually open encounter – then subjectivity had to be something that I overtly worked towards, not just something I acknowledged as I referred to my journal notes whilst reflecting on and writing up my research.

I find the notion of inter-subjectivity a particular challenge not because of my politics, but because of my psychotherapy training. In this role, my own experiences are not relevant to the client; my task is to provide an empathic, congruent and non-judgmental space in which the client can explore her or his life, and work with me to find some meaning, understanding, resolution or containment of subjective experiences. Therefore, whilst I am familiar with, and committed to, valuing and facilitating my client's subjective experience, the challenge for me was creating a different understanding of the boundary to my own experience. I initially understood inter-subjectivity to be the disclosing of personal information, as though I was presenting my "credentials"; my experience not only as a lesbian, but as a lesbian who has faced my own mortality and also that of my partner in our respective diagnoses and treatment of breast cancer. I realised that I had not fully understood the task.

About half way through my research period, I found another lump in my breast. In the event, assessment showed a benign, not a malignant, cause for the lump, but I had by then opened the door to a feelingful world that I had largely consigned to the past. I realised that it was not so much in the disclosure of myself and my personal history to an interviewee that made the interview 'inter-subjective', but owning and bringing to the surface my fear of dying early, my dread of yet again telling my family of the recurrence of a life endangering illness, and perhaps most painful, my distress at seeing my partner again envisage a future without me. I am sure that this opening up of old wounds, and my acknowledgement to myself of their overt presence as I talked to other women about their or their partners' future deaths, enabled deeper, more productive interviews. Stanley and Wise's assertion (cited in Maynard 1994: 16) that 'the researcher is also a subject in her research and that her personal history is part of the process through which "understanding" and "conclusions" are reached' extends this process to all elements of research, and Hastrup's (1992: 116) comment that: 'the anthropologist is not merely *writer*, but also *author*' (italics in the original) places this process firmly within a personal framework.

In summary, whilst this research area could be considered 'sensitive', I have decided to proceed assuming, in the first instance, that participants are able to make their own decisions about the impact of this subject matter on their emotions, whilst at the same time remaining mindful and respectful of participants' own emotional safety mechanisms. This dovetails with my understanding of feminist research principles in facilitating a mutual research encounter. I am also aware of the overlapping of boundaries between the 'counsellor I' and the 'researcher I' and how these two roles, if held in balance, will allow collection of data to be achieved, honouring both inter-subjectivity and an ethical care of participants.

### 3.2 Research strategy

> Participant observation is usually taken as the archetypal form of research employed by ethnographers. It is more properly conceived of as a research strategy than a unitary research method in that it is always made up of a variety of methods.
>
> (Davies 1999: 67).

Davies went on to say that whilst participant observation was classically a single researcher spending an extended period of time living among a discrete group or community and participating in their daily lives, the nature of 'the group' has evolved to include community groups, and groups in specific institutions such as prisons or schools. Caputo (2000: 21), in proposing fieldwork that did not have a specific geographical area, challenged 'anthropology's enduring relationship with bounded fields and traditional fieldwork'. Additionally, Oakley (1988: 57) maintained: 'a feminist interviewing women is by definition both 'inside' the culture and participating in that which she is observing'. I belong to a group for whom knowledge of our own mortality is not slowly awakened as we enter old age and realise we have become the elders of our families or social groups. Contemplation of my own and my partner's mortality became an unwelcome inevitability as we discussed treatments and research on different drugs and food regimes that might increase our individual chances of survival. By investing in survival, death was brought into an unwelcome focus, and this links me with other women who have chosen to, or had to, think about how we and the women we love will be presented in memoriam.

Davies (1999: 95) goes on to discuss the relationship between semi-structured interviewing and participant-observation. She considers that whilst the former does not meet the 'extensive time involvement' of participant-observation, the relationship between interviewer and interviewees has a wider territory than just that of the interview. The fact that many of the lesbian participants were known to me meant that my relationship with them, and their relationships with each other, went beyond the bounds of the interview. I have therefore questioned myself as to whether I can legitimately describe the research I undertook as 'participant-observation'. My response is a qualified 'yes' in that although the restricted time and depth of research achieved at this level falls short of that commonly found in participant-observation studies at higher academic levels, I would argue that the embryonic beginnings of participant observation are present.

There is also the issue of 'the field', and implicitly with that, the issue of 'home' and 'away'. Green (1997: 11), in discussing her field, considered that 'the boundaries of the community existed more as conceptual markers'. My chosen field also does not have a tangible or specific geographical border; I consider it to be boundaried by a

shared willingness to focus on death by women who identify as lesbians. However, the 'conceptual boundary' has ethical and personal implications. The methods of recruitment I used meant that I knew many of the participants socially, and so explicitly identifying when I was 'in the field' and therefore collecting data, was important both ethically and personally. If the boundary between "home/social time" and "away/research time" had become blurred it would have been easy to fall into being a covert researcher and unethically using my observations when people were unaware they were being observed (ASA 1999 section I paragraph 5a).

Amit (2000: 8) discusses the role of travel in traditionally demarcating the boundary between ethnographic field and home, and goes on to discuss the 'cognitive and emotional journeys' that undermine the easily definable fields of the past. Knowles (2000: 55), too, is clear that the journey to the field is not always a physical one and discusses how a 'symbolic distinction' between her home and field sites was breached by discovering that participants were being interviewed in her office, rather than at the nearby venue usually used. In thinking about how my field was defined, I discovered that there were specific elements that demarcated the 'the field'. One was the presence of my research equipment – voice recorder, notepad and pen, consent forms and information sheets – and the other was a specific emotional and cognitive "headspace". This is demonstrated by the occasion when I interviewed three lesbians in a group setting. All three participants were known to me, and the interview took place within a planned social evening. Not only was a physical space made available for the interview (sitting round the table which was bare apart from the research equipment), but I can also hear from my tone of voice on the recording that I was focussed on research rather than social activity. This same table was laid for a meal after the interview and it became my 'home space' then; the journey between home and away in this instance had no physical distance at all, but the 'symbolic distinction' referred to by Knowles above was very clear.

### 3.3 Research Methods

I obtained data from two different groups. One was made up of lesbians who were responding from a personal perspective and the second was comprised of those who were professionally connected to death and memorialisation. These included funeral directors, clergy, independent funeral celebrants, memorial masons, cemetery

managers and those involved in providing funeral transport. I quickly realised that these two groups were not mutually exclusive, and there was a third group – those who worked in these professions and were lesbian. I used different data collection methods for each of the two main groups, and in the case of the third group, I used a variety of data collection methods according to the respondents' choices.[12]

**Lesbians**

To find lesbians willing to participate, I sent posters both physically and electronically to the following groups:

- Kenric (a national social organisation for lesbians);
- Pink Sou'westers (a Birmingham based non-scene social group for lesbians and gay men over the age of 50);
- Lesbian Discussion Group at 'Gay's the Word' (London based);
- Older Lesbian Network (an umbrella organisation for groups around the UK),
- Rainbow Voices (a choir for LGBT people based in the English Midlands).

I also placed an advert in 'Diva', a monthly magazine for lesbians and bisexual women.

Other women were contacted by networking (often referred to a 'snowballing'). Lee (1993: 67) suggests that this method is particularly useful with populations who are vulnerable or stigmatised, and whilst many of the participants in my study would not refer to themselves in these ways, some of the women who responded were not out as lesbian in all parts of their lives. Snowballing meant that I could be 'vouched for' both in my identity as a lesbian and my ability to work confidentially. Kehoe (1986: 149), having used snowballing to reach respondents in her study, said 'the present survey cannot be considered representative of any but a small and very select segment of the total population', and this will apply to this piece of work too.

Due to time and opportunity restraints, I had to be sure that what was covered in the interviews held enough data specifically relevant to my research questions. I was keenly aware that Oakley (1988: 41) considered the use of traditional interview techniques by women interviewing women to be 'morally indefensible', and so I

[12] See appendices II – VII for copies of posters, questions, information sheet and consent form.

compiled a list of broad questions with which to define the territory of the semi-structured interview rather than to control it. Some respondents preferred not to meet face to face, or it was not possible to find a mutually convenient time, and for these I sent an email with broadly similar questions, encouraging respondents to write as little or as much as they wanted, to try and replicate the feel of a semi-structured interview.

**Professionals**

I sent a brief description of the research and a request for comments on research question 1 to the following:

- 12 funeral directors;
- 8 individuals, organisations or businesses advertising memorial masonry or artwork;
- 2 independent funeral celebrants;
- 10 Christian clergy;
- 2 funeral transport businesses;
- 2 cemetery managers.

Information about my research was also printed in a monthly newsletter for memorial masons and in a quarterly magazine for funeral directors.

**Recording responses**

I recorded ten of the eleven lesbians who opted to be interviewed face-to-face, and then transcribed each interview. One lesbian did not give permission to be recorded; in this instance I made contemporaneous notes, and typed them up immediately afterwards. All notes and transcripts were made available for corrections or edits by interviewees. Two women took advantage of this, neither made any edits.

A**nonymity**

I stated to all professional and individual respondents that I would anonymise their responses in my write-up unless they specifically asked to be referred to by their own name. I made the decision not to automatically anonymise identities after reading the following:

> Particularly bothersome to me was the argument that fake names must be used for the narrators. As a feminist I must reject this convention. Women are made invisible in so many ways, and lesbians in still more ways and the elderly in still more additional ways. To use a name is a bold move, a defiant move, an honourable move.
>
> (Classen 2005: 20)

Given this work is positioned within the context of lesbian invisibility, this was an important point to acknowledge. Of the 15 lesbians who took part in the research, 10 recorded on their consent forms that they wished to be referred to by their own first names.

### 3.4 Analysis and interpretation of the data

The women who have allowed me access to their thoughts, feelings and experiences are giving voice to hitherto silenced possibilities. It is important, therefore, that I choose ways of analysing and interpreting their words that does not itself maintain silence and invisibility. As well as presenting and analysing the data thematically, I also plan to use Okely's (1996: 206) 'alternative approach', which she writes about under the heading of 'defiant moments' (1996: 206-233). Here Okely describes a focus on 'moments of resistance to the conditions of subordination' which, while acknowledging the wider context of oppression, does not reduce the players to silent and invisible roles. The genesis of Okely's approach was with regard to Kaberry's study of Aboriginal women. Okely described how Kaberry wanted to re-examine her work in a way that did not collude with the more common practice at the time of marginalising women. However, in doing this, Kaberry failed to acknowledge the women's subordinate social position (Okely, 1996: 207).

My analysis and interpretation of the data could focus on what is not allowed to happen, whether that be by cultural or religious determination. Equally, I could examine lesbians' feelings, thoughts and experiences about what, so far, has been largely withheld. However, Okely's approach means that specific moments in personal contributions are invested with a sense of agency, thereby giving my respondents a voice which also honours the under-pinning feminist principles of this research, without by-passing or skimming over the influences of sexism, heterosexism and homophobia. In Okely's words: 'the atypical also gives insights into the structures of power' (1996: 206), and so I hope that by examining 'defiant

moments' I will gain a better understanding of the structures that presently shout loudest, and thereby maintain the status quo.

### 3.5 Limitations and potential problems

The limitations and problems that I am aware of are as follows:

1. **Access to respondents**. The use of social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook may have accessed different and wider populations, in particular a younger demographic, but these forums are not open to me due to professional boundary constraints.[13] Here, the 'counsellor I' and the 'researcher I' clashed in a way that restricted my research.
2. **Range of respondents.** I consider that this research has been limited by the absence of participants who are of African descent. I did not approach any Black lesbian groups specifically, and this is something I would ensure happened in any future research of this type.
3. **Only Christian churches were approached**. I approached both Protestant and Catholic churches – and within Protestant groups both the Church of England and non-conformist churches. However, I did not approach leaders of other world faiths. Given that three lesbian participants were Sikh, this was an omission. I consider that the absence of Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindi and Sikh faith leaders was a major limitation, but a realistic one for a study of this size.
4. **Snowball method of recruitment.** This method achieved more participants than all the other methods put together. Whilst it was useful in finding people willing to be interviewed, it is likely that most of the participants will have had much the same set of experiences, values and politics given we were all connected to the same social network. This is: non-scene, politically aware, educationally comparable, employed or retired, and if employed, in areas such as social work, teaching, social welfare and counselling/psychotherapy. All but one of the lesbians recruited in this way are over forty years old. Whilst it is likely that increasing age may mean that people are more willing to think about their own and others' mortality and the arrangements that

[13] My work as a counsellor/psychotherapist means that making information publically available about my personal life or activities is therapeutically undesirable.

might be put in place, these reflections will not be confined to middle aged and older lesbians. I think this is a major limitation, and one which would be good to redress in future research.

5. **Unclear geographical strategy for contacting a range of professional roles.** This is a major limitation. I now think that I should have decided on a geographical area (for example the English Midlands) and aimed to obtain all participants (both those responding personally and from a professional role) from this geographical area. Whilst this was my intent when I started, I could not find any overtly gay friendly funeral directors, for example, in the Midlands, and so was drawn to those belonging to a network in London. This area of my research feels the most unanalysed, and would most definitely be approached in a different way if I repeated this research with the benefit of hindsight.

In summary, I acknowledge that my occupation as a psychotherapist has had a significant impact on how I approached this research, most notably in the interviewing phase. My feminist politics and my research into feminist methodology have underpinned my intent to have mutually open encounters with respondents within a physical and inter-personal setting that enables as much parity as is possible in research activities. However, I initially felt uneasy at the change from setting clear boundaries around personal information in my therapeutic role, to the responsibility to create an inter-subjective relationship in my research role.

I am also clear that whilst the subject matter may touch on respondents' sensitivities, I do not consider it to be 'sensitive' research *per se*. I have, however, been mindful of ethical requirements for appropriate care of respondents. This is where the notion of a 'counsellor I and researcher I' has been particularly helpful. There are several key learning points at this stage regarding both the restricted range of respondents and an unclear delineation of geographical boundary. Finally, I consider that my choice of a thematic approach for analysing the data allows for the most reflection on and exploration of the results, and my inclusion of 'defiant acts' allows an analysis that does not blur the reality of the power held by religious and social structures, but equally does not present respondents as impotent within it.

# 4. Results

In this chapter I will present the results in various ways. I will firstly overview who I invited to take part, and how many responded, both in terms of individuals and organisations. I will then present thematically the data that was collected from both the lesbian group, and from those who took part from the professionals group in response to each of the research questions. I will then examine the data for critical points, or 'defiant moments' (Okely 1996: 206). I will discuss the results in the following chapter.

## 4.1 Research participants

### Lesbian respondents

Twelve lesbians responded to posters, adverts and snowball contacts and data was collected via:

- Group interview: 3 (Mandeep, Satwant and Sunali,)
- Individual interview: 6 (Anna, Dee, Jean, Karen, Kate and Polly)
- Email response: 3 (Cath, Della and Glenys)

Three further lesbians decided to withdraw.

### Professionals

Of those respondents who were contacted because of their professional roles, three indicated that they were lesbian:

- 1 independent funeral celebrant: Angela (face-to-face interview);
- 1 owner of a funeral transport company: Carole (email response);
- 1 funeral director: Megan (interviewed with her heterosexual colleague Geoff).

Nine further professionals responded:

- Memorial masons/memorial artists – 1 (email response);
- Christian clergy – 2 (one a Unitarian minister, one a Roman Catholic priest, both email responses);

- Cemetery manager – 1 (email response);
- Funeral Directors – 5 (3 responded by email, 2 face-to-face interview).

### 4.2 Research question 1:

Given lesbian relationships in life now have a legal visibility, what forces are at play that maintain the invisibility of lesbian relationships in materialised words of death?

#### Themes emerging

In response to this question, the themes that emerged from the responses as a whole were: unacknowledged or silenced relationships; disempowerment by family or church/faith ; the language available, and dissonance between legal progress and social acceptance.

#### Unacknowledged/silenced relationships

Seven of the total of fifteen lesbians discussed covert or hidden lesbian relationships within their families, both in generations past and in the present. All these respondents felt that this impacted directly on why there was so little evidence of lesbian relationship in the cemetery. Kate talked of early messages that were implicitly given about the acceptability of lesbian love. Two elderly aunts had lived together for all their adult lives, no-one talked of them in her family and when the young Kate asked questions about the aunts she was left feeling that she had done something wrong. It was only after one aunt died that Kate knew for certain that they had been lesbians. Megan reflected on a hidden history:

> I think it's quite sad that when you go back to these early tombstones, there's nothing that depicts the relationship I have now. It must have gone on, I suppose they are all grouped together under 'spinster of this parish' or something. Fifty years ago it was all kept secret.
>
> (Megan, lesbian, funeral director 1).

Angela, Glenys and Karen talked about their relationships today, and said that either their own or their partners' parents were either unaware that their daughters were in a lesbian relationship or chose not to acknowledge it. Two more lesbians (Anna and Polly) talked of siblings who were actively antagonistic. Anna talked of an implicitly understood penalty; whilst her brother was now willing to meet with her, she and her partner knew that if they indicated in any way the nature of their relationship in front

of his children (aged between eleven and sixteen), all visits would cease and Anna would lose contact with her three nieces.

Six lesbians talked of funerals they had attended where the lesbian identity of the dead woman was not referred to, and therefore her lesbian partnerships in life were omitted. One of these was Jean, whose partner of many years had died the previous year. There was no mention of Jean in the family-arranged Catholic service. Carole had been to her friend Sal's funeral:

> Her very Catholic funeral did not mention she was a big 'ole' dyke and in fact a DJ at [local gay bar] for a time. This is one of the reasons I started [the business] as a matter of fact, I was so angry that it wasn't mentioned that I wanted to give people the opportunity to let people know what they were all about by way of personalising the transport.
>
> (Carole, lesbian, funeral transport business)

Four lesbians, all members of a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) choir, had been to the funeral of a founder member of the choir some months before. All were angry that no mention was made of the woman's lesbian relationships, despite a eulogy that talked in detail of her work and sporting achievements.

> Her partner and ex-partner were sitting on the front row but were never mentioned within the whole of the service, despite the fact that (the deceased) was a member of that church. There was no reference in any of the written literature either. Although we heard a lot of information about her life, there was no reference to any companion that she'd ever had. Nothing said by anybody within the whole day.
>
> (Polly, lesbian)

Responses from the professional group highlighted how little lesbian or gay relationships are acknowledged in the cemetery. Of those that responded to this question (which included Catholic and Unitarian clergy, three funeral directors, a cemetery manager and a memorial mason) nobody had any knowledge of any stone or memorial that referred to a lesbian relationship.

> As far as 'lesbian death' and partnerships go, I spend much time in and around cemeteries all over the country and have, to date, never seen any that would indicate that the person in question was a lesbian.
>
> (Carole, lesbian, funeral transport business)

**Disempowerment by family or church/faith**

The influence of families of origin was discussed in most of the interviews, whether it was actual influence already, or fear of such at a time of the lesbians' own or partners' deaths. Carole described the funeral of a lesbian friend where her "professional family" (the police force) 'took over the job and it became all about the police'.

The fear that funeral and memorial arrangements would be taken out of the partners' hands was particularly strong when there was homophobic response to the relationship by close members of the family combined with religious belief. There was much discussion by lesbians about how to protect their wishes in the face of family who had different ideas. Four of the respondents said that they had entered a civil partnership (on one occasion without the knowledge of one set of parents) in order to have legal status when making end-of-life or funerary decisions. Three respondents talked of leaving clear instructions in wills, and of taking further steps to protect their wishes. Each acknowledged that even so, they could imagine others disregarding this and making the arrangements that they wanted. These are representative of these discussions:

> All Margaret's family are Catholic, so we had a Catholic funeral that they organised. I wasn't part of that really and it wasn't said that I was Margaret's partner. The priest was very nice, but I wanted nice music to be played and he said I could only have certain 'proper' pieces. I was disappointed about that.
>
> (Jean, lesbian)

> My mum is quite strong willed, I was brought up a Catholic. I have said to my mum, I want a Humanist service, but my partner has said she's worried she won't be able to fulfil my wishes. Everyone is emotional at that time, what if my mum wants a big Catholic service?
>
> (Karen, lesbian)

> We do worry – just that we know what we want as opposed to what our families want. She'd have a Catholic service because that's what the family would want. Because my partner is from Scotland, I can imagine her family saying 'we'll scatter her remains in Scotland', which is all very well, but I live in the Midlands.
>
> (Polly, lesbian)

Mandeep, Satwant and Sunali opted to have a group discussion, and talked of how their partners and relationships would be seen within their Sikh culture:

> Say one of us was in a car accident tomorrow; I can envisage the whole scenario of the Gurudwara, the priest, my family – people that don't know what Mandeep means to me. My family respect Mandeep as a daughter, but not as my partner. They will look out for her, they will care for her … but that's because she's a girl. They won't give her the same rights as if she was my husband.
>
> (Satwant, lesbian)

> To have your own wishes respected you'd need to leave a legal document behind. It would have to be signed, and it would have to be notarised and even then, your family may say 'you know what? You can stick that up your bum, we're doing what we're going to do according to all the rituals and practices'.
>
> (Mandeep , lesbian)

> I'd say we're a couple, not a family. When I look at you guys [Sunali and partner] I'd say you are a family - yourselves, your girls, your grandchildren, and all the partners who join the family. Well, there's me and Mandeep, and we each have our families. And there's a real difference. The decisions that we make and the decisions that you make are quite different. We've got an obligation to respect what everybody else would want to do.
>
> (Satwant)

> I think that part of that difference in yours and my situation is that [my partner] and I are the elders. Our parents are dead, grandparents are long dead so we head the family tree. Yes, the power does rest with us, but if my mum and dad were alive, my mum and my partner would have to battle it out.
>
> (Sunali)

All of the professional group were emphatic about the powers church and civil authorities have over what words can (and cannot) be inscribed on memorials. Megan and Geoff, two funeral directors from the same company, discussed the differences between church and civil authorities:

> Churchyards have very strict criteria. I think it is fair to say that an application to erect a memorial to the memory of a same sex partner in a churchyard, with wording depicting the relationship between two women, would more than likely be rejected.
>
> (Megan, lesbian, funeral director 1)

> We're constrained by the councils and church authorities, so we have no option. Powerful pair. If we were to say 'Clare, one true love of

> Sarah's life' we might be able to put that in the cemetery, but I bet you next week's salary we can't put it on one in a churchyard.
>
> (Geoff, heterosexual, funeral director 2)

There were two contrasting replies from clergy:

> From a Catholic point of view, to identify a sexual, homosexual relationship (whether male or female) on a tombstone would be problematic since the Church teaches that sexual acts outside marriage are wrong. Therefore, the celebration in a Catholic Church of a funeral that was openly a "gay event" or the burial of a dead person by a Catholic priest in a way that spoke warmly of same-sex sexual activity would both be unlikely in the extreme.
>
> (Roman Catholic priest)

> Unitarianism has a long record of support for the LGBT community and alongside the Quakers and Liberal Jews have been instrumental in campaigning for the equalisation of marriage laws.
>
> (Unitarian minister)

**The language available**

There was some discussion about the language available to describe lesbian relationships, both in life and after death in memorial. This was seen as a key factor that restricted memorial inscriptions – even if memorials referring to lesbian relationships were accepted in time. The opinion expressed by most participants on this issue was that vocabulary had not yet evolved that was consistently acceptable to, and used by, same-sex couples. Many thought that 'civil partner' had a cold or clinical feel to it, and preferred the term 'life partner'. Karen and Polly struggled to find a term that felt mutually acceptable, settling in the end for 'partner'. This word was not first choice for either respondent, however, both wanted the term used to have an equal feel to it. Others felt that 'partner' did not describe their relationship adequately, particularly since it was no longer specifically used to describe lesbian and gay relationships.

> My memory is that when straight people were talking about their husbands, wives, girlfriends and boyfriends, lesbians talked about our lovers and partners. Now those words have been appropriated by straight people, their original meaning has become lost and the words have an implicit assumption of heterosexuality.
>
> (Dee, lesbian)

Two funeral directors discussed the different inscriptions they had come across in their professional roles. Although they had seen words that denoted a depth of

relationship, they both acknowledged that they had never seen wording that named a lesbian relationship:

> At a funeral I handled recently, the surviving partner said 'we were one whole, but now my other half has gone'. But 'other half' on a headstone, I don't think that would be accepted by a church, or by a cemetery. I can only remember one that was written on the stone, that was 'much loved by Rose' that was it. But instead of a title, it's a description.
>
> (Megan, lesbian, funeral director 1)

> A few years ago, I saw one in Wales. It says something like 'mortal remains of Helen, shining star of Jo's life'.
>
> (Geoff, heterosexual, funeral director 2)

> That's lovely, really nice. But it still doesn't say *what* the relationship was. How would you describe on a stone the exact relationship of two ladies that loved each other? Wife? Girlfriend? When you're in your 50s and 60s girlfriend is a bit inappropriate. Soul mate, perhaps?
>
> (Megan)

> There is no label, and that's not going to happen until there's a different title than partner. I mean my wife's my partner, she's my best mate. But until we evolve as a society you have to keep using these slightly frilly names to describe the relationship. We need a word for it, "wusband" or "hife" or something.
>
> (Geoff)

It is interesting there that here Geoff not only used the term 'partner' for his wife, but did not think beyond the established heterosexual terms of wife and husband.

**Dissonance between legal progress and social acceptance**

Several respondents thought that there was a difference between what had been legally set in place, and where they judged the attitudes of society actually were. Although the Civil Partnership Act gave a legal presence to same-sex relationships from 2005, participants from both the lesbian group and the professionals group thought that what was considered acceptable and valid by society changed at a slower rate.

> An Act of law changes legal entitlement overnight: social attitudes take a lot longer to change! A change in the law may, however, provide a springboard from which social attitudes can change, but I wouldn't expect to see a major change in social factors only seven years after legislation came in.
>
> (Cath, lesbian)

> After the Sex Discrimination Act, certain forms of discrimination became more subtle, but didn't disappear. But people knew it was wrong whether they were perpetuating it or suffering from it. Before the legislation, not everybody knew it was wrong. It takes a long time to filter down. I think that the generation that are born into a time when something is already law have an advantage because by then it's established, it's not a major change.
>
> (Dee, lesbian)

> To my knowledge no municipal cemeteries and certainly no churchyard have a procedure in place for [references to lesbian relationships] - whilst the practice is being more accepted with regards to marriage etc, I guess the general consensus is that it is not yet acceptable for headstones to reflect these relationships.
>
> (Funeral director 3)

> No. Won't happen. Absolutely not ... although it's being talked about within the profession.
>
> (Funeral director 4)

The following responses from professionals suggested that they saw the impetus for change as having to come from the bereaved:

> I have not yet received any memorial applications containing the words lesbian, partner or civil partner in the inscription details and I am not yet aware of any differences that the Civil Partnership Act 2004 has made to inscriptions.
>
> (Council Cemetery Manager)

> I don't have any experience of this. However perhaps you ought to talk to the ministers who conduct the service to see if their opinions have changed. As far as we are concerned we follow the instructions of the deceased's loved ones, whether it be husband, wife, daughter, son, civil partner, live-in partner or close friend.
>
> (Funeral Director 5)

> The word Partner has been used on the headstones but to my knowledge we have not had anyone request the other wording yet.
>
> (Memorial mason)

Many of the lesbian group felt that whilst the Civil Partnership Act gave their relationships a legal validity, they were still restricted about where and how they could be open about their relationship in public.[14]

[14] Please see Appendix VIII for comments made by research participants about their experiences of homophobia and heterosexism.

### 4.3 Research question 2:

Is a visible presence of lesbian relationship in the cemetery something that lesbians would want, and in what circumstances might this take place?

### Themes emerging

In response to this question, the themes that emerged from the responses of the lesbian participants were: recognising all parts of a life; for those that follow, and fears.

### Recognising all parts of a life

Angela, an independent funeral celebrant aiming to provide services primarily for lesbians and gay men, had thought ahead to her own funeral and memorialisation. She wants a lesbian celebrant because it is very important to her that her life is 'spoken about with understanding'. Angela was not alone in this thought. There was a strong feeling from many of the lesbian group that they wanted their lives to be represented and understood accurately; the subtext here was that unless individual specifics were spelt out, assumptions would be made by onlookers that the deceased was of the dominant social position of white and heterosexual.

> I would want all parts of my life recognised, so the thought of leaving a huge part out (my partner) doesn't fit at all. Because there has been so much homophobia in my family, I don't want a replication of that situation in the cemetery where Kate cannot be referred to as my partner.
>
> (Anna)

> I think I'd want it to say 'lesbian activist' or 'lesbian feminist activist' or even 'Black lesbian feminist activist' so that I would be acknowledged as that and not assumed to have been a white straight person. If I wasn't in a relationship it would still feel important to me that my sexual orientation was acknowledged because otherwise I would just be assumed to be a heterosexual spinster.
>
> (Dee)

> My vision of my death as a lesbian is a cremation being marked by a biodegradable grave-marker, which carries my name and a password that, in a building on site, opens up a ten minute recording of me and my life.
>
> (Della)

For some, how a whole life might be memorialised was a more complex issue, particularly when a respondent had been in a heterosexual marriage before she came out as a lesbian:

> I'm still in the stage where I've been in a heterosexual relationship longer than I've been in a gay one. I realised I was gay when I was about 30, so if people said what's your identity I would say 'I'm gay', but I was with my ex-husband for 12 years. Although Karen is part of my life and my ex-husband isn't, it will be easier when I've been with a woman longer than I've been with a man.
>
> (Polly)

Of the fifteen lesbians who responded, only one (Megan) was adamant that neither she nor her partner wanted any form of memorialisation. Cath, Glenys, Karen and Kate were clear that they would not want a memorial for themselves, but understood that a partner might want one for them. What was particularly marked, and said most strongly, was that most respondents wanted to be known as a person in a relationship, rather than as a lesbian *per se*. These responses are representative:

> I definitely want my relationship to be acknowledged on any gravestone. In my life I have loved, and been loved. It runs through my bone marrow.
>
> (Anna)

> I don't want a gravestone/memorial but if I was having one, I would want, in death as in life, to be unambiguous about how much we loved each other and that we meant everything to each other.
>
> (Cath)

> If we stay together a long while and have a civil partnership I would want it acknowledged the same way as straight partners acknowledge their relationships.
>
> (Glenys)

Mandeep and Satwant talked of their Sikh culture's practice of holding history orally, and therefore it is unlikely that there would be a written memorial. Both discussed whether their love for each other would be honoured by those that survived.

> In our culture, everything is held orally, and with a certain group of people. For me, I think my wishes would be respected, probably mostly with my nieces and nephews, potentially my siblings, but definitely by the next generation coming through.
>
> (Mandeep)

> My wishes aren't even known by my family, but now I have Mandeep it's different. I would leave very clear instructions with her about what I would want. So, wanting my ashes to be spread at Old Trafford, that's an expectation – my soul will not be rested until that happens! But my family, my parents, would not have a clue about that, and they would not endorse that, nor would the community.
>
> (Satwant)

**For those who follow**

Jean, whose late partner Margaret was buried in a natural burial ground, chose just to have Margaret's name and dates engraved on the wooden post. She said: 'I don't need to put 'Margaret, partner of Jean' because I know that already. Who else needs to know?'

This question became a significant divider in the lesbian group. Many of the group did not have children; of the fifteen who participated, only four had parented children. The presence or absence of children was influential on decisions about memorialisation.

> My mother said: 'no-one else in the family is like that'. Actually, no-one in the family had come out before! I want my grand-daughters to be able to tell their grand-daughters that I loved, and was loved by, a woman, when times were not so welcoming.
>
> (Anna)

> Who would look after [the grave or memorial]? I don't want to have children, neither does Karen. I don't have a huge amount of family, I can't imagine my sister going to tend my grave. I wouldn't want to be just planted there and left, so it gets overgrown and nobody cares for you! If anything happened to one of us, the other would look after it, but when that person dies, there's not going to be anyone else.
>
> (Polly)

Some lesbians wanted to leave a green legacy, and those that had been politically active talked of the interface between feminism and ecological concerns.

> I would wish to have a burial, and being quite a normal lesbian myself would prefer the eco - green natural ending affair. I would like my burial to be in a natural burial ground so the wildlife can bounce over my remains and the trees can take any goodness that's left and flourish.
>
> (Carole)

> So many feminist lesbians are environmentally conscious, we wouldn't want a slab of concrete. Something that gives back to the earth, dying as we have lived. Probably a lot of lesbians are in the natural burial ground as we won't have wanted to cause more congestion ... wanting to put something back in that doesn't have a massive footprint, doesn't destroy.
>
> (Dee)

> I don't think it's a viable option really, not going green at the end. I like the ethos at green burial sites, I want to be kind to the earth and preserve things for later generations, it's how I've tried to live.
>
> (Kate)

**Fears of homophobic damage**

Whilst most of the lesbians interviewed wanted a memorial that acknowledged their relationships – and by default their lesbian identity – there was much concern about what response this may attract. Eight lesbians spontaneously brought up this issue, fearing that words or symbols that indicate a lesbian identity and/or relationship would be defaced or damaged. This response is typical of the concerns:

> The thing about cemeteries is that the memorial or gravestone could be attacked, and is that what someone grieving would want? We'd have to think carefully about what was said, but even then if you put something out there it is still going to be hit by hate crime. It's a sitting target, I mean if you had a gravestone in rainbow colours...
>
> (Polly)

Both Anna and Dee discussed natural burial grounds as more accepting environments. Anna felt that as natural burial grounds are less common and harder to find visitors would be more likely to share the values of the place rather than want to damage what they saw there:

> If it was going to be explicit I think I would choose a little plaque on a bench in a place that either had CCTV or was unlikely to be vandalised. I was struck by a natural burial ground and assumed that in such a natural place there wouldn't be gangs hanging around that would want to desecrate it. Because all grave markers will rot down anyway, there won't be a traditional edifice to smash. Hopefully it will be safer to be not so traditional, and eco-friendly.
>
> (Anna)

> Any surviving lesbian partner might have to watch her back on leaving, as that identifies her when she came to visit the grave. A bench at a nature reserve, where there would be visitors who would be more nature loving or non-violent would be better than a more

> public place. Hopefully there would be fewer religious zealots there too, who will probably be in their own place of faith.
>
> (Dee)

### 4.4 Personal reflections

As a lesbian, I have found it much more impacting than I was expecting to collate these responses. Firstly I found myself wanting to include every response from every lesbian participant; deciding what to include and what to leave out has felt disrespectful to those women who offered their thoughts and experiences so freely. I also felt as though I was colluding with invisibilising and silencing forces that are, in different ways, the experience of every lesbian that participated. Secondly, I was initially shocked at how frequently these oppressions occur. However, an incident during the writing up of the results helped me to realise that it was not the frequency that was shocking, it was how often emotional adjustments need to be made in order to survive them. At one point while writing this chapter, my partner returned from a reading group of fellow psychotherapists who had been meeting for five years. The facilitator of the group commented that for two successive meetings, papers with a lesbian or gay focus had been brought by my partner and a gay man respectively, and a suggestion was made that the group 'widen out' its professional focus. I was conscious of how quickly the 'other' becomes threatening – even in a group for whom challenging prejudice and stereotype is an ethical obligation. In writing about the prevalence of silence and invisibility as ways to oppress, I have been brought face to face with those forces in my own life, and how much emotional energy it takes to maintain a balance between a sense of identity and a sense of safety. Della wrote about 'the daily little victories which are the bedrock of lesbian wellbeing', and these become essential not only in mitigating the effects of oppression but also in maintaining mental and emotional well-being.

### 4.5 Defiant moments

Writing this dissertation has felt in itself a defiant act; one that was born in a moment singing in a LGBT choir in a High Anglican church at the funeral of a strong, successful woman whose lifetime lesbianism was silenced in her funeral. My discussion of these results will have, as its foundation, other defiant moments; some were spoken loud in the interviews, and some barely heard at the time and only later

recognised as such because written transcripts did not allow such moments to fade out. These are some of the 'defiant moments' that I have heard and will write large:

- Anna, who will not have her partner left off her memorial because that will replicate in death what was so in life.
- Angela, who became an independent funeral celebrant because she did not recognise her siblings from their funeral services.
- Carole, whose anger that her lesbian friend was not presented as the 'big ole dyke she was' was such that she started an openly lesbian funeral transport service so that personalised transport could celebrate identity even if words at the funeral did not.
- Dee, who wants that she was a Black, lesbian, feminist activist in a lifetime relationship articulated clearly on her gravemarker to challenge the implicit assumption that she was a white, straight, spinster aunt.
- Della, who wants her lesbian identity known long after she has died because in life she feels depleted by those in societal positions of power.
- Jean, who was not acknowledged as the lifetime partner of Margaret in Margaret's funeral, but 'when I put the notice in the paper I made sure it said "partner of Jean"'.
- Polly, naturally reticent, who decided to take part in the research because of her experience in the LGBT choir whilst singing at the funeral of a founder member.
- Satwant, who wants her ashes to be spread on the Old Trafford football ground, despite her knowledge of the likely resistance from her community.
- Sunali, whose celebration of the term 'lesbian grandmother' defies commonly held assumptions about lesbians regarding dysfunctional family relationships and lonely old ages.

In the next section I will discuss the themes identified, focus on the symbolic visibility of death in two differing burial sites, and then discuss how some of the themes identified here are differently manifested in each place.

## 5. Discussion

In this section, I will work towards gaining insight into the implicit and explicit dynamics that have, so far, inhibited the open declaration of lesbian love and relationship in the cemetery. Where appropriate, I will acknowledge a 'defiant moment' (Okely, 1996: 206), so that dynamics of invisibility and impotence are shifted into one of agency. Additionally, I plan to discuss my findings through their situation in two physical spaces – a municipal cemetery and a natural burial ground. This latter decision was informed by my observation that lesbians' more frequent use of direct language (dead, death and die) contrasted with the professionals' greater use of euphemistic language (passed away and lost/lose). This led me to consider how the language used in differing burial environments interacted with the presentation of death itself in these places, and whether this implicated on wider issues of visibility. I begin this discussion, therefore, by exploring the visibility of death in two sites that I visited in the course of my research – a municipal cemetery and a natural burial site, both in Warwickshire, England.

### 5.1 The visibility of death in two contrasting sites

In the municipal cemetery, gravestones stand, and can still be read, from the late 1800s. These earlier, grand memorials had a two-fold function according to Bachelor (2004: 11); not only to mark the dead but also to: 'animate every citizen to a love of virtue and glory, and to excite in youthful minds an ardent desire of imitating those celebrated worthies'. There is a sense of permanence here – in the evidence of the distant past, in the assurances of a Christian life everlasting and in the gravestones, which, in their solidarity, facilitate belief that they will always be there.[15] Looking from the older gravestones to the more recent ones, family names can be tracked and this, together with the many family plots, gives a sense of order and tradition. Vegetation is mostly mature and evergreen, and is clipped regularly to the same shape and size; the greenery does not appear to grow or develop with the seasons and so the landscape is relatively unchanging.

In the natural burial ground change and impermanence are seen everywhere. A sapling is planted by each new grave so the passing of time is marked by the differing maturity of the trees, and vegetation is left to grow large and eventually die

[15] The actual weather resistant properties of gravestones are discussed at a later point.

down. Newer graves are easily identified by the large mounds of earth which gradually sink over time, and the wooden gravemarkers gradually weather and decay, meaning that only more recent inscriptions can be read until they, too, fade away. The visibility and consequences of death are represented in everything: flowers are left to decay on burial mounds; leaves that drop from the trees are not removed, and even small animals or birds that die are left in situ to rot down. Here, the decay of the bodies beneath is symbolised by everything above ground. Death is, of course, present in the municipal cemetery, but it is not overt in the words chosen for the inscriptions (often phrases like 'fell asleep' or 'went away'), nor symbolised in the landscape. The tidying away of dead flowers and the removal of dead leaves in autumn suggest a stand against decay – as does the neat and uniform appearance of the more recent parts of the municipal cemetery. The greater visibility of death in the natural burial ground contrasts with the re-affirmation of life in the municipal cemetery, and thus leads this discussion into a consideration of order and control in the cemetery and its ability to absorb difference.

### 5.2 Control and difference in the cemetery

Davies (2002: 12), writing of the physical body as a microcosm of society, states that within social life, the more 'social' an occasion is, the more controlled is the individual body, just as the further individuals are from the social centre, so their control over themselves will lessen. In the context of this study I see a parallel here. The landscape of the natural burial ground is, at present, far from the controlled core of this society, and this is literally so, too. The natural burial ground cannot be seen from the road and it is some miles from the nearest village, whereas the cemetery, originally placed on the edge of the town, has become surrounded as the town has grown. Davies (2002: 12) uses the example of the civic function to demonstrate the synchronicity of the physical body and society – carefully groomed individuals use stylised speech and movements. This can be paralleled with the municipal cemetery. In this place, the environment is carefully controlled, the graves are well-dressed, the words on them are stylised and the valuing of order, convention and tradition is explicit. In contrast, the natural burial ground evidences lesser control over the landscape and the memorials within it. This can be demonstrated by a gravemarker in the natural burial ground which says only: "40 a day!" It has no biographical details but is accompanied by the depiction of a smoking cigarette. This would

almost certainly not be allowed in a church or civic cemetery given its acknowledgement of a behaviour that, although widely accepted in past decades, is now rigorously controlled both legally and socially. Perhaps the "disorder" of those who live or behave outside prevailing social norms can be more accommodated in a natural burial ground, whereas in a place where neatness and uniformity over-ride the unsightliness of death, relationships or identities that stand on the margins of society are less tolerated.

The natural environment in the burial ground has a particular synchronicity with lesbians, specifically those whose feminist politics are actively expressed. A connection between feminist politics and nature is supported in the academic literature. Warren and Cheney (1991: 179) state that: 'ecology, understood in its broadest sense as environmentalism, is a feminist issue'. The differences between the landscapes of the natural burial ground and the municipal cemetery can also be metaphorically linked with the ways in which many lesbians and heterosexual women engage with their own physical appearance. It is possible to parallel lesbian feminists' lesser preoccupation with social norms of beauty and the effect of ageing (Huxley *et al*, 2011; Heaphy *et al*, 2004 respectively) with the natural burial ground where the grass is uncut, burial mounds are left to find their own level and the elements are allowed to age the memorials. Conversely, in the municipal cemetery grass and shrubs are regularly cut and pruned, new grave mounds are flattened and tidied and matching gravestones are arranged in regular, predictable rows. This might be equated with many heterosexual women's greater attention to socially acceptable appearance. It has been shown that radical feminists and lesbians are least likely to remove body hair (Basow 1991: 83), and also how obvious facial hair contravenes social constructs of feminine beauty (Chapkis 1986: 1-6).[16] This is not the place for an in-depth review of that literature, neither do I want to create too crude a parallel between the "shaving" of grass and vegetation in the municipal cemetery and the "hairiness" of the undergrowth in the natural burial ground. However, it is sufficient to recognise that these elements do promote a metaphorical linking between lesbians and natural burial grounds. In a place that honours the

[16] Although these were written sometime ago, the debate still continues, see Tiggemann and Lewis, 2004; Fahs, 2011.)

"natural" environment there is a metaphorical synchronicity that may facilitate lesbians, as well as the natural world, to be "out".

### 5.3 Unacknowledged relationships

When lesbians were asked what they felt were the causative factors in the absence of identified lesbian lives in the cemetery, the issue that came across most strongly was that of unacknowledged or silenced relationships, both in the present and in the past. Some of the lesbians were not out to, or they experienced homophobic responses from, key members of their families, leading to concern that their partners would be sidelined and their own wishes would not be respected at their deaths. Additionally, many lesbians talked of knowing of no other same-sex relationships in their families, leading to a situation where each new generation of lesbians felt like they were the first ones, only for their presence to be silenced and the process to start again:

> '... but these were secrets, hidden. These women were not able to be role models for me not merely because they weren't out, but because everyone else refused to be out about them as well. They were there, and they were invisible'.
>
> (Duffy 2006: 45)

With these family dynamics in mind, five lesbians stated that they wanted to be interred in a natural burial ground. Not only was this congruent with their values, all believed that it was in this place, where neither church nor council controlled what could and could not be written in memoriam, that their identity and relationships could be visible for those that followed. This has a clear parallel with the older gravestones seen in the municipal cemetery which were designed to inspire generations to come. And yet, herein lies a paradox. In the natural burial ground, memorials do not outlive the generation of the deceased; the parallel decomposition of body and memorial mean that lesbian identities and relationships will not be seen by later generations to act as inspiration for those who do not see themselves reflected in their families. In the cemetery, stones stand for many more years and inscriptions are visible for many generations – and yet it is in this place of perceived permanence that convention and majority also hold sway.

It is interesting to note that while the imposing older gravestones, and the uniform polished stones in the cemetery of more recent times, suggest permanence this is, in fact, not so. Curl (1983: 144) discusses John Louden's pioneering work in the

development of the modern cemetery, and states that Louden's intent was that all memorial monuments should have '*the appearance of* security and permanence' (my italics); despite this, stone is weathered by the elements, concrete is impermanent at high altitudes and granite, apparently hard and enduring, crumbles if water penetrates.[17] Boyle (2003: 709) suggests that 'we have embraced a view that suggests that no-one shall die, at least symbolically, as long as there are people to remember them and markers by which to remember the deceased'; it is perhaps in the hope of our own permanence that we are drawn to the belief that memorial stones last forever.

### 5.4 The power of the traditional family and the Church

This section addresses a key theme of this research – the issue discussed by some of the lesbians that they or their partners are not accepted into families in the same way as are non-blood related heterosexual men. This conditional offer of family membership underlines Bernstein and Reimann's (2001: 2) acknowledgement of the great emotional and cultural force carried by the term 'family' – and yet the traditional notion of "the family" is being challenged.

The Local Government Act 1988 enabled the controversial addition of section 28 to the Local Government Act 1986 (affecting England, Wales and Scotland) which declared that a local authority shall not 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Although later repealed, the particular use of the last three words shines a spotlight on the broadly perceived view of lesbian and gay relationships and their place in the family at that time.[18]

These earlier conflicts have rested on the notion that a family is headed by the marriage of a man and woman, and it is this family configuration that is presented and celebrated in the municipal cemetery. Challenges to the traditional configuration of the family have been strongly resisted, and a proposal in 2012 by the Government to allow all couples, regardless of their gender, to have a marriage ceremony brought about a firm response from the Church of England that 'such a move would alter the intrinsic nature of marriage as the union of a man and a woman, as enshrined in

[17] With thanks to Dr Penny Dransart for information on the impermanence of gravestones.
[18] After much campaigning, this amendment was repealed in June 2000 in Scotland, and in November 2003 in the rest of Great Britain by section 122 of the Local Government Act 2003.

human institutions throughout history' (The Church of England 2012).[19] Tellingly, in an interview about the Government's proposal, the Archbishop of York (Sentamu 2012) commented: '[the Church of England] supported civil partnerships because we believe that friendships are good for everybody'. Here, the word 'friendships' not only avoids the sexual content of relationships between adults of the same sex, but also undermines their validity and sets them apart from the social recognition of family members.

On 5th February 2013, MPs voted in favour of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill after a heated debate. The arguments that were put forward against the Bill centred on a heterosexual definition of marriage, and the importance of the traditional family to the stability of society. This contribution arguing against the passing of the Bill was representative of many:

> Whether members care to admit it or not, there is a natural, a biological, and indeed a scriptural order to life. Marriage begat children, by and large, children begat family, by and large, and families are the root of society; they form society. It's a simple observation of life, a timeline, but it goes right to the root of what we are discussing today in debating in this House. This Parliament can tweak all it wants with laws and legislation but it cannot pretend that marriage of same-sex couples is even close to being on a par with marriage of mixed-sex couples, because of nature itself.
>
> (Paisley 2013)

Spoken only yesterday at the time of writing, this view emphasises a heterosexual definition of marriage and family. Boswell (1994: xxvi), makes it clear, however, that socially and legally sanctioned adult partnerships such as marriage have not always been the sole prerogative of heterosexual couples, referring to the 'visceral disinclination' of Western tradition to consider the possibility of anything other than a union between a man and a woman. He states that:

> Many cultures other than Western ones have *recognised and institutionalised* same-sex unions – Japanese warriors in early modern times, Chinese men and women under the Yuan and Ming dynasties, Native Americans from a number of tribes (mostly before white domination), many African tribes well into the twentieth century, and residents (both male and female) of the Middle East, South East Asia, Russia, and other parts of Asia, and South America (my italics).
>
> (Boswell 1994: xxvi)

[19] I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr Penny Dransart for prompting my thinking on this subject.

Writing over a decade before the latest response by the Church of England and the debate in Parliament, Weeks *et al* (2001: 4), asked why challenges to heterosexual marriage 'evoke such a rushed, and even hysterical response'. They argued that same-sex partnerships and 'queer families' are at the helm of changes to traditional family patterns, and it certainly appears that the notion of who is given credence in law as being part of 'the family' is changing. In 2004, the House of Lords ruled that a gay man could be considered part of his partner's family with regard to tenancy rights (Stonewall 2012), and more recently the emergence of families headed by same-sex couples has been formalised in law via the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008. These conflicting developments – the changes facilitating same-sex families in law and the resistance to same-sex marriage – also make reference to the dissonance between social recognition and legal progress that was identified by many of the respondents, and this theme also runs through the next part of this discussion.[20]

### 5.5 Lesbian relationship and family

I was moved, and taken aback, by the strength of the message that came from many of the lesbians interviewed that it was not their sexual orientation *per se* that they wanted acknowledged on a memorial, but the fact that they were a person in relationship with another. The desires of Anna, Cath, Dee, Glenys, Karen, Mandeep , Polly, Satwant and Sunali to be identified in death as someone who was in a loving relationship in life, and Jean's action in stating 'partner of Jean' in the death notice of her late partner, can be interpreted as defiant acts – challenges to medical, religious and psychological opinion in the published literature (summarised well by Clarke *at al* 2010: 3-24) that lesbians are not capable of healthy relationships (Wilson 2007), and cannot be seen as valid family members (Naples 2001).

In this context of family membership, it is productive to discuss lesbian mothers in particular. Whilst, increasingly, lesbians and gay men are becoming parents within same-sex relationships, and some have children from previous heterosexual relationships, there is a particular dynamic around lesbians and motherhood. Lesbian-headed families have been seen as fragmenting or destabilising the family as

[20] It is important to note that many non-conformist Protestant churches, and some branches of Judaism have worked towards the acceptance of same-sex marriage.

a bedrock of society, and lesbian mothers have been considered selfish and self-serving (Almack 2008: 1195). Bergen *et al* (2008: 27) discuss how, despite their increasing number, lesbian-headed families constantly have to negotiate and affirm their identity through a broad range of strategies. Children in lesbian headed families – having appeared proud of the configuration of their families when younger – become silent and secretive as they grow older (Bergen *et al*, 2008: 42). These are powerful, if covert, comments about lesbian family life and the implicit message that the term 'lesbian mother' is an oxymoron is reminiscent of the split between woman and lesbian discussed earlier. This also means that Anna's, Dee's and Kate's desire to make known their places in their families in death, and Sunali's celebration of her family position as 'lesbian grandmother' can be interpreted as defiant acts. There is also a further consequence of these acts, one that can be understood linguistically.

### 5.6 Expanding patterns of language

The lack of appropriate language to describe relationships and family membership that stand outside of the mainstream has been one of the consistent strands in this discussion. The limitations of vocabulary and linguistic markers have left lesbians restricted in ways to identify self and others (Moonwoman-Baird 1997: 204). However, if this issue is looked at through the lens of defiant acts, a different theme emerges. I propose that relationship terms are expanding; individually known words are conjoined to make new phrases and these linguistic developments can be interpreted as defiant acts in themselves. Good examples here are Sunali's self-description of 'lesbian grandmother' and Anna's claiming of 'lesbian mother'. It can also be argued that legally recognised terms such as 'civil partner' and 'legal parent' (the term for a non-biological parent of children born into a lesbian or gay relationship) are contributing to this expansion. The original splitting of lesbian and woman, discussed earlier, is challenged by these new word combinations. Additionally, these phrases name relationships that have previously been nameless, and in so doing, give a visibility to these relationships in the cemetery.

Davies' (2002) discussion of 'words against death' is pertinent here. His central thesis is that humans have evolved as self-conscious beings, and as such, know that they will die. Mortuary rites become the means by which individuals and societies mitigate the challenge of death to human identity and to social continuity. Whilst not

minimising the importance of non-verbal forms of communication in the rituals surrounding death, Davies focuses on language, the key medium of self-consciousness, as the means by which connection to life is reaffirmed; thus he terms the language used as 'words against death'. In Davies' words: 'funerary rites and the language of death thus mark the divide between the paradox of social eternity and physical mortality' (2002: 7). Davies goes on to talk of social change and evolution, seen most particularly in the shift of words against death from religious to secular sources, describing this as 'expanding patterns of the rhetoric of death' (2002: 209). Davies' argument lends itself to a similar documenting of change through the words used in epitaphs to women who have had, in life, relationships and family groups that have only recently found a vocabulary. Words describing identity, relationship and family connection are moving away from being purely heterosexually based to those that include same-sex terms; any eventual movement of these terms into cemeteries and places of remembrance will mark further contemporary adaptation to the processes of social evolution (Davies 2002: 209).

Funerary rituals, therefore, remove the deceased from the sphere of the living, either into immortality in a religious sense, or into the past and in memory in a secular context. They also affirm life and the survival of the society by helping the formation of new social networks, and new roles within those networks (Davies 2002: 3-4). It is possible that this regrouping and re-forming of identity is more problematic within lesbian populations who do not have publicly reinforced messages of social and individual continuity, and this may jeopardise the development of resilience in lesbian communities. Put simply, if there are few 'words against death' pertinent to lesbians, there is little sense of transformation in ways which make lesbians better adapted for their own, and for lesbian society's survival in the world. Even when 'words against death' are spoken within the funerals of lesbians, the 'durable public profile' that Davies describes in terms of architectural monuments (2002: 1) is not easily available, meaning that there is no visibility of ancestors. Here, Copper's words (1988: 17), warning that lesbian identity would merely become a 'temporary mirage' if old women are considered to have no contribution to the women-loving world, become acutely relevant. Lesbian life and identity is in danger of having a transient presence that is most visible in young, attractive adulthood, less visible in

the media, in older age, and in minority communities, and virtually invisible in the society of the cemetery. This discussion now examines the society of the cemetery in more detail.

### 5.7 The visible society of the cemetery

I have come to the concept of the visible society of the cemetery through reading Hertz's (1960) study of secondary burials in Indonesia. Proposing that grief reactions and funerary rituals were differentiated by the status of the deceased he said: 'since children have not yet entered the visible society, there is no reason to exclude them from it slowly and painfully' (1960: 84). Here, the implication is that those who do not yet warrant society's investment in them are not "seen". I propose to extend this idea to the cemetery. Earlier, I discussed how my reading of the literature suggested that entry into the visible society of the cemetery is via a triad of factors: biographical information on the memorial, being remembered by the living, and evidence of loving relationships in life. With reference to Tarlow's work (1999: 20), I speculated whether this triad engendered an empathic connection; in having a feelingful response to what is inscribed on a memorial the onlooker is able to bestow a sense of humanity on the deceased, and therefore "envisage" that person.

One of the factors that respondents identified as a constraining influence in the acknowledgement of lesbian lives in the cemetery was the issue of language, and this impacts on how evidence of relationships in life (the third of the triad as identified above) is presented – in particular what term to use for the other in the relationship. This resonates with Moonwoman-Baird's (1997) work where she stated that a lack of a pertinent vocabulary and a scarcity of lesbian-specific linguistic markers result in lesbians not only being unable to put voice to their lives, but also being unable to identify others in their community through auditory channels. Syntactically, the term 'civil partner' is equivalent to 'wife' and 'husband' – they all name a person in a particular relationship – but as yet there is not an equivalent of the verb 'to marry'. Additionally, the terms 'civil partner' and 'partner' do not yet hold implicit family trees as do heterosexual terms such as 'wife' and 'husband'. These latter terms, even if no direct descendents are listed, convey integration into a pattern of socially valid

relationships in the way that 'partner' and civil partner', as yet, do not.[21] The consequence of these linguistic factors may well be that an onlooker is not connected to the humanity of the dead person in the way s/he is with more accepted familial terms, and a lack of family or relationship information, which is inevitable in the present context, dehumanises the process even more.

It could be argued that the natural burial ground, with its greater sense of intimacy and comparative freedom about what can and cannot be inscribed on gravemarkers, will have a proportionately larger 'visible society'. Inscriptions here can make known non-traditional relationships and/or life choices, and these, some of the respondents thought, would be more tolerated than in a traditional cemetery. However, there is a further paradox here. The absence of formal rules for inscriptions in the burial ground tends to mean that words are written for those who know the deceased rather than for formal identification; in my visit I saw a number of markers just giving a first name, or 'Mum' for example. The environment that facilitates a more open disclosure of lesbian relationship is therefore also the one that renders the naming of relationship less relevant; the place where it appears to be safer to be "out" is also the place where inscriptions are likely to lack the most common biographical and relationship information. There is a further conflicting dynamic here too. Many lesbians stated that they feared homophobic vandalism if they made their relationships visible on a memorial in a cemetery. It is interesting that whilst access to the visible society in the municipal cemetery might well be withheld, these relationships are overly visible in terms of hostility and ill-intent. Dee hoped that, within an environment that provides an alternative to the mainstream and convention, identification as a lesbian would be less likely to attract hostility – and yet identification as a lesbian in this more intimate environment might not be made.

The next section will draw together the different strands of this discussion and identify further areas for research.

[21] The passing of the second reading of the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Bill heralds a change in this regard, although if it becomes law it is unlikely that all same-sex couples will "upgrade" to marriage. The future of Civil Partnership as a viable alternative to same-sex marriage is yet to be addressed.

## 6. Conclusion

Central to this discussion have been the thoughts and experiences of a group of lesbians who were prepared to discuss their own mortality and that of their partners, and a group of funerary professionals who offered their own thoughts and knowledge about why, eight years after the legalising of lesbian and gay partnerships, this acknowledgement had not moved into the cemetery. Homophobia and heterosexism, in all their forms and presentations, impact on lesbians and gay men on a daily basis. However, additional dynamics of invisibility, and an exploration of the metaphors held in a comparison of a natural burial ground and a municipal cemetery mean that placing lesbians at the centre of the discussion is not only informative, but warranted. Nearly half of the lesbians interviewed wanted an ecologically friendly burial; it may be that the natural burial ground, with its more realistic representation of death, offers a more congruent space to relationships that still do not quite fit into a predominantly heterosexual society.

Most of the lesbians and professionals interviewed considered that whilst there had been much progress in terms of the validation of same-sex relationships, further development is needed if social attitudes are to synchronise with legal rights. If social and religious attitudes are still largely resistant to the acknowledgement of lesbian relationship in the cemetery, as many of the professional respondents suggested, then Hamer's (1996: 1) assertion that 'lesbians have not been written out or missed out of history; it is rather that their lesbianism has not actually been written into their lives' holds true in epitaphs as well as in literature and historical documents.

I have used Hertz's thinking about 'the visible society' (1960: 84) to consider how lesbians who have died might gain entry into the visible society of the cemetery. I have proposed that a triad of elements, if all present, evoke a humanising, empathic connection from onlookers, thereby bringing the deceased "into vision". However, it appears that for lesbians, one element – evidence of relationship in life – is particularly curtailed by the scarcity of known and socially accepted terms for lesbian relationships. This inevitably minimises empathic connection from a detached onlooker, who may sense the grief of mourners from fuller inscriptions. The particular dynamics of hostility to lesbian mothers mean that it is not a

straightforward step to gain the access to a visible and valid society in the cemetery that is more easily available to heterosexual mothers. A final factor of relevance here is that of fear of homophobic damage. All the respondents were keenly aware that a memorial overtly to a lesbian would be vulnerable to homophobic damage. This also may well affect people's decisions as to how much information to put on the memorial, and thereby access to the visible society is curtailed.

However, it is the paradoxes at the centre of this dissertation that are intriguing. Many of the lesbians hoped that by being part of a visible community in places of burial and remembrance, those who followed would find a sense of community and be 'inspired', paralleling the intent of the grand monuments of the Victorian era. It was thought likely that the natural burial ground would provide a safer space, and yet, it is here that individual markers do not last much longer than living memories of the person. Conversely, it is in the municipal cemetery, where lesbian relationships are least likely to have an overt place that the ethos and the materials used allow a presence that, although not the permanent record that is often assumed, does outlive people's memory of that person. Additionally, the intimate sense of relationship and lack of regulations about what is permitted to be put on a gravemarker in the natural burial ground mean that whilst a community of lesbians may well be there, they are not identified as such. The seemingly irresolvable paradoxes within this perhaps echo the unsettling, untidy process of death that is reflected in the natural burial ground, so maybe no tidy conclusion is possible.

Perhaps, then, defiant moments help to bring a sense of cohesiveness. The power in all of the acts of resistance is that they name something that has previously been un-named, and thereby the invisibility that comes from assumption is challenged. Heterosexual identity is generally unmarked – that is, it is the dominant, unremarkable or assumed description and it is articulated and maintained in the forces of heterosexism and heteronormativity. These moments of resistance ensure not only that lesbian lives and relationships are made visible, but they also challenge assumptions that lesbians are unable to have healthy family lives, un-fragmented identities and wholeness of body and mind. Dee's determination, for example, that her gravemarker will not only tell of a long and loving lesbian relationship, but also of her race and political activism, means that these defining elements will not be lost

in the assumption of unmarried, celibate heterosexuality and white European heritage.

Defiant acts also bring together linguistic themes, particularly that of putting a name to unacknowledged relationships. Naming gives presence and naming the breadth of lesbian adult and family relationships is likely to contribute to their visibility in places of memorial. I have proposed that this expanding language of relationship and its eventual move into the cemetery can be understood in the context of Davies' (2002) work about the purpose of language used in funerary ritual. I believe that the arguments put forward here about absence of relevant 'words against death' for lesbians reveals a further layer of Davies' discussion, as does the synchrony between Davies' 'expanding patterns of the rhetoric of death' (202: 209) and the expansion of words of relationship. Interestingly, Davies' discussion, combined with Moonwoman-Baird's (1997) work on language used by lesbians, brings inaudibility to the fore, despite my initial intent to focus on invisibility. I therefore suggest that not only is there a need for further research in this area, but that the processes that resist or facilitate acknowledgement of lesbian relationships in the cemetery could be better understood in further discussion not only of invisibility, but also of inaudibility.

I would like to close with the words that first set me on the pathway that has ended with this dissertation. It is chastening to think that whilst this subject has come relatively recently into my thinking, the loss of a sense of ancestors and a "family line" has been recognised and grieved for by many others in the wider lesbian community for many years. It is important that these words continue to be seen and heard:

> As a people we have been deprived of the ritual of common sorrow. Many lesbians have experienced the pain of silent mourning. Often in newspaper obituaries, a euphemism for the death of a lesbian is "There are no known survivors". This is not true. We are each other's survivors ... Their voices and lives should not be lost or made invisible when we are no longer here to tell their stories.
>
> (Lesbian Herstory Archive Collective 1991: 8)

## Appendix 1 — Excerpts from Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice

### Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth

### I. Relations With and Responsibilities Towards Research Participants

The close and often lengthy association of anthropologists with the people among whom they carry out research entails personal and moral relationships, trust and reciprocity between the researcher and research participants; it also entails a recognition of power differentials between them.

**1. Protecting research participants and honouring trust**: Anthropologists should endeavour to protect the physical, social and psychological well-being of those whom they study and to respect their rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy:

(a) Most anthropologists would maintain that their paramount obligation is to their research participants and that when there is conflict, the interests and rights of those studied should come first;

(b) Under some research conditions, particularly those involving contract research, it may not be possible to fully guarantee research participants' interests. In such cases anthropologists would be well-advised to consider in advance whether they should pursue that particular piece of research.

**2. Anticipating harms**: Anthropologists should be sensitive to the possible consequences of their work and should endeavour to guard against predictably harmful effects. Consent from subjects does not absolve anthropologists from their obligation to protect research participants as far as possible against the potentially harmful effects of research:

(a) The researcher should try to minimise disturbances both to subjects themselves and to the subjects' relationships with their environment. Even though research participants may be immediately protected by the device of anonymity, the researcher should try to anticipate the long-term effects on individuals or groups as a result of the research;

(b) Anthropologists may sometimes be better placed than (at the least, some of) their informants to anticipate the possible repercussions of their research both for the immediate participants and for other members of the research population or the wider society. In certain political contexts, some groups, for example, religious or ethnic minorities, may be particularly vulnerable and it may be necessary to withhold data from publication or even to refrain from studying them at all.

**3. Avoiding undue intrusion**: Anthropologists should be aware of the intrusive potential of some of their enquiries and methods:

(a) Like other social researchers, they have no special entitlement to study all phenomena; and the advancement of knowledge and the pursuit of information are not in themselves sufficient justifications for overriding the values and ignoring the interests of those studied;

(b) They should be aware that for research participants becoming the subject of anthropological description and interpretations can be a welcome experience, but it can also be a disturbing one. In many of the social scientific enquiries that have caused controversy this has not arisen because participants have suffered directly or indirectly any actual harm. Rather, the concern has resulted from participants' feelings of having suffered an intrusion into private and personal domains, or of having been wronged, (for example, by having been caused to acquire self-knowledge which they did not seek or want).

**4. Negotiating informed consent**: Following the precedent set by the Nuremberg Trials and the constitutional laws of many countries, inquiries involving human subjects should be based on the freely given informed consent of subjects. The principle of informed consent expresses the belief in the need for truthful and respectful exchanges between social researchers and the people whom they study.

(a) Negotiating consent entails communicating information likely to be material to a person's willingness to participate, such as: the purpose(s) of the study, and the anticipated consequences of the research; the identity of funders and sponsors; the anticipated uses of the data; possible benefits of the study and possible harm or discomfort that might affect participants; issues relating to data storage and security; and the degree of anonymity and confidentiality which may be afforded to informants and subjects.

(b) Conditions which constitute an absence of consent: consent made after the research is completed is not meaningful consent at all. Further, the persons studied must have the legal capacity to give consent. Where subjects are legally compelled (e.g., by their employer or government) to participate in a piece of research, consent cannot be said to have been meaningfully given by subjects, and anthropologists are advised not to pursue that piece of work.

(c) Consent in research is a process, not a one-off event, and may require renegotiation over time; it is an issue to which the anthropologist should return periodically.

(d) When technical data-gathering devices such as audio/visual-recorders and photographic records are being used those studied should be made aware of the capacities of such devices and be free to reject their use.

(e) When information is being collected from proxies, care should be taken not to infringe the 'private space' of the subject or the relationship between subject and proxy; and if there are indications that the person concerned would object to certain information being disclosed, such information should not be sought by proxy.

(f) The long period over which anthropologists make use of their data and the possibility that unforeseen uses or theoretical interests may arise in the future may need to be conveyed to participants, as should any likelihood that the data may be shared (in some form) with other colleagues or be made available to sponsors, funders or other interested parties, or deposited in archives.

**5. Rights to confidentiality and anonymity**: informants and other research participants should have the right to remain anonymous and to have their rights to privacy and confidentiality respected. However, privacy and confidentiality present anthropologists with particularly difficult problems given the cultural and legal variations between societies and the various ways in which the real interests or research role of the ethnographer may not fully be realised by some or all of participants or may even become 'invisible' over time:

(a) Care should be taken not to infringe uninvited upon the 'private space' (as locally defined) of an individual or group;

(b) As far as is possible researchers should anticipate potential threats to confidentiality and anonymity. They should consider whether it is necessary to even a matter of propriety to record certain information at all; should take appropriate measures relating to the storage and security of records during and after fieldwork; and should use where appropriate such means as the removal of identifiers, the use of pseudonyms and other technical solutions to the problems of privacy in field records and in oral and written forms of data dissemination (whether or not this is enjoined by law or administrative regulation);

(c) Researchers should endeavour to anticipate problems likely to compromise anonymity; but they should make clear to participants that it may not be possible in field notes and other records or publications totally to conceal identities, and that the anonymity afforded or promised to individuals, families or other groups may also be unintentionally compromised. A particular configuration of attributes can frequently identify an individual beyond reasonable doubt; and it is particularly difficult to disguise, say, office-holders, organizations, public agencies, ethnic groups, religious denominations or other collectivities without so distorting the data as to compromise scholarly accuracy and integrity;

(d) If guarantees of privacy and confidentiality are made, they must be honoured unless they are clear and over-riding ethical reasons not to do so. Confidential information must be treated as such by the anthropologist even when it enjoys no legal protection or privilege, and other people who have access to the data should be made aware of their obligations likewise; but participants should be made aware that it is rarely, if at all, legally possible to ensure total confidentiality or to protect the privacy of records;

(e) Anthropologists should similarly respect the measures taken by other researchers to maintain the anonymity of their research field and participants.

**The Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice were adopted by the Association at its Annual Business Meeting in March 1999.**

**Appendix II** **Poster to lesbian groups**

**Are you interested in participating in research?**

I am an older lesbian working towards an MA in Death Studies. I am researching whether the words and/or symbols on gravestones and memorials reflect lesbian partnerships, and whether this has changed at all since the Civil Partnership Act took effect in 2005.

I was very moved when I came across these words written by the Lesbian Herstory Collective in 1992 and entitled 'In memory of the voices we have lost':

> As a people we have been deprived of the rituals of common sorrow. Many lesbians have already experienced the pain of silent mourning. Often in newspapers, a euphemism for the death of a lesbian is 'There are no known survivors'. This is not true. We are each other's survivors.

Would you be interested in answering a few questions about how you think lesbians and their relationships should be acknowledged (or not) in the graveyard?

This is a very sensitive area, and please be assured that I am mindful of this. If you decide to participate, you can decide to withdraw at any time, and any contribution would be completely anonymous unless you decided otherwise.

If you'd like to find out more, please contact me:

[contact details provided]

**Thank you**

**Carolyn Stevens**

**Appendix III** **Information sheet**

***INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH TO BE CARRIED OUT BY***

*CAROLYN STEVENS*

*School of Archaeology, History and Anthropology,*

*University of Wales Trinity Saint David*

My research study is exploring:

**THE VISIBILITY OF LESBIAN DEATH IN MATERIALISED WORDS.**

This means that I want to research whether the words and/or symbols on gravestones or memorials ('materialised words') reflect lesbian partnerships either directly or in a codified form.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

Previous research has shown that there is often little social acknowledgement of the grief felt by a bereaved lesbian when her partner has died, and taking this a step further, it is clear that there are very few gravestones or memorials that make clear reference to lesbian relationships. Julia Darling, the lesbian poet who died in 2005, designed her own gravestone to have the double women's symbol, and the names of her partner and her children, saying "you don't see many lesbian gravestones".

I wondered whether it was becoming more acceptable to use the words 'partner' 'life partner', 'civil partner' or other terms that acknowledge lesbian relationships in life, in the way that 'husband' and 'wife' are used to indicate heterosexual relationships. If so, would we *want* to out ourselves or our partners in the cemetery? I am also interested in whether the Civil Partnership Act has had any effect on the words chosen (and accepted by church or council run graveyards/cemeteries) to commemorate those we love.

**Who is being interviewed?**

I am hoping to talk with any lesbian who is willing to share thoughts, opinions or personal experience in this area. I have contacted lesbian groups around the country, and some of the women there have passed my contact details on to others they think may be interested. I am also aiming to talk with funeral and cemetery professionals – funeral directors, monumental masons, and religious, humanist and independent funeral celebrants.

**How will information be collected, and what about confidentiality?**

Participation will involve a semi-structured interview of up to an hour, or a small group discussion, which I will record. A semi-structured interview is one where I am guided by a list of questions I would like to ask, but as the interviewee you are not constrained in having to answer in a certain way; this means that the interview will hopefully have quite a relaxed feel and our conversation can range more freely. Once transcribed, I will send you a copy for you to make any edits you choose.

All information collected will be kept in strictest confidence (subject to legal limitations). If I use anything you say in my final dissertation, I will use pseudonyms, unless you specifically ask that you be referenced by name, or by the name of the organisation you represent.

The interview would be face-to-face, by 'phone or by Skype depending on your location and preference. If you prefer, I can email some questions to you.

**This could be an upsetting subject, what if I change my mind?**

Please be assured that I am mindful of the sensitive nature of my research. Anyone who progresses this would have the right to withdraw at any time and without notice or reason. If participating has re-sensitised painful times of your life, I can arrange a one hour debrief session on the 'phone with a British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Senior Accredited Counsellor at no cost to you (www.bacp.co.uk).

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

I am hoping to finish the research and writing up by mid 2013. It will be submitted for assessment to the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. A copy of all dissertations which have passed is deposited in the University's Learning Resources Centre and a second copy will be retained by the school of archaeology, history and anthropology. If you would like to read the finished dissertation, I can send an electronic copy to you.

If you are interested in taking part, please contact:

[contact details given]

**Thank you.**

**Carolyn Stevens**

## Appendix IV Consent Form

Study title:
**The visibility of lesbian death in materialised words.**

**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason. ☐

3. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

4. I agree to the interview/consultation being audio recorded Y N

5. I would like any reference to the information I have given to be:

Anonymised: Y N

Credited as follows:

……..

6. I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised). I understand that it will be held securely, and may be used again for future research. Y N

| Name of Participant | Date | Signature |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

| Name of Researcher | Date | Signature |
|---|---|---|
| | | |

**Appendix V** **Lesbian Respondents**

**Angela,** 50s, white, in a civil partnership. Independent Funeral Celebrant. Individual face-to-face interview.

**Anna,** 50s, white, in a civil partnership with Kate. Individual face-to-face interview.

**Cath**, 40s, white, partnered and planning to have a civil partnership in 2013. Email response.

**Carole**, 40s, white, in a civil partnership. Owns funeral transport business. Email response.

**Della**, 50s, white, single. Email response.

**Dee,** 50s, Asian, in a civil partnership. Individual face-to-face interview.

**Glenys**, 30s, white, partnered. Palliative care nurse. Email response.

**Jean**, 60s, white, widow. Individual face-to-face interview.

**Karen**, 30s, white, in a civil partnership with Polly. Individual face-to-face interview.

**Kate**, 50s, white, in a civil partnership with Anna. Individual face-to-face interview.

**Megan,** 40s, white, partnered. Funeral Director. Paired face-to-face interview with heterosexual colleague.

**Mandeep**, 30s, Asian, partnered with Satwant. Group face-to-face interview.

**Polly,** 30s, white, in a civil partnership with Karen. Face-to-face interview.

**Satwant**, 40s, Asian, partnered with Mandeep. Group face-to-face interview.

**Sunali**, 50s, Asian, partnered. Group face-to-face interview.

**Appendix VI** **Professional respondents**

**Funeral Directors**

**1.** Megan, lesbian, interviewed face-to-face with colleague (Geoff), Leicestershire.

**2.** Geoff, heterosexual, interviewed face-to-face with colleague (Megan), Leicestershire.

**3.** Email response, Warwickshire.

**4.** Face-to-face discussion, Ceredigion.

**5.** Email response, Warwickshire.

**Memorial Masons**

**1.** Email response, nationwide.

**Funeral Transport**

**1.** Carole, lesbian, email response, Warwickshire.

**Cemetery Manager**

**1.** Email response, municipal cemetery, Warwickshire.

**Independent Funeral Celebrant**

**1.** Angela, lesbian, face-to-face interview, West Midlands.

**Clergy**

**1.** Unitarian Minister, email response, Warwickshire.

**2.** Roman Catholic Priest, email response, Warwickshire.

**Appendix VII** **Semi-structured interview questions**

- What led you to participate in this research?

- What do you think about gravestones or memorials that acknowledge lesbian relationships?

- Has this subject got any personal relevance for you that you would feel comfortable sharing?

- Any thoughts about what you would want for yourself when you die?

- Have you talked to your partner about this? (if relevant)

- How do you think the wider public might respond?

- Has the Civil Partnership Act changed anything for you in the area of how open or not lesbians can be in writing epitaphs to those that have died?

**Appendix VIII** **Experiences of homophobia and heterosexism as reported by lesbian participants.**

**Angela**
My partner's parents still treat me like some random friend (although I've been hanging around for over twenty years!). We are civil partners although B's parents don't know – neither of us want her parents making life decisions if she was unable to do so herself, which they would do, over-riding me in the process, making things legal is the only way we can protect ourselves should anything like that happen.

**Anna**
'Despite being with my partner for nearly twenty years, one of my brothers will not acknowledge that the person who accompanies me and our family of daughters, sons-in-law and granddaughters to yearly visits to him and his family is anything other than a pleasant but unrelated individual. More than this, I implicitly know that should I give any indication of our relationship, by an affectionate mannerism for example, in front of my three nieces, then my brother would end the contact which I have so carefully nurtured'.

**Dee**
My lesbian niece and her partner have just had twins, went to register the babies, weren't really treated very well, not very appropriately. They feel an absolute right to feel angry about that, probably because of the law, but they wouldn't walk along the High Street holding hands because it still wouldn't be safe. [Midlands town] isn't ready yet. When we can hold hands on Saturdays at the outdoor market and nobody thinks anything of it, I guess we'll be ready.

**Glenys - palliative care nurse**
I found a real insensitivity when it came to a man in his 70's losing his partner (who we nursed), treating the relationship as though it wasn't as meaningful as a straight relationship, and yet my colleagues are generally very sensitive/caring when it comes to a patient dying.

**Karen**
'When I came out to my mum she said something like 'life's hard enough already, why make it harder on yourself?'

**Kate**
'A friend of mine decided to come out recently and talked to her parents about it. The first thing her mum said was to offer to pay for her to have electric shock treatment'.

**Megan**
'Our youngest son is 12, and getting some stick at school. "Your mum's a lezzie"'.

**Polly**
'When I started teaching you wouldn't dare to say anything about being gay, section 28 and so on, but even though that's gone, I can't risk being seen holding hands with my partner'.

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