OUT OF TIME AND OUT OF PLACE

Habitus dislocation and the importance of affinity groups for older lesbians and bisexual women

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

Jill Wilkens

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Without the thirty-five participants and the gate-keepers who gave me access to them, this research would not exist. Skeggs (1997) observes that the affectivity of research is diminished through the 'academic analytical filtering process' (p.15) but I hope some trace of my participants' resilience and good humour remains. Their warm hospitality and patience in answering my questions made the interviews a joy. Nothing could make transcription a pleasure, but their attention to detail when reviewing their transcripts, made the process feel worthwhile. Most importantly, the courage and joie de vivre with which they have lived their lives and told their stories are an inspiration to generations of women, including my own, for which I am truly grateful. As someone born in the 1960s, I am mindful of my privilege and protection. The experiences of self-concealment, discrimination, family estrangement and harassment bear little resemblance to my own and those of my contemporaries, although I do not suggest that they have been eradicated.

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Dedication

Everything I write is, and always will be, dedicated to the loving memory of Jacqueline and Frederick Wilkens, whose unswerving love and belief in their daughters continues to make everything possible.

This particular piece of work is also dedicated, with love, to Gwen
(21st December 1936 - 20th September 1996).
I wish I'd known you better.

Publications

Part of Chapters Seven and Eight were initially published in 2016 as 'The significance of affinity groups and safe spaces for older lesbians and bisexual women: creating support networks and resisting heteronormativity in older age', in *Quality in Ageing and Older Adults*, 17 (1), pp. 26-35.

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Abstract

This research investigates the intersection of ageing, gender, class and sexual identity with a particular focus on the role of same-sexuality social groups and networks for older lesbians and bisexual women.

Thirty-five women aged between 57 and 73 were interviewed about a range of topics including what it was like to come out in the 1950s and 1960s, their education and employment, their feelings about ageing, whether they had been lonely or isolated and their experiences of attending groups for lesbians and bisexual women.

The research found that many participants experienced feelings of being 'out of place' that were not to do with financial or structural inequalities but were culturally and socially shaped by aspects of their social mobility, generation, gender and sexuality. Using an intersectional approach, I draw on Bourdieu's work, using the concept of *habitus dislocation* to consider the contradictions of these mobilities. I suggest that many of my participants faced unprecedented and unique disjunctures between their original habitus and the new classed, sexual and gendered locations in which they finally 'arrived'.

The research indicates that participants' friendships and families of choice, as well as the social groups they have created and attended across the life course, have had an important role to play in helping to alleviate the feelings of difference that are a consequence of multiple mobilities. For many participants they are sites of resilience and help to promote positive ageing, offering a sense of belonging to a generation of lesbian and bisexual women who have faced marginalisation across their life course. However, they are also locations of hierarchy and privilege, where some are excluded or precariously positioned.

This study offers a unique view of habitus dislocation as a consequence of multiple mobilities across the life course of a generational cohort of women, often under-represented or absent from sexualities research. It makes an important contribution to the literature on lesbian, gay and bisexual ageing that focuses solely on loneliness and isolation and the significance of social support.

Contents

Chapter Seven: Affinity groups and safe spaces: Creating support networks and resisting heteronormativity in older age

Chapter Eight: Looking back, looking forward

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0   The scope of the research

In this research I explore the challenges and consequences of living a non-heterosexual life in a heteronormative society, attending particularly to the intersections within and between ageing, sexuality, gender and social support. Plummer (2010) proposes that age is a significant location for such a study, seeing sexualities as 'situated in age standpoints' (p.165). My research focuses on women born between 1940 and 1956 who identify as lesbian or bisexual. It explores the ways in which they have been 'mobile' within their lifetimes, transgressing class boundaries through further and higher education and resisting the conservative gender and sexual norms of the mid-twentieth century. Such mobility comes at a cost; lesbians and bisexual women of this generation are at risk of increased loneliness and isolation, particularly in their older age. My study investigates the 'hidden injuries' of social class mobility, the impact of self-concealment and exclusion and the effects of living with sexism, homophobia and heteronormative regulation, which have led some women to feel 'out of place'. It exposes the support networks and communities of resistance and activism built by lesbian and bisexual women; places that offer a sense of belonging and social and emotional care to many but are also hierarchical and rent by disagreement and exclusion. Essentially, this study considers the impact of multiple mobilities experienced by some older lesbians and bisexual women, looks at whether belonging to social or support groups mitigates their sense of 'difference' and asks how individuals are positioned in different ways with regard to these groups and the benefits they afford.

My specific research aims and questions are further detailed in sections 1.4
and 2.6.

1.1   The rationale for this study

I embarked on this project for many reasons; as a sociologist, teacher and

feminist, committed to empowering others through my work, I am drawn to

the words of Back (2007) when he asserts that sociology has an

increasingly important role to play in attending to otherwise unheard voices:

> [S]ociologists can still pay attention to the fragments, the voices and
> stories that are otherwise passed over or ignored. (p.1)

This study contributes to and informs the growing body of research

regarding the lives and needs of lesbian gay and bisexual individuals

becoming old in the twenty first century. This generation has grown up and

come of age in a unique social environment with diverse social, economic

and political influences. The post-war, so-called 'baby boomer' [1] generations

of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (hereafter LGBT) people, whose

formative years were lived in an era where same-sex attraction was still

widely condemned and generally regarded as deviant, are coming to

retirement and older age; on 1st January 2016, the first 'boomers' turned 70.

Although recent estimates put the total lesbian, gay and bisexual (hereafter

LGB) population in England at around 1.6%,[2] it is impossible to accurately

calculate the number of individuals in this cohort as there is evidence of

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[1] The term 'baby boomer' is generally used to refer to anyone born between 1946 and 1964.
Although this is often regarded as one generation, there will obviously be a diversity of experiences
between the two ends of this period.
[2] In 2014, 1.6% of adults in the UK identified their sexual identity as lesbian, gay or bisexual.
Integrated Household Survey (Experimental statistics): January to December 2014.
http://www.ons.gov.uk/ [Accessed 1.3.16]

LGB self under-reporting in the age categories 50-64 and 65 and over (Aspinall, 2009) and, as Richard and Brown (2006) point out, for many people 'sexual orientation is not a static entity' (p.51). It has been suggested that an absence of research into the ageing needs of lesbians and gay men is the consequence of heteronormativity and has damaging implications for both theory and policy:

> Heteronormative assumptions have dominated the study and analysis of aging in North America, leaving either unasked or unanswered questions about the experiences of sexual minorities, including the social context of their aging […] further detailed examination of midlife and older sexual minority populations would benefit sexuality theory, as well as gerontological and aging policy in general.
> (Barker, Herdt and de Vries, 2006: 2)

The implicit inevitability and legitimacy of heteronormativity, expressed through the lens of binary gender and reinforced by the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990), may result in older lesbians and bisexual women being particularly prone to under-representation. Averett et al.'s (2014) review of research on lesbian gerontology between 1979 and 2010 revealed significant gaps in knowledge; they suggest that not only are older lesbians rendered invisible in general society but also 'within the research community' (p.349).

Perhaps as a consequence of a similar 'heterosexual assumption' (Weeks, 2015: 54), little governmental interest, research or policy has been expended on the ageing experiences and needs of this generation in the UK. Many will choose to eschew traditional pensioners' clubs and other similar age-sameness groups with inherently heteronormative and often patriarchal assumptions and organisational structures in favour of groups

predicated on similarity of characteristics other than, or additional to, age; groups where sexual identity *and* generation come together. In the absence of definitive research, services such as support groups for sexual minorities are under increased threat. Political-economic arguments of austerity and public spending cuts are being shored up by twenty first century discourses of achieved equality; the misguided, but politically expedient, belief that the social and legal endorsement offered by equalities legislation and advances have rendered LGBT-specific provision unnecessary at best and divisive at worst. A nuanced account of the benefits of these groups and networks is germane in a decade where financially and ideologically justified cuts for funding to LGBT groups in the voluntary and community sectors are influencing not only the way they are staffed and offer services, but whether they can even continue to exist.

As well as my social and political concerns, and genuine belief in the need for social and health services appropriate to the needs of marginalised groups, there are other reasons for pursuing this topic. As a woman in her early fifties, in a same-sex relationship, I am personally situated within the research in some vital respects. Although I initially attributed my choice of research topic to my personal investment in its outcomes, as this research has progressed I have recognised a second private motivation for my interest and genuine concerns. I have always known that my mother's sister was a lesbian. Born in 1936, she is inscribed in my memory as a butch, socially awkward woman who rarely appeared at family events and, when she did, was received mostly with a kind of distant compassion; somehow part but not really *part of* our family. I met her only a handful of times in my

childhood and adolescence. She existed largely in the margins roots our lives; it was only when she died that I became aware of her large social network. At her funeral there was a tangible gulf between the two parts of her life; her birth family and her social family who knew her by a different name and through a different life-lens altogether and clearly had greater affection and a more genuine relationship with her than any laid down by blood. I do not pretend to have understood Bourdieu's concept of cleft habitus at that time but her presence in the early part of my life gave me insight into the price paid by some women for pursuing a lesbian lifestyle in terms of the losses and challenges they faced.

As I moved deeper into this research, I began to appreciate other personal connections between myself and the theoretical framework I use to explore my participants' lives. In 2012, I had never heard of cleft habitus and had no reason to think that I would become immersed in its study when I set out to investigate sexual identity, loneliness and groups. However, as many people warned me, a PhD has more evolutions than you can imagine and here I am four years later with a piece of research that is hardly recognisable. With hindsight, I realise that just as I am theorising its relevance to my participants I have experienced habitus dislocation in all its iterations. Now in my fifties, I remain enmeshed in the cultural and social consequences of my own experiences of being a working-class grammar school attendee, a 'non-traditional' woman and a 'later-life lesbian'. Weeks (2014) suggests that the researcher's biography not only links to their research but becomes part of the story. My affinity with older lesbian lives, sense of being out of place and desire for connectedness has roots that

entangle me, reaching deep into my family history and threading themselves through my work.

1.2 Theoretical foundations and methodological approaches

Older lesbians (and particularly bisexual women) are likely to be absent from or misrepresented in dominant knowledge discourses and empirical data. In order to understand the subjective lives of such women, their life course diversity and the multiple intersecting factors that have positioned them in different ways, I have purposefully created a blended theoretical and methodological framework from within which to work, combining socialist-feminist constructivism with a life course approach and an appreciation of inequalities as intersectional, rather than additive, elements. The three elements are outlined in the following section.

A socialist-feminist, constructivist framework

When contemplating the theoretical perspectives within which I could locate my work, I recognised a personal (feminist) and political (socialist) commitment to ensuring my research has worth and significance to the individuals and communities within which it is located. Adopting any perspective has implications for the entire research process, from the choice of research topic to the conclusions drawn from the data. Gabb (2004) places great significance on the researcher's 'standpoint':

> How we situate ourselves within lesbian and gay politics may significantly affect the ways we structure the research process and interpret our data (p.170).

I am working from a socialist-feminist, and constructivist epistemology. Stanley and Wise (1993) argue that traditional sociological frameworks are

often inadequate to describe the research process and suggest that feminists often combine elements of different epistemological positions. Lincoln (2001) stresses the need for researchers to uncover, 'mutual reinforcements between paradigms' (p.124). Initially taking a social *constructionist* approach, I was increasingly drawn to social *constructivism,* finding it more inclusive of the aspects of self and subjectivity that I believe will be an essential part of understanding how individuals are rendered out of place by structural inequalities and mobility. Although the terms are often used interchangeably and are drawn from the same non-essentialist, meaning-making perspectives, constructivism widens the focus to include individual constructs and promotes advocacy and activism, which fits with my intent to produce meaningful research that benefits individuals and communities. Lincoln highlights the similarities between social constructivism and action research, noting their shared concern with the influences of, 'social class, gender, race and other oppressive historical systems' (p.125). She concludes that they have, 'several profound and sympathetic connections' (p.130).

The integration of social structural and individual accounts provides a powerful, inclusive framework for my work. Rather than seeking to achieve a single viewpoint, constructivism accepts each person's experiences as valid and 'does not dismiss divergent or conflicting constructions of reality' (Appleton and King, 2002:643). Guba and Lincoln (2004) suggest that such divergence may depend on 'social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender factors that differentiate the interpreters' (p.31). Combining the philosophical and methodological principles of constructivism with a

socialist-feminist perspective empowers my intent to put marginalised women's lives, opinions and understanding at the heart of my research, enabling the diversity of their voices be heard. Feminist constructivism rejects claims to universal knowledge, emphasises the importance of reflexivity and acknowledges the importance of social and political commonalities within and between marginalised groups whilst not seeing these diversities as unproblematic. Allen (2011) uses feminist constructivist grounded theory in her study of women's resistance to abuse, suggesting that it can take account of both the 'structural aspects of women's lives… and their individual constructions of meaning…' (p. 30). Although I am not adopting a grounded theory approach, Allen's work has resonance; she believes that sensitive research topics demand a feminist analysis, which remains open to a diversity of narratives. Using this approach enables me to focus on the social and cultural processes that underpin the construction of some sexualities as 'other' while remaining mindful that they are located within and intersected by the unequal social relationships of capitalism, enshrined in the class system and other hierarchies of stratification.

Accounting for class is not an inevitable element of feminist work but taking a *socialist*-feminist perspective ensures that issues of class and material (dis)advantage are central. 'Feminism' and 'feminist theory' are complex and conflicted terms and movements incorporating a diversity of positionings. Skeggs (1997) suggests that some feminist theory has adopted a literary, 'highbrow' stance where class analysis has no place; this is not a position I am comfortable with or wish to draw upon. Skeggs proposes several reasons for this shift, including difficulties in definition and

measurement and the perceived redundancy of class, which has led to the virtual disappearance of class analysis from even materialist feminist writings. I remain mindful of these difficulties and attend to participants' own classifications as well as more traditional understandings of their class positionings. Skeggs (2004a) suggests that attention to Bourdieu's work may be particularly useful in this respect; my analysis draws on the concepts of habitus and cleft habitus to explore how my participants' social and other mobilities position them.

This research intentionally adopts a life course approach in order to highlight how participants' positioning in older age is connected to events and experiences across their lifetime. Blending this with an intersectional analysis has provided a unique and effective way of exploring and understanding multiple mobilities and their cumulative effect on the individual. The rationale for using these specific approaches is discussed in the following section.

Taking a life course approach

> The later years of aging cannot be understood without knowledge of the prior life course. (Elder, 1994:5)

Plummer (2001) suggests that by taking a 'generation cohort perspective' a researcher is made aware of the importance of the historical time through which their participants have lived and been shaped, particularly the 'critical location' of youth and the subjective sense, 'through which they may make sense of their 'memories' and 'identities'…' (p.128).

In rapidly changing societies, different generational cohorts are socialised in different historical worlds with different limitations and choices. Some of the constraints experienced by current cohorts of LGB elders include the social stigma attached to their sexuality, the lack of visible role models and the absence of legislative protection. Adopting a life course perspective in order to study such a cohort situates their ageing within socio-historic contexts. Life cycle approaches or those which offer models of the life course often identify different life stages, varying from two-stage models which contrast such periods as childhood and adulthood or work and retirement to Erikson et al.'s (1986) eight-stage model. However, the diversity and greater fluidity of life course transitions associated with LGB lives renders many of these stage-based models redundant. Older LGB individuals do share commonalities but equally, have diverse lives (Herdt et al., 1997). Plummer (2001) reminds us that the shape and order of all lives is changing and a straightforward pathway, with a pre-retirement focus on work for men and raising children for women that previously characterised how we thought of lives, has been disrupted; 'heterogeneity, fragmentation, discontinuities have happened for many and the sequencing is no longer quite so clear' (p.129). Traies (2012) demonstrates how the gender and sexual identities of older lesbians are fluid, negotiated over time, often after years of 'oppression and concealment' (p.80). A life course approach accentuates the significance of this movement across time.

Using an intersectional approach

Identity categories, including those of 'lesbian' or 'gay' are diverse, complex and complicated entities bisected and criss-crossed with multiple

inequalities, privileges and differences. I have already alluded to the significance of class as a vector of oppression or privilege; other axes of difference relevant to this study include gender, sexuality and age. When such variables are combined they impact on each other, changing the lives and life chances of individuals, positioning them uniquely with regards to material, social, physical and psychological well-being. There are numerous ways to conceptualise this diversity. In their study of 25 older lesbians in Connecticut, Richard and Brown (2006) view their respondents, already triply oppressed by their gender, age and sexual identity as facing 'even more layers of oppression' as they age, in the form of disability, for example. However, other theorists are critical of such methodologies regarding them as insufficient to explain how one inequality impacts catalytically on others (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Erel at al., 2008). Yuval-Davis suggests that rather than viewing them merely as items that can be added up, intersecting social divisions must be seen as constituting each other.

Intersectionality offers an alternative way of conceptualising these differences, by showing how the experience of oppressed groups is shaped by the intersection of other axes of oppression including race, class, gender, disability, degree of 'outness' and religion. Rather than regarding inequalities as an additive listing of oppressions, an intersectional approach acknowledges the complex interrelations between multiple forms of power, recognising that hierarchical positionings are not always congruent. Drawing on the concept of intersectionality theorised by Crenshaw (1993), Taylor sees it as both theory and practice and defines it as:

> [T]he mutually constructed nature of social division and the ways these are experienced, reproduced and resisted in everyday life. (2010a:38)

Whilst an intersectional approach to diversity within LGBT communities has been emphasised in recent years (Taylor, 2007, 2010; Richardson and Monro, 2012), it has not been applied consistently to all aspects of identity and difference. Taylor (2010b) proposes that while sexuality and class are often raised in discussions of intersectionality they are rarely empirically evidenced. Intersectionality offers a perspective that recognises the interplay between characteristics as well as their potential to create new positionings. In this study it offers a way of understanding some of the differences that straddle the commonality of shared sexual identities; not all older lesbians experience oppression in the same way and some may actually be dominated or excluded by others with privilege and power. Combined with an understanding of life course diversity, it offers a nuanced perspective; a valuable tool for mindful, inclusive research into older lesbian and bisexual women. Brought together, these three elements offer a new way of looking at how different mobilities and vectors of inequality intersect and combine, while being attentive to life histories and changing patterns and the life course.

1.3   Conceptualising and defining 'sexual minorities'

The terms 'LGBT' and 'community' are often used uncritically; a kind of 'diversity shorthand' built on a popular understanding prevalent in the media and public domain. This section queries the diversity and complexities concealed within identity politics, and considers the extent to which the

current language of sexuality meets the needs of older LGBT individuals who have previously been viewed and described in very different ways.

One feature of the change in attitudes and behaviour witnessed in recent years is the language used by members of sexual and gender minorities to describe themselves and their lives. While LGBT populations are often combined as a single entity for research, political and advocacy purposes, each is a distinct population group with its own specific needs. As Weeks (2015) notes, there exists:

> [A] diversification of identities, a pluralism of subjectivities, and of political and cultural projects. (p.51)

The use of acronyms to describe sexual minority communities is a complex area with little agreement. Richardson and Monro (2012) point out that many descriptors are highly contested and do not have global application. Formby's (2012) participants acknowledged the advantages of acronyms for promoting visibility and 'strength' but raised questions as to whether the LGBT acronym represented the diversity within the communities it is tasked with representing. Significantly, the experiences of those diverse LGBT identities are not uniform and are shaped by factors including race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, geographical location, and age. However, while conflating diverse sexual and gender identities into convenient groupings, such as LGBT, conceals many differences, conflicts and tensions it does serve to highlight the commonalities in experiences and political struggle for recognition and equalities regarded by some as crucial to identity politics (Richardson and Monro, 2012).

Weeks (1995) reminds us that sexual identities change with the times and can be 'taken up and abandoned' (p.98). However, although he demonstrates such identities to be historical inventions he concludes that these are indeed 'necessary fictions' that offer a valuable locus in an otherwise hostile world and provide a force for social change as well as a support network that nurtures individuals within the 'community' and protects it when under attack as for example, during the homophobia and AIDs crisis of the 1980s. Weeks suggests the advantages of affirming shared identity probably outweigh the drawbacks:

> If they are asserted too firmly there are dangers of fixing identifications and values that are really necessarily always in flux; yet if their validity is denied, there is an even greater danger of disempowering individuals and groups from the best means of mobilizing for radical change. (p.88)

For many years, 'queer', described by Rosenblum (1994) as a term used 'to deride a broad group of social outcasts' (p.87) was a label heralding loss, exclusion and rejection, assuming a 'master status' which overshadowed and obliterated all other statuses, roles and relationships. The nexus of language and sexual identity is fraught with tension and feeling, particularly for those whose direct experience of such terms and losses may find language reclamation problematic; as Gould (2008) observes 'the language of lesbian and gay politics is saturated with emotions about self and society' (p.384). For Rosenblum, one advantage of using queer is that it does not offer an essentialist understanding of sexual identity. However, in Formby's (2012) study investigating conceptualisations of LGBT communities, respondents to the online survey favoured 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'bisexual' as sexual identity descriptors, with less than 3% opting to self-define as 'queer'. Richardson and Monro (2012) suggest that whilst it is important to recognise

the importance of work pertaining to queer identities it must also be

recognised that in some countries (including the UK) the term still has

negative connotations. I believe this is true, particularly for the older

generation. Weston (2004) notes that while younger participants and those

who had less connection to feminism were more likely to use the label gay

to describe themselves, her older lesbian participants eschewed the term

gay:

> Those who had come out in association with the women's movement
> were inclined to call themselves lesbians and reserve the word "gay"
> for men. (p.183)

In acknowledgment of these and other concerns, I use the terms lesbian

and bisexual women throughout this research,[3] feeling them the most

appropriate to describe my sample of older women and one with which my

participants can identify.

1.4   Research aims and questions

The aims of this research are drawn from the gaps in the extant literature

and, as such, will be revisited at the end of the literature review. They

appear here in order to alert the reader to the key issues as they appear in

the next chapter and to briefly introduce the concept of 'habitus dislocation'

as a way of understanding how the dispositions of habitus (ways of being

and doing, acquired in childhood through primary socialisation processes)

may flounder if our conditions of existence change dramatically.

It is important to acknowledge that my research aims, questions and

direction have gone through several iterations before arriving at this point. I

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[3] Except when drawing on existing literature where I replicate the terms used therein.

originally conceived of this research at the end of my MA dissertation, which concluded that the ten older lesbians in my study went to groups because they were lonely and socially isolated, primarily because they had been hidden, were childless and single. I also found that working-class participants felt they were positioned on the edge of those groups; they were somewhat precarious in their membership and perhaps derived less sense of belonging from them. At the outset of this PhD, I was coming from the position that older LGBT people didn't have children; they lost contact with their parents; they haven't got relationships; they're getting old; they've been lonely all their life and now they are even lonelier. The first draft of my literature review was embedded in the literature around loneliness as a consequence of society changing and people becoming less connected. My interview schedule asked about loneliness and social isolation. Then, somewhere around the third reading of the transcripts, I recognised that it wasn't just about childlessness or about being hidden. Those things are important but there is something more than that. Making the connection between Piaget's (1985) discussion of the feelings of disequilibrium that result when your existing schema doesn't equip you for a situation or task, and Bourdieu's (2000) thoughts on habitus clivé, was significant. On the *surface* was a lot of discussion about loneliness and isolation and being alone, but *underneath* was a huge set of mobilities, through education, gender and sexuality, that had positioned people out of place. Even *in* the groups, it doesn't entirely *repair* - and that is why I've used the term habitus *dislocation* - when you dislocate something, it gets fixed and from the outside it looks fine but it's never quite the same. It is always a little bit vulnerable, a little bit weaker; in this case, vulnerable to the pain created by

having been out of place in *so many* fields, for such a long time.

Overarching aims

- To investigate how lesbian and bisexual women, born in the 1940s and 1950s, have been influenced by multiple mobilities across the life course.

- To explore the potential of habitus dislocation as way of understanding the feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by many lesbian and bisexual women across the life course.

- To consider how friendships, families of choice and coetaneous groups offer affirmation and provide ways of resisting the challenges of heteronormativity.

Specific research questions

- How has access to education and the social mobility of lesbian and bisexual women born in the 1940s and 1950s impacted on them across their lives and particularly as older adults?

- How have the transgressions of sexual and gender role expectations of lesbian and bisexual women born in the 1940s and 1950s impacted on them across their lives and particularly as older adults?

- Why have these 'multiple mobilities' rendered participants out of place and vulnerable to the emotional pain of habitus dislocation?

- What protection do friendships, families of choice and movements of 'equality and change' offer against the challenges of heteronormativity and pain of habitus dislocation? To what extent are they able to provide identity affirmation and avenues of resistance?

- What do social support groups offer older lesbians and bisexual women?

- How significant is the composition, organisation and location of social support groups?

- How do hierarchies and exclusions affect groups and other communities of belonging?

1.5   Outline of chapters

The following chapter reviews the extant literature starting with a cautionary note regarding the limitations of quantitative research, predominantly drawn from North American data. The chapter charts relevant aspects of recent LGB history and examines key areas of oppression and marginalisation. Issues of LGB loneliness and resilience are presented and debated. The chapter ends by exploring LGB communities and belongingness and the role of friendship and LGB identified groups and networks. Chapter Three describes the study's methodology, including the research design and implementation, an account of my own positionality and some of the ethical issues raised by the nature of the research.

The remaining chapters contain an analysis of the findings. Chapter Four explores issues of social class and widening access to education in the 1950s using the concept of habitus dislocation to understand the emotional and social cost of social mobility. Chapter Five unpicks the gender and sexuality transgressions of the participants and explores their potential to create further habitus disruption. Chapter Six offers an account of the sense of difference these mobilities have engendered in the participants, differences that have provoked loneliness and isolation but also resilience and creativity as women have found and created alternative ways of belonging throughout their lives. Chapter Seven explores the meaning of older age to the participants and looks at the groups they attend now, offering an analysis of the joys and benefits of belonging, as well as exploring the tensions, exclusions and hierarchies encountered by some participants.

Chapter Eight evaluates the contribution of this study to the extant literature on older lesbian and bisexual lives. It discusses the significance of this research to older lesbians and bisexual women themselves and to future generations of LGBT individuals. Finally, it offers recommendations for future research as well as suggesting ways forward for social policy and practice.

Chapter Two: A review of the literature

2.0   A word of caution: The limitations of existing research

There is only limited research about older lesbians, much of which is drawn from US based studies. Much of the research in this chapter is drawn from studies conducted in North America, Australia, and, to a lesser extent, Europe and the UK. Whilst I have deliberately sought out UK research wherever possible, North American studies dominate the literature and it is necessary to regard their conclusions with caution in respect of the generalisation to the UK. Whilst there are some significant commonalities across countries with respect to LGBT individuals' experience in the UK (for example, the legal sanctioning of 'equal' marriage signalling a developing acceptance and equality), there are also some significant differences, which may limit their usefulness for the purposes of comparison and generalisation.

One example of these differences can be found in the complex and contested area of social class. Many North American studies omit reference to class completely and when referenced it is, in the main, linked solely to socio-economic position. As observed previously, it is true that many UK studies also elide issues of class, although several writers are intentionally bringing it back to the agenda, developing a more nuanced investigation of the relationships between social class and lived experiences (Reay, 1998a, 2002; Lawler, 1999; McDermott, 2006; Taylor, 2007, 2009, 2011).

US sociology has a trend towards 'scientific methodology' whereby many studies are based on highly quantitative methods applying statistical

techniques to pre-collected (often government census) data. Whilst these are useful for highlighting associations between certain identifiers, they lack a reflexive dimension and do not explore issues of causality nor reveal anything of the subjective, lived experience of their 'respondents'. Bourdieu urged caution of this 'instrumental positivism', which he saw as having 'ruled virtually unchallenged since the 1940s' in the USA. (Wacquant, 1992:31). Studies using purely statistical methods, whilst appearing relevant, can shed only limited light on the relationships between ageing, sexual identity and loneliness and tell us nothing about the lives of those being 'measured'. Quantitative researchers themselves acknowledge these limitations, for example, McLaren (2009) proposes that:

> Further research is clearly warranted to further elucidate the experience of sense of belonging among lesbians. Qualitative methods are likely to be particularly useful in gaining an understanding of the complexities of belonging to multiple communities. (p. 9/10)

2.1 The historical context of the current generation of LGB elders: Forming an alternative sexual identity in post-war Britain

To understand the present, it is necessary to interrogate the past. Whilst it is impossible to compress years of history into a couple of pages, it is essential to establish a sense of the times and changes experienced by older LGB individuals. There have been significant attitudinal changes towards sexuality over the past 30 years. The British Social Attitudes Survey of 1987 indicated that 75% of people thought homosexuality was 'always or mostly wrong'. By 2008 this had substantially reduced to 32% (Ward and Carvel, 2008) (although it is noteworthy there is still uneasiness with same-sex intimacy in the media; a BBC survey found 18% 'uncomfortable' with the depiction of LGB characters, with men and the over 55s particularly likely to

be offended).4 A move towards a broader understanding of equality initiated by the post-1997 Labour government and confirmed by the 2010 Coalition government's commitment to equal marriage, resulted in the introduction of sexualities and transgender equalities legislation. The Adoption and Children Act (2002), Sexual Offences Act (2003), Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2003), repeal of Section 28 (2003), Civil Partnership Act (2004), Gender Recognition Act (2004), Equality Act (2010) and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act (2013) alongside profound attitudinal changes mean that individuals' experiences will differ greatly depending on the era into which they are born and come out. Rodríguez Rust (2012) identifies the historical time period within which an individual comes out and the age at which s/he does so as having 'profound and lasting effects' (p.163).

Born in the immediate post-war period, the current generation of LGB elders in the UK were mostly socialised and came of age in the 1950s and early 1960s, a time when homosexuality was seen as deviant or disordered behaviour that must be vilified and 'normalised'. In an environment where the heterosexual assumption prevailed, the LGB community was vulnerable to ridicule, physical and mental abuse, harassment, and employment and health care discrimination, resulting in many people living lives of full or partial self-concealment. Some are still hidden; Traies (2012) reports that almost 10% of her sample of 370 lesbians aged over 60 were not out to any family member, a quarter were not out to their neighbours and 49%

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4 *Portrayal of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People on the BBC*, Research Report, (September 2010). http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/reports/pdf/diversity_research_300910.pdf
[Accessed 6.10.15]

(including all those over 80) were not out to any social service professionals. Stonewall (2008a) reports that only half of lesbians and bisexual women are out to their GP or health care professional. The recent EU LGBT Survey (2013) reported that many respondents were still not out to family members and 'a majority avoid holding hands with their same-sex partner for fear of victimisation' (p.15).

Although from the vantage point of the twenty first century, the pace of change over the past 50 years appears to have been rapid, it may not have seemed that way to those who lived through the worst excesses of homophobia and the tentative development of a gay liberation movement. The 1960s witnessed many demands for social and legal reform and the LGBT community were amongst their number, with campaigns in the USA and UK seeking tolerance and civil rights. Richardson and Monro (2012) point out that whilst the sixties were generally conservative, by the early seventies a more militant politics emerged. However, lesbians were often alienated and excluded from the main campaigns for change. Weeks (1990) describes early membership of political organisations such as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) as small and predominantly male; in 1972, only 6-8% of the 2,800 CHE members were women. Initially, there were few alternatives for women; some joined the Women's Liberation Movement, which became increasingly separatist at this time, and Sappho, which became the focus for London lesbians, holding discos and weekly meetings in Notting Hill Gate. Several smaller organisations emerged in response to generic LGBT issues of loneliness and isolation; these included 'London Gay Switchboard', set up in 1974, 'Friend' and 'London Icebreakers'. Gay

social centres in cities including London, Bradford and Manchester offered an alternative to the developing commercial gay scene. Anderson (2006) suggested that the 'imagined community' of nationalism became possible because shared discourses were facilitated by 'print capitalism' which, 'made it possible for […] people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways' (p.37). Similarly, the establishment of an imagined sexual community was aided by the emergent gay press in the 1970s; although this was predominantly male focussed, Virago Press (1973) and The Women's Press (1978) were committed to producing work about women's diverse lives and relationships. Lesbian events and campaigns were small in number and divided in strategic direction; 500 women attended a National Lesbian Conference in 1976, but there was little unity on discussion of issues such as abortion, wages for housework or the essential nature of lesbian identity. Although there were lesbian groups and activists, the small numbers of women involved in public campaigning suggests that many stayed 'under the radar', perhaps because they feared exposure or possibly because the organisations that did exist did not appear sufficiently diverse to accommodate or represent them.

The 1980s brought two key threats to the UK's LGB population. The decade witnessed the onset of a global AIDs crisis, which whilst devastating the gay male population, also served to bring the LGB community together, although bisexuals, already characterised as 'traitors' by some gays and lesbians came under increased attack as potential 'carriers' of the virus back into the 'general population' (Rodríguez Rust, 2012). In the UK, the introduction of Section 28, outlawing the 'promotion' of homosexuality and 'pretended

families' as well as other attacks on equal opportunity policies and funding by the Thatcher administration also served to unite and mobilise communities, desperate not to lose the gains of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1988, an anti-Section 28 rally attracted over 20,000 people and the following year's lesbian and gay Pride rally over 30,000. Far from silencing them, Section 28 had galvanised supporters of LGBT equalities into action in numbers never previously seen in the UK. Weeks perceives that by the end of the twentieth century, the lesbian and gay community were:

> [E]mbattled, but resilient, politically vulnerable but socially and culturally more vibrant and visible than ever before. (1990: 231)

However, older lesbians are still far from visible in a range of familial, social and professional situations. Visibility brings its own challenges as demonstrated by Morales et al. (2014) who compared the experiences of LGBT adults aged 50-64 (the baby boom generation) with those born between 1925 and 1945 (the so-called Silent Generation). Their study found that the 'boomers' perceived significantly more barriers, for example, to health and care services, felt less safe than the 'Silents' and experienced a greater degree of harassment, almost certainly as a consequence of higher levels of sexual identity disclosure. Despite the trend towards the 'normalisation' of LGBT lives and equalities in the UK and many other parts of the world, discrimination, stigmatisation and public invisibility have by no means been eradicated, particularly for bisexual and trans communities. Hostetler (2013) suggests that while LGBT 'baby boomers' have certainly benefitted from societal changes and increased visibility, 'the course of their middle (and late) adulthood has been shaped in indelible ways' (p.121) by events including involvement in movements such as feminism and the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the AIDS crisis. Whilst it is evident that many

LGBT people have participated fully and openly in society and been active and successful in seeking equalities, I suggest that for some individuals, predominantly (but by no means exclusively) elders, changed attitudes and apparent equalities have come too late to transform lives blighted by exposure to homophobia and the complexities of concealment, self-hatred and shame associated with homonegativity (Szymanksi and Chung 2001).

2.2   Identity and difference: The intersection of multiple inequalities

Chapter One outlined my use of an intersectional approach combined with an understanding of life course diversity as a mechanism for understanding the impact of multiple inequalities in older age. It is challenging to attend to *all* axes of oppression affecting older lesbian and bisexual women. Whilst my research focuses predominantly on the intersections between class, gender, sexuality and ageing, there are many other influences on participants' subjective experience. This section explores some of the structured inequalities that have the potential to disrupt the lives of lesbians and bisexual women, singly or in combination with each other.

Ageing

We have many 'facts' about ageing at our disposal. It is a growth area; there are now 11.6 million people in the UK aged 65 and above,[5] and this number is expected to reach 20 million by 2030.[6] Currently, 3.5 million people aged 65 and over live alone, of whom almost 70% are women.[7] We know that ageing has the potential to isolate individuals; in 2014, 2.9 million people felt

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[5] *Population estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland; mid 2015.* Office for National Statistics. www.ons.gov.uk [Accessed 23.6.16]
[6] *National population projections for the UK, 2014-based*, Office for National Statistics, www.ons.gov.uk [Accessed 23.6.16]
[7] *Labour Force Survey*, cited in *Later life in the United Kingdom*, Age UK. www.ageuk.org
 [Accessed 7.6.16]

they had no one to turn to for help and support.[8] It is estimated that there are approximately 700,000 lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals aged 65 and over, [9] many of whom may find isolation a particular issue. Although this data suggests that older lives are a worthy research topic, as previously noted, there is an absence of qualitative research into older LGBT lives in the UK; certainly little is known about class or ethnic diversity within this category. Jones' (2012) review of literature found most research focused on the lesbian and gay experience with few studies of bisexual, trans or other queer ageing. Clunis et al.'s (2005) study of 62 lesbians aged between 55 and 95, asked about their lives, ageing and hopes for the future. Most participants in this North American study reported strong social networks and friendships and were enjoying life. However, many spoke of the challenges of ageing including inadequate financial resources for medical bills and expressed particular concerns about appropriate housing and loss of lesbian community as they aged. Maintaining support networks was seen as a priority.

Education

As well as universal elementary education, the Education Act (1902) allowed for secondary education for 'able pupils', often provided by grammar schools, which charged fees for the pupils they educated. The Education Act (1944) further transformed the educational landscape between 1945 and 1972, implementing the ideology of a fully funded, compulsory education system. The new tripartite system provided all children up to the age of 15 with the

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[8] TNS survey for Age UK, December 2014, cited in *Later life in the United Kingdom*, Age UK. www.ageuk.org [Accessed 7.6.16]
[9] *Integrated Household Survey* (Experimental statistics): January to December 2014. http://www.ons.gov.uk/ [Accessed 23.6.16]

right to free secondary education. However, this was not a utopian or meritocratic transformation; gender and class bias was evident in educational structure and practice. The eleven plus results were skewed by social class and weighted in favour of boys, a double disadvantage for many working-class girls restricting their access to the superior educational and occupational chances afforded by grammar schools; it was not unusual for girls to leave secondary modern at 15 without any qualifications. Although the gendered curriculum was more evident in the secondary modern, grammar schools still offered a curriculum weighted to the domestic sphere. While the offer of scholarships widened working-class participation in the grammar school system, the educationally successful were more likely to come from 'aspirant, home-owning' working-class families. There were also significant repercussions of the 1944 Act on educational practice; the need for selection generated concerns about the practice of 'streaming' or 'grouping by ability' which emerged in the 1940s and grew during the 1950s with schools under intense pressure to group even primary age children well into the 1960s. Streaming has been found to be associated with social class; Jackson (1964) revealed the over-representation of working-class students in low streams and the tendency of schools to allocate less experienced and qualified teachers to such groups. Such streaming was not implemented on the basis of ability alone; parental capital and pupils' appearance influenced such decisions, and children who came from clean and orderly homes had:

> [A] greater chance of being put in the upper streams than their
> measured ability would seem to justify.
> Douglas 1964:118, quoted in Gillard (2008)

Reay (2002) suggests that class has the ability to operate as a 'fixing mechanism' (p.224), an aspect which can be seen in operation in the tripartite system. Rather than opening up access to new cultural, social and economic capitals, the schooling options of the 1950s for those working-class children who did not pass the eleven plus or go to grammar schools often had the reverse effect; rendering them immobile and fixing them firmly in their place.

Social class

The relevance of social class for this research is located particularly in its relationship with education and social mobility, and at its intersection with gender. Despite its impact on a multitude of life outcomes and experiences, social class (along with sexual identity), is an often overlooked characteristic, leading Brown (1995) to comment:

> [C]lass is invariably named but rarely theorized or developed in the multiculturalist mantra, "race, class, gender, sexuality. (p.61)

McDermott (2006) observes that an analysis of sexual identity and social class *together* is often absent from research. Taylor (2011) also notes the erasure of a class analysis in sexuality studies although she has attempted to redress the balance in her research into working-class lesbian lives (2007; 2009). Unequal class positionings are revealed in her interviewees' experiences of education, their relationships with families and friends, access to 'scene space', geographical restrictions and lack of access to support mechanisms which would facilitate coming or being 'out'.

Some studies have recognised the impact of social class as seen in economic inequalities at the intersection of older age and minority sexual

identity. Richard and Brown (2006) suggest that older lesbians have particular financial concerns that are linked to their occupational choices, for example self-employment, which may have resulted in low income across the life course. The nexus between ageing, sexual identity and socio-economic position is clearly illustrated in a report by Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. (2013), which revealed that, despite being more highly educated than the general older population in San Francisco, 40% of the older LGBT respondents lacked sufficient income to meet their basic needs and 30% had incomes below the federal poverty level.

As well as economic advantages, middle-class identity has social benefits, including the power to protect LGBT individuals from bullying at work. In a survey of more than 1500 LGBT individuals, working-class respondents were over 50% more likely to have experienced workplace bullying than their middle-class counterparts (Stonewall, 2008b). Barrett and Pollack (2005) studied the effects of class on gay men's sexual self-expression. They suggest that differential access to economic and other resources shapes the ability to express sexual identity. Formby's (2012) research into LGBT communities revealed segregation based on class and economic resources; some respondents acknowledging the privilege conferred by their middle-class professional standing, which enabled them to draw down support from work rather than relying on the LGBT community.

While accounts of class have traditionally focused on occupational and economic positionings, more recent analyses have moved towards subjective understandings of the multiple ways class is experienced and

negotiated. Lawler (1999) examines the way in which class, rather than being external is embedded in our history, integral to our sense of self. Skeggs (2004b) sees class as being in continual production and stresses the connections between class, gender and sexuality, suggesting it is reductive to study class in isolation:

> Class cannot be made alone, without all the other classifications that accompany it. […] Historically, there are strong and intimate parallels between the generation of classifications of social class and the production of sexuality and gender." (p.3)

Recent interest in the analysis of persistent class inequalities has been informed by Bourdieu's expansion of materialist conceptions of social structures through his exploration of different forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. This body of work moves away from measures of income and wealth alone, recognising the multi-dimensional and subjective aspects of class. Savage (2015) incorporates measures of economic, social and cultural capitals in an attempt to provide a more nuanced analysis of social positionings. Drawing on the Great British Class Survey, he identifies seven classes, reveals increasing polarisation between top and bottom and confirms the enduring salience of class in the UK.

Gender

> The period after the war and in the fifties saw a general cultural reaction against the independent woman […] marriage was held out as the most normal and desirable state for a woman to be in. (Sharpe, 1976:42)

Elder (1994) notes how, in rapidly changing societies, lives can be radically altered between one birth cohort to the next, resulting in each cohort being exposed to, 'different historical worlds, with their constraints and options'

(p.5). Essentialist sex-role models of the 1950s and 1960s imposed strict

gendered (and classed) limitations on the majority of women's lives. Butler,

(1990) acknowledges the resonance between Bourdieu's habitus and her

understanding of gender performativity, suggesting that, 'what we take to be

an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of

acts' (p.xv). The dominant gender regime, embedded in habitus, is

performed and reproduced in social institutions including the family, media,

education and workplace culture, regulating appearance, behaviour and life

events oriented towards domesticity (marriage and children being

paramount). McNay (1999) notes that Bourdieu's understanding of 'le sens

pratique' (feel for the game) is that it is acquired at a 'pre-reflexive level'

(p.101). However, it is crucial to recognise the agency of women and avoid

presenting a passive or singular version of female experience. As Skeggs

(1997) observes, women are subject to diverse cultural and social pressures

and respond to them differently, partly as a consequence of the interaction

of gender with their other social identities:

> [B]eing, becoming, practicing and doing femininity are very different
> things for women of different classes, races, ages and nations (p.98).

Sharpe (1976) proposes that the relaxation of formal sanctions that

prevented women from 'straying too far from conventional sex roles' (p.61)

increased the importance of instilling these through 'informal beliefs and

sanctions' including the socialization process at the heart of family life.

Sharpe identifies stereotyping as another mechanism of control and

highlights the underlying class basis of 'masculine' and 'feminine' ideal

types, pointing out that not only do the ruling classes define these ideals,

they have the greater means to achieve them. Sharpe suggests that, in

adolescence, 'tomboy' girls (who have previously internalised their gender role) 'feel and respond to pressures that point them in a more feminine direction' (p.205).

Although in 1945, between 9% and 12% of adult women were not married and many cohabiting, unmarried couples raised children together,[10] the Second World War appears to have strengthened the ideology of the family and the 1950s and 1960s endorsed a new domestic ideology with Bowlby (1953), among others, not only promoting full-time motherhood as the most desirable of female states but essential for children's well-being. Early marriage was also the norm,[11] although, after reaching a peak in the late 1960s, the emphasis on marriage started to wane in the early 1970s. Working-class girls, often designated as 'less able', were particularly targeted for marriage and motherhood through the schooling practices of the 1950s:

> With the less-able girls, however, we think schools can and should make adjustments to the fact that marriage now looms much larger and nearer in the pupils' eyes than ever before.
> The Crowther Report (1959) as cited by Marks (1976:196)

Marks (1976) points out that in addition to ideological differences underpinning boys' and girls' schooling, there were also material differences in resource allocation. Quotas and other barriers served to further limit girls' progress by restricting access to certain universities, professions and apprenticeships schemes. In 1970, just 30% of undergraduates and 16% of postgraduates were female. By 1975 these figures had risen to 35% and

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10 http://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/articles/marriage-and-civil-partnership#sthash.CrizFSpS.dpuf
[Accessed 15.3.16]
11 The average age on marriage for women in the UK was 22 in 1972.
http://www.oneplusone.org.uk/content_topic/committed-relationships/key-data/
[Accessed 9.11.15]

26% respectively.[12] Blackstone (1976) notes that in 1969/70 while the proportion of girls progressing to full-time further or higher education was marginally higher than boys (23% compared to 19%), more than half the girls were in further education colleges with many studying shorthand and typing. Boys were also more likely to be given day release from employment to undertake further training.

The data on education and marriage speaks for itself; in the 1950s and 1960s women's gender role was located firmly in marriage and motherhood. The reinforcement of this belief through education the media and socialisation, made career choices, and alternative relationships and sexualities appear deviant and difficult to attain in practice, particularly for those girls from working-class backgrounds.

The 1970s heralded a new gender regime where women's economic activity increased, particularly in part-time work and by 1991, just over 70% of women in the UK were in paid employment,[13] although over half were confined, by the intersection of their gender and class or education, to occupational segregation working in just three, low-paid, occupational groups. In 1970, prior to the Sex Discrimination Act, women's average earnings were 63% of men's, rising to 80% by 1995,[14] although issues of childcare and domestic responsibility remained largely unresolved. Dunne (1997) highlights the additional intersection of gender and sexuality in the

[12] Equal Opportunities Commission (1978-9), as cited by Oakley (1981: 127)
[13] Employment Gazette, 1994, Institute for Employment Studies
 http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/report-summary-women-labour-market-two-decades-change-and-continuity [Accessed 6.4.16]
[14] New Earnings Survey, 1994, Institute for Employment Studies
http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/report-summary-women-labour-market-two-decades-change-and-continuity [Accessed 6.4.16]

economic imperative for lesbians to work in order to survive, in the absence of a male wage earner. These limitations on women's earning power come home to roost in older age. Ageing women are not only culturally devalued and marginalised (McDonald and Rich, 1983) but also economically disadvantaged. Later life autonomy is dependent on access to adequate funds and material resources, factors which are strongly influenced by both gender and class restrictions on earnings across the life course (Arber, 2006).

Sexual identity

Studies of 'alternative' sexual identities in the 1970s were often framed in terms of psychological health and well-being. Despite demands for gay and lesbian equalities in the USA and Europe and significant shifts in visibility and attitudes, homosexuality was not removed from the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases until 1993.[15] Prior to this (and still in many countries and by religious and cultural groups) homosexuality was viewed as sinful and immoral - a source of stigma and discrimination which has left its mark on many elders who lived their early developmental years in a world unenlightened by the 'gay rights movement'.

The process of coming to identify as a lesbian or bisexual woman, the notion of 'coming out' to ourselves or others, only becomes an issue because it is always framed against heteronormativity. Cass (1979) proposed a general theory of homosexual identity formation (HIF), which includes lesbians and gay men although it does not explicitly address

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[15] *Equality for older lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people in Europe* (2012). Europe Joint Policy Paper. www.ilga-europe.org [Accessed 17.4.16]

bisexuality. She suggests that 'healthy' sexual identity develops over six stages, prior to which individuals explicitly assume that they are heterosexual. These sequential stages of identity comprised: confusion; comparison; tolerance; acceptance; pride and synthesis, by which point the 'homosexual identity' is fully synthesized and seen as only one of many identities held by the individual.

Levine's (1997) study of 118 lesbian-identified or questioning participants aged between 18 and 56 broadly confirms the six stages of development. They suggest that there is a gap of approximately five years between participants' first questioning their sexuality and entering an intimate lesbian relationship. The average age at 'questioning' (stage one) was seventeen and a half and twenty-four at the 'coming out stage'. Jones and Nystrom (2002) explore several factors that contribute to successful ageing and suggest that when lesbians came out earlier in life (even if to themselves) they developed resilience, skills and social networks to overcome the effects of stigma and alienation which would, in turn, serve them well in older age.

Although Cass's (1979) theory provides a useful starting point from which to interrogate the development of sexual identity, it has shortcomings. One of these is its failure to highlight the intersection of social and cultural factors, including class subjectivities and geographical mobility, which McDermott's (2010) study identifies as creating additional psychological burdens in the process of sexual identity development:

> [W]hile initial identification as 'lesbian' is psychologically demanding […] class advantages protected the middle-class women and some of the working-class educated women from the mental strain of coming out. (p.208)

Cass's theory also assumes linearity. Sophie (1986) suggested that the order and timing of stages varied when she applied Cass's model to her female participants and found the process of lesbian identity development 'sensitive to social/historical context' (p.39). Markowe (2002) also suggests that many women's experiences do not correspond to Cass' s stages. Her study focussed on their subjective experiences of 40 women, noting the role played by 'lesbian invisibility' and stereotyping in adolescence, their strong positive feelings towards other women and the need for affiliation. Szymanski and Chung (2002) suggest that lesbian identity formation is unique and should be considered in the context of gender-role socialisation, sexism and the influence of feminism. Traies (2012) reports that over half of older lesbians in her study were previously married and while a third of these married because 'it was the expected thing', a quarter were in love with the person they married. This supports Rodríguez Rust's (2012) assertion that coming out is not a linear process and sexual identities may change over the life course.

The benefits of a well-integrated lesbian identity however, *have* been widely endorsed; Walters and Simoni (1993) found it to be linked with higher levels of self-esteem. Markowe (2002) found authenticity and integrity to be a recurrent theme and a 'strong foundation for lesbian identity' (p.76). Peterson and Gerrity (2006) conclude that 'consistent relationships' appear between identity development and self-esteem.

An intersectional approach to the study of older lesbians and bisexual women must be mindful that even the grouping 'sexual identity' will not

encompass the diversity of experiences within these 'categories'. These identities give rise to differences in life chances; in comparison to gay men, older lesbians are likely to be less well off, live longer and make greater use of health and social care services (Traies, 2012). There are also indications of conflict and lack of acceptance, e.g. bisexual women report marginalisation within both heterosexual and lesbian communities and there is evidence that a high proportion of lesbians regard bisexuality as a transitional identity (Rodríguez Rust, 2012). In the Stonewall Workplace Equality Index (2014) staff survey only 65 per cent of bisexual people said they could bring their 'whole self' to work, compared to 84 per cent and 82 per cent respectively for their gay and lesbian colleagues. Whilst there is less research into bi and transsexual than lesbian and gay lives, recent studies show that transgender respondents consistently experience a 'less tolerant' environment than gays, lesbians and bisexuals (EU LGBT Survey, 2013; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013). Participants in Formby's (2012) research identified hierarchies within LGBT groupings that placed gay men at the 'top of the heap' and trans people at the bottom.

Ethnicity

Fish (2012) suggests that Black and minority ethnic (hereafter BME) LGBT individuals have 'fallen between the gaps' in research; under-researched within LGBT studies whose sampling methods have not accessed them and overlooked by studies of BME populations, leaving their health and care needs 'possibly the most under-researched field in queer studies' (p.7). This is confirmed by a recent study (Fredriksen-Goldsen, et al., 2013). Whilst just over one fifth of the 616 participants was BME, making it one of the most

diverse samples to date in LGBT research, the findings are still not

generalizable to the older adult population of San Francisco where the

research was located. What it did reveal was diversity in income and service

use between ethnic groups. In the UK, Opening Doors London (hereafter

ODL) identifies older ethnic minority LGBT individuals as 'hard to reach'

(2010). This lack of inclusion makes it impossible to speculate about the

needs of Black and ethnic minority LGBT individuals let alone begin to

understand the potential impact of factors such as gender, class and

ageing.

2.3 Out of field and out of place: The habitus and contemporary mobilities

Section 2.2 detailed some axes of difference experienced by individuals

across the life course. These elements, often involving mobility or

transformation, intersect at different times and in unique ways. Mobility has

become a ubiquitous concept in sociology leading Urry (2000) to call for an

understanding of more diverse mobilities, noting that:

> Much twentieth-century sociology has been based on the study of
> occupational, income, educational and social *mobility* […] one might
> say that sociology has always regarded mobility as its 'core business'
> (p.2).

Contemporary educational and social policy rests on the assumption that

'upward' social mobility is a desired state; a key mechanism for societal

transformation. While such mobility is lauded as positive and desirable,

transforming lives for the better, those who are socially mobile face unique

pressures to adapt to their new environment which can also result in

alienation, feelings of dislocation; a sense of being different; somehow out

of place. Lawler (1999) suggests that pain and a 'sense of estrangement'

(p.3) inhabits the intersection of gender and class mobility for women. One way of exploring the emotional cost of mobility is to understand its challenge to the *habitus*. Bourdieu (1977; 1990) conceptualises the habitus as 'embodied history' routinely acquired via inculcation during childhood, whereby individuals receive (at a largely unconscious level) the rules, values and dispositions which enable them to function effectively within a given social field:

> [S]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations (1990:53)

Bourdieu (1990) suggests that the habitus, which is formed from and embodies past conditions of existence, is more effective at ensuring correct practices than 'all formal rules and explicit norms' (p.54). Thus, the sexual division of labour, motherhood and other practices of femininity are established as logical and 'natural' ways of being. Class inequalities and dominant (hetero)sexual norms are maintained easily and appear as seemingly ''reasonable', 'common-sense' behaviours' (p.55).

Bourdieu's accounts of the habitus have been criticised as inconsistent and ambiguous, leading to Lizardo's (2004) description of it as, 'a mysterious entity able to do lots of conceptual and theoretical work' (p.378). Friedmann (2002) challenges Bourdieu's view of habitus' durability, suggesting that it can be fundamentally altered by events such as social mobility and migration, which disrupt the social order. Lizardo (2004) traces the origins of Bourdieu's work on habitus back to the structuralist cognitive work of Piaget, highlighting the similarities between Bourdieu's practice theory and Piaget's

understanding of cognitive operations. Piaget understood development as a series of operations through which a child comes to know the world, their schema extending through the processes of assimilation and accommodation to adapt to new skills and experience. The child moves between disequilibrium and equilibrium (balance) as the schema adapts. Bourdieu saw the habitus doing similar work, as embodied, internalised history; a guiding principle underlying individual and collective practices through its generation of a 'system of strategies' (1990:16) which equip individuals to function effectively within a particular social field or region of social activity.

Attention must also be given to an understanding of field, developed after Bourdieu conceived the notion of habitus. The term denotes the various social and institutional arenas in which people express and reproduce their dispositions; for Bourdieu (2002) field was a, 'space of forces or determinations […] inhabited by tensions and contradictions' (p.47) where agents' actions were determined by their capital and habitus. Prior (2000) views it as an attractive concept for the 'active researcher' despite, or perhaps *because of* its ambiguities:

> [I]t remains a somewhat vague and elastic idea. The concept has an almost chameleon-like quality in that it can mean all things to all people (p.144)

Recent feminist engagement with Bourdieu's work has explored the value of habitus and field in understanding gender and class relations (Reay, 1997; Skeggs, 1997; Lawler, 1999; Lovell, 2000), although the concept of habitus has been criticised for its 'latent determinism' (Reay, 2004) and its difficulty in accounting for agency leading to disruptions to the gender order (Lovell,

2000). Rooke (2007) suggests that Bourdieu's work 'offers a fertile interpretive framework for a cultural understanding of the intersections of class, sexuality, and gender' (p.231).

For Bourdieu (1990), the habitus is not only logical but long-lasting, comprising 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions' (p.53). He was working from the premise that, generally, we encounter situations similar to the ones in which habitus was formed so that it needs only to make minor adaptations to remain in balance within any given field. However, as Aarseth et al. (2016) point out:

> [R]apid social transformations or social mobility may entail conditions that are markedly different from those conditions in which the habitus was produced. (p.150)

Habitus clivé (cleft habitus) occurs when the conditions of socialisation and those of the present world are at odds (for example, at times of accelerated change). As well as having a theoretical interest in the disjunctures of habitus, Bourdieu (2004) both acknowledged the existence, and alluded to the emotional cost, of his own habitus clivé, observing that this particular 'life story' was neither easy or agreeable to tell (p.110). The son of a clerk who had 'crossed over' from his peasant sharecropping family, at primary school Bourdieu felt, at once, close to the children who were from modest origins, yet separated from them by 'a kind of invisible barrier' (p.110) which he attributed to his own academic success. In a later experience at boarding school, the disjuncture was inverted when his 'low social origins' were brought into contact with the 'high academic consecration' generating 'a cleft habitus, inhabited by tensions and contradictions' (2007:100).

Recent studies of social mobility as a consequence of elite education have explored the impact of higher education on the habitus of working-class students, evaluating the extent to which individuals are rendered out of place by mobility, trapped between two worlds (Ingram, 2011; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Lee and Kramer, 2013; Friedman, 2014, 2015; Reay, 2015). These studies are particularly focussed on the habitus' ability to adapt to change. Ingram (2011) suggests that the concept of habitus may be:

> [P]articularly useful for theorising the misalignment of dispositions and practices acquired through early life experiences. (p. 289)

Reay's (2002) four-year study of a comprehensive school suggests that, for one pupil, 'Shaun', trying to achieve educational success and maintain the integrity of his white working-class masculinity creates an 'intolerable burden of psychic reparative work' (p.222). While Abrahams and Ingram (2013) suggest that the development of a 'chameleon habitus' adaptable to both working-class and middle-class fields is possible, Sayer (2011) asserts that early life social relations and practices are particularly powerful meaning that change to the 'youthful habitus' is a slow process requiring 'repeated practice' (p.15).

Other studies indicate that the difference between working-class and middle-class fields may render the habitus divided, unable to adapt sufficiently or offer the correct dispositions to furnish individuals with a 'feel for the game' leaving them entangled in 'affinities of the past' (Friedman, 2015:1) while Reay (2015) notes the 'heavy psychic costs' of managing movement across fields (p.13).

It has been suggested that Bourdieu's work on habitus privileges social class over the 'postmodern feminisms of difference': gender, sexuality and race (Lovell, 2000). His understanding of disruption to the smooth operation of the habitus has, until now, predominantly been used to understand the difficulties of students moving from their working-class origins to middle-class fields via elite education and those traversing cultures as a consequence of migration (Schneider and Lang; 2014; Nowicka, 2015). Friedman (2014) suggests the concept of habitus may be particularly useful in analysis of other, modern mobilities:

> [A] promising theoretical frame for analysing some iterations of the contemporary mobility experience. (p.362)

My research builds on and extends previous understandings of cleft habitus in order to theorise the dislocation, dissonance and emotional costs experienced by those crossing multiple social and intimate fields, specifically the transgression of social class, gender role and sexual identity norms in the mid-twentieth century.

2.4   Loneliness and resilience in older LGBT individuals

> It can make you strong […] but it can leave you on the outside looking in. You watch so hard you forget to live. Gale (2015:323)

This review has examined literature indicating that lesbians born in the 1940s and 1950s have been marginalised by a number of intersecting factors. Some studies link such marginalisation and intersecting oppressions with loneliness; other writing associates it with resilience. This section explores both views.

Marginalisation and minority stress as a predictor for loneliness

Loneliness affects many individuals and groups; it is certainly not specific to the LGBT population nor is it the domain of the older adult alone. The existing literature demonstrates that social isolation, loneliness and lack of support in older age affect the general population of many countries and are by no means unique to lesbian, gay bisexual and transgendered communities. A considerable body of evidence suggests that older adults generally are particularly susceptible to social isolation and lack of social connectedness (Ashida and Heaney, 2008; Cornwell and Waite, 2009). These conditions, exacerbated by socio-demographic trends such as increasing geographical mobility and the decline of traditional family structures and networks, exist for many older people, impacting negatively on physical and psychological well-being. The extant literature demonstrates that loneliness is a fairly universal problem (certainly in most 'developed' countries). It can be seen as a consequence of a changing society where ties and obligations are no longer rigid and permanent. It will almost inevitably be exacerbated by increased longevity. It appears to be associated with age and other antecedents including gender, poverty and quality and frequency of social relationships. However, many studies seem to indicate a clear association between loneliness and sexual identity. There are a number of risk factors for loneliness and isolation, which appear to be more prevalent in LGBT individuals and communities and, for a variety of historical and generational reasons, may be particularly pertinent to the older LGBT population; these will now be explored in more detail.

Minority stress

Elevated rates of depression and social isolation in the LGB population may be attributed in part to homophobia leading to minority stress. Kuyper & Fokkema (2010) see prejudice, concealment and internalised homophobia compounded by differences in social embeddedness as key factors. Adelman suggests that homophobia is a key factor in mental health:

> The most important factor for determining psychological well-being in lesbians in later life is the level of homophobia in society and in ourselves. (1987:11)

Lesbian homonegativity is a relatively under-explored area; the majority of studies are focused on gay men. Friend (1991) suggests that older lesbians who 'conform to the stereotype of being lonely, depressed and alienated' (p.103) may be exhibiting extreme homonegativity, although he points out that this is by no means inevitable and many older lesbians and gay men reconstruct a positive affirmative identity. Munt (1998) suggests that while homophobia has the potential to provoke resistance and lesbian activism, it may also generate passivity and self-hatred, 'shame sediments in our concept of Woman, specifically in the nexus of female sexuality' (p.119). Grossman et al.'s (2001) study of 416 LGB older adults reports that 17% of respondents wished they were heterosexual. There were significant gender differences in homonegativity, with the men in their study considerably more likely to experience internalised homophobia than the women. As well as finding a higher level of internalised homophobia in participants living alone than those living with a partner, they also report lower levels in participants with higher incomes and those with greater involvement in LGBT organisations and bigger support networks.

Szymanski and Chung (2001) found loneliness and lower self-esteem to be associated with higher levels of internalised homophobia in their study of over 300 women in the USA, the majority of whom identified as lesbian. They draw on a range of evidence, which suggests that lesbians with higher levels of homonegativity may be less likely to enter into collective activities with other lesbians, limiting their opportunities for social interaction. Bobbe (2002) asserts that lesbians' challenge to patriarchy and the status quo means they are devalued more severely than gay men:

> Lesbians are oppressed not only because they are homosexual, but also because they are women. (p.218)

She suggests that the pain of internalised homophobia and the shame associated with lesbian identity has the potential to become a destructive force leading some lesbians to seek relief in drugs and alcohol.

Loneliness as a practical reality

For many lesbians born in the 1940s and 50s, making and maintaining adolescent friendships was particularly difficult as they were forced to conceal their true feelings and emerging sexual identity. Ernst and Cacioppo (1999) suggest that peer relations in childhood and adolescence are crucial predictors of adult loneliness. Fokkema and Kuyper's (2009) analysis of data on 152 LGB adults aged 55 plus in the Netherlands found that, compared with heterosexual counterparts, they were 'significantly lonelier and less socially embedded'. Whereas 2% of heterosexual men and 5% of heterosexual women rated themselves as 'seriously lonely', the figure rose to 19% and 14% for gay men and lesbians. The LGB elders were less likely to have children, see family members or attend church although they were

more likely to work and maintain contact with friends. Fokkema and Kuyper suggest that whilst factors such as being single, childlessness and frequency of contact with family partially explained the elevated rates of loneliness, their research design did not allow an interrogation of the *quality* of relationships and the impact of minority stress which they propose may have accounted for the rest of the variance in loneliness. The increased likelihood of gays and lesbians being single, living alone and being childless, often results in a lack of immediate family support; less than a quarter of LGB people see a biological family member weekly whereas the figure for heterosexuals is nearer to 50% (Stonewall, 2011). A study of older LGBT adults in San Francisco has drawn similar conclusions (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013). Of the 616 respondents aged between 60 and 92, nearly 60% lived alone and only 15% had children. Nearly two-thirds of the sample were single. Although the majority of the participants reported moderate levels of social support, 9% said they had no one to turn to and 15% had seriously considered suicide.

Intersections of age and gender

The relationship between age and loneliness is by no means straightforward. There are some indications that older adults are more likely to experience feelings of loneliness. Victor et al. (2005) found that almost 40% of their sample of 'community-dwelling elders' experienced loneliness to some degree. It has been suggested that loneliness is highest in the 'very old' (aged 80 and over), becoming almost a 'norm' with 40-50% of individuals experiencing either moderate or severe loneliness (Dykstra et al., 2005). Cornwell and Waite (2009) examined the extent of perceived

isolation and social connectedness across a range of age groups. They report the 'oldest old' (aged 75-85) feeling more isolated than the 'young old' (57-64); although social network size is relatively constant across the older age groups, the *perception* of isolation is greater in the oldest old. Although network size is also similar across genders, women are less likely than men to experience social disconnectedness possibly because they are more socially engaged, for example, through volunteering or social activities. However, there is no evidence to indicate whether this relationship holds true for lesbians and bisexual women.

Resilience: What doesn't kill you makes you stronger

Although the evidence associating lesbian and gay lives with negative characteristics including isolation, loneliness and depression seems consistent, it is not without critique. It has been suggested that the earliest of studies are either anecdotal or located in a clinical context and focused on a narrow and often pathological area of investigation while later research was more empirical but suffered from having small, often self-selected samples (De Vries and Herdt, 2012; Nystrom and Jones, 2012). De Vries and Herdt note that recent literature suggests happiness and successful adaptation (to ageing) by LGBT elders 'perhaps because of coping skills and competencies unique to aging homosexuals.' (p.87/88). Nystrom and Jones argue that research into older lesbian lives is limited and skewed by its origins in narrow, clinical settings, focussed on mental health and pathology. They suggest that negative stereotypes do not do justice to older lesbians who 'comprise a diverse, active, and vibrant facet of our society […]' (p.131). Savin-Williams (2008) suggests that research has neglected to

explore the capacity of LGBT individuals to 'adjust, thrive, and lead exceptionally ordinary lives' (p.137). He concludes that there is a need to redress the balance, focusing not on what goes wrong 'but what goes right' (p.137).

Genke's (2004) study of ageing gay men with health concerns suggests that having coped with stigma and loss across the life course they have 'hidden reservoirs of courage and resiliency' (p.82) with which to face the challenges of older age. Genke attributes their 'unique strengths and creative coping strategies' (p.83) to successful negotiation of the coming out process.

Orel (2006) suggests that the process of sexual identity disclosure and the deconstruction of negative stereotypes have led older gay men and lesbians to develop psychological resilience. Balsam and D'Augelli (2006) see the victimisation of LGBT people, often beginning in childhood and including minority stress and violence, leading to the development of coping skills resulting in 'unique competence and resilience' (p.116). Fredriksen-Goldsen (2011) defines LGBT adults as a 'resilient yet at-risk population' (p.3) citing their high level of engagement with physical pursuits and leisure activities as well as noting deleterious health behaviours.

Meyer (2007) attributes minority stress to anticipated and actual experiences of discrimination, concealment and internalised negative societal attitudes. However, LGB individuals have responded to these experiences with 'resilience and resolve', and Meyer points to evidence suggesting that minority stress is associated with the creation of important

resources including group solidarity and communities, 'as varied and diverse as the LGB individuals that comprise them' (p.242). Such groups validate shared experience and enable the establishment of alternative norms. Meyer notes that the challenges faced by older LGB individuals are unique to their generation with, 'new opportunities for LGB youth that have never been present before' (p.258). Carastathis et al.'s (2016) small-scale study of gay men and lesbians explores the impact of family rejection, finding that participants sought social support, connected with other LGB people and deployed 'strategic concealment' (p.13) following negative response to their disclosure. Resilience was not easily achieved and followed a period of negative self-identity, poor mental health and destructive behaviours for many participants. However, most eventually reported a strong sense of self.

2.5   LGBT communities, friendships, groups and belonging

Traies (2015) suggests that 'the distinction between "organized networks" and "informal, local and 'hidden' networks" is unhelpful' (p.40) as, in reality lesbians' social organisations span both categories and membership and communication are interconnected. It is true that intersections and overlaps exist; however, in the following section, community, friendship and formal networks are separated as I outline the existing literature regarding their potential to support older lesbians and bisexual women.

Community

There are many ways of conceptualising and theorising the purpose and function of communities predicated on sexual identity. Phelan (1989)

suggests that, as one of the 'primary deviant classes', lesbians have created

their own communities partly to create a sense of belonging with which to

counter feelings of exclusion and to challenge stereotypes. She notes that

there are two prevailing strategies at play; one to create a culture viewed as

superior to that from which they are excluded and the other, 'reformist'

strategy to challenge the legal and institutional barriers of exclusion. Weeks

(1996) proposes that communities founded on sexual identities are a

relatively recent phenomena, emerging in the 1960s, the so-called 'golden

age of liberal-humanitarian reforms',[16] as a response to the hardening

division between 'normative' heterosexuality and its antithesis 'deviant'

homosexuality. He distinguishes between traditional communities, which, he

suggests, are beginning to crumble and 'critical communities' which are

based on, and reinforce, identity as well as offering social capital and the

opportunity for political activism to their members. Weeks suggests that

being part of (an) otherised group(s) is sufficient to motivate LGBT

communities to transcend their internal conflicts and tensions and develop a

common purpose as a sexual community; albeit one that is dynamic,

constantly changing and evolving alongside societal changes and

evolutions. Drawing on the notion of imagined communities introduced by

Anderson (1983), Weeks highlights the sense of meaning and

embeddedness such communities offer:

> [A]n imagined community, an invented tradition which enables and
> empowers. It provides the context for the articulation of identity, the
> vocabulary of values through which ways of life can be developed.
> (p.83)

Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) reaffirm the significance of community

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[16] Weeks (1990, p. 173)

for LGBT people and identify it as a 'place' and/or 'practice'; in other words, community can be conceptualised in spatial terms or as an 'imagined' community based on shared experience - both offering a bond or sense of solidarity and belonging. Omoto and Malsch (2008) note that, at a conceptual level, 'community' is viewed differently from social support regardless of the fact that a sense of community often evolves from, or is enhanced by, membership of social networks and that both offer many of the same elements including feelings of belonging and connection.

While the establishment of communities is one way that LGBT people have traditionally dealt with the isolation brought about by estranged or difficult familial relationships, childlessness and isolation, Goffman (1963) was alert to the possibility of marginalising aspects of self becoming entrenched:

> The stigma and the effort to conceal it become 'fixed' as part of personal identity' (p.84).

This phenomenon can be used to problematise attachment to communities predicated upon 'otherised identities'. Whereas many writers take a relatively benign view of such communities, Brown (1993, 1995) and Munt (1998) offer alternative perspectives, seeing them as potentially divisive and self-perpetuating. Brown proposes that the politicised identities created as a protest against marginalisation actually contain within them a 'politics of recrimination' that not only portrays them as helpless, but actually harms them further by reifying the (white, middle-class, masculine) structures of privilege and normalisation they theoretically oppose. She suggests that identity based on a sense of 'woundedness' is problematic; the politicised identity – premised on exclusion –becomes attached to this exclusion,

hindering the development of truly emancipatory politics. Brown's concept of wounded attachment may help me to explicate the reluctance of some coetaneous lesbian groups to open up to other ways of being, form inter-generational alliances and 'let go' of old hurts.

Phelan (1989), reflecting on the 'limits of community', observes that rather than facing up to the issue of difference, lesbian feminists erased it:

> Any sense of the plurality of lesbian lives was lost in the construction of "the" lesbian… (p.139)

Similarly, Munt (1998) warns that, while seductive, notions of community based on sameness and shared identity should be regarded with caution as they are equally premised on the exclusion of difference and divergence. Thus, feminist attempts to create a categorical identity of 'lesbian' resulted in the marginalisation of 'other others' and quickly led to a focus on, 'what a lesbian is not' (p.156).

Woolwine (2000) discusses various conceptualisations of 'community' as experienced by sexual minorities – in his particular research, gay men. These community experiences included having a gay identity, living in a 'gay area', participation in local organisations, and networks of 'like' friends. Woolwine also offers the notion of the 'imagined community', a united national or global community, to which many of his research participants perceived themselves belonging, with varying degrees of emotional connection.

There are a number of empirical investigations into the relationships within

LGBT communities that may prove particularly pertinent to my research into the social and support groups of older lesbians and bisexual women although few focus on the impact of older age. Rothblum (2010) charts how the lesbian 'community' transformed itself from a feminist, political movement centred on shared sexual identity in the 1970s to a more 'mainstream' culture in the present day where the desire for 'similarity' can be fulfilled by similar hobbies not just sexuality. Her qualitative study of 60 lesbian, bisexual queer and heterosexual women in the US found that they associated 'community' with people, organisations, support, similarity and proximity. Her research was prompted by the apparent contradiction that despite extensive LGBT provision, services and organisations in the USA and Canada, there is still a significant feeling of isolation and loneliness. Although the majority of women in the study were part of physical or virtual communities, Rothblum identifies some participants as 'flounderers', individuals who felt excluded from or could not access LGBT groups. Women in this category included those who were closeted, bisexual women and those isolated by other factors such as racism. Bisexual women who were closeted or had relationships with men were particularly likely to 'flounder' in predominantly lesbian communities. This sense of exclusion signals that the need for 'connectedness' is not currently being met within existing LGBT communities, and particular combinations of characteristics render some individuals more vulnerable to isolation than others. Moreover, these differences may be further impacted by ageing, a variable which was not explored.

Formby's (2012) multi-method study of over 600 LGBT individuals in the UK

also shows place and proximity as important considerations in the construction of 'community'. Formby's respondents rated 'support and a sense of belonging or connectedness' (p.18) as the two most important aspects of LGBT community with activism and shared experience of discrimination also seen as important. Many respondents were however, suspicious of the term 'community', feeling that if it were to reflect the true diversity of LGBT individuals, it should be used in the plural. In line with Weeks et al.'s (2001) suggestion of 'place and practice', 48% conceptualised community as a 'feeling' (of belonging or acceptance) whereas for 53% it was a physical/geographical entity. However, this study does not explore the dimension of age either. Formby's respondents were mostly aged between 24 and 55 and none of the over-55 female respondents participated in interviews or discussion groups, making it difficult to ascertain whether their views are adequately represented.

Belongingness

> The more tradition loses its ability to provide a secure and stable sense of identity, the more individuals must negotiate lifestyle choices and, attach importance to these choices. Heaphy (2007:99)

Research into belongingness has shown that lesbians have a lessened sense of 'belonging' to the general community and that this is associated with higher levels of dysphoria (McLaren, 2006). McLaren's (2009) study of 178 self-identified lesbians aged between 18 and 63 indicates that a sense of belonging to the general community may protect to some extent against depression associated with a lack of belongingness to the lesbian community. It might have been expected that a sense of connection or belongingness to *both* communities would afford the highest levels of

64

protection against depression. However, women who felt a sense of belonging to the general community reported the lowest levels of depression, suggesting that 'dual belongingness' to such diverse communities may be complex and problematic; contributing to the alienation from the lesbian community that some women perceive, often rendering them doubly disconnected. Weeks (1996) warns that communities built on sexual identity were no more exempt from internal division than any others:

> [C]ommunities built around sexuality are no less likely than others to develop their own norms which may exclude as well as include. (p.84)

It is evident that while there are benefits associated to feeling a sense of belongingness to LGBT communities *and* the general community, neither of these 'memberships' is unproblematic or guaranteed. LGBT communities are as difficult to connect to as straight ones; belongingness and 'fit' are predicated upon and flounder on similar characteristics including social class, affluence, ethnicity and sexual practice. Other studies have revealed evidence of ageism in LGBT groups and communities (Jacobs et al., 1999). Heteronormative attitudes, patriarchy and homo/bi/transphobia in the general population exclude or alienate many LGBT individuals further leaving them disconnected and isolated. Although there are indications in many societies that attitudes towards sexual identities and practices are changing, this is a slow, incremental and by no means a global phenomenon. There are few indications that the 'imagined future' is likely to be either immediate or inevitable, and it is almost certain that attitudes will not change sufficiently quickly to meet the needs of today's older LGBT communities. In the meantime, what do the various forms of social support groups and organisations offer them in the way of a sense of belonging or

connection and the amelioration of loneliness and isolation?

It is well established that perceived social support moderates the effects of stress and decreases the risk of loneliness and social isolation, which, in turn, reduces the risk of the incidence of physical and mental ill-health, even morbidity. This support may come from diverse sources, offering different avenues of social engagement and connectedness, which are associated with differing levels of benefit and protection. The particular circumstances resulting in this generation of LGBT people being less likely to be partnered, have children or have regular contact with a biological family means their social support sources differ from their heterosexual counterparts. Like many elders in geographically mobile countries where family forms are increasingly diverse and fragmented, they cannot necessarily rely on the support of a wider family or children. Sources of support for LGBT elders can be divided broadly into two categories: familial and friendship support (including 'families of choice') and LGBT identified social/support groups and networks.

Friendship and 'families of choice'

In the same way that social isolation and loneliness are not unique to the older LGB community neither are the benefits of friendship, although Roseneil (2004) sees changes to gender and family relationships as reducing the distinctions between gay and heterosexual experiences of friendship. Such networks and friendship groups are sometimes described as 'families of choice' to distinguish them from 'given families' or 'families of origin' (Weston, 1991). The organisation of these 'friends as family' groups

is diverse and competing conceptualisations and interpretations exist; do families of choice constitute 'substitute families' (thus maintaining the privileging of the family as an organising structure) or challenge and subvert the family as the 'core structure' primarily based on biological ties (Weinstock, 2000)? De Vries and Herdt (2012) assert that regardless of these differing interpretations, there is a 'cultural specificity' about the role of friendship in the lives of older gay men and lesbians whereby friends are, 'defined in ways that one might expect would be applied to kin among heterosexual adults' (p.104).

Many researchers (Plummer 1995; Stanley, 1996; Grossman et al., 2000; Jones and Nystrom, 2002) have identified unique gains from friendship for LGB communities. Plummer asserts that gay and lesbian networks are 'as strong as any family, and maybe stronger because they are chosen rather than simply given' (1995:154). Grossman et al. believe that social support provided by peers may provide a positive and unique benefit in mitigating the impact of stigmatization. Jones and Nystrom speculate that critical social networks, built over time by the 62 older lesbians in their qualitative interdisciplinary study, offer a sense of belonging and trust which may be an important factor in successful ageing. Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan's (2001) study of 96 women and men living in a wide variety of family and intimate relationship scenarios found friendship a consistent and recurring theme and conclude: 'Friendship is a key to understanding non-heterosexual ways of life […]' (p.51). Similarly, Heaphy et al. (2003) note that their LGBT participants, aged between 50 and over 80, placed enormous value on friendships with 96% of female participants rating

friendship as 'important' or 'very important'. Fredriksen-Goldsen et al.'s (2013) study of older LGBT individuals in San Francisco revealed that nearly three-quarters (72%) would turn to a close friend for support, encouragement or short-term help whereas only 17% would turn to a family member.

Birds of a feather: Lesbian friendships

Goldberg et al.'s (2005) report notes the continued significance of friendship networks in the lives of older lesbians. Social lives were centred on female friendship often with other lesbians; respondents shunned mainstream services for 'seniors' because they perceived discrimination. Stanley (1996) proposed that such friendships have unique benefits, protecting individuals against social devaluation, offering opportunities for role modelling and enabling the sharing of aspects of daily life, an important outlet for those women whose sexuality remains covert. Her research suggests that there is a significant relationship between friendship and ageing with older lesbians increasingly likely to value and utilise their friendships.

More recent studies confirm the idea that older lesbians' friendship patterns are homophilous (Galupo, 2007; Traies, 2015). Galupo reports that older participants were slightly less likely to report cross-sex or cross-orientation friendships. In Traies' research, 57% of respondents defined other, similarly aged lesbians as their closest friends; nearly half of the women saw their closest friends at least once a week.

Weeks et al. (2001) identify affirmation and acceptance as other key factors within friendships in a predominantly heterosexual and often hostile world, suggesting the emergence of a 'friendship ethic' rooted in the values of the non-heterosexual community, a theme developed by Roseneil and Budgeon who regard gay and lesbian friendships as both a 'practice and an ethic' (2004:137). Stein (2007) also suggests that same-sexuality friendships enable lesbians to form and reconstruct a sense of personal and social identity. Waitt and Gorman Murray's (2011) article exploring the journeys and returns of (young) lesbian and gay-identified people echoes the friendship ethic with participants establishing safe places and friendship groups in a regional Australian city with few gay venues.

The evidence indicates that friendships are of huge benefit, offering LGB individuals an important, if not unique, source of identity affirmation and support. However, the benefits of emotional and, particularly, practical support offered by these networks may be limited and vulnerable in older age. While some individuals enjoy cross-generational friendships, others feel excluded from the youth-oriented non-heterosexual 'community' (Weeks et al., 2001; Heaphy et al., 2004). Spencer and Pahl (2006) point out that although individuals' personal communities may contribute to their social integration, those groups drawn from a narrow local base are restricted and limited, 'containing a set of dense inward-looking ties' (p.209). Lesbian friendships and families of choice are often similarly aged, (for example, 81% of Traies' respondents' closest friends were within ten years of their own age), potentially diminishing their ability to offer support in later years.

Being partnered

Unsurprisingly, individuals living with a partner report significantly less loneliness. Grossman et al. (2000) found that those participants who lived with a partner rated their physical and mental health more positively than those who lived alone. Kuyper and Fokkema (2010) also suggest that the existence of a 'steady partner' is the single most important factor affecting emotional loneliness, although friendship and social networking also ameliorate against feelings of emptiness. Their study revealed that elders with more LGB friends or acquaintances experienced lower levels of loneliness. Knocker et al. (2012) indicate that partners are often the main source of emotional and social support, pointing out that partnered women are less likely to attend ODL groups in the first place and single women may drop out if they meet a partner. However, as we have seen, LGBT individuals are more likely to be single than heterosexuals (Grossman et al., 2001, estimate that between 63 and 75% of older LGBT adults live alone), with older age bringing the numbers of those partnered even lower.

Formal networks, groups and places

LGB communities have a long history of coming together socially in networks and groups. Whilst friendships, groups and networks are all important components of social support, *places* may offer an additional sense of connectedness or belonging. Geographers and psychologists agree that place has an important part to play in the development of identity and a sense of self. Rose identifies this need for place as a response to the process of otherisation and the sense of exclusion from other groups and places:

> Some groups, especially if they feel threatened… may insist on their own alternative sense of place. (1995:105)

Many of today's LGB elders, spent their formative years in the UK's emerging post-war 'bar culture'. This experience still has resonance for understanding the networks and groups they attend today. Jennings' (2006) account of the development of lesbian sub-cultures in the UK suggests that current lesbian organisations and groups are derived from political models rooted in the 1970s (a fact alluded to by Knocker et al.'s (2012) account of separatism in ODL groups). Much of the evidence of a UK post-war lesbian subculture is drawn from personal narratives, the remainder from police accounts, which tell us much about how this early visibility was constructed.

Jennings (2006) uses oral histories to document the development of lesbian bar culture, contextualising the strict butch/femme dress and behaviour codes of this early period within the need for structure and identity. She suggests that the development of lesbian social networks was significant in sharing news of the 'emerging subculture'; by the end of the 1960s a range of clubs was opening, each with its own community and, influenced by gay liberation politics, with increasing mixing between lesbians and gay men. While clubs such as The Gateways had been important as symbols of lesbian 'community', they troubled many younger, more politicised LGBT individuals who did not want to be associated with the subculture they represented. The arrival of younger lesbians on the scene created inter-generational conflicts leading to division, as there was little sympathy for the butch/femme styling and a refusal to comply with the accepted conventions. In the course of campaigning for visibility, acceptance and social equality,

groups such as the GLF disrupted the established social networks that had previously thrived, making way for new possibilities, new identities and new cultures to emerge.

The intersection between ageing, sexual identity and space is complex. Commercial 'scene' space is notoriously youth focussed (Browne and Lim, 2009). Several studies, including Waitt and Gorman Murray (2011), identify that some lesbians experience scene space as male dominated and intimidating. This study also suggested that gay men felt similarly excluded by the 'butch' style of masculinity modelled. Browne and Lim suggest that older LGBT people experience multiple marginalisation in respect of 'place', feeling excluded from straight events and places on account of their sexual identity yet feeling similarly alienated from LGBT events and places by their age.

In Philips and Knocker's (2010) evaluation of ODL, 100% of respondents agreed with the statement 'I feel uncomfortable on the scene now because of my age and fear being rejected' (p.11). Over a third of the participants in Fredriksen-Goldsen et al.'s (2013) study of older LGBT individuals in San Francisco felt that they had recently experienced age discrimination. Feelings of exclusion from the commercialised scene may be further exacerbated by age (Browne and Lim, 2009) and social class (Taylor, 2009). Taylor's participants experienced commercialised scene space as classed, causing them emotional discomfort and diminishing any potential sense of belonging.

Browne's (2007) study of the LGBT population in Brighton reveals a strong desire for non-scene social space with over a third of respondents expressing the opinion that there were 'social spaces/venues missing' (p.53). Kuyper and Fokkema (2010) view this as a critical area, suggesting that, alongside the reduction of societal homonegativity, the 'enhancement of social activities for LGB elderly' (p.1171) should be a priority for the reduction of loneliness in this population. However, LGB community spaces are fraught with conflicting concerns some of which are connected to age and gender. Many health initiatives and social groups for 'older' LGBT individuals fix the minimum age of admission as 55 or even 50, resulting in some younger members feeling in a minority (Phillips and Knocker, 2010). Conversely, Richard and Brown (2006) suggest that their older lesbian participants found gay community centres unappealing because they were designed for 'men, younger people, and/or singles' (p.55). Knocker et al. (2012) put forward that age and gender differences are 'as important a consideration as differences in sexuality' (p.158).

The need for homophilous provision: a case study

Opening Doors London was developed to work exclusively with older LGBT people to improve social well-being and combat social isolation through the provision of activities including walking, art and lunch groups, information and a befriending service. ODL currently supports over 1000 individuals aged 50 plus,[17] drawn from across London, 21% of whom participate

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[17] Halls, S. (2015) Opening Doors London (ODL) Evaluation 2015
http://www.ageuk.org.uk/brandpartnerglobal/camdenvpp/odl%20evaluation%202015%20final%20(2).pdf
[Accessed 20.10.15]

specifically to reduce their levels of social isolation.[18] The service has been positively received; in 2012, 77% of users felt less isolated and 82% felt more connected to the LGBT community as a consequence of attendance. However, an early evaluation of ODL recognised the difficulties experienced in attracting lesbian women to the project (Phillips and Knocker, 2010). Although the number of members has increased from 669 in 2012 to 1045 in 2015, the ratio of men to women has remained unchanged. Less than a third of ODL's overall members are female, a fact which ODL attribute to the fact that the organisation was set up out of an informal support group for older gay and bisexual men and the different patterns of socialising demonstrated by gay men and lesbians; women being more likely to have activities and groups outside of the ODL network. However, ODL has been operating for over 10 years, which suggests that its origins may no longer be a key factor influencing the gendered nature of its membership. An analysis of the monthly events programme reveals only four women-only events compared with over 25 'mixed' events, a fact that may well be contributory to this disparity.[19] Knocker et al. (2012) document the significance of gender and age in groups, noting the significance of gender politics, with both feminist separatists and some gay men preferring same-sex environments and women particularly expressing a preference for older female workers. They conclude that gender-based differences in ODL group membership preferences and attendance patterns indicate a 'need to accommodate different patterns of sociability' (p.157).

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[18] Opening Doors London Quarterly 1 (Spring 2013) http://openingdoorslondon.org.uk [Accessed 11.7.13]
[19] Opening Doors London (September 2015) Groups and activities. http://openingdoorslondon.org.uk [Accessed 20.10.15]

It is possible that older lesbians have particular concerns regarding concealment, making them more likely to rely on 'informal, local and 'hidden' networks' (Heaphy et al., 2003:6). Richard and Brown (2006) suggest that when older lesbian women find 'formal' support mechanisms unappealing, they turn to their informal networks for social support. Traies (2015) notes that 'past experience of stigma and secrecy' (p.37) may shape lesbians' preferences when it comes to friendships and groups. She suggests that providers of services for older people must be particularly alert to these as 'the close relationships of LGBT elders are too often overlooked or misunderstood' (p.38). These findings may be particularly significant for my research as they suggest that older lesbians and bisexual women will experience social and support groups in particular and specific ways that have yet to be researched in depth.

The impact of network typology

A number of studies have examined the benefits of different types of social network, although few explicate the variable of sexual identity. Grossman et al. (2000) report that typically, support networks of older lesbians comprised approximately six people and included friends, partners, siblings, other relatives and social acquaintances, with colleagues and parents far less likely to be included. The gender composition of networks was shaped by the gender of the respondent and lesbian networks contained more women than men's and tended to be larger. The extent of satisfaction with networks reported by respondents was positively influenced by the size of the network (the bigger the network the greater the satisfaction) as well as whether or not their sexual identity was known.

Numerous studies explore the relationship between social support and older age well being; many of them focus particularly on how support network type impacts on loneliness and health. Most of these studies employ quantitative methods and invariably they are conducted without regard to sexual identity; based on heteronormative assumptions of life cycle events where marriage is a stable source of support and 'empty nest syndrome' threatens disruption to network composition. Wenger (1997) suggests a hierarchical pattern of normative expectations in terms of support giving, which places spouses (sic) at the top followed by adult children and siblings. She identifies five types of support network, each associated with different levels of risk for loneliness and depression: locally integrated, wider-community focused, local self-contained, local family dependent and private restricted. Elders belonging to communities built on friendships experience reciprocity and high levels of emotional care, but such support is not extended to older age physical frailty or loss of mobility. Wenger predicts that although such networks alleviate loneliness and protect from isolation, long-term care needs, dementia or mental illness may rupture the ability of the community to sustain the individual, resulting in loneliness.

Golden et al. (2009) utilise Wenger's network types to analyse the psychological and physical health of individuals aged 65 and over. They conclude that, regardless of network type, 'social engagement' is the 'active ingredient of social support networks' (p.288). Stephens et al. (2011) used surveys to examine associations between social networks and health in the 55-70 age group. Their study supports the proposition that aspects of social

context, including age, gender and socio-economic status, produce different types of social networks offering different levels of benefit. Fiori and Jager (2011) explore the health benefits conferred by six different types of support network. Their research, based on the mid 50s-60s age group, suggests that there is no 'best' network type, with each having gains and losses for the participants. However, the 'restricted' network where individuals had fewer inter-generational interactions with grandchildren, nieces and nephews, reported the highest levels of 'depressive symptomology'.

It is clear that networks differ in their effectiveness at providing social support and reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness for their members. However, these studies elide sexuality; the intersection of network type with lesbian and bisexual identities is not explored and may substantially alter how individuals understand their experiences and impact on the benefits offered by their networks. If older LGB networks have been shaped by broader societal norms and values to be homophilous groups, these are almost certainly less integrated and more likely to be private than many others. Given the levels of concealment reported by Traies (2012), older LGBT individuals stand far less chance of participating in 'locally integrated support networks' (Wenger, 1997) offering members robust protection and diverse support networks resulting in high morale and lower levels of isolation and loneliness. Many older LGB individuals prefer the safety of same-sexuality, same-age company for obvious reasons. Grossman et al. (2000) found a correlation between reduced loneliness and 'satisfactory' support networks – where sexual orientation was known and partners or close friends gave support, although age and sexual identity did not seem

as significant. Over 80% of respondents to an ODL survey said that they felt more comfortable there than within mainstream services.[20] It is possible that, in the longer term, these preferences may prove be deleterious to the establishment of wider integrated networks and inter-generational groups, consequently limiting the benefits to members and building in obsolescence.

2.6   Research questions

This chapter has demonstrated that older LGB individuals, born in the mid-twentieth century, have lived through an era of unprecedented change. The research suggests that, as a consequence of heteronormativity, older LGB individuals may be vulnerable to feelings of isolation and loneliness. It is equally evident that they can develop resilience as a coping mechanism, particularly through friendships and support networks, which are beneficial to positive mental health and happiness. Such issues require nuanced investigation that is attentive to the specific experiences of older lesbians and bisexual women.

My research questions, which emerge from the spaces in the current literature, explore the impact of mobility across the life course as a starting point to an understanding of the subjective experience of belonging to groups for older lesbians and bisexual women. Significantly, I do this using qualitative methods, conducting in-depth narrative interviews in order to elicit subjective experience. This review has shown that much research into LGBT lives has been conducted using quantitative methods and concentrated on the experiences of younger, white middle-class individuals,

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[20] http://www.openingdoorslondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ODL-Quarterly-Spring-2013.pdf
  [Accessed 11.7.13]

offering little perspective on the diversity of experiences *within* and *between* LGBT communities. Additionally, many studies report on their participants as a homogenous group. Not only does this overlook important gender differences, it disguises that fact that women often comprise far less than half of the sample from which theories and conclusions about LGBT life are drawn, for example, Jacobs et al., 1999; Grossman et al., 2000; Heaphy et al., 2003. In a recent European survey[21] of over 93,000 LGBT individuals, only 453 (less than 0.5%) were lesbians aged 55 and over. Such imbalance leaves significant knowledge gaps in our understanding of older lesbians, trans and bisexual women; by concentrating solely on older lesbians and bisexual women, I aim to make a small contribution towards redressing their under-representation in sexualities and gerontological research.

In this thesis I will examine how access to education and the subsequent social mobility of lesbian and bisexual women born in the 1940s and 1950s has influenced them throughout their lives. I will also explore the impact of their transgressions of sexual and gender role expectations. I am particularly interested to establish why these 'multiple mobilities' rendered participants out of place and vulnerable to the emotional pain of habitus dislocation.

As well as looking at issues of mobility, I will consider the extent to which friendships, families of choice and movements of 'equality and change' have offered protection against the challenges of heteronormativity and pain of habitus dislocation by providing space for identity affirmation and resisting

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[21] *European Union LGBT Survey*, 2013. http://www.equalpayportal.co.uk/statistics/
  [Accessed 17.3.15]

heteronormativity. I will explore groups across the life course looking at the

benefits offered, the significance of their composition, organisation and

location and the extent to which they are compromised by internal

hierarchies and exclusions.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.0   Introduction

> What has been identified is a need for a methodology that […] will enable the older lesbians who participate in the study to feel as if they have had an opportunity to discuss what is also important to them…
> Jacobson (1995:53)

As discussed previously, this research seeks to enhance, as well as reveal, the lives of lesbian elders. The development of a 'partially-participative', qualitative methodology was grounded in my socialist-feminist, constructivist approach. This chapter explores the research design, how it fared in practice and the ethical considerations I experienced along the way. Rather than writing up my reflections on reflexivity as a discrete section, I aim to demonstrate throughout the chapter that I designed and conducted the research in ways that made holistic, reflexive practice an integral part of this investigation. Stanley and Wise (1993) propose that when the feminist researcher makes herself vulnerable through the process of 'displaying her actions, reasonings, deductions and evidence to other people' (p.168) power imbalances in research can be addressed. In this chapter I have aimed to do this by creating a sense of the 'local context' (Riessman, 2008); offering details of how the research was conducted, issues of language and elements of my interaction with the participants. This is key in light of my decision to use thematic analysis where the focus is on the content of the narratives rather than their co-creation:

> Investigators in the thematic narrative tradition typically pay little attention to how a story unfolds in a conversational exchange or the questioner's role in constituting it. (Riessman, 2008:58)

It is noteworthy that this study is being conducted at a time when a wealth of research into older LGBT lives is emerging in the UK and many other countries (with notable omissions). This is no coincidence; the social and political conditions under which (predominantly) LGBT researchers feel that there is sufficient interest in the lives of LGBT elders for them to conduct research, even attract funding, are significant to the construction of these important narratives which may shape social, health and housing policy for future generations. Plummer (1995) suggests that stories 'can be told when they can be heard. […] For stories to flourish there must be social worlds waiting to hear' (p.120/121). After many decades, the tellers of these stories have found both 'coaxer' and audience. Studies such as mine, which attempt to capture the nuanced intersections of class, gender, ageing and sexual identity, have many decades of invisibility to account for; a responsibility which sits heavily on the shoulders of those who attempt to represent these marginalised groups and bring their voices to life.

3.1   Who can speak? Defining and refining the scope of the research.

McDermott notes that 'the spaces for lesbians to speak about their lives are often very limited' (2004:177). Despite my good intent to create a space where lesbians *could* speak about their lives, much of the first year of my PhD was consumed by the constant sharpening and refining of my scope as I tried how to decide and justify who should be included and what would they be called. Dunleavy (2003) rightly suggests that this filtering process is 'psychologically taxing' (p.52). I had initially planned to interview trans women alongside lesbians and bisexual women. However, a colleague's

review of my early work encouraged me to question the 'adding on' of transgender, noting that while *experiences* of older age may be similar, the *route* taken might be very different. The realisation that one thesis could not do justice to these diverse journeys and subsequent decision to focus solely on older lesbians and bisexual women helped to frame the borders and boundaries of my study.

The descriptors of old, older and ageing proved similarly problematic both in terms of language use and measurement; there are many understandings of what is meant by 'old'. Firstly, I had to decide how to define my target group and determine who should 'count' as old/er. The category 'older people' is constituted as if it has a pre-existing reality and set of attributes, yet even the chronological age at which one joins the category has been adjusted over time as attitudes change and the longevity of many populations increases. In debates about global ageing, The World Health Organization (2002) uses the United Nations standard age 60 as the benchmark for 'older' whilst recognizing the diversity of chronological age experiences across developed and developing countries. In this research I am trying to capture the intersection of social change and historical cohort through the experiences of the older end of the UK's 'baby boomer' generation, being mindful that the experience of living with an LGBT identity may differ sharply for individuals born in the thirties, forties and fifties. Thus I made the arbitrary decision to interview only women born in or before 1953, making them 60 or over at the time of interview. In fact, two women fall outside of this age category, being born in 1956 and 1955 respectively. They both attended an information session, heard that I planned to include only

testimonies from those aged 60 and above, yet still completed and returned participant information forms indicating their desire to be interviewed. Given their motivation to contribute to this study, I felt it important to allow them to do so. Averett et al. (2014) experienced similar responses from lesbians who fell outside their stipulated age range; they attributed this to their participants' unwillingness to fit into categories. I attribute the persistence of my participants, Michelle and Ivy, to their desire to be heard.

In addition to the diversity of numerical categories, 'older age' has many descriptors. The term 'older' is frequently adopted to describe research participants (Traies, 2012; Westwood, 2013; Averett et al., 2014) whereas Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC) has adopted 'old' as an important political statement:

> "Old" has become a term of insult and shame. To be "Old" means to be ignored and scorned, to be made invisible and expendable. We refute the lie that it is shameful to be an "Old" woman. […] We call ourselves OLD with pride. (Raphael, October 2013)

Political and academic debate aside, I am personally steeped in the social convention that regards 'old' as pejorative, an insult rather than a descriptor. In addition to western social mores, I have a personal investment in this debate. While I am chronologically entitled to attend many events for 'older lesbians', I have no physical or psychological affiliation with the description 'old'. Many people feel similarly well into their sixties and seventies, shying away from a label which has so many negative connotations and assumes a homogeneity of experience. In recognition of this and in anticipation of my potential participants' diversity of physical ages and subjective perceptions of what it means to be 'old' I chose to primarily use the term older in

preference to old.

3.2 Situating my 'self' in the research: Researcher as a positioned subject

If I were asked to describe my life and circumstances, the following

descriptors would probably feature quite heavily:

> White, a recent Women's Studies graduate, in a same-sex
> relationship, early fifties, propelled from aspirant working-class to
> middle-class by virtue of a grammar school education that left me
> with huge habitus dislocation resulting in an imposter syndrome and
> an awkward and uneasy relationship with 'proper' middle-class
> women. The fact that I embarked on my first same-sex relationship
> when I was nearly forty also brought a sense of habitus disruption as
> none of my existing dispositions were able to guide me through this
> sexual transgression.
> Extract from my Research Diary 2 May 2014

This description highlights some of the characteristics I shared with many

participants, just as it illustrates the many differences between us.

Discussing the complexities created by 'presumptions of a common frame of

reference' (p.182) while simultaneously recognising the researcher as a

positioned subject, Weston (2004) submits that her participants would not

have talked to her had she been straight. Some gatekeepers enforce shared

researcher/participant characteristics; the sexual minority status of the

(preferably older) researcher is stipulated as a condition by OLOC before

they endorse research (Averett et al., 2014). Mindful of this literature, but

not wanting to compromise my own feelings about lesbian self-identification,

my introductory information stated merely my age and the fact that I was in

a same-sex relationship. For many women this declaration of age and

sexual identity was sufficient assurance that the project was serious, well-

intended and valid:

> I like the way you've written this. I felt yeah, that's worth doing. […]
> [reading] 'I'm a 51 year old woman in a same-sex relationship', you
> know it tells you everything doesn't it?
> Val (born 1940).

For other participants however, this statement was inflammatory and perplexing and I was pressed to identify myself as a lesbian or bisexual woman. Several women asked direct questions about my sexuality. I always answered these honestly even when I sensed that my answers were not the ones expected or desired. This process of making explicit, and sometimes even defending aspects of my identity, felt exposing and uncomfortable, offering a salutary lesson in reflexivity. McCorkel and Myers (2003) suggest that subjecting ourselves (as researchers) to the same level of scrutiny we apply to participants is an essential part of acknowledging our positionality:

> The researcher's awareness of her own situatedness is further
> enhanced when she takes seriously the questions, concerns and
> challenges that her subjects raise in response to the research
> process. (p.228)

Some participants asked questions as though they were entitled to some kind of quid pro quo for being interviewed, which perhaps they were. Nora's questions, instigated before the start of her interview, holds a powerful suggestion that her participation would hinge on my ability to defend my own sexual identification:

> And then can I ask you a more *personal* question, which sort of links
> this and it really won't stop me doing it but it *might mean* that in the
> end I decide to pull out. A friend told me this weird thing […] she said
> something about you didn't identify as a lesbian!

Other questions and comments, while delivered in a more jocular way, had a sense of being designed to test my authenticity and competency as a

researcher and at the same time establish the academic credentials of the participant, many of whom were retired teachers or social workers.

3.3   Designing and 'doing' qualitative feminist research

My aim to elicit subjective, lived experience meant that qualitative methods were an obvious choice. Plummer (2001) describes the use of in-depth interviews as having the capacity to produce 'short life stories' which may then be woven together to create 'a larger map' (p.25). It was imperative to me that my work was empowering and gave participants an equal chance to contribute their story although I recognise that the narratives are inevitably constrained by factors personal to each individual as well as the design of the questions, the characteristics and demeanour of the interviewer and the interview location and process. My desire to 'give voice' to a marginalised group will also be limited by the small and often elite audience of an academic researcher, which is another reason for establishing an on-going dialogue with the participants and group facilitators to ensure they are aware of the results and recommendations of this study.

Participatory action research requires a completely egalitarian approach and a greater level of commitment than most academics can manage (Lincoln, 2001). I describe my own research design as partially participative; my intent to address power imbalances between 'researcher and researched' being only partially fulfilled because my participants did not contribute to the research design.   I originally contemplated using focus group meetings at the early stage of the research to formulate the key interview topics and questions. However, mindful of the restricted access I had to suitable

groups – which was usually limited by the group's schedule or a gate-keeper to just one meeting or part of a meeting, I rejected this method and opted to give participants more control within the interview and at the other end of the research process, offering them authority over the shape of their own testimonies which were returned to them, verbatim, once typed. Such 'member checks' alongside an on-going researcher-participant dialogue and the provision of information regarding support services, may be seen as constituting 'ethics as process' (Liamputtong, 2007).

Selecting the interview style required careful consideration. In McDermott's (2004) study of class and power relations in lesbian interviews, middle-class women spoke for around 40 minutes longer than those saw themselves as working-class; McDermott attributes part of this difference in 'talking practices' to the self-assurance of the ingrained middle-class habitus. Initially I considered using a biographical narrative approach believing that it might be an effective way of empowering participants to determine their own agenda without the restrictions imposed by pre-set topics and categories. Ultimately, I abandoned this idea fearing it might be an intimidating method for some participants, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, although Roseneil (2012) reports that depth interviews using the biographical narrative interpretive method produced 'rich complex narratives […] across classes and educational backgrounds' (p.130). Additionally, I feared the transcripts would become unwieldy and the essence of people's narratives diluted or lost by my decision to take a life course approach, rather than focussing on a specific period such as childhood or older age. Eventually, I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews guided by a

schedule that was sufficiently open and flexible for participants to add substantially to the generic questions.

Praxis: Putting my feminist principles into practice

The use of in-depth, face-to-face interviews was a considered choice intended to offer the best possibility for the reduction of researcher-power as the participants could and did lead the research 'conversation'; in some interviews I barely asked a single question. As well as outlining my methodological approach at the group meeting, I reminded each participant of my commitment to feminist research and what that meant for them in practice quite early on in the interview. Another aspect of my approach was my decision to type the full transcript and return it to the participants for checking and editing. Participants were also made aware of their right to edit and withdraw from the project without offering a reason:

> Kate [reading] 'I understand I'm free to withdraw from the study without giving a reason for withdrawing.' That's truly feminist.

Each group was offered the opportunity of a feedback meeting after thesis submission as a way of keeping participants aware of the outcomes and use of the data. These meetings are also a way of offering reciprocity and help avoid the perception that I 'mined' the groups, 'extracted data' and disappeared, although I am mindful of Lewis's (2011) counsel that speaking further with participants at the conclusion of a study may blur the boundaries between being a researcher and a friend/mentor.

Finding participants

I approached the issue of finding participants initially by using social groups for older lesbians and bisexual women as my sampling frame, thus drawing on a cohort of women who self-identify as lesbian or bisexual. While my sampling frame is, in many ways, an obvious one, it is not without disadvantage; research investigating issues of loneliness or feeling 'different' in self-selected groups must pay attention to possible bias. Berger (1982) reports that older lesbians typically preferred to associate in informal friendship networks as opposed to organised groups. It is possible that this is a preference that has changed over time as lesbian identity has become more visible. Recruiting research subjects from such groups excludes the possibility of interviewing many older lesbians who fear revealing their sexual identity (Nystrom and Jones, 2012). Richard and Brown (2006) identify this kind of recruitment process as being open to bias in that participants are by nature of their group membership, both willing to reveal their sexual identity and motivated to seek involvement in activities. I am mindful that women who attend affinity groups[22] may not be representative of older lesbians and bisexual women in general and therefore, the findings of my study are necessarily limited.

I conducted my interviews in London, Yorkshire and Lancashire. This was a practical decision as I was living in London but had maintained a connection with a social group in Yorkshire where I had conducted my MA interviews and which wanted to be part of my continuing research. I also anticipated that these different locations would present contrasts; London offering many

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[22] The term affinity group is generally taken to mean a group of people linked by a common interest, bond, background or purpose. First known use, 1970. More commonly used in the USA than the UK. Merriam-Webster. http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary [Accessed 5.5.15]

groups and organisations for the older LGBT population whereas the provision in the North would be smaller and more confined to major cities. I was keen to avoid places such as Brighton and Hebden Bridge, which I felt were atypical and at risk of being over-researched. Ultimately, it was harder to recruit participants in the South, possibly because individuals in the Yorkshire group already knew me and partly because some groups in London felt that they had been over-researched.

I compiled a list of organisations offering LGBT social and support groups and in October 2013, having obtained ethical approval, I contacted group leaders requesting an opportunity to speak about my research. In the course of the research I visited four groups (two in London, one in Yorkshire and one in Lancashire) where I talked and answered questions about my research. These meetings recruited the majority of the participants.

Recruitment was initiated through a London-based organisation where I initially requested to go to one of the group meetings held in east London. Accessing potentially vulnerable participants can be a sensitive and problematic issue. Although the organisation were positive about my research, they thought it inappropriate for me to attend a group in Waltham Forest as it was very small and male dominated, while a group in Newham had recently stopped running due to lack of numbers. However I was able to attend a relatively new group meeting in north London [London bisexual group] in November 2013. Unfortunately, the majority of participants were male and although they were all pleased that the 'bi voice' was being sought

in older LGBT research, I only recruited one person from this small group, and one further participant who had seen my research information.

At the same time I contacted an LGBT organisation in Yorkshire where I had conducted research in 2011. Previously their group for older lesbian and bisexual women [Yorkshire social group 1] was co-ordinated and run by a centre worker but subsequent cuts have resulted in it becoming a self-organising, self-funding group. Rather than having a staff member as gatekeeper as before, I now liaised directly with the older woman informally running the group. She invited me to attend a session in January 2014 to discuss my research and recruit participants. Sixteen women attended this meeting and volunteered to be interviewed, four of whom had been part of my MA research. Another three women were recruited from a new older lesbian group in Lancashire [Lancashire social group] where I spoke in February 2014.

As the difficulties of recruiting sufficient participants in London became apparent, I utilised snowball sampling, taking up a friend's offer to share my call for participants with members of her lesbian reading group [London lesbian book group]. The first woman to respond proved to be a highly effective organiser and recruited a further five participants. Not all of them attended the book group but they also had a women-only ballroom dancing group in common.

I also attended a meeting of older feminists [London feminist group] and recruited one participant there. Three participants identifying as *not*

attending groups came forward to be interviewed because they had been told about the project by other women and felt they had a different perspective to offer (although this turned out to be far from straightforward).

When it became obvious that my sample was not being drawn equally from the North and South, I extended the research period from my original deadline of the end of May 2014 to the beginning of July 2014 in an attempt to recruit more London-based participants and a more diverse cohort - with limited success. In this way I recruited four further participants from an established social group [London social group 1]. Continuing with the fieldwork beyond this point in the hope of creating 'balance' or finding more class and ethnic diversity held great appeal - a temptation noted by Back (2007) but I resisted the 'one more interview syndrome'. The final sample of 35 women consisted of 19 participants from Yorkshire, 3 participants from Lancashire, 12 participants from London and 1 participant from the south coast; a total of 22 participants from the North of England and 13 from the South.

Not finding participants: Desperately seeking diversity

Whilst I have a commitment to include participants from a range of ethnic and social class backgrounds that are representative of the groups they attend, I also recognise the diversity within them and do not hold a simplistic view of these socio-economic or cultural groups as internally homogenous or able to represent or speak for other members of their communities.

LGBT research with a white, middle-class bias is not unusual (Cronin, 2006;

Richard and Brown, 2006; Traies, 2012; Averett et al., 2014). Jane Traies'

study of 370 older lesbian and bisexual women, found that 83% now

describe themselves as middle-class (although half were born into working-

class families) and 'almost all' identified as white. In the groups I visited

there were always women who declined to be interviewed on the grounds

that they had 'nothing to say' or that 'someone else would say it better'. It is

not possible to make assumptions about their class although other

participants have suggested that these 'self-excluders' would be good

interviewees *because* they would offer a working-class perspective. Their

apparent diffidence may be interpreted as a lack of confidence or 'linguistic

competence' (McDermott, 2010) but could also be linked to their positioning

within a group they have often struggled to gain entry into. One interviewee

outlined this very clearly:

> They have a hard time. […] If you can get them to talk about
> themselves they will all say that they feel – they don't use the words
> – that you know, they're structurally disadvantaged for all the obvious
> reasons. And there's one woman there […] and she had to *really
> struggle* to even *vaguely* position herself. There's some women who
> […] often position themselves *literally* outside of the circle and it's
> *always* the same ones and *always* for the same reasons.
> Gina (born 1952).

Despite my efforts to recruit a diverse sample, all participants identified as

white, the majority as British or English. Other studies have reported similar

issues in trying to recruit Black lesbians (Edwards, 1990; Jones and

Nystrom, 2002; Moore, 2011). Edwards describes her 'extreme difficulty in

actually getting black women to take part in the research' (1990:483).

Averett et al. (2014) connected with racial minority communities online and

managed to attract a racial minority population that comprised 13% of their

sample of 456 older lesbians. They recommend that building relationships

with marginalised racial communities before research commences, and suggest that the research team should include individuals of similar racial and sexual minority status as the target participants.

Phillips and Knocker's (2010) review of ODL's provision identified older ethnic minority individuals as 'hard to reach'. Kimmel et al. (2006) document the historical context of LGBT ageing and note that 'racism influenced the degree to which many lesbian and gay men of colour interacted with the broader lesbian and gay community' (p.3) tending to meet instead in each other's homes. In my efforts to increase participant diversity I contacted a BME/LGBT group in London; unfortunately, they had no members aged 60 plus. I also interviewed a BME/LGBT Project Worker who had been employed at one of the organisations in an attempt to increase BME presence. He confirmed the difficulties in attracting older BME lesbians to organisations; he had recruited sufficient gay men for a group, but only three (young) women. Across the course of the research I met just two women who, based on their appearance, may have defined as BME or non-white. I have no way of knowing how they self-defined as they did not choose to participate in the research or indeed whether other women, who did not come forward, would have defined themselves as non-white. Nystrom and Jones (2012) suggest that research which manages to include both white and non-white LGBT elders will offer 'a necessary aspect of understanding resilience among older adults' (p.134). In this study, the narratives of BME lesbian and bisexual women might have revealed diverse ways of responding to their additional oppressions and challenges, which

alongside other aspects of identity including class, gender and sexuality, create unique and significant axes of difference.

Conducting the interviews

I conducted all thirty-five interviews face-to-face rather than by telephone or email, believing this method the most likely to produce authentic narratives. Consequently, I was able to see participants' non-verbal reactions as well as being able to probe their answers and pursue particular avenues of interest. Personal interviews may take on the quality of a 'therapeutic conversation' (Ezzey, 2010). Power relations are constructed more equally when two-way questioning becomes a possibility and informal exchanges may be made.

Asking questions: Wording, order and change

My interview schedule (Appendix 1) allowed the participant to elaborate on certain areas or talk about any aspects of their lives that I had not asked about. The schedule also probed whether the participant had taken part in any previous research and asked them to talk about their motivation for participating. My sense was this would be particularly useful for encouraging working-class participants to speak as well as offering a framework for *all* participants to tell their story. Inevitably, the schedule evolved as the interviews went on. I made four minor revisions, settling on the final version in March 2014 just before my twenty-first interview. The following extract from my Research Diary [12.3.14] details the changes to the schedule:

> This is the fourth amendment. Changes this time included separating out the question about loneliness from the question about social isolation, deleting the gender identity question, inserting the word gay before pride, moving the retirement question to be nearer work

questions, extending the retirement question, extending the impact of the age question by breaking it up. Changing the question about groups closing by adding 'or you could not access them', adding a disability question, which to my shame, I only thought about when I recruited a disabled participant last month.

The focus on demographic questions at the start of the schedule combined with the propensity of some participants to talk at great length and in great detail meant that it was often a while before we actually broached the topic of 'groups'. In fact, by the time we arrived at the topic some participants were so immersed in the telling of their life story that it came as a surprise.

Esther and Alison were the first two participants to be interviewed. When I conducted an analysis of how frequently participants are quoted in each of the analysis chapters (Appendix 2), it was apparent that neither of them had spoken much about class, gender and sexual mobilities. I think it likely that my interview schedule and technique at that point was more focussed on loneliness and groups. As the interviews progressed and I started to 'hear' the stories of multiple mobility and dislocation, I actively sought narratives of these 'transgressions'.

My final question 'Is there anything you'd like to tell me about that I haven't asked you?' turned out to be a very powerful prompt. Most women initially said that they did not think they had anything else to say and in the first couple of interviews I switched off the voice recorder at this point. By about the third interview, I knew to leave it on as the majority of women having made this declaration then went on to talk at some length and it was often during the final minutes of an interview that new and important information was revealed.

Space and place

> [I]n the setting of the interviewee's own home an interview conducted in an informal way by another woman can easily take on the character of an intimate conversation. (Finch, 1984:74)

Participants were offered the option of meeting in a public location such as a café or to be interviewed in their homes. Although, home interviewing would be my preference wherever possible, the decision was obviously theirs. My preference for interviewing in participants' homes is partly practical – home interviews offer better sound quality and greater control over privacy – but mostly connected with the emotional qualities of the interview. The participant is more likely to be relaxed in this informal and familiar setting; power relations between researcher and participant are not so obviously marked.

Edwards and Holland (2013) suggest that the interviewee's home offers the researcher a glimpse of their *whole life* not afforded by other settings and brings a new dimension to the research process:

> Seeing the participant in context (in their home, their classroom, their workplace), surrounded by the material culture of their created space, and possibly interacting with others in that space, offers a wealth of information beyond that obtained, and possibly obtainable, in an interview, providing an ethnographic dimension to the exchange. (p.45)

Twenty-six interviews were held in the participant's home, six were conducted in the home of a participant's friend and three took place in offices. Where women knew each other well, for example, Yorkshire social group 1, there was a huge amount of self-organisation .[23] One woman

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[23] The generosity of the arrangements described here may have been more than a consequence of the women knowing each other. There was equal evidence of long-term membership in London Social Group 1, but no such provision was offered or made.

arranged four interviews (including her own) in her home on the same day so that I didn't have to travel between them. She set aside a room and furnished it with water, biscuits and tissues, made coffee for each participant and prepared me a hot lunch. Another participant invited me to come early for her interview and cooked me breakfast. In every other house I was offered tea, coffee and biscuits, without exception.

The richness of the 'ethnographic dimension' of home-interviewing was revealed over and over. I was privy not only to people's homes, but their furnishings, photographs, choice of biscuits; even their bathrooms. Having access to these cultural and economic signifiers was to prove particularly interesting when it came to the 'vexed issue' of defining class (Weston, 2004:183). Anne, for example, self-identified in her interview as 'lower middle-class'. However, in her north London home she employed a cleaner and a gardener, both present on the day I visited. She and her partner had recently sold a second home in France and also talked openly about Nell's 'very good' pension. Anne saw home ownership as a 'choice'. Another participant, Joyce, strongly identified as working-class but acknowledged the irony of this as we sat in her beautiful three-storey house in Hackney. These insights certainly do not over-ride participants' self-identification but they do offer an opportunity to consider how people's self-descriptions are not uniform and are open to diverse interpretation.

Most interviews lasted between ninety minutes and two hours. The shortest, which took place in the least private space, lasted just 43 minutes. A longer interview offers more opportunity for the establishment of trust and rapport

as well as allowing 'contradictions, tensions and complexities […] to unfold' (Davies and Heaphy, 2011:11). Several features indicated that participants were relaxed during the interview, including revelations about intimate and sensitive medical conditions and unprompted sharing of very personal information. Since the interviews, several participants have sent me emails, cards or notes, for example, when returning their checked transcripts.

What did people redact and why?

The data set from which my analysis is drawn is limited to the redacted transcripts (and emails and notes sent by participants following interview) as opposed to the data corpus of verbatim transcripts. Most transcripts were returned and checked online although four participants requested their transcripts returned for checking by post; Val and Pamela because they accessed their emails at the public library and were concerned about confidentiality, and Susan and Edie because they were not IT literate, an issue I return to in Chapter Six. The opportunity to redact transcripts was offered to all participants and people responded to this in different ways: four participants made substantive changes to their text. These changes were mostly concerned with concealing their own and others' identity although one participant asked me to correct her grammar if I quoted her, as did another participant who did not request substantive changes. Three women from the North of England commented on my use of their regional dialect and two asked that it be 'corrected':

> The only things I would like changed are my atrocious grammar in the use of me rather than my. At home I was always pulled up for saying (ME). Now I fully understand why.
> Edie (Lancashire)

> Didn't realize how broad I am. Awful.

Susan (Lancashire)

Frustratingly, one participant withdrew several paragraphs pertaining to her belief that her life as a lesbian was significantly different from that of a heterosexual woman in terms of feeling she'd been reluctantly pushed into the role of bread-winner, one that she could have avoided if married to a man. She had also talked about cliques and bullying in a group she had attended but asked that this not be quoted. Another participant redacted everything she had said about certain trans people who attended a group she belonged to. Her justification was that it was necessary to protect the identity of the people concerned. These redactions were frustrating and sometimes tested my feelings about the power-sharing aspect of my research design as this extract from my Research Diary (24.4.14) reveals:

> My commitment to feminist participatory methods faltered a little this evening as I spent an hour and 19 minutes on the telephone to a lesbian couple I interviewed at the beginning of February. The sun went down and my office became dark and cold as paragraph after paragraph of painstakingly typed text disappeared under a redaction fiercer than any MP expenses scandal could have conjured up. Some of the withdrawals were obvious, place and organisational names, the names of friends and family. Others were more intriguing. 'Did I say very, very Jewish? I meant quite.' 'Can you remove all the identifying comments, I wouldn't want anyone to be hurt' seemed like a euphemism for 'I've been far too honest about my feelings about transexuals'. It also made me wonder about the 'interview space' a space where people feel moved to share, to confide, to boast – only to be surprised or perhaps horrified when they see their words in print. It is such an intimate space – particularly when it occurs in the participants' homes – as these did. It leads people perhaps to make revelations they later regret, but, if their interviewer is not employing such participatory methods, these confidences once given are not seen again and therefore, are almost certainly not retracted.

Equally aggravating was the fact that although my commitment to a feminist methodology was welcomed and applauded by many of the participants, it was not always sufficient to ensure participation. Two groups in London

declined my request to attend their meeting; one on the grounds that their members had taken part in previous research and felt misrepresented, the other because they were a small group. As well as pointing at the negative impact of research that is 'done to' participants, this response hints at the danger of over-researching some women as does the fact that one of my participants, a volunteer at the feminist library, is contacting the members in order to compile a list of women who are willing to be contacted as they often get calls from people doing a study on feminists. Although well intended, this could potentially result in the same women being interviewed repeatedly and becoming '*the* voice' of older lesbians and feminists. It is noteworthy that four of my own participants had taken part in other research (in addition to the four women I had previously interviewed).

The physical and emotional labour of transcription was huge and there were many occasions when I wondered why I had committed to such an undertaking. The option to transcribe selectively and 'own' the finished product without further recourse to the participants felt very tempting at times. However, on balance, I feel that this labour not only kept the participants more engaged, it gave me greater depth of understanding and emotional connection to the research. As Lewis (2011) comments 'it was as though I heard something new and compelling each time I listened' (p.38). The messages returned with the scripts indicated that the participants also felt connected to the research.

3.4 Issues of ethics and care

All researchers bear significant responsibility for the care of their participants and themselves. In the case of research with vulnerable individuals who may have been marginalised, hidden or suffered discrimination and harassment, such responsibility is even greater. I was aware that I was necessarily asking questions about potentially sensitive areas: estrangement from family, loneliness and isolation and the fears of older age. My ethical responsibility to minimise potential emotional distress compelled me to shape the research process carefully, particularly at the interview stage where it was vital to ensure that participants were not left exposed or burdened by emotion long after I had packed up my voice recorder and left.

One of the first steps I took to ensure 'informed participation' was that, in addition to my attendance at various group meetings and adverts placed in groups' newsletters or websites, all participants were made aware of the research through an information sheet (Appendix 3), which detailed the purpose of the research and gave assurances about the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and the ways in which the findings might be used. If they subsequently expressed an interest in participating in the research they were asked to complete a 'participant information form' (Appendix 4).

Informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality

At the start of the interview, the purpose of the research, confidentiality, anonymity and the right to withdraw were again discussed and all

participants signed a consent form (Appendix 5) at this point. This also outlined the use and storage of the anonymised data. Participants were assured that their identity would be kept confidential and a pseudonym used to ensure their anonymity. They were alerted to the fact that their confidentiality could be limited only if I became concerned that someone was at risk of harm.[24]

It may be particularly important to conceal the identities of lesbian and gay participants to protect them and their friends and families from social stigmatisation. Weston (2004) assigned pseudonyms to her participants but she notes that, in the main, they did not request them and, when they did, it was in relation to concealing their identity in relation to employment and their children's identities. Seven participants chose their own pseudonyms and I allocated the remainder, aiming to be attentive to their name, age and what they had told me about themselves when discussing issues such as ethnicity and faith. At least two of the women lived under first names they had actively chosen rather than been given. Saunders et al. (2014) report that several of their interviewees resisted attempts to conceal their identity and this was reflected in my study. Not all participants wanted to be anonymous and two women, Val and 'Denny', felt quite strongly that I should use their real names. Ultimately I decided to retain Val's name as she stressed its importance repeatedly and also sent me identifiable photos of herself as an older woman to use as part of a presentation at a lesbian conference. 'Denny', though, is a pseudonym as the participant was highly critical of the older lesbian group she belonged to and using her true name

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[24] As part of the consent procedure, I explained that if I became aware of something that gave cause for concern, I have a duty to act upon it, but would talk with the participant first about my concerns.

might jeopardise her relationship with the organisation and its members. These are complicated issues and I saw no way of making a single choice that would honour the participants' wishes while at the same time protecting the anonymity of other individuals and organisations. Kaiser (2009) suggests that it is time for researchers to re-think the thorny issue of consent rather than making blanket decisions about what is best for participants:

> A more nuanced view of consent means moving away from the assumption that every respondent desires complete confidentiality and instead recognizing that a research participant might want to receive recognition for some or all of what he or she contributes. (p.9)

The issue of anonymity was revisited when transcripts were returned for checking. Each transcript was returned with a note (Appendix 6) by email or hard copy in the post depending on the participant's preferences. One of my participants had stated at the outset of the interview that she was not bothered about the possibility of identification:

> What I think – the confidentiality stuff – is that if somebody knows you – even vaguely knows you – depending on how much you share, they know who you are anyway so… I don't care. I don't care. I wouldn't offer to do it if I cared really.

However, she was one of several participants who exercised their right to edit the transcript, removing a number of statements where she had ridiculed members of the social group she belonged to and exposed the hierarchies and rigid social stratification that structured the group. Her reasoning for the redaction was ostensibly to preserve the confidentiality of others although she admitted that the interview had also led her to be judgemental:

> The highlighted bits are to be deleted/not used, mainly because they are too identifying, although I have also deleted the mean things I said about [name of group] in case I was identifiable! [By post]

This fear of identification is explored by Nespor (2000) who interrogates the assumption that full anonymity for participants and organisations is both possible and desirable. She suggests that there are a number of reasons why preserving anonymity may be neither practical or possible, particularly in research fields such as mine, which are relatively small and close-knit:

> [T]he very activity of doing extended fieldwork implies a level of public visibility and engagement - of being seen and presenting oneself as a researcher in certain places, at particular events, with specific people - that later makes it relatively easy for others to reconstruct identities (of settings, if not individuals) from published accounts. (p.547)

As well as anonymising participants, I have concealed the identity of the groups they attended – as far as is possible given the small number of groups for older lesbians and bisexual women, particularly outside the capital, and the fact that many participants were friendly both within and across groups. The codes used for the groups are further explained in Appendix 7. My own identities however, remain exposed. As Ryan-Flood (2009) discusses, 'this openness both within and beyond the Academy can make the researcher potentially vulnerable' (p.223). Although I do not feel particularly vulnerable within the confines of the university and research community, when this period of study is over, I may be more sensitive about the identities I have put in the public domain through conducting and speaking about this research, particularly if I return to my previous employment in education.

Emotions in research: Protecting participants

Although I had prepared a 'support sheet' for participants which they were

given at the end of the interview (Appendix 8), asking people to think about

issues such as older age and intimacy and future care needs was sensitive

and sometimes felt invasive, even devious. It was not always easy to get the

timing right; asking too early meant running the risk of disrupting the rest of

the interview and having developed insufficient rapport to explore such a

tricky topic. Too late and there was not enough time to 'recover' safe ground

and ensure the participant's well-being before the interview closed. On one

occasion this question came very near the end of an interview, which was

time-limited, as the participant had another meeting to go to (and had

travelled up from the south coast early in order to be interviewed before

this). I worried for a long while after about the timing of this, knowing that

she had left the interview still thinking about these difficult issues.

> 22.5.14 – Email from Rosie to me
> […] The very last question you asked me still floats worryingly around my head – even though it is something that I already thought about a lot. The fact that you actually asked how would I feel or cope when I wasn't so mobile and couldn't travel to London easily made the potential not-so-distant possibility of this quite disturbing. I think I said at the end that when this happened I would have to consider joining local activities provided by Age Concern/UK (an awful thought)!!!

> 22.5.14 - Email from me to Rosie
> I'm really sorry I asked you about 'later life' restrictions at the end of the interview. It was very thoughtless of me and I hope it didn't cause you too much anxiety or distress.

> 2.6.14 – Email from Rosie to me
> No apology needed re the 'later life restrictions' question. It was odd to hear it – but I had already thought about it and your question actually made me consider it more and, after all my moans about [name of place], when I am less mobile I would rather be here than in London! At least I can drive my mobility car along the four miles of prom!!

Sometimes recalling difficult situations and losses provoked an emotional response that was both painful to witness and not easy to respond to naturally or with ease in the context of the interview. Questions about older age, loss and loneliness invoke feelings of vulnerability and can cause emotional distress. Recounting the 'closing down' of her life following her retirement, the death of her mother and the deterioration of her eyesight, reduced Anne to tears within the first five minutes of her interview. Here, Sofia admits that my questions are emotionally difficult to address and that it is causing her pain to think about her own loneliness:

> What prompts loneliness? I'm just trying to think. [Long pause] Loneliness, loneliness. I'm not sure if loneliness is the right feeling but you know, when you break up with a long relationship it's, it's, it's *disappointing*, it's *gut-wrenching*, you feel a *hole* so I guess that's loneliness. [...] Do you want some more coffee while it's still warmish? [...] Distraction. Distraction.

My intent to interview reflexively was influenced by Bowtell et al. (2013) who urge ethical mindfulness as a way of attending with compassion to the 'here and now' (p.654). Although I felt I had engaged in mindful practice, with hindsight, I wonder whether I subconsciously 'soft-pedalled' the questions about loneliness as I became more attuned to the emotions I was provoking. Certainly, when I arrived at the analysis stage I was surprised at my own superficiality; my lack of follow up and probing questions indicating the desire not to provoke further distress. I am hopeful that my transparency about such research difficulties may help others to develop more mindful practice.

Emotional labour: Empathy, guilt, responsibility and reciprocity

> I hope that you manage to keep your energy up 'cause it must be draining for you, like you say, meeting different people and hearing their *stories*.
> Shirley (born 1948).

Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) identify several challenges facing qualitative researchers who investigate sensitive issues. These include 'researcher self-disclosure, listening to untold stories [and] feelings of guilt and vulnerability' (p.327) all of which are particularly germane to the experience of those whose participants are marginalised. Interviewing older lesbians was certainly not an objective process. The similarities and differences between us impacted on me profoundly, provoking an emotional response and causing me to consider my own future ageing. I experienced intense sadness and empathy, for example, when Anne talked about how she imagined her dead father would regard her life, my own father having died when I was a child. I felt guilt for the many freedoms and privileges, which my generation as well as my class have bestowed, and feared the isolation conjured up by some of the testimonies.

> I am drawn in by Anne's conjecture about how her long dead father *might* have been supportive or *might* have found it strange and it chimes with me - as does her discussion of her partner, 11 years older than she and the possibility that she might die before her (I am 13 years older than my partner). This then is the danger of characteristics shared with participants, being offered a premature glimpse of a world of older lesbians – a world that I will, in the not too distant future, inhabit.
> Extract from my Research Diary 25.2.14

Hubbard et al. (2001) document the emotional labour of research including addressing the challenges that trigger emotions such as anger or upset in researchers and participants, pointing out that while there is much concern and protection for the participants' emotional well-being there is less

jurisdiction for the researcher. I have previously written about the toll of emotional labour attached to research (Wilkens, 2014) and, forearmed with this knowledge, I took steps to protect my own emotional well-being as well as that of my participants. As well as utilising the regular supervision sessions offered by the university, myself and another PhD student undertaking research in sensitive areas with 'shared characteristic/lifestyle' participants talked frequently about our research and emotions, thus forming an informal co-supervision group which provided mutual support and empathy and was ultimately grounding and constructive offering an opportunity for reflexive discussions and theoretical development. Lewis (2011) calls for a community of social support for researchers doing 'emotion work' - based on her own experience as a Black lesbian researcher investigating similar populations. I would suggest that whether we opt for critical friendship, co-supervision or community of support, some type of social support network is an essential component of research where emotions may be provoked by similarities in lifestyle, characteristics or experience as well as the sensitive or traumatic nature of the topic of the investigation. I also found that reflexive use of a Research Diary helped me to record (and diffuse) some of the disappointments, anxieties and joys of the active research phase as well as expressing the emotional responses I withheld in some interviews where I attempted to contain and manage my reactions.

Several interviews revealed assumptions of shared identity and a common frame of reference indicated for example, by cultural references. Clare Summerskill was referred to on so many occasions I eventually booked

tickets to see her! The assumption of shared characteristics was sometimes

inscribed with another belief, that of my political activism as a researcher,

and I was left with an overwhelming sense of responsibility and obligation to

use the data and history diligently and to the greater good:

> And you and I have *fought hard* all our lives for this. **You're going to have to stand up at conferences as an *out lesbian,* choosing your *image*, choosing your *words,* choosing your *ideology*.** You, like me, you've got a sense of all of this history, right?
> Kate (born 1946).

> I would say that actually it's imperative for the majority, for the majority of – this sounds dreadful but – from 60 plus people that this does still exist. **Because this is coming to their time in life where they're at their most vulnerable. So, from that point of view, I think 'good on you' for fighting the case!**
> Vanessa (born 1947).

As one way of honouring the trust placed in me by the participants,

throughout the project I have made connections with various groups

promoting the interests of older LGBT individuals in practice and policy and

shared my ideas within these forums. I have contributed to work conducted

by the Campaign to End Loneliness, attended events put on by ODL and

facilitated sessions at one of the older lesbian groups where I recruited

several participants. I have also given several presentations and published

articles about my research in order to make the lives of older lesbians more

visible. One of my overriding aims is to produce research that is accessible

and has practical and 'real life' application. Although I am conducting

academic research with the aim of generating original thought and

knowledge, at the same time it is important to me to feel that I am able to

contribute meaningfully to the knowledge base and practice of organisations

working with, or on behalf of, older lesbian and bisexual women.

3.5 Demographics: Talking about the participants

The thirty-five female participants in this study were born between 1940 and 1956 and ranged in age from 73 to 57 at the time the interviews took place (between December 2013 and July 2014). The average age was 64, with only two participants aged over 70. While this age range may be representative of older women participating in social groups, it does not represent the cohort of older lesbians in their late 70s and 80s. These women may be physically less able to access groups or unwilling to claim a public lesbian identity and consequently more at risk of loneliness and isolation. Twenty-five participants (71%) were single. Of the 10 women in committed relationships, 9 lived with their partners. Fifteen of the women were formerly married to men; twelve of these women were biological parents. Two women were adoptive parents and one was a co-parent. In total I interviewed three couples (who were interviewed individually). In all three partnerships one woman was a biological parent, while the other was not; in two cases, both women referenced themselves as being a grandparent.

Some studies of older lesbians enquire about annual income in order to explore the relationship between poverty and LGBT older age experiences (Richard and Brown, 2006). With hindsight, questions about economic capital might have generated useful information with which to understand participants' access to groups and events, but feeling it a sensitive and private topic, I did not ask any questions about savings, pensions or other forms of retirement income nor did I ask about housing status (owner-occupied, rented, social housing etc.) although in some cases this

information was volunteered.

Six participants identified as disabled with many more reporting a range of health issues including stroke, incontinence, thyroid issues and ME. Fredriksen-Goldsen's (2011) study of 50-95 year old LGBT adults proposes that they experience significant disparity in physical and mental health. 41% of the sample of 2,560 adults had a disability and 31% reported depression. She also notes that 53% report loneliness. It is likely that those with disabilities or poor health are at increased risk of social isolation and thus more likely to seek a lesbian community in the form of a social group.

In terms of faith, thirteen participants (37%) defined themselves as pagan or spiritual and three of these self-identified as witches. Many reported being brought up in a religious faith but abandoning it in favour of a spirituality that was often connected to nature and the passing of the seasons, *or* what one participant described as 'half-hearted Buddhism'.

A précis of the participants' social class is by no means a straightforward event and issues of education, employment and self-identification will be debated in Chapter Four.

Why participate and how does it feel?

For every woman who participated in this research there were several more who attended the same group, listened to my talk about the research but chose *not* to participate. I have speculated that social class and ethnicity may play a part in the choice of some women not to be part of the research

but I was curious as to the reasons women had for actively choosing to be interviewed. At the end of each interview I asked participants about their motivation for participating. The responses indicated that many women viewed their participation almost as a moral obligation:

> Pamela: […] I mean I agreed to do it because I think it's *good*, this sort of research.
>
> Joyce: […] it's a responsibility *all round* really isn't it? I'm *really glad* you're doing the work so it's easy to put the time in.
>
> Alison: I think it's important as well actually. I've had a pretty weird life and I think it's quite important… people keep telling me I should write a book but I don't think I'll get round to that so, I'll be in other people's books instead!

As noted previously, several women had participated in other research; the 'moral obligation' motivator makes sense of this phenomenon. Plummer's (1995) analysis of the therapeutic function of 'coming out' stories' may also have a bearing in the research process; the interview providing a channel, 'through which a negative experience is turned into a positive identity' (p.50). In addition to a commitment to making their lives more visible, the participants seemed to enjoy the interview experience. Kirsch (2005) explores the intimacy created in depth interviews, citing the interviewer's attention and sincere interest, the interviewee's enjoyment and their desire to 'help' the researcher. The majority of my interviews were lengthy, intimate events punctuated by cups of tea, gales of laughter and a few tears. Women showed me their photographs and their gardens, offered me refreshments. One invited me back later for wine; another offered me a tarot reading. Subsequently several have sent me photographs of themselves for a presentation I was giving, one woman taking the opportunity to update me on her new romance as she did so. In short, the research relationships felt

genuine and mutually enjoyable as far as is possible in such a short and defined interaction. This was reinforced by some of the comments that women volunteered at the end of the interview:

> Jacqueline: I've enjoyed it very much. It's nice to chat. Lovely.

> Kate: It's been ever so exciting. I've been ever so enjoying… 'cause you don't know *what* you're going to say until this happens! I'd no idea. […] I thoroughly enjoyed it and thank you so much for the facility of doing it.

Much is written about the ethics of research that 'fakes friendship' or capitalises on rapport - in short manipulating participants to gain rich data. While I am sure that not every woman I interviewed enjoyed the experience in the same way as the participants above, I feel my genuine intent translated into an empowering research design has avoided exploiting them as far as possible in a research relationship.

3.6   Analysis: The art of interpretation

> Nothing speaks for itself. Confronted with a mountain of impressions, documents and field notes, the qualitative researcher faces the difficult and challenging task of making sense of what has been learned. (Denzin, 2004:447)

The method of analysis chosen for this study is thematic analysis. Thematic sequencing involves the connection of events by themes rather than by time. Plummer (2001) places thematic analysis at the centre of a continuum of 'construction' designed to depict the problems of editing and interpretation faced by researchers. I believe that this approach will best preserve the integrity of the themes and issues pertinent to my participants' lives.

I was confident that I knew the transcripts well enough to make the use of data analysis technologies, such as that offered by NVivo, unnecessary. I wanted to preserve my sense of connection with the participants and their narratives and liked the idea of recognising themes from the transcripts more organically and naturally than if they were coded and analysed using a software package. One of the advantages of conducting and typing up the interviews myself and including everything that had been said (rather than just those parts that appeared 'relevant') was that I developed a detailed knowledge of the transcripts as they emerged, painfully and slowly from my computer. This stage acted as a first close reading. I transcribed the interviews in the order in which they had been conducted. As I was listening to the voice recordings and transcribing, I kept and updated a separate document in which I copied extracts from the women's testimonies into different categories as I went along, looking initially for moments, ideas and patterns which were either corroborated by other interviews or 'stood out' for some reason.

When I had finished transcribing and had sent all the interviews back to the participants for checking and amendment, I conducted a second line-by-line close reading of the transcripts. Rather than looking at them in the order they had been conducted, this time I divided them into geographical groups, 'North' and 'South', and ranged the participants within each group from eldest to youngest. I then re-read them carefully looking for new themes and for additional data to corroborate or challenge the themes previously identified. After the 467,000 words of transcripts had been listened to, read and re-read I had developed a sense of how the narratives could be

organised. Some of the themes, such as loneliness and the role of groups in offering social support, were obvious given the scope of the research and it would have been surprising if they did not appear in the participants' narratives. Others were less tangible and it took longer to recognise the patterns of responses that I eventually clustered around mobility, belongingness and fit, for example. By the end of the second reading I had identified the following broad themes:

- Realisation, coming out and relationships
- Ageing
- Groups and communities
- Feminism
- Class, education, mobility and privilege
- Loneliness
- Belongingness and fit
- Living near an LGBT community

As I stated in section 1.4, I originally set out to research loneliness and the role of coetaneous groups in alleviating social isolation. Braun and Clarke (2006) remind us that the selection of themes from a given data set can be influenced in different ways; driven by the data itself, influenced by theory or the researcher's own analytic interest in the area. Drawing on Boyatzis (1998) who distinguishes between 'gross' and 'intricate' aspects available in the 'raw information' (p.30), Braun and Clarke identify two levels of thematic analysis: semantic or explicit analysis where the themes are identified within the surface meanings of the data and latent/interpretative where there is an attempt to theorise the significance of patterns. My analysis of the rich narratives produced in this study aims to incorporate both levels by looking at and beyond what participants have said as well as capturing the 'brilliant shafts of light and colour' Mason (2011:77) suggests exist in even the smallest facets, but I am mindful that in doing so I may influence and distort

117

the meaning made by the narrators. The themes listed previously exist at a semantic level; participants talked explicitly about loneliness and groups across the life course. A crucial emergent theme is that of cleft or dislocated habitus; a way of understanding the situation of those who have been socially mobile put forward by Bourdieu (2000) to explain the difficulties of working-class scholars in elite education. It is used in this study as a key analytical tool with which to understand the social and emotional implications of multiple contemporary mobilities.

Structure

I originally considered using temporal location as a structuring device for analysing the data. I felt that this method would provide chronological continuity and a sense of how the passing of time played out in participants' lives. When I trialled this approach it revealed a significant disadvantage; discussions of coming out or relationships with families in women's past and in their present - even future - lives, became dislocated; fragmented across several chapters.

The second organisational structure considered was the arrangement of data according to the generation of the participants. In this way, each analysis chapter could be devoted to the stories offered by women born in a certain generational period. This would provide continuity to the participants' stories and expose the different experiences of generations across time and through societal change, for example, contrasting Val's very real and lifelong sense of her own unimportance as the third girl born to already stretched parents in 1940's wartime, with the narratives of women born in

the 1950s, some of whom were adoptive or co-parents with university

degrees and careers. Ultimately though, life stories are not that

straightforward. Gwennie, for example, born in 1953 is one of the younger

participants yet has never had an intimate loving relationship with a woman

and has only just started to attend a lesbian group where she 'can admit

who and *what* I am'. Additionally, using this method separated the

testimonies of women who have talked about social mobility through

education and the subsequent impact on their sense of 'fit' or belonging in

various situations.

Although these methods offered many advantages, including keeping the

women's stories more connected and showing the impact of generational

and societal change, I felt they were outweighed by a potential loss of

connectedness. I have chosen simply to structure the narratives around the

selected themes. In order to make the generational and 'human' aspects of

these stories as clear and present as possible, and allow readers to

establish and retain a picture of the narrators, the next two chapters start

with a vignette featuring one participant's narrative highlighting the

intersection of mobilities across her life course. A detailed participant

biography and an overview of the groups can be found in Appendix 9. In

order to orient readers, a short piece of information about each participant

will be stated the first time they appear in each analysis chapter.

Absences and presences

In any research only a minute amount of original data will survive to the final

'product'; this project is no different. Firstly, there are the stories of the

women who have never attended social groups, perhaps because they are isolated by geography, poverty, racism or fear. Then there are those who were present but did not feel able to come forward and be interviewed. Finally, there are the women who were interviewed but, as a consequence of the way I have selected the themes and organised the data, have 'lost their voice' to some lesser or greater extent. It is important to recognise that the stories that do survive are not the only ones and are not necessarily representative of the ones that have been omitted whether through self (de)selection or my choice of themes and narrators. In the final analysis it is not possible to address all of the themes raised in this data set and I have elected to focus my attention on the following:

- Intersections of gender role, sexual identity and class 'transgressions': Habitus dislocation and contemporary mobilities

- Loneliness and other challenges: Communities of belonging and resistance across the life course

- Affinity groups and safe spaces: Creating support networks and resisting heteronormativity in older age

When deliberating on these themes I returned to the original research aims and questions, set out at the beginning of the research process. The questions, written before the interviews took place, were narrow and focussed almost exclusively on the groups attended by the participants, asking about group composition, benefits conferred and class differentials in experience. At the start of the research, my sole aim was to investigate the benefits of groups to lonely older lesbians and bisexual women and determine what kind of group composition would offer optimum benefit. As the transcripts grew in number, I became aware that many interviews were

taken up with talking about things other than loneliness. Richard and Brown (2006) suggest that my experience is not uncommon:

> This discrepancy between what one expects to learn in the field and what one actually learns in the field frequently occurs in qualitative research. (p.54)

The groups still feature hugely in the interviews and, as I had anticipated, participants discussed the benefits they derived, their preferences for exclusively lesbian or mixed company and the role of groups in buffering loneliness. But we also talked across a range of topics, intimate, ordinary and everyday. It became clear that the interviews created a space for a conversation about ageing, gender, sexual identity, education, social class and mobility and, most significantly, the intersection of these diverse, multi-layered and complex aspects of human life and experience. Very quickly, I realised that my original research aims and indeed some of my interview questions were pedestrian and pragmatic and would not serve to capture the essence of these fascinating lives. Although the research *does* function on this 'policy and practice' level and reveals important information about the organisation type, composition and benefits as well as revealing some of the hierarchies, disharmonies and exclusion zones of lesbian and bisexual social space, it also operates on another, more elusive and less tangible plane. In many ways, this research is less about groups for old/er lesbian and bisexual women and more about the multiple mobilities, experienced across the life course, that have led this generation of women to seek friendships, social interaction and support in groups predicated upon shared age and sexual identity. These ideas will be explored in the subsequent chapters, which start with an analysis of how the participants' social class,

gender and sexual identities have positioned them as older women in twenty-first century Britain.

Chapter Four: Social mobility as a site of habitus dislocation

4.0   Vignette: Ivy

Although I am drawing on an understanding of intersectionality to explore

the unique collision of gender, sexual identity and class mobilities and their

consequences for my participants, in reality it is difficult to write

'intersectionally' and participants' accounts have been deliberately disrupted

and fragmented in this analysis. Therefore, this chapter and the one that

follows start by offering one, more complete narrative, illustrating the

intersection of class, gender and sexual identity. The vignette starts with Ivy

talking about her early education. Her narrative reveals the classed nature

of 'choices' about schools and careers; Ivy's career aspirations foundered at

the intersection of her gender and class:

> My parents both left school at 14. My dad was an engineer and my mum […] used to take in sewing. So my dad went through an apprenticeship once he'd left the forces and in the end did quite well, but as a small child we didn't have much money at all.
>
> My primary school was a really, really disadvantaged primary school - only a couple of kids each year got through to the grammar school […] but I did and I went to [name of] grammar school because my friend at school's sister had been there […] and if Shirley's sister had been there then it must be good thought I, so I asked my parents to put that down and they did. And so I ended up travelling quite a distance really to go to [name of] grammar school and it was very middle-class and I'd come from a *very* working-class background, so I found it quite *hard*. And never really quite fitted. But […] I got by and then when it came to choosing careers, we were, girls were channelled into... at the grammar school it was nursing, teaching or academia if you were *very* bright, and I certainly didn't want to be a nurse. […] I picked up all the stuff about horticulture and I really thought I wanted to go into horticulture but it had all the fees on the back cover and my parents said, 'Oh we can't afford that.' Never realised that we could have got a grant.
>
> I didn't feel as though I *knew the rules*. I didn't quite *get* how to be like the other girls. I didn't quite *get* how to dress or where to shop for clothes, how to get… certainly how to get the *money* for clothes or how to *converse*. It all felt like a bit of a foreign language. […] You know all the classic stuff – getting people to… getting friends' parents

to drop me off not too close to home and things like that, so that they didn't see where I lived. That kind of thing. You know, going to parties… nobody had parties when I was a child. Going to birthday parties and taking a book token and when you get there realising that *nobody took a book token* to a birthday party... You took *make-up* and things like that but my mum had bought me a book token to take… and, you know, all those things that you do *wrong* because you didn't know what to do. You know, desperate for a pair of jeans and you get them and you find out they're the *wrong kind*; they should have been Levi's and *I never knew*.

It wasn't something that was ever talked about; any feelings of being a lesbian were kindly and firmly *dismissed*. […] You know, you read the magazines, the girls' magazines and it said 'lots of girls go through these phases, not to worry 'cause they just pass' and you know, that was very much the message. And nobody ever spoke. I suppose I must have known what a lesbian was but… it wasn't part of *my* world. […] I mean I had a girlfriend when I was oh 12, 13, and *we never named anything, we never acknowledged that it was anything other than messing* around. […] I think if I were 13 *now* and being that girl I would *know*; I would recognise it. My daughters would have done at 13, *huge* difference there in a generation, *vast* difference. […] It's sad isn't it? That those things… I mean, if I had recognised it for being what it *was*, if I had been able to *name* it, if I had *known* women who were in lesbian relationships - my world would have been completely different. But then I wouldn't have my girls.

If someone cracked me open they'd find working-class inside. With all the advantages and privileges of having had an education and a career and the money. […] So I find it quite impossible really to unpick some of the class things along with the sexuality because, in the end, it was all about being… being *different*. And me being a person who didn't fit in to the group.

Unlike some of the older participants who completed their education in the 1950s, Ivy, who grew up in a small town in Yorkshire, didn't start secondary school until the mid 1960s and married and had her children in the 1970s. It might have been expected that her feelings of transgression would be less than some of the other participants; the introduction of educational and equalities legislation and attitudinal change across the sixties and seventies perhaps softening society's censure. This proved not to be the case; Ivy's life has still been shaped by her working-class, gendered habitus and her

belief, rooted in the conservatism of her socialisation, that motherhood and lesbian sexuality were incompatible identities. Her final words signal the inseparability of classed intersections with gender and sexuality that will be explored in the next chapters.

4.1   Introduction

This chapter exposes the central importance of social class, looking particularly at changes to the education system in the 1940s which gave rise to schooling opportunities and practices that transformed the classed lives of the majority of my participants. In this and the following chapter, I establish how the participants' mobility, their 'transgressions' of the boundaries of class, gender and sexual identity, have intersected to position them as 'different' or out of place across their life course; in Bourdieusian terms creating within them a state of 'cleft habitus' (2004). Informed by an understanding of intersectionality to make visible the 'multiple positionings that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it' (Phoenix, 2006, p.187) Bourdieu's concept of the cleft habitus is extended from its usual position as a tool exposing the difficulties and 'cost' of social mobility to an understanding of the way that multiple mobilities and re-positionings in different fields leave individuals 'out of place'. This intersectional analysis reveals how participants' understanding and subjective experience of their own class, gender and sexual identity changes as they are transformed by movement across fields against a backdrop of rapid social and cultural transformation in the UK. In some fields and under certain circumstances, mobility's potential to disrupt habitus may be lessened, enabling individuals to get 'a feel for the game'. Friedman

(2015) highlights the speed of educational mobility while Nowicka (2015) identifies neighbourhoods as sites of habitus transformation for migrants, particularly their understanding of the rules of behaviour in public spaces. Lesbian and bisexual women born in the 1940s and 1950s had no mentors to coach or prepare them for the social and cultural specificities of elite education; their diverse gender and sexual trajectories happened without instruction. It is my argument that the habitus dislocation that results from movement through such diverse fields of origin and destination is so powerful and so toxic it has motivated participants to seek and create affinity groups where the anxiety and isolation associated with cleft habitus - the hidden, but persistent, injuries of class, gender and sexual identity transgression - are alleviated through social interaction with other, similarly placed individuals. Rather than using Bourdieu's description of the habitus as 'cleft', I am adopting the term *habitus dislocation*[25] to signal the weight and enduring consequences of displacement created by multiple mobilities.

The boundaries of class are internalised through early socialisation. I am particularly interested in exploring the sense of difference that emerges through the contradictions of participants' various positionings as socially mobile, sexual and gender non-conforming adults at a time of rigid and conservative societal norms, which rendered them 'out of place'. I am using Bourdieu's conceptual tools of field, habitus and capital to explain this positioning. The habitus is not immutable; McNay (1999) suggests that although the habitus 'accords a disproportionate weight' to early socialisation, predisposing individuals to act in certain ways, 'the potentiality

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[25] Dislocate, to displace: to put out of joint. From the Latin dislocãre, dis - apart, locãre, to place. Chambers English Dictionary (1990) Edinburgh: W & R Chambers Ltd. p.408.

for innovation is never foreclosed' (p.103). Bourdieu himself felt in a situation of 'habitus clivé' experiencing the contradictions created by his own high academic achievements set against 'lower class and provincial origins' (2004:111). Bourdieu describes the cleft habitus as:

> [B]earing in the form of tensions and contradictions the mark of the contradictory conditions of formation of which they are the product (2000:64)

It is my contention that these 'tensions and contradictions' act as a motivator for the women in my study to organise and participate in the groups and networks for 'likeminded' women that constitute much of their social family. These groups, and their contribution towards rebuilding habitus, are examined in Chapters Six and Seven.

I attend primarily to the women's subjective experience, which as Lawler (1999) observes, can provide insights into the mechanisms of class. Clearly not every participant has had the same experiences or was rendered out of place by every single aspect of their class, gender role or sexual identity. The most profound sense of habitus dislocation I seek to establish lies at the *intersection* of these transgressions. The gendered, sexual and classed aspects of life are not easily separated from each other; the nature of intersectionality forcing us to understand each issue in terms of its interrelation with the others and the catalytic effect of a changing society. My analytical separation therefore should be seen as artificial and partial; a deconstructed viewing platform from which to examine how participants' lives deviated from their origins and the expected norms and conventions of female behaviour in mid to late twentieth-century Britain.

4.2 The timing of lives

> [T]he present is always configured through the ontological tug of the past. (Friedman, 2014:363)

Using a life course paradigm which calls attention to the link between 'human lives and their historical times' (Elder, 1994), alongside an intersectional approach, encourages an understanding of my participants *now* as older women through the context of their prior life course. Plummer (2010) alerts us to the influence of history on the present moment and the difficulty of recording sexual lives:

> The sexual lives I was studying were lived both diachronically and synchronically and were always emergent. […] We live with perpetually reconstructed life others, life memories, life stories, life accounts, life selves—drawing continuously on our own imagined pasts. (p.165)

In an attempt to capture the essence of my participants' lives, both *in* and *over* time, this chapter explores how they are positioned as older citizens by their generation in terms of class identity and social mobility. It is inevitable that their lives have been influenced by the historical period in which they have grown up and lived. Some participants in this research expressed feelings of difference related to their rejection of the prevailing social norms with regard to female roles and appearance, others experienced a profound sense of sexual difference as teenagers and young women; for many their choice to live a lesbian life fractured relationships with parents and siblings and, when shrouded in secrecy and fear, made establishing intimate adult relationships more difficult.

Differences created by gender role and sexual transgression are explored later; here I attend to the educational experiences and social mobility of

participants. For some, social mobility was an early life event; they were propelled via scholarships from working-class family life and primary education into grammar schools with a middle-class milieu. Others encountered middle-class culture through feminist and lesbian groups across the course of their lifetime. Stories of upward social mobility were threaded through many discussions of family history, suggesting historical and emotional associations as well as a certain precarity in several participants' class of origin. Class disjunctures leading to misalignments between habitus and field run through the life course of many participants. Education was a field of profound change, with developments in educational structure and practice in the 1940s, inadvertently leading to conditions which challenged the working-class habitus of a significant number of participants leaving them conflicted and positioned 'neither here nor there'. Regardless of the vehicle or timing of their mobility, I suggest that the fact that at least three-quarters of participants have been socially mobile, mostly through education, has resulted in habitus disruption with consequences that have lasted into their older age.

4.3   1950s education as an agent of social (im)mobility

Interviewing women in their sixties and seventies reveals much about the neglected intersection of gender with the changing class landscape in the mid-twentieth century and it is important to understand the very early experiences of participants in order to appreciate their cumulative influence in older age. Many women shared stories of poverty, large families and deprivation either experienced first-hand or passed down from parents and grandparents; these narratives demonstrate both the aspirational and

tangible journey away from need as well as providing a vehicle for signalling the distance travelled between their parents' and their own generation. Some key issues influencing the participants' experiences of older age - particularly in terms of class, gender and social mobility - have their roots firmly embedded in the education they received. Therefore, this analysis looks back to the 1940s and 1950s, as the participants entered a rapidly changing post-war education system where the provision of free grammar school places, as part of the government's commitment to a universal system of secondary education, changed the course of several participants' educational trajectory when they became the first in their family to go to a grammar school.

While much previous work on cleft habitus has explored the cultural and social schism experienced by working-class students entering *higher education*, this study shows that the contrast between working-class origins and *secondary education* within the elite grammar school system of the 1950s provided an equally fertile site for habitus dislocation. It is evident from the interviews that secondary education represented a turning point for the majority of the participants.

Susan and Minerva both attended Catholic schools in the 1950s leaving, aged 15, without any qualifications. Minerva, who had failed her eleven-plus, joined the army where she was able to obtain professional qualifications and progress to a banking career but Susan went straight into employment in a sewing factory where she worked until she was made redundant in 1996:

I went to the same school from being *seven* until being *fifteen*. I can honestly say I could have left school at *thirteen*; what I learnt in the *last two years* was *appalling*. Most of my education I got through being in the Army.
Minerva (born 1945) retired Army personnel and bank worker.

I liked school; it were alright. But we only went to fifteen so there were no chance of taking any O Levels. I said to me mother, you know, she wouldn't let us go to secondary modern where we, you know, could have done a lot better. […] It were Catholic school […] she wanted us to go there because of religion, which was silly really. 'Cause you'd learned what you needed to learn by eleven hadn't you, you know.
Susan (born 1947) retired factory worker.

The new grammar schools were by no means transformed into egalitarian institutions by the 1944 Education Act. Children from working-class families comprised less than 7% of the school population as the Donnison Report (1970) observed:

Three out of four pupils come from the homes of white-collar workers: three out of five have fathers in professional or managerial occupations. Only one out of thirteen comes from a semi-skilled or unskilled worker's family. (p.49)

It wasn't just the pupils that were middle-class. Schools themselves were often organised along strict classed (and gendered) lines. Joyce's parents left school before they were eleven; she was only able to attend grammar school because she passed the scholarship and the fact that her mother's employer paid for her uniform. She recalls how the classed nature of grammar school was evident to her; her social mobility exposed her to an institution that did not welcome rebellious working-class girls:

My mum was a *cleaner* for one of the posh houses near us and *really*, really kind people and they paid for my school uniform. […] So… I went to the convent [where] the nuns were in class order. So the working-class nuns were the cooks and the cleaners and the more educated nuns were the teachers and it was *so* obvious; it *just* was so obvious. […] There were a lot of very well off girls there and only a few scholarship or working-class kids. […] I just didn't thrive, I

> hated *everything* about it and I *really* made a fuss so the more that I did awful things, the more awful they were.
> Joyce (born 1946) retired housing manager.

This period of rapid change and social transformation, which fulfilled the educational aspirations of thousands of working-class parents for their children, left some participants caught between two worlds. Walkerdine and Ringrose (2006) suggest that while there was a conflict between working-class belonging and educational aspiration for both men and women in the post-war period, women's 'combination of pain and desire went largely unrecognised.' (p.33). Many of the women interviewed referred to streaming and other classed practices of secondary school as diminishing their confidence and eroding their parents' joy that their aspirations had been achieved through their daughters' 'elevation' to a grammar school environment. For some, social mobility became a 'family project'; the girls were pioneers bearing the success of their family, even their school, while the financial and social pressures incurred by their opportunity limited the chances of other family members. Clary and Kate both encountered the complex cultural dynamic of class and gender for the first time as working-class grammar school entrants:

> I went to grammar school and it was a *big thing*. It was a big thing for the *school* because it was a little school – the headmaster was always leaving *me* in charge of the class when I was 10 […] *Two* of us that year passed for grammar school and it had been *years* before that since anybody had. So it was a *big* thing for the *school* and it was a *big thing* for my parents but especially for me *mum*. *She* lived her education and career if you like *through me*, which I *understand*.
> Clary (born 1951) retired counsellor.

> So the ideology and the life-style and the worry about money were *all* about *class*. We *didn't* have enough money. […] That was childhood. It *never leaves you.* […] The children were all what they classically called 'first and onlys'. The *first* child in a mining family or the *only* child in a mining family […] there were *eight* of us at the top of the grammar school vying for the first place. And I won it the first year at

grammar school, so I was the top of the *entire* grammar school so my aspirations went through the roof and I decided I was never going to be poor again.
Kate (born 1946) retired author and teacher.

Their difference and the privilege of grammar school was made apparent to working-class girls in many ways, sometimes subtle, but on other occasions, very overtly as Clary's narrative shows:

I enjoyed being *clever* but when I went to grammar school and I was amongst a lot of other clever girls, it was a different story. […] They were *a lot* more sophisticated than I was. I was still reading Enid Blyton and they were reading Jane Austen so there was a *huge gap* and it was very difficult. […] *One* teacher said, 'Oh girls who come from [name of place] can't speak with a good French accent' so there was quite a lot of stuff, subtle stuff. *That* wasn't subtle but a lot of subtle stuff about my accent and being working-class and *seen* as being *poor*.

Pamela experienced habitus dislocation as she struggled to reconcile her working-class family background with the unfamiliar environment of her grammar school:

I went to a grammar school but my accent would always be wrong. […] Well it was a *shock*. I remember I *met* what I considered to be the *real* middle-class, what I *think* was, when – although when I went to [name of school] quite a few people had *professional* parents and my father was just an ordinary bank worker…
Pamela (born 1945) semi-retired psychotherapist.

Stahl's (2015) research highlights how education challenges certain dispositions in the habitus of working-class students and is 'fraught with potential risks and embarrassments' (p.22). Grammar school proved to be a site of social embarrassment, emotion and disappointment for many participants. With insufficient economic and cultural resources to ease their passage into the new field, their awareness of opportunities they couldn't access also generated dissatisfaction with their home circumstances. Nell

grew up in a Lancashire mill town. She describes here the shadow cast over

her time at grammar school by her economic circumstances:

> [I]t aggravated the situation. It made me more irritable, more sort of,
> 'Why hasn't me dad got a better job?' […] I went to grammar school,
> it was *lovely*, but I was *disappointed* when my best friend, well one of
> my good friends, who was a bit older than me and bigger,
> disappointed when I got her, you know, last year's frock, last year's
> school uniform dresses and things like that. And there were certain
> things that become quite traumatic.
> Nell (born 1942) retired senior bank worker.

Far from being a 'social leveller', school uniform embodied social and

economic inequalities in such a visceral way that the pain of the memory

was evident in the recounting of the experience:

> I *tried* to fit in. I had a little group of friends […] when we got to the
> third year we were allowed not to wear gymslips and we could wear
> skirts. You had to wear a navy blue A line skirt and I, *I* had a girl
> Guide skirt and *they* had skirts they'd got from Barrie's. […] And so
> they used to say 'oh the wind's blowing up our school skirts and up
> Clary's *Guide* skirt'…
> Clary.

Spencer (2005) suggests that research into 1950s education marginalises

the experiences of girls whilst 'over-researching the effects of class' (p.60),

a fact which she attributes to the male domination of sociology at the time.

Feminist writers including Reay (1997) and Skeggs (1997) draw on their

own experiences alongside empirical research to examine the gendered

aspect of mobility, finding it to be particularly problematic for girls, creating

feelings of disloyalty and dislocation (Reay, 1997). These narratives often

resonate with the sense of inequality and difference instilled in the 'first and

onlys' in their attempts to navigate the class divide inherent in the grammar

school system; their lack of the 'right' cultural capital was a painfully

memorable experience. Rosie's parentage; Eastern European Jewish

mother and Dutch, compulsive gambler, father already made her feel different as a child but school set her apart even further:

> We went to grammar school but even in primary school we used to have my cousins' cast-offs so that was *difficult* and you know, cardboard in your shoes and things. […] I felt *different* 'cause there were a *lot* of middle-class kids at grammar school so – although I'm grateful to have been there because you know, it gave me my *future* - so I didn't fit in *there*.
> Rosie (born 1949) retired teacher.

Fifteen of the thirty-five participants went to university or college straight from school and another fifteen obtained degrees or professional qualifications as adults. Aspirant but uneducated parents often lacked the dispositions to support their daughters' progression in the way that more middle-class families took for granted. As a result, some women ended up in jobs they hated, although others were more fortunate in having more enlightened teachers:

> I went into the civil service. I absolutely hated it but when we went for careers advice, you know, that's what they said – you should go into the civil service […] I didn't make a *considered* decision about it. I think that was partly to do with my own naivety in the sense of not being sophisticated. 'Cause my parents couldn't educate *me* in that way 'cause they didn't have it *themselves*.
> Clary.

> [I]f you didn't want to be a teacher or a *nun* they didn't particularly want to know you. I mean me saving grace was me art teacher who was wonderful and I went to art college from that, thanks to him.
> Brenda, born 1950, retired policewoman and charity worker.

Despite having passed the eleven plus and made it to grammar school, Nell's future choices were limited by a lack of knowledge about what was 'out there' and the absence of female role models. She didn't go to university, opting for a job in the bank instead:

> I'd no ambitions really; I didn't know what to do. You didn't have anything in those days you know, you didn't have television, you didn't have… you'd no expectations beyond Lancashire working-

135

class; you hadn't been much beyond Manchester. […] I was good at chemistry and physics, maths and things like that. And I didn't really know what to *do* to go into the sixth form.

University proved to be another field of habitus dislocation where the tension of navigating between working-class community of origin and elite institution often resulted in what Bourdieu (2004) describes as a 'double distance' whereby individuals are detached from both the fields of origin and arrival; literally, positioned 'out of class'. Although she went on to Higher Education and eventually became a teacher and author, Kate dropped out of medical school at the end of the first year, noting the domination and class privilege of her male peers, 'I couldn't join the *sailing club;* I couldn't afford a *drink'*. Kate's interview, resonated with what Lawler (1999) describes as 'two (related) sets of anxieties' (p.11); the fear of returning to working-class poverty set against her sense of being an imposter in her new world. This tension, the sense of being caught between two worlds was not uncommon. Reay (1997) speaks of her own move away from her origins in 'militant working class culture' rendering her a misfit 'out of place and out of time' (p.24). Pamela has experienced similar feelings since her teenage years. She referred frequently to her subjective sense of difference, ascribing it to her own 'eccentricity':

> I never went to university – 'cause it was so hard in '63 – hardly anyone went. And I just knew there was a big difference. A *big* difference in even education, even though I'd been to [name of school], there was a *big difference*. […] That's why I say I'm eccentric – I've never been particularly *socially fluent* right?

In fact, higher education would probably have reinforced Pamela's feelings of difference even further, as working-class female undergraduates were

still scarce in the early 1960s. In 1963, 75% of HE students were male,[26]

offering little opportunity for women to share their experiences and feelings

with similar others, a factor suggested by Friedman (2015) as a key buffer

against the anxiety and cultural dislocation caused by mobility. The class

bias was similarly evident with just 25% of undergraduates coming from a

family with a father holding a manual occupation,[27] and for several

participants it was a site of conflict and disappointment. Reay (2015)

suggests that when habitus is over-extended by movement across fields,

the end result is not the smooth adaptation implicit in the notion of the

chameleon habitus but 'struggle and conflict' resulting in 'heavy psychic

cost' (p.13). For three of the fifteen women who went to university straight

from school, the experience was devastating and they experienced serious

mental health issues in their first year. Clary was sent to a psychiatric

hospital after her first term at university and never went back; the feelings of

difference and inadequacy she had previously experienced at grammar

school returned to haunt her:

> I *made friends*. It wasn't that I didn't have any. Maybe some of it was
> because I felt, amongst people at university, that I had to work twice
> as hard to do as well and I spent a lot of time when I'd been to
> lectures typing up notes afterwards […] The feeling I had at grammar
> school […] was more *intense* at university.

Class differences were not the only elements of struggle and conflict

encountered through education by my socially mobile participants.

Catherine came from a strong religious, working-class family. When she

'escaped' her family's surveillance at the age of twenty, having hidden her

same-sex attractions and feelings for several years, she fell in love with a

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[26] The Robbins Report, 1961-63, cited in Sharpe, 1976, p.21
[27] The Robbins Report, 1961-63, cited in Sharpe, 1976, p.21

female student. She attributed her mental ill-health directly to the

suppression of her lesbian feelings:

> I went to college in 1970 and then essentially what happened then
> was I just had this absolutely massive… the only way you could
> describe it really would be a breakdown. Which was because I'd had
> these feelings from the age of 11, probably earlier, you know for like
> different girls and then when this happened at college the whole lot
> sort of caved in.
> Catherine (born 1950) retired teacher and sexual health worker.

In addition to classed mobilities, feelings of difference or being out of place

have been generated by transgressions of sexual identity such as

Catherine's, resulting in an accumulation that has stayed with some

participants all their lives and continue to shadow their later years. These

'contemporary mobilities' are explored further in Chapter Five.

4.4   A material world: Intersections of gender and class in employment

So far, this chapter has explored the diversity of ways the participants

subjectively experienced their classed origins and were positioned by their

(im)mobility through social and academic education. I want to look now at

how these positionings create material differences, which accumulate

across the life course resulting in economic disparities in older age.

Although most participants did not identify employment as a particular site

where classed differences were overt or troubling, some were able to

articulate how their working-class origins had impacted on their middle-class

careers. As a teacher and author Kate was aware of the kudos her working-

class, lesbian status offered her employers:

> And there was a group called 'Working Class Women Through
> Higher Education' so those of us that had that class identity began to
> meet and in the middle of all of that I was writing and [name of book]
> was published in 1986 and then chosen for Feminist Book Fortnight

the year after. And I was *kind of* the working-class token at the Women's Press; I served the *lesbian slot* and the *working-class slot* so they were *sorted.*

In the 1980s Kate published several books to great acclaim. However, another extract from her interview shows that, despite her success as an author, she wasn't confident operating in a middle-class world; her working-class habitus, her sense of being an imposter, still holding her back:

> I didn't know enough about getting agents - about getting agents or competition to *handle* that world and it comes back to class. There's the feeling of 'they won't let you in'. And my mum used to say that, 'I'd like to be middle-class but they won't let you in'. It's a very, very complex dynamic and *they won't let you in.*

Jacqueline's understanding of what it meant to be 'properly' middle-class was also complicated. She described herself as aspiring working-class; despite her grammar school and university education and job as a senior teacher she still didn't view herself as middle-class and felt she had lacked the confidence and cultural competence to progress further in her job:

> Class has a great deal of meaning. I still think it's one of the hidden factors in almost every aspect of our lives really. The friends we make, the people we feel comfortable with, how easy we do things, what we put into our lives. I think class is more about how you feel about yourself and your place in the world and what you should be achieving than it is about what you *do.* […] You know, I was going up the scale, I got to head of lower school and the next step would have been deputy head and I took one look and I thought, 'Oh no, […] No I don't want to do that.' Now there was nothing pushing me to feel, 'But you should! Of course!'

Most discussion of employment recollected participants' experiences of class *and* gender as a restriction on certain occupations. In 1968, only 29% of children at maintained schools were still in education at the age of sixteen compared with 72% of children at non-maintained schools. Boys were more likely to stay on than girls and strong geographical differences existed, with

children in the north of England significantly less likely to stay in education than those in the south.28 Unfortunately, delays to the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) from 15 to 16 meant that the change, planned in 1964, was not implemented until 1972, the year my youngest participant turned 16. Several participants left school at the age of fifteen often with disastrous consequences for their employment prospects and far-reaching impact on their chances of accruing a living pension. What is very evident from the narratives is that although many of the 'working-class educated' participants still experience the conflict and tensions inherent in the divided habitus and retain *feelings* of insecurity about their classed positions, in reality many of them have had access to more permanent employment and better pensions than those participants whose class location has not changed, resulting in greater financial security across their lifetimes and in their older age.

Michelle just missed out on the extension of the school leaving age, but did manage to gain a degree as an adult. Now in her late fifties, and in recovery from cancer, she is still doing a variety of quite physical jobs including DIY, decorating, joinery and gardening:

> I left school at 15 and I had no qualifications at all so I started out in an office job. I've worked in factories, I've worked on the buses, I've worked for Royal Mail, I worked in a cash and carry in the butcher department. I've worked stuffing teddies in a factory […] I've filled washing up bottles and bleach bottles. I've worked on production lines, I worked in electronics, I've worked in IT, I've done all sorts. Michelle (born 1956) self-employed, working when she can.

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28 The Donnison Report (1970) The Public Schools Commission: Second Report
London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1970 [Online]
http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/psc2/donnison1970-1.html [Accessed 17.3.15]

Michelle now self-defines as middle-class, seeing her mobility *not* as a consequence of education or occupational status but acquired indirectly through her sexuality via her association with middle-class women in lesbian groups. Her description of herself as being both middle-class and working-class contains some of the ambiguity highlighted in previous studies of class in the North of England (Savage et al., 2001) and she hints at a desire to escape her working-class origins in a way that no other participant did:

> I *am* working-class because I *work* but I'm now middle-class […] I mix with professional people *now*. Teachers, social workers, the usual. […] It was a completely different type of person to the people I'd mixed with *before*. Different values, different beliefs, different *attitudes*, you know? And it *was*, although I suppose I didn't realise it at the time, I just thought these are nice people, I like these people, and I didn't really think about it much at the time, but it was because, I think, they were middle-class and they had different attitudes, a different attitude to life and a different outlook.

Susan's interview had a fatalistic quality; education had no transformative influence on her life. She grew up (and still lives in) in a small Yorkshire town, left school at fifteen and saw her factory job, (and marriage and children) as inevitable for someone of her class and gender:

> We just went into local factory, like sewing you know. 'Cause it were good money, so, that were it. There were no […] wanting to *get on*...

Despite their original straight marriages and their status as (predominantly single) adoptive, biological or co-parents, all the participants have also worked throughout their lives; indeed eight women continue to work in some form or other. Lesbians in Jones and Nystrom's (2002) study had been largely self-sufficient and independent for most of their lives. Their self-esteem was often strongly connected to workplace achievements. This suggests a flexibility of gender roles that is a key part of lesbian identity and may contribute towards resilience in older age. For many women,

141

particularly working-class and lone parents, the financial imperative to work

is great; two participants talked of their deep regret that they could not have

stayed at home with children but, in the absence of a male breadwinner,

had to work outside the home:

> I've *had* to be a career woman because of […] not being married. I've been conscious of the fact that I've had to support my daughter like a one parent family almost and *make sure* that I've been able to *earn* a *good salary* so I've had to *work really hard* like most gay women do. […] If I'd have had the *choice*, I would have been a *housewife* […] but not having the *choice* I've pushed myself and *worked all my life*.
> Shirley (born 1948) still working as an adult foster carer.

In addition to the classed aspect of the labour market, which confined

participants such as Susan and Gillian to factories, the deeply ingrained

sexism of the 1950s and 1960s meant that only certain jobs were seen as

'suitable for girls'; participants were clustered in several professions and 13

had been teachers at some point in their career. Having been streamed at

school, Val's restricted education meant that her employment opportunities

were limited and dependent on chance. Between the ages of 13 and 15

when she left school, she had been placed on a 'commercial course':

> Well I, I got into the *bank*. 'Cause my *dad* was in the *bank*. I mean one of the few things he was useful for. *But* the first letter I ever *received* from an employer said 'well you're not up to our usual standard but we'll give you a trial' you know. That's a really good start, you know. So I was *lucky* to get into the bank really.
> Val (born 1940) retired secretary.

This section has illustrated the ways participants' social class was either

transformed or held unchanged by the beliefs and practices of the 1950s

education system, leading to occupational differences, which in turn have

economic implications across the life course. Mindful that the essence of

social class is greater than the sum of one's education and occupation

(McDermott, 2006), I now turn to an understanding of class as a lived

142

experience, looking at the meaning these (im)mobilities held for my participants.

4.5 Theorising adult class identity: 'Upward' mobility and habitus dislocation

Initially when exploring how participants viewed their social class and the importance it held, I asked them to describe their social class and talk about how and why they self-defined in that way. In addition, I asked separate questions about family background, education, occupation and lifestyle. I am drawing on an understanding of class as a lived experience and significant axis of inequality; a view conceptualised by Reay (1998a) as 'a complicated mixture of the material, the discursive, psychological predispositions and sociological dispositions' (p.259).

I suggest that, despite recent research proposing that feelings of class solidarity or loyalty are weakening generally (Savage, 2015), class remains a salient identity for this generation of older women. Only two participants queried the validity of the question or struggled to self-identify, Joan who denied an understanding of class, 'I don't know *anything* about the categories; they don't have any meaning to me' and Vanessa, who identified as middle-class but suggested that class meant 'fuck all'. Vanessa's parents were both professional; her mother was a musician and Vanessa was teased for being 'posh' because they had a grand piano. Vanessa claimed 'not to get' class and felt she had been discriminated against in some lesbian groups because of her class:

> Doesn't mean anything to me. No. The only impact I experience from it is other people who comment about it. Ridiculous things. Like I've got a camper van and I go to France in it, with a friend, not on my

own and the fact that I can do that is because of, you know, the way I was brought up and I've got the confidence to go off and drive on the other side of the road. And it's got nothing to do with class.
Vanessa (born 1947) retired teacher.

The other 33 participants displayed little of the class dis-identification noted by Skeggs (1997) or the ambivalence and high levels of refusal to identify experienced by Savage et al. (2001). Robin grew up in a working-class family where she felt ostracised because she loved music, poetry and reading, in an environment where these pursuits were not valued: 'What's the point of writing poetry; you're not going to get a job with poetry'. Despite running away from home when she was 16 and later gaining a degree as an adult, Robin's continued self-definition as working-class bears none of the shame or stigma suggested in other accounts of working-class women (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 1998b). Living now in a small rented flat in Yorkshire, her sense of class allegiance and pride were uncomplicated:

> Well *now* it signifies you know, a *great pride* for me because it's, you know, apparently *there is no working-class anymore*, which I find *astonishing.* It's like when they say post-wave feminism – it's like almost *what the fuck* is post-wave feminism? I'm *in it* I'm *working at it*. […] So this working-class thing that's becoming a myth is… well it's not a myth for *me* and it's not a myth for *lots* of people that I know. And it's *always* been a *pride*; I've *never* been *ashamed* of it.
> Robin (born 1949) retired Women's Aid worker.

Brenda grew up near Huddersfield in the 1950s. She went to Catholic grammar school and then Art College. For her, class identification was immediate and easily calculated. She saw herself now as 'working-class; I speak as I find' and traced her class identification back to family and school:

> Jill: How do you know you were working-class?

> Because… Because me dad was on the bins and I didn't have any money. We lived on a council estate and then I passed my 11 plus and it was oooh [Laughs]

144

Jill: What was it like?

Then you get to *school* and they *tell* you you're working-class.

Heaphy (2012) found sexual identities to be stronger than class ones for his lesbian and gay participants although he observes the diverse ways in which they articulated, constructed and lived their class identities, often relationally to other identities. Many of my participants offered similarly complex narratives that acknowledged their social mobility and embraced both their past and present classed identities rather than being based purely on 'objective' class. While I accept and honour these subjective definitions, they can be misleading and conceal vast material differences and power imbalances between participants. Here Annie acknowledges some of these contradictions:

> I would say that I'm *working-class*. I don't think that I'd be *perceived* as working-class; I think I'd be perceived as middle-class. And I think that's partly to do with my *education* and the *kind* of work that I've done and quite often people I've mixed with. But, for *me*, I would say I am working-class.
> Annie (born 1951) retired social worker and children's advocate.

An analysis of participants' self-definitions, stories of journey travelled, ambiguous descriptors and sense of allegiance to the working-classes (irrespective of education and occupation) reveals that just under half of the participants either self-identified as working-class or referenced their working-class roots and history, as Anne does here, indicating perhaps a degree of inverted class pride:

> My mother was *definitely* working-class, no question. Her father was a sort of bricklayer, they had 10 children, she was the oldest girl – the second child but the oldest girl - of ten, and they slept 5 in a bed with coats, no blankets and the bed was planks, I mean it was working-class.
> Anne (born 1954) semi-retired teacher.

These narratives were offered in response to my questions about childhood and parental occupation. Participants traced their trajectories through a variety of routes including education, feminism and meeting middle-class lesbians in social groups and frequently used these stories as a way of positioning themselves. Some of these stories were deeply rooted in emotion and awareness of classed and gendered limitations on the previous generation. Here Catherine articulates the origins of her working-class identity:

> I think the emotional bit's inherited, yeah. That sense of identity. Cause both me parents were manual although me mother always wanted […] to work in an office. And she had the ability and the intelligence to, but she never made it all her life, 'cause she was bringing up kids and the war and all that stuff.

Traditional studies of 'upward' mobility often portray it as a positive, indeed desired state, where the socially mobile easily bridge class boundaries by becoming culturally omnivorous (Goldthorpe et al., 1980). Only one interview supported this model; Emily revealed her view of class as something she acquired through education and her professional employment as a nurse-educator, which gives her access to culture and money:

> Well it's *middle-class*. My parents were *working-class*, I was brought up in a working-class environment but I've *educated* and had a professional *role*, so that makes you middle-class doesn't it?
>
> Jill: Do you *feel* differently? How do you know you're middle-class?
>
> [Laughs] I've got lots of money! I've got an *MA*. I've got a *BA*. I've got *loads* of certificates; I think that's middle-class. […] It's more about having ambitions and goals and pursuing them and having the opportunity…
> Emily (born 1949) retired nurse-educator.

Emily's conventional narrative of a smooth trajectory of upward mobility

through education stands out from the majority of others where class is not

so easily or eagerly left behind. Friedman (2014; 2015) draws attention to

mobility's potential to create habitus separation, suggesting that 'the

emotional pull of class loyalties can entangle subjects in the affinities of the

past' (2015:1). Some of my participants' narratives speak to those internal

contradictions and conflicts and resonate with the 'deeply defensive aspect'

identified by Walkerdine and Ringrose (2006) in their discussion of women's

upward mobility. While acknowledging their now middle-class status and

lifestyle they also recognised the social and emotional costs of the painful

transition away from working-class origins often alluding to feelings of

attachment or allegiance to their early childhood class and culture:

> Well I still feel *incredibly* working-class, that's the education I *had* or the *lack* of it, never been to university, so I *feel* very working-class. But I *live* a very middle-class lifestyle. But I don't think the two things just come together and *merge* and make you middle-class; I *won't* have that.
> Joyce.

The fact that Joyce retains such a strong sense of her working-class self

despite her middle-class lifestyle implies that, as Lawler (1999) suggests, for

many people, rather than being attached to external markers - indicators

such as employment, housing and the accumulation of material goods -

class is in fact inscribed as part of the self. Gina saw herself as middle-class

now:

> [Y]ou know, look at where I *live*. Obviously I'm middle-class right. You know I've got two Masters' degrees; of course I'm middle-class. *But historically* absolutely not. I always feel *really* intimidated by people with posh accents.
> Gina (born 1952) full-time hospice counsellor/social worker.

Gina's movement through the class structure renders her middle-class

identity as tenuous and uncertain but she doesn't feel she 'fits' in a working-class milieu; a position she attributes to growing up feeling 'out of place':

> I'm historically… it's difficult to say even working-class but my parents were very aspirant. But like I say absolutely zero culture, zero books, zero nothing, nothing, nothing. 'Cause I was dead clever I got a bursary or whatever you called them. Basically I went to a direct grant school for free […]

Gina is not alone in her sense of being an imposter in a 'middle-class world'. Many other women, including Ivy, Gwennie, Joyce, Clary, Pamela, Nell and Val made reference to similar feelings of dislocation, having developed their abilities, skills, attitudes and dispositions under very different social arrangements to the ones they find themselves in as adults. Lawler 's research with socially mobile white British women born into working-class families reveals similar findings. She uses Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital to understand their expressions of anxiety around class about which she concludes:

> Although these women have acquired a measure of symbolic and cultural capital, they have not inherited these capitals but 'bought' them within systems of education and training, or through the relationship of their adult lives. They cannot fully occupy what Bourdieu calls the 'habitus' […] of the middle classes. (1999:13)

Annie and Kate's descriptions of their positioning as working-class women moving in predominantly middle-class circles exemplify Lawler's notion that class distinctions are inscribed into the self and cannot just be taken up or left behind. These women acknowledge the disjuncture between their working-class origins and the adult middle-class lifestyles they have acquired through their education, relationships, careers and the subsequent assimilation of the 'dispositions' of the middle-class. In many cases, they have been professionals operating at a senior level in careers including

education, housing and social work. However, not only do they refuse to identify as middle-class but, unlike participants such as Ivy and Gina, their interviews did not resonate with the pain of estrangement that has been associated with aspirational mobility (Lawler, 1999; Allen, 2015). What they do reveal is a resistance to assume an inauthentic identity, deeply entrenched in a working-class 'loyalty to self' narrative similar to the one identified by Stahl (2015):

> The opportunity may start a journey that takes you away from your roots but it doesn't change the *roots*, it changes the *label*, and I… I won't change the label. I am who I am […] *for me*, being working-class means that I can identify with the vast majority of… just ordinary people out there. You know, ordinary families, ordinary kids; that I don't *have* to have a pretention. That I just *be*. I am who I am. I am Annie and I identify as working-class.
> Annie.

> My identity will *always* be working-class but other people won't see me as that. *Deeply* working-class.
> Kate.

Heaphy (2011) explores the cultural and economic construction of classed gay (male) identities. Joyce's narrative exemplifies his assertion that class is, ''fundamentally relational, and […] middle-class identities often represent the 'given' norms against which working-class identities are judged as lacking' (p.47):

> We used to fight about *white bread*, you know, I'd buy white bread and she'd say 'you can't bring that in this house, it's too bad, it's horrible, get out!' and I'd say, 'it's me or white bread!' [Laughs] or it's *both* of us or *nothing. Now* I wouldn't *dream* of buying white bread because I know it's not healthy. I've had to have my own journey *around* the things that are *working-class* and *bad* for you or are *working-class* and *good* for you, which is… I can't name the things which are working-class and good for you! But yeah, we have a *completely* different approach. […] I think some people *do* totally move themselves into a middle-class arena, but it's not where I want to live. And I feel quite a lot of middle-class ways are what's the word, sort of *patronising*, you know.

With the exception of Michelle, none of the narratives suggested that participants saw working-class origins as something from which they particularly wanted to escape although, like Joyce, several were able to articulate their appreciation of the lifestyle and choices that 'middle-classness' provided.

Savage et al. (2001) suggest that 'class is a marker by which people relate their life histories' (p.875) and this was certainly true for many of my participants. As can be seen from the narrative extracts, conversations about class were inevitably relational, accompanied by some kind of contextualizing story whereby several participants still claimed a working-class identity while acknowledging their middle-class lifestyles (for example, Ivy, Gwennie, Joyce, and Kate) and several others offered what I describe as a 'reluctant middle-class' narrative whereby working-class origins, struggle, sacrifice and allegiances were stressed (for example, Catherine, Alison, Nora and Rosie). These findings would seem to indicate that a working-class identity remains a source of pride; an important and esteemed category for many of the participants, echoing the work of Savage et al. who established the existence of inverted working-class pride in their study in the Northwest concluding that '"working classness" is not entirely a stigmatized identity' (2001:885). Two participants identified as 'educated working-class' (Gina and Jacqueline) and eleven women offered fairly straightforward middle-class/comfortable definitions (including Vanessa, Lilia and Louise).

To tease out some of the inconsistencies apparent in the narratives, I have

analysed the women's self-definitions of class and discussions of education, careers and mobility using more objective typologies, whilst being mindful of Reay's (1998b) caution of the pitfalls of exploring class through, 'a rigid theoretical framework grounded in occupational categorization' (p.23). If I seek congruence between education, occupation and the participants' self-definition as an indicator of 'authentic class', just two women (Gillian and Susan) would be classified objectively as working-class. These women are both located in the North of England and represent just six per cent of participants.

An alternative analysis discards the women's self-definition, using only education and occupation to attribute class. Drawing on McDermott's (2010) framework, I have adapted the category of 'working-class educated' to make it more relevant to the educational opportunities open to this generational cohort of women. Extending the category to include college *or* the acquisition of professional qualifications as well as university attendance, reveals an extraordinary level of social mobility. Five participants can be identified as working-class (Edie, Frances, Denny, Gillian and Susan) as they lack any further or higher education or professional qualifications. This indicates that the middle-class self-definition claimed by Edie and Denny lacks congruence with their jobs and education and is invested in their social and cultural networks. Frances was 'frightened' by the middle-class women she met in groups; her self-perceived middle-class status was fragile, signified predominantly by the etiquette practices drilled into her in childhood:

> Cocktail *parties*, the way I *spoke*, *manners,* the people we *associated*
> with, the dos and the *don'ts*, you know, I know how to use all me

knives and forks and all me glasses…
Frances (born 1952) retired NHS administrator.

Using this framework, 4 participants (Esther, Louise, Nancy and Vanessa) would be classified as middle-class, with the remaining 26/35 (74%) participants located in the category 'working-class educated' (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Participants' social class using an adaptation of McDermott (2010)

Middle-class (11%)	Working-class (14%)	Working-class educated (74%)
Esther	Denny	**Alison**
Louise	Edie	**Anne**
Nancy	Frances	**Annie**
Vanessa	Gillian	**Bina**
	Susan	**Brenda**
		Catherine
		Clary
		Emily
		Gina
		Gwennie
		Ivy
		Jacqueline
		Joan
		Joyce
		Kate
		Lilia
		Michelle
		Minerva
		Nell
		Nora
		Pamela
		Robin
		Rosie
		Shirley
		Sofia
		Val

This figure is a testament to the widening of educational opportunity in the 1960s and 1970s signifying upward social mobility as these women were the first in their families to enter further or higher education. As this chapter demonstrates, it is also an indicator of a potential site of habitus conflict; many working-class educated participants lacked the economic, cultural and

social dispositions to guide them through this new field leaving some disappointed and others feeling trapped between two worlds, never comfortably fitting in either.

While some studies of education and mobility propose a transformation of the habitus - a movement away from the field of origin and the acquisition of new ways of being - Abrahams and Ingram's (2013) study of local students entering university suggests that many people who are socially mobile create a 'third space' whereby a 'chameleon' habitus is possible, adaptable to both the field of 'departure' and the field of 'arrival'. Schneider and Lang (2014) propose a similar idea with their suggestion of 'habitus diversification' whereby assimilation to the expected habitus of professional or elite fields occurs. These concepts *could* work to explain Annie and Joyce's apparent closeness to their milieu of origin and stated ease in moving between working-class and middle-class fields. However, many other participants like Ivy, Rosie and Nora, linked their mobility to fragile class identities, feeling that they were positioned as 'out of class'; experiencing a sense of hybridity akin to that discussed in accounts of queer and diasporic unbelonging:

> [M]y *roots* are working-class and I would *like* to say I'm working-class but I know full well my economic situation means I'm *not. But*, but it means you don't *fit* and *there's* an element of loneliness. Because you're not one or the other.
> Rosie.

> Well I know I sort of am middle-class 'cause I've got a middle-class lifestyle and because I've got a middle-class job […] and I've been to university. *I'm not sure* whether I identify as middle-class.
> Nora (born 1954) part-time teacher.

Jacqueline's social mobility means that she feels most secure not in the new middle-class world or back in the working-class world of her birth but somewhere halfway between the two:

> I call myself the '*educated* class' 'cause I think that's what we are. You know, there's a certain group of friends I have that I feel the most confident with; the *first* ones to go to university, the different backgrounds… so I call us the educated class and for whom education has *continued* to be important.

I suggest these feelings of displacement can be best understood as another example of habitus dislocation. Bourdieu (1999) recognised its occurrence in cases of long-range mobility when the habitus was unable to adjust to the economic, social or cultural conditions of the new. The habitus of participants such as Rosie, Nora, Jacqueline and Gina was extended from its working-class roots, through grammar school, university and middle-class occupation. Not only had they never fully adapted to the new circumstances, but also they were unable to return comfortably to the field of origin; habitus dislocation rendering these participants emotionally, socially and culturally alienated. Michelle and Gillian have experienced similar habitus disruption through their social encounters with middle-class lesbians exposing them to a new, cultural milieu. Bourdieu suggests that these disruptions are not easily resolved, creating:

> [A] habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and with its ambivalence, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities. (1999:511)

This chapter has traced the participants' journeys through the life course looking particularly at how social class and social mobility impacted on their lives. For a few, lack of educational opportunity served to 'fix' their lives rendering them socially immobile and creating economic challenges that

continue to accumulate in older age. Participants such as Susan and Denny have retained their original class identity (but traversed gender and sexuality norms rendering them 'different' to their families of origin, school friends and work colleagues). Other participants experienced social mobility, often as a consequence of access to grammar school and then higher education or via meeting middle-class lesbians in social spaces. Some of these women, for example, Pamela, Ivy and Gina, feel that their class of origin still marks them as being 'out of place'. Several participants, including Kate and Shirley have crossed class borders but claim to retain a sense of being authentically working-class despite the social and cultural dispositions of their lives today. I believe that this movement across fields, whether it be socially or through educational or occupational opportunities, has created internal conflict in many participants; their habitus stretched between different fields is not fully adapted to either, leaving them 'out of place', neither feeling to belong in their communities and families of origin nor in their new middle-class environments.

While the narratives of aspiration, social class mobility and change offered by my participants are important ones, indicating the social, educational and cultural origins of this generation of elders, they reveal just one aspect of the 'difference' that has positioned many of my participants as 'other' - both socially and materially - and continues to do so in their older age. Whereas recent discussion of cleft habitus is located in the *single* field of social mobility (Ingram, 2011; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Friedman, 2015), I suggest that the concept can also be used to understand *multiple* misalignments of dispositions and practices; through their rejection of

traditional gender norms and straight sexual identity many of my participants were caught between a number of social fields and have never shaken off the resulting sense of disequilibrium.

The following chapter discusses other forms of mobility, looking at the experiences and consequences of transgressing gender role and sexual identity expectations in the mid twentieth century. These contemporary mobilities, which have intersected with the participants' experiences of social class transgression, have placed participants into lives where their existing dispositions were inadequate to guide them, where they had no moral or social 'code' to follow leaving them with feelings of dislocation and 'unbelonging'.

Chapter Five: Life course diversity: Gender and sexuality - contemporary mobilities as a site of habitus dislocation

5.0   Vignette: Gillian

Gillian was born in 1944 and grew up with her mother and grandfather in a house with gas lighting and no bath, where she was responsible for managing the budget, shopping and caring for her family. This account starts with her description of how being placed in a lower stream combined with her family's inability to support or guide her stacked the odds against her educational success. Whereas Ivy chose her grammar school because her friend's sister went there, Gillian chose her secondary modern because they played hockey:

> I wasn't *too bad* at school but then nobody encouraged… there was no encouragement to go to school or to be… nobody ever went to see how I were *doing*. […] And then when I went to secondary school they put me in a class that was *lower* and once you're in a *lower* class it's really *hard* to get back up again […] it were 2 years before I got moved up into a C and then of course you're leaving at fifteen. […] I can remember me mum saying 'our Gillian's not *right good* at *school'* so I thought 'oh I'm not *right good* at *school'* but I were always really good at *athletics* so I sort of concentrated on that.

> I worked in the mill for *thirteen* years. But I didn't work in the *proper* mill as like spinning and weaving, I worked for [name] wools, do you know knitting. […] I did that for thirteen years. I *hated* it. Every *minute* of it. And then I worked at [name] joinery for another thirteen years making windows and doors. That was horrendous…

> I don't know how I knew this but must have *read* summat in a *book* and saw the word lesbian – it must have been a story about two women, I can't remember now, I think I was really probably quite *young* – and so I looked it up and then I thought 'oh *bloody hell*, that's *me*' and then I was *really, really scared*. I was really scared. I was *scared* all the time that anybody would *know*. I used to think that my… if I had *hairs* on my *arms*… I must have had hairs on my arms and I thought 'Oh God I've got *hairs* on my *arms* if anybody sees that they'll *know*.' I *did*!

> [T]he people that I worked with, the one guy that I worked with *never spoke to me*; he didn't used to speak to me, it was *horrible*, it was horrible. […] But you see in *them* days the foreman they'd just be touching women up *all time* and just getting away with all that stuff

and I were just *frightened*. I just said *nothing*, I were just *petrified* that anybody were gonna *know*.

Do you know what my mum said when I told her? She said she wished she were *dead*. […] After my *mum* died, I decided I was gonna tell everybody so I told everybody and people were like *horrified*; *friends* you know, some friends from the walking group and they were like *mortified*, really like, really weird like and people at *work*… I can remember somebody at work and she says 'oh never mind'.

I stopped wearing skirts - as soon as my mum died - I never wore a skirt *again*. […] You know, it just suited me really better.

I've got a *scooter* you know and there's a big movement with people with scooters but the trouble with going on that is that it is all very *heterosexual* and very *male*. […] It's alright when you're talking about the *scooters* and everything but you can only do that… you know you never really *fit in*. it's like a lot of things, you don't really *fit in* because they're all talking about, you know, their wives […] I've never managed to find a lesbian scooter club.

Gillian's life has been shaped by her social class, and her transgressions of gender role and sexuality in a particularly traditional and conservative era. Her narrative reveals the material consequences of her relative social immobility and the emotional pain of habitus dislocation, engendered by the rejection of 'hegemonic femininity' (Waite, 2015) and heterosexual identity, which was experienced by many participants and is explored further in this chapter.

5.1   Introduction

The previous chapter established how social mobility, partially created by changes to the education system in the 1940s, led to the fracturing of habitus for several participants rendering them 'neither here nor there'; caught between two social classes but uneasy in both. Feminist writers have indicated that such social mobility may have particular emotional costs for women (Skeggs, 1997; Lawler, 1999). This chapter traces further

emotional and economic challenges of the habitus dislocations brought about by sexual identity transgressions and the rejection of dominant gender norms. Bourdieu (1999) described the 'double bind' provoked when the habitus is too far stretched between fields revealing a 'system of dispositions that is itself contradictory and divided against itself' (p.383). Bourdieu did not employ the notion of cleft habitus outside the field of social mobility via elite education, however, it is my contention that applying this conceptual tool to more contemporary mobilities helps to understand how my participants were positioned by multiple transgressions. Reay (1995) notes that the dispositions of habitus are 'inevitably reflective of the social context in which they were acquired' (p.357). With effort, my participants were able to refuse the gender and sexual norms laid down for them in the 1940s and 1950s but such resistance came at a cost; participants had few dispositions to guide them in the new fields. The assumption of heterosexuality in childhood, reinforced by education and a media which ignored or reviled non-heterosexual figures, compounded their sense of difference and invisibility - revealed in comments such as this:

> I thought I was the only lesbian on earth and I thought people would view me as completely odd or perverted.
> Lilia (born 1952) didn't marry or have children. Lilia and Ivy were a couple and had lived together for many years.

I suggest this early isolation, coupled with feelings of difference, even abnormality has left some women adrift; feeling incongruous in conventional gender and sexual identity orders yet lacking the unconscious practical expertise of habitus to orient their practices in the new fields. This chapter starts with an outline of the historical era in which this generation grew up and then turns to childhood and adolescence where many of them first

encountered (and began to question) stereotypical gendered identities and 'compulsory' heterosexuality. With their prior life course firmly in mind, this chapter explores how participants experienced, negotiated and challenged the power of hegemonic femininity and heterosexuality, transforming their own lives in the process. I propose that such transgressions can be viewed as contemporary mobilities and, as such, produce similar challenges to the habitus creating social and emotional disequilibrium; feelings of isolation and being 'out of place' akin to those of social mobility, generating a need for belonging and group participation. The resulting groups, social movements and friendships, which can be viewed as a way of affirming lifestyle choices and establishing habitus, are explored in the two final analysis chapters.

This generation of women was born into and lived through a period of particularly rapid social, technological and legislative change, which has transformed many aspects of society rendering them new and unfamiliar. Particularly pertinent to a contemporary understanding of gender role flexibility and sexual difference are the rise of the Gay Liberation Movement in the early 1970s alongside second wave feminism, which not only generated positive images of alternate sexual practices but, more importantly, created space to problematise 'institutionalised heterosexuality'. Although sexual equalities are by no means a universal inheritance, LGBT individuals coming of age in the UK today have visible models in sport, media and politics. They will grow up expecting their rights to be enshrined in law; the past decade has witnessed a raft of equalities legislation

including civil partnerships, the opportunity to adopt, rights of succession, and protection against employment discrimination.

By comparison, the post-war, pre-Stonewall generation cohort of women in this study were socialised in a conservative social, political and religious climate. Although the 'swinging sixties' are widely viewed as a period when social and sexual freedoms increased, an objective analysis reveals British society to be maintained by harsh legal penalties and strict moral code. It is only towards the end of the 1960s, when a raft of legislation decriminalised private homosexual acts between men aged over 21 (1967), legalised abortion (1967), abolished capital punishment and reformed the divorce laws (1969). By this time, the majority of my participants was in their late teens or early twenties. It is my contention that, in addition to the financial and structural inequalities experienced by some (often as a consequence of class and gender limitations on education and job opportunities, frequently resulting in low-paid employment with inferior pensions, and the financial hardship of the gender pay gap),[29] many participants also experience feelings of being 'out of place' that are culturally and socially shaped by the collision of their generational positioning with social class, gender and sexuality mobilities.

Women born in the 1940s and 1950s grew up in a time of rigid gender roles, specifically the pervasive 'ambition' of marriage and motherhood and a traditional division of labour underpinned by the blanket assumption of

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[29] In 1982, the average hourly income for full-time male workers and full-time female workers in non-manual jobs was £4.62 and £2.82 respectively. In manual jobs, the figures were £2.95 and £2.03.
1982 New Earnings Survey, cited in Sharpe (1984:50)

heterosexuality. At some point in their life trajectory each of my participants has resisted and rejected these social constructs to varying degrees and with varying emotional costs. De Vries and Herdt (2012) report that feelings of difference and not fitting in were frequently and uniformly repeated in their research with older gay men in San Francisco and Chicago. For some participants in my research, similar expressions of difference were related to their rejection of the prevailing social norms surrounding female roles and appearance. Others experienced a profound sense of their own sexual differences as teenagers and young women and for many their choice to live a lesbian life fractured relationships with parents and siblings and, when shrouded in secrecy and fear, made establishing intimate adult relationships more difficult. Not only was a lesbian or bisexual identity without validation in mainstream society where it was stigmatised and marginalised, but the existing lesbian social networks - predominantly in the form of bar culture - were hard to access, classed and dominated by a butch/femme dogmatism.

Butler (2015) views the 'psychosocial and slow inculcation of [gender] norms' as arriving, 'when we can scarcely expect them […] animating and structuring our own form of responsiveness' (p.29). The consequences of socialisation during a period of essentialist understandings of binary gender which prescribed explicit and rigid roles, were habitus dispositions not always able to fully adapt to the challenges of living in an alternative, relatively uncharted, way. I believe these challenges to the habitus were exacerbated by the fact that many women did not discover or disclose their sexual identity until their thirties and forties. Thus, it is my argument that the intersections of these gender and sexual identity transgressions, along with

social mobility and other axes of difference have positioned many participants as 'different'; rendering them out of place across the life course and influencing how they have approached, entered and will live out their older age.

5.2   Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s: Recognition and transgression of gender role

Participants frequently spoke of their transgressions of heterosexuality and conventional gender roles as intertwined; the borders between them are blurred and indistinguishable. For some women, Minerva, Gina and Esther for example, early recognition of lesbian or bisexual feelings triggered new ways of being along with the refusal of marriage and motherhood. Others, such as Louise and Joan, transgressed the dominant gender role expectations of their generation long before they acknowledged or acted on feelings of sexual difference. Some women, including Ivy, Kate and Robin, found a new sexual identity through feminist groups and politics. Two women, Shirley and Alison, gave up full-time housewifery reluctantly, an indirect consequence of their sexual identity being the financial necessity for full-time work, although this would have been the likely future for the working-class women regardless of their marital status.

Several participants expressed frustration at the limitations of inadequate education, their lack of opportunity and the passivity wrought by marriage. For some, awareness of these limitations served as a driver for them to deliberately negotiate a different kind of life where they could deploy individual agency and reflexivity. For others, they contributed to the increasing sense of difference, which had emerged as they navigated their

163

'upward trajectory' through education. Mackinnon and Bullen (2005) comment on the deployment of agency noting that the articulation of both class and gender:

> [V]ary considerably according to the context in which they are embedded. The changing context may provide the space in which some agency is possible, some politics can be engaged, some means of transcending the gendered and classed structures of our lives can be found. Or it may render agency, political engagement and transcendence less possible. (p.32)

Jacqueline's early rejection of traditional gender role expectations pre-dates her engagement with the politics of women's liberation, which made her later sexual and emotional relationships with women almost obligatory. While her mother's modest educational aspirations for her to be a secretary were grounded in her own limited experience and expectations, in relation to marriage and motherhood she urged Jacqueline 'to travel! *Not* to make a home':

> [F]rom about the age of 14 onwards I hadn't wanted to get married. […] As far as I could see, people were rabbits and they endlessly reproduced and there was no progress in society, of any kind, other than just reproduction. […] I also hated housework, didn't like cooking, wasn't particularly attracted to babies, didn't like the idea of a home, particularly. None of that stuff interested me very much. Jacqueline (born 1944) didn't marry or have children. She was single and lived alone.

For some participants, early awareness of their sexual and emotional preferences positioned them on an unconventional life course; others reached this point later, in their thirties and forties. Regardless of when they occurred, transgressions including the rejection of the twin pillars of hegemonic masculinity - heterosexual marriage and motherhood - or refusal to conform to codes of dress and appearance often set women apart from their parents, friends and siblings, creating a fracture between them that

remains into older age. Val, the eldest of the participants, recalled how

familial expectations for her were centred on domestic life, marriage and

children:

> It was *so* drummed into us that what was expected was, you know, you couldn't be a *proper woman* without being *married* and having *children*. […] I didn't want *that* really. I had […] a single aunt but my twin got married at eighteen. Still married to the same chap! And so, you know, everybody… oh you next, you next. […] I still thought I'd *have* to do it. I'd *have* to do that. So when I was eighteen for instance, I thought 'well I suppose it'll be alright if I married at twenty-three. But then when I got to twenty-three I thought 'Oh. I wish I'd got this bloody husband and children.' […] I didn't want it. But I *still* tried, it's *crazy*, I was *so* tied into that. I didn't see an alternative. So you know, I used to go out with these chaps and my mum used to say 'you could have married him if you'd played your cards right.'
> Val (born 1940) didn't marry or have children. She was single and lived alone.

When Val discovered feminism, which she now describes as her religion, it

became an integral part of her identity as a lesbian feminist. She is a

qualified social worker, an articulate and committed activist; proud to have

been instrumental in the setting up of the Camden Lesbian Centre and the

London Older Lesbian Network. Yet, her acute awareness of her parents'

low expectations, combined with the fact that she left school in 1956 aged

15 having studied a 'commercial course', continue to impact her life now.

She described to me how she tries to 'catch up in knowledge' through

reading and how, now in her 70s, she is positioned differently from her

slightly younger contemporaries both materially and culturally:

> You know, I don't have a computer - I don't *want* a computer in here because it's a tiny space and I just feel it would take over – so I *don't want* that but I haven't you know… I had a motorbike but never had a *car*. Never had a *house*, haven't got a *washing* machine, you know. And it *doesn't matter* to *me* as it might to somebody else because of my low expectations I think.

These 'low expectations' can be partially attributed to Val's early habitus

formation acquired within a particular set of social conditions; a female child

born to a working-class family in Battersea 'with the guns blazing away'. Her

new experiences and interactions do not eradicate the earlier dispositions,

which were cast on her inferior status as a third girl in the family and placed

her social capital within femininity, marriage and motherhood. Friedman

(2014) suggests that the concept of habitus helps us to imagine how:

> [T]he mobile person's past can shape their horizon of expectations in
> the present. (p.362)

Emily was another participant who recognised quite early on that her

expected path of marriage and motherhood held no allure. In her interview,

she described herself repeatedly as 'different':

> Because there was always the expectation, you'll get *married*. I kept
> moving to places where the marriage age was later and I was really
> pleased about it! Scotland you got married at seventeen and a half,
> eighteen in Canada they got married two or three years later in
> London, they seemed to get married even *later* – great! So it just
> didn't appeal – nor having babies.
> Emily (born 1949) didn't marry or have children. She was single
> (civilly partnered and then widowed) and lived alone.

Awareness of gender injustice and the limitations on women's role often

started within the family. Like Val, Louise found solace in the feminist

movement, and was active in the Greenham Peace Camp. Her impatience

with the constraints of the traditional feminine role prevalent in her 1950s

adolescence can be seen in this narrative, which reveals her palpable sense

of frustration and desire for a different kind of life:

> [T]he thing to do, the *only* thing to do was to have children and
> women didn't *work*. And I think the first thing I would remember
> about becoming a feminist, I must have been about 10 or 11 and it
> must have been the school holidays, I was at home all day and it was
> a windy day and when my dad came home from work at night, she
> said to him, 'Vincent do you think you could possibly shut the tall

bedroom window, it's a bit stiff and its been blustery all day and I haven't been able to close it.' […] I don't think I said a word, I just thought then, 'Well why the hell didn't you ask *me*? I was in, I can close windows and what's more I am *not* going to grow up into the sort of person that has to wait all day to ask her husband to shut the window when he comes home from work. I think I was 10 or 11. And I felt that very strongly and I haven't forgotten it.
Louise (born 1949) married, didn't have children. She was now single and lived alone.

Although her (middle) class was a constant, as a single, lesbian woman who worked as a building surveyor, Louise's sense of her own gendered and sexual difference from other women remains to this day. Following her divorce, she has lived alone for many years, now living in a suburb of Leeds, which she described as mostly middle-class but 'mixed'. This more diverse environment was highly significant to her; she described how saying hello to passers-by connected her to the local community, helping her 'to feel normal' whereas her previous housing situation, in the midst of young heterosexual families, had made her feel conspicuous and out of place; isolated by the intersection of her class and gender role choices:

> It's an odd thing to say isn't it? I *am* normal. The last place I lived was a little terraced house in south Leeds in what was a mining village and became suburbia. And it was a place called R. Nearly everybody else in the terrace I lived in came from R, been brought up there, they'd married somebody from R, they'd moved into this little terrace and the estate agent advertised the terrace - every time a house came up for sale – it was 'suitable for a newly married young couple'… How dare they! But anyway that's what moved in; newly married young couples from R, working-class, they usually had a baby very quickly. […] And I thought, 'Oh for goodness sake! I don't belong here!'
>
> Jill: Ok. Whereas here you feel…
>
> Yeah, they're not all the same as me by any means, but just the fact that people are *different* and there's a bit of everything. […] At R people couldn't understand difference; I was just *completely* beyond the pale. I was certainly not out […] I mean being out as a woman living on your own was *extraordinary* to them. And then they,

probably some of them must have caught on that I was doing joinery work and they… they just couldn't relate to me at all.

5.3 Swimming against the tide: Recognition and transgression of heteronormativity

Development of lesbian or bisexual identity

> As children, gays and lesbians are raised, by default, as heterosexuals and are socialized to maintain a heterosexual lifestyle, often in an environment filled with antigay sentiment (Peterson and Gerrity, 2006:50)

For sexual minorities, sexual orientation is a significant part of the more general search for a unique identity, with other influences including the historical period in which one lives, class, gender and ethnicity. In the 1950s and 1960s the 'hidden but continuing weight of the heterosexual assumption' (Weeks, 2015:54) was all-pervasive; there can be few aspects of identity which engender fear and resistance in the same way as the realisation of non-normative sexual (or gender-identity) feelings in a repressive society:

> I allus felt yeah a bit different. […] I didn't realise at first, you know, just be *meself*, you know. But then when I found out I thought 'ooh', you know, especially with religious aspect, 'I don't want to be… I don't want to be like this' so tried to… you know, you want to be like everybody else.
> Susan (born 1947) married and had children. She was now single and lived alone.

Over forty per cent of the participants talked about having crushes or relationships with girls at school or feeling 'different' in their adolescence. Dunne (1997) notes how women in her study, 'felt at odds with the dictates of emphasized femininity and romantic heterosexuality' (p.39). In 1950s and early 1960s Britain, these 'dictates of femininity' were focused on curtailing the independence briefly afforded to women during the Second World War.

Fashion and the female image became 'restrictively feminine' (Sharpe, 1976:42) and Dunne (1997) suggests that the cultural reinforcement of heterosexuality, acted to 'obscure and stigmatise' alternative emotional and sexual practices particularly during adolescence.

Like the women in Levine's (1997) study, many of my participants experienced same-sex attraction in their teens, some even earlier. Some women knew at a young age that they were not attracted to men and did not want to marry them or have babies, but they were living in an era where there were no opportunities to discuss their adolescent same-sex attractions and feelings and certainly no validation of a lesbian identity as a legitimate lifestyle:

> I'd always had close friendships with girls, but never… I mean I didn't even… I hadn't even heard the word lesbian, y'know. And I remember being desperately unhappy because… there were no […] we would have had a television by then, there was nothing at all… Catherine (born 1950) didn't marry or have children. She was single and lived with her sister.

In the 1950s and 1960s not only was there no positive media representation of lesbians, the existence of lesbianism, even the word 'lesbian' was not known by many of the participants making the development of a positive lesbian or bisexual identity a more complex and difficult process. Clunis et al. (2005) suggest that because of the conservatism of the 1950s, women coming out then had even less information available to them than previous generations. Markowe (2002) reports her participants as feeling 'very alone in coming out to self' (p.67), a situation exacerbated by the paucity of positive media images in the 1980s and 1990s. Jones and Nystrom (2002) report one of their participants living her whole life 'in the closet' and not

using the term lesbian until she was 94. In my study, Louise's testimony

reveals the contradictory nature of the tension between her lesbian feelings

and the inevitable heteronormative discourses of her adolescence:

> At boarding school, I had a sort of a tentative lesbian relationship at the age of about 13 or 14 I think. It was very tentative and I don't think we labelled… I don't think I knew what a lesbian was. I don't think I knew what we were doing either. […] But at the same time we were talking in our daily lives about when we had boyfriends and when we were going to get married and all the stuff, traditional boring stuff, that teenage girls talk about. So what we actually did in the dormitory didn't seem to come into it; I don't know why not!

As teenagers in the 1960s, Brenda and Clary were similarly unaware of the

existence of lesbianism; they had no knowledge or language with which to

express or authenticate their teenage attraction to other girls:

> It was a *different time* then - it's hard to explain – it was *totally, totally* different. Didn't *exist*. It's not that people were saying 'ooh, look at *them*, *they're* not *right*', it *didn't exist*.
> Brenda, born 1950, married and had a child. She was now single and lived alone.

> I got strong attractions to different girls but I didn't think of it as something *sexual* – maybe because I didn't have the *language*. […] Well I'd never heard the *word* lesbian. I wasn't even *aware* that, that *girls* could be attracted to *girls* and I didn't *recognise* it as a sexual thing.
> Clary (born 1951) married and had a child. She was now single and lived alone.

These narratives reveal something of the early socialisation and habitus

formation of many participants, which were steeped in the conservative

sexual mores of the period. Bourdieu (1990) indicates that the 'anticipations

of the habitus give disproportionate weight to early experiences' (p.54). I

suggest that the tension between the participants' experience of a powerful

heteronormative socialisation fortified by the cultural invisibility of lesbians

and their compelling but subdued non-heterosexual feelings, over time

created a conflicted habitus, unsuited to the job with which it is tasked; to

provide the psychological stability that enables 'practices to be objectively

harmonised without any calculation or conscious reference' (Bourdieu

1990:58).

Brenda's experience of early same-sex attraction echoed Louise's; she

concluded, 'the feelings you had just didn't even come into your lifestyle'.

Clunis et al. (2005) suggest that women experiencing non-heterosexual

feelings in the mid-twentieth century had only two real choices: repression

or secrecy. That would seem to be the experience of all but a handful of my

participants. Bina, who grew up in Ireland, tried to talk to her parents when

she was sixteen about her emotional feelings for another girl. Their reaction

kept her closeted through a heterosexual marriage and two children; she

finally came out when she was 44:

> I came out late […] because when I was raised in Ireland there was
> no gay people and I actually came out at 16 to my parents! […] My
> dad started laughing a very silly, strange laugh and mum *staggered*,
> back to the table. So I actually didn't know what I said about caring
> about this person that actually caused that reaction. So I actually
> didn't go there any more…
> Bina (born 1947) married and had children. She was now single and
> lived alone.

Bina's childhood, adolescence, marriage and children were no preparation

for her coming out in her mid 40s; her habitus dispositions were formed

around heterosexuality and stereotypical feminine practices, attitudes and

appearance. One of the consequences of difficulties or delay in forming a

positive lesbian identity in the absence of affirmation is the legacy of

internalised homophobia that seems to pervade some women's lives leaving

their lesbian identity precarious and still stigmatised. An example of this can

be found in discomfort with the language describing sexual identity. I asked

Emily if she felt comfortable with the term lesbian:

> Not *particularly*. I usually say to people my partner was a woman. I
> don't know whether it's internalised homophobia, I don't think it's a
> *particularly* nice word.

The binary affect of shame and pride described by Munt (1998) is

personified in the ambivalence and discomfort of participants when asked to

choose words with which to describe themselves and their sexual identity.

Several women recognised that their aversion to using certain language

was rooted in the negative connotations it held in their formative years and

the homophobia they still feared:

> Lesbian's a word *I'd* use. I'd like to be able to use the word *dyke*
> more comfortably but probably it relates to something pre-1948 that
> was negative and bad.
> Joan (born 1946) married, didn't have children. She was now single
> and lived alone.

> I *hate* the word queer. Because it was always a derogatory term
> when I was younger. *Always.* And I still feel it grates on me, even
> though, you know, some people like to use it, I *never* use it.
> Brenda.

> Well I describe myself as lesbian but I find it a bit *difficult* to say the
> word. I've *always* found the word lesbian difficult because there was
> so much homophobia – or lesophobia – and if I'm speaking to people
> where I'm not feeling comfortable I say *gay*.
> Pamela (born 1945) didn't marry or have children. She was single
> and lived alone.

I'm coming out: (Don't want the world to know)

> The most momentous act in the life of any lesbian or gay person is
> when they proclaim their gayness - to self, to other, to community.
> (Plummer, 1995:82)

Some participants, including Minerva and Gina, recognised their sexuality

early on and acted on their feelings, leaving home and starting relationships

with women in their late teens/early twenties. In other cases, early attractions to other girls or burgeoning same-sex relationships were observed and subsequently thwarted. The severing of these relationships was emotionally draining and gave a strong message that a lesbian identity was not an acceptable one. Nancy was separated from her best friend when she was just thirteen:

> Her mother saw what was going on and thought she could avert it by separating us and it broke my heart. […] I *mourned her* for quite a long time, the loss of that relationship and so just kind of turned away from that *possibility* and no one else kind of tore that curtain down until I was in my twenties.
> Nancy (born 1951) didn't marry or have children. She was in a relationship and lived with her female partner.

Frances' first relationship took place at her convent boarding school:

> During the school holidays she wrote to me and I put this letter under my bed, under my *pillow* and my *mum* found it and, you know, they called me up – my parents did – and they took me to the doctor…
> Frances (born 1952) didn't marry or have children. She was single and lived alone.

Sexual identity disclosure is a unique aspect of LGBT life entailing daily choices about what to reveal and to whom; for some participants coming out had far-reaching consequences often marking a full or partial departure from the comfort of family of origin, friends and colleagues, even religion. Meyer (2003) notes that while disclosure presents opportunities to meet other sexual minority individuals, concealment, while limiting those chances, does reduce the incidence of victimisation. Rejection by family is still a fairly common response to disclosure of lesbian gay or bisexual sexuality, often leading to negative identity and destructive behaviours (Carastathis et al., 2016). Not all my participants had come out to their parents or siblings, but where they did, disclosure often resulted in estrangement. Although some of

these relationships have subsequently healed, others remain fractured.

Catherine's relationship with some of her siblings is still disrupted by her

sexuality, forty years after she left home to escape the heterosexual

expectations of her adolescence. Joyce and Robin were prevented from

seeing their nieces; other women lost close relationships with parents.

Frances' father's reaction to her made her feel like 'a fly on the floor':

> This life of mine was not, you know, was not going to be shared with, with, with my father. […] I didn't really think about it much, just got on with it, you know. […] I was living a dual life… when I was around *him* and he *never asked* me, you know - 'cause I used to go back and see him obviously - but he *never asked* me anything about my life, it was just something I *did*.

For many women in this study the gap between their initial questioning of

their sexuality and coming out was significantly longer than the five years

identified by Levine (1997):

> I was probably eleven, twelve […] I *couldn't get over* looking at her bum and her ankles. And in the shower she had a *lacy* bra; it was all sewn round and I can still remember my hands wanting to cup it. And I woke up in bed *years later* with a temporary lover […] and I thought I'm in bed with Pat at last!
> Kate (born 1946) married and had children. She and Annie had been partners for over 15 years, in a civil partnership since 2007 and lived together.

Kate was married and pregnant with her second child when she 'discovered

and named' her lesbian sexuality. Cass's (1979) model predicts that after

initial recognition the individual starts to 'evaluate the societal and familial

implications' of their feelings (Peterson and Gerrity, 2006:53). For several

participants the severity of these implications prevented them from

achieving 'identity acceptance' for many years. Pamela describes the fifteen

years between her initial questioning and first intimate relationship as a

'fight' and in her interview admitted that she still found it difficult to say the word lesbian:

> I had a fight with it all from the age of… I think the age of fifteen to when I was probably… was I twenty-nine or thirty? And I had my *first* full lesbian relationship when I was twenty-nine or thirty.

Emily recognised that she was 'different' in her early twenties but didn't have a sexual relationship until she met her long term female partner when they were both in their forties:

> I didn't have many previous relationships. I had one or two boyfriends that were really safe choices and they were *friends*; and that's it, they were *friends*. And I was never that interested. But you feel you should go down a certain line. […] I wasn't ever so interested in men […] you think, 'I'm not *trying*, I'm really not *trying*. And why is that? I'm not interested.

Joan first recognised her same-sex attraction when she was 11 or 12 but her awareness of society's disapprobation meant she didn't act on her feelings for over 30 years; at the age of 48 in 1994, she decided she needed to become a 'proper' lesbian:

> I had no idea what it was I was feeling, but I believed, felt, *knew* instinctively it wouldn't be approved of. It wasn't something you were meant to do.

Twenty years later Joan is still 'coming out':

> I try to be more out. And have done over the last 10 years because that's me being me. But 95% of the time I'm the only lesbian in the room.

Many women were in their thirties or forties before they had an intimate relationship with a woman. For Nell and others, same-sex attraction came through political awareness:

> I didn't really know at *all*. I mean I had loads of relationships with *men*. And then when I was in my mid forties or so, it was the time in which… there was a big awareness. I was very involved in women's equality.

> Nell (born 1942) didn't marry or have children. She and Anne met in 2000, became civil partners in 2008 and lived together.

Recognition, even relationships did not necessarily bring freedom from the closet and some women were one person publicly, another in private. It has been suggested that social class mediates the coming out process, giving middle-class women greater reflexivity and autonomy (McDermott, 2010). Susan, aged 66 at the time of her interview, described herself as 'not as open as I should be'. She talked about the difficulties of 'living two lives' throughout her thirteen-year relationship; being insufficiently confident to inhabit lesbian spaces, yet feeling out of place and uncomfortable with her family, workmates and predominantly heterosexual friends, had left her isolated in her older age:

> But there again it were like a different sort of… bit secretive in a way. You know, I should have been more upfront. Should have talked to the children as well, which I didn't really do. […] *She* lived at her wi' her mother so we'd just like meet at like weekends, or she'd come down and you know… It were like, you know, living two lives in a way weren't it? […] It's probably liberating really if you, you know, stand up and be counted. […] I mean… what have you got to lose really? It's alright me saying that now! But you know, you haven't have you? […] Probably find out who you actually *are*. 'Cause I've sort of lost… you know.

For those who *did* encounter same-sex intimacy later in life there was a sense of being out of synchrony with 'age-appropriate' social and sexual behaviours:

> I think *probably* I had my first *intimate* experience with a woman […] thirty years ago, *just* when I was thirty-four, just before I was thirty-five… I went '*Oh my God* - she's *beautiful! Oh my God* - it's a *woman! Oh my God* - what am I going to do?' and I was sort of struck down in total chaos and confusion!
> Rosie (born 1949) didn't marry or have children. She was single and lived alone.

> It was like being a teenager in your thirties. It's just hopeless because you haven't got that… that background. I mean I'd fancied women

but you know I had so little self esteem […] I couldn't make the connection.
Val

Groups and organisations such as Lesbian and Gay Switchboard were frequently referenced as being particularly significant to participants in their early days of coming out. Married with a child when she acknowledged her sexuality, Shirley literally had no one to turn to:

> I didn't know *anybody*, I didn't know any *lesbians* so but there was something called CHE and that was in Sheffield and I rang the person up […] and this woman answered and she said 'oh yes, come to Sheffield'.
> Shirley (born 1948) married and had one child. She was now single and lived alone.

Trying to access information and connect with other lesbians was not always an easy process; the liberalism of the 'swinging sixties' was not for everyone:

> I used to get […] a newsletter from Sappho, from *London* and it came in a *brown envelope* […] It was showing the clubs and stuff in London and all… everybody's *faces* were all blocked out and stuff so I *knew* that there were *clubs* in London.
> Gillian (born 1944) never married or had children. She was in a relationship and lived alone.

Gorman-Murray et al. (2007) suggest that, 'social exclusion means that gay men and lesbians often have a heightened sense of the 'need' to belong' (p.237). Vanessa experienced this need in the early stages of recognising and disclosing her sexual identity. She found the necessity of organised groups waned as she created a network of lesbian friends:

> [I]t was necessary to be part of a community because we were not accepted […] we didn't *exist* or we were discriminated or whatever else. So […] a sense […] that there *are* others out there because perhaps for many years I spent not knowing there were others out there.
> Vanessa (born 1947) never married or had children. She was single and lived alone.

Repression or suppression of one's sexual orientation was a common scenario. Some participants recognised their sexual and emotional feelings in adolescence, but smothered them, giving into social pressures to marry. Expectations for Susan were both classed and gendered; regardless of her teenage attraction to other girls, she saw marriage and children as inevitable as her sewing job in a factory:

> [I]t was just in them days […] just thinking oh well, you'll probably get married and that'll be it. Have kids, you know, that's how it were.

It never occurred to Clary that her 'strong attractions to girls' in adolescence were sexual. She did not have a lesbian relationship until she was thirty-five, having married and had a child:

> Well it was the thing to do. And I wanted to have children and you know, I didn't consider that there *might be* other options. So I was actively looking for a husband.

Susan and Clary's marriages were not unusual; previous research with lesbians aged 55 and over reveals that more than 50 per cent had been married (Clunis et al., 2005; Averett et al., 2011) with the figure rising even higher in the over-80s (Traies, 2012). Fifteen of my participants (43%) entered into straight marriages, for a variety of reasons, including a lack of awareness of alternative ways of living, social/familial pressures, the desire to have children or not recognising or acknowledging their preferred sexual identity until they were older. An alternative explanation can be found in an interpretation of Bourdieu's (1977) discussion of 'improbable practices' in which he suggests that 'agents':

> [M]ake a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway refused and to love the inevitable. (p.77)

Twelve women were biological parents, two more were adoptive mothers and one co-parented her ex-partner's child; all retained responsibility for their children. For some participants, marriage and motherhood was a fairly unproblematic state and created the appearance of 'normality' at least for a while, but for other women the attempt to confirm to heteronormative expectations rendered them awkward, vulnerable, isolated and unhappy. Several women referenced feelings of loneliness and despair during their marriage.

Sofia's marriage ended when she fell in love with a woman. She had married her husband aged 21, fully aware of her same-sex attraction but determined to 'keep quiet' for fear of being sent to a psychiatrist. Aged 67 when she was interviewed, she described herself as 'still quite closet':

> I kept *quiet* all that time because I just had this worry that I might be sent to a psychiatrist and cause a lot of bother […] It's just that the NHS had opened up and it was possible that this could be done for free so I kept quiet. So I've always kept that *legacy* of closetness. Sofia (born 1946) married and (later) had a child. She was single and lived alone.

Unlike 'upward' social mobility where the destination milieu carries a higher status than that of the field of departure, the movement from a heterosexual to a lesbian, queer, or bisexual identity is not viewed as a positive advancement up a sexual hierarchy. If anything - and particularly several decades ago - it was viewed as an inferior and undesirable position. So not only are individuals marked as 'out of place' in a new milieu which, in the absence of same-sex role models and social structures, they are ill equipped to navigate but there is no external validation of their choice. Furthermore, as Weeks (2015) observes, it may be pathologised and

stigmatised by the 'defining, normalizing power of the heterosexual assumption, which marginalizes other sexualities at best, and invalidates them at worse' (p.52).

Non-normative sexuality then is a substantial area of difference; while I absolutely do not subscribe to a 'deficit view' of lesbian and bisexual sexual identity solely as a marker of damage, difficulty, depression and loneliness, many participants described how they were often forced into uncharted, marginalised and covert lives, often inhabiting two separate worlds, feeling uneasy in both - all factors which to a greater or lesser extent, have left their mark:

> Well that word used to frighten me. Somebody said to me when I were a teenager, you know, you're a lesbian…. *I am not.* You know, it were like frightening. […] I don't know why. […] Just being different really I think. Yeah. Yeah. Because before that I used to be quite confident, you know, and then I sort of changed, you know. I sort of went into me shell I think. […] I tried to really change it. I didn't want to be, you know, *different.* It's different growing up, I think, when… I think the fifties and the sixties really weren't really… you didn't really know anybody did you? Probably different for *you*?
> Susan.

These early contraventions of sexual identity and gender role expectations have had a powerful impact on many participants' lives. Reay (2015) deploys a psychosocial understanding of habitus in order to explore the emotional dimensions of lived experience. She suggests that:

> [T]he learning that comes through inhabiting pathologised spaces within the field often results in a predilection for shame, fear, anxiety or even righteous indignation… (p.12)

Positioned apart from their peers, friends, siblings and parents - participants often had no one to talk to about their early sexual feelings unless or until they were able to access other lesbian or bisexual women, which was by no

means straightforward. Exercising their agency through the rejection of conventionally gendered lives brought liberation, but this came at a price, resulting in many losses and challenges as well as opportunities for resilience and solidarity. These early transgressions can be seen as leading to disjunctures between the field of origin (for example, heterosexuality/straight marriage/motherhood) and the field of destination (lesbian or bisexual identity) and, as such, rupture or dislocate participants' habitus; unavoidably putting them in new and unfamiliar roles and situations, where their existing dispositions and ways of being were woefully inadequate.

5.4   Women at work: Gender, sexuality and employment

Dealing with one's sexual and emotional feelings does not occur in isolation, particularly when those feelings are being addressed in one's thirties or forties. Many women were married, some had children; all had jobs. The discussion of employment exposed it as another site of difference, for some women the challenge of being a lone woman in a traditionally masculine field of employment battling for recognition, while others felt vulnerable as a consequence of trying to conceal their sexuality or confronting the overt sexism and harassment prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. As a consequence of their 'working-class educated' status some women were 'career pioneers' often lacking the social and cultural dispositions to operate smoothly in the middle-class professions of teaching, nursing and social work where almost half of them started their working life. The majority of women had come from working-class families where a gendered division of labour prevailed; mothers often doing sewing, cleaning or other employment

that could be fitted around children and domestic work. Brenda came from a working-class family where her father was a refuse collector; her mother was delighted by the fact that her daughter received equal pay at work:

> When I first went into a *job* at 18, it was in the offices of local government, and I mean *my mum* thought it were marvellous that I were getting *equal pay*, a tenner a week and the boys did, you know? That was *enough*.
> Brenda was the first mounted policewoman in the UK. She also worked as a charity worker and support worker. She was retired.

A number of participants had struggled to attain 'better' educational and job opportunities. These battles with families, with schools and with employers were often overtly gendered ones provoked by the ideas prevalent at the time. Jacqueline's life was transformed in 1960 when her potential 'beyond the typing pool' was recognised, not by her mother who 'lacked confidence' because she'd 'dropped a class' on marriage but by her Head Teacher:

> My mother's idea of aspiring was that I should become a secretary. And I should have left school at 16 and done shorthand typing. But the Head teacher persuaded them to let me stay on in the sixth form and from there to university.
> Jacqueline, retired teacher and therapist.

Other participants were not so lucky and the intersection of their female gender and working-class identity led to a very reduced career pathway being offered even in the 1970s:

> It wasn't an expectation that people from this background ever went on to, even stay on at school […] so I didn't because it was never expected; nobody ever mentioned it. You know, they didn't even *say*, 'You *could* do this if you *wanted* to and if you *did* this you could do *this* mebbe, but if you leave now, you'll do *this*.' My careers advice was the deputy head and it consisted of about 10 minutes and she said, 'Well, you could be a nurse or you could work in a factory.' I thought, 'I'm not gonna do either of them so…' I said, 'Oh right, fine' and off I went and that was it. That was the only careers advice I ever had when I left school.
> Michelle (born 1956) self-employed, still working when she can.

Some narratives centred on the desire to work in traditionally masculine fields. In the 1950s and 1960s, job roles were heavily demarcated and stepping across the boundaries was an act for which there were few precedents or role models. As Sharpe (1976) points out:

> It takes self-confidence and courage for girls to break through the prejudice that surrounds entry into male-dominated careers. Throughout school life, they have experienced the separation of sexes and subjects, and have moved toward the safer 'feminine' areas of interest. (p.176)

For Brenda it took both courage *and* the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act before her career aspirations could be realised. Prior to its introduction in 1976, her application to be a mounted policewoman had been repeatedly rejected:

> And he come *rushing* in to me one day and said 'this Act is coming out and they're having a woman in mounted!' […] He said 'get your application in!' and I did. And I was the *first woman* in the mounted! *Only* woman in fact, while I was in, so I suppose I've done me bit. Wasn't easy, I'll tell you.

It is hard to imagine how women of this generation, particularly working-class women, managed to have careers given the educational divisions, absence of role models and limited, often gendered, career advice and opportunities. Women faced challenges in both traditional and non-traditional occupations including sexism, the ever-present threat of homophobia and the isolation brought about by concealment and/or being the only women in a, frequently hostile, male environment. Dunne (1997) highlights the financial imperative for lesbians to undertake paid work and become self-reliant, particularly when they reject the option of heterosexual marriage. Emily, who worked all her life retiring only when her partner became terminally ill, recognised this:

> Lesbians who know they're lesbians early on, have careers and make much better money than women who don't realise, mess about, get married and have children like you were expected to do and they hadn't planned for their future.
> Emily, retired nurse educator.

Jacqueline's narrative indicates that the established social and cultural milieu of 'courting, marriage and motherhood' engendered habitus formation that did not support the relatively pioneering practices of single women in the 1950s and 1960s. She saw lesbians and other single women of her generation as unique; social and cultural innovators taking responsibility for managing their own lives and having a 'particular uncharted channel to live in life':

> Now there are very few people without children […] or women who live alone, very few, who have to, who *have* to *manage* their *lives*, *every single aspect* of it […] The majority, a lot are living alone. For me, those are the threads; there's managing *everything* yourself, making *all* your decisions about *everything:* there's managing all your *money*, only having *your* money and nobody else's money to manage; there's *living* alone; there's your sexuality…

Louise's early awareness of gender inequality in her home led to her engagement with feminism at the Greenham Common Peace Camp; empowered to end her marriage, she rejected other gendered constraints on her potential including employment opportunities. Her experience reiterates that of Brenda's; sexism was an everyday occurrence and merely getting your job of choice did not guarantee equality and respect. Here she contrasts the liberation of having career options with the reality of training as a building surveyor in the face of sexism that pervaded her career:

> The feeling that I could be independent, that there were lots more choices than my mother had and that I was going to *make* some of them. Like when I was at, particularly at the boarding school, there were 3 jobs, possible careers, laid out for women. There was secretary and nurse and… what was the other one… teacher! And

just realising that I didn't have to do *any* of those, that there was a much *bigger* choice and that I was going to look at that bigger choice.

I started out as a joiner and it all came really from rebuilding the cottage 'cause I just really enjoyed it, I thought oooh. It took me a while to get round to it, to realise that I might actually make a living out of one of the building trades that I'd liked doing so much. And it was a bit of a battle to get trained and everything […] I'd go to the builder's merchants and they'd say, 'What's he sent you for?' Stupid things like that.
Louise, retired building surveyor.

Nell found herself the only woman working in a very senior position at a bank, a situation she believes happened partly through chance and partly because of her reluctance to be the only woman doing sciences at university:

I said to my brother, 'How many women are there at the Manchester School of Technology?' 'cause he was doing chemical engineering. He said 'None, none'. So I didn't really want, you know, I didn't particularly want to be the only woman.
Nell, retired senior bank worker and NLP trainer.

Being a lone woman in any employment field is difficult. Brenda felt isolated by the sexism she experienced in the police force:

Oh God it was *terrible*. Terrible. I mean my sergeant got me in the first day […] and he said 'I'm telling you now Mrs don't *ever, ever* come to me with any complaints.' He said, 'I *do not* want to know.' He says, 'you're *in* and that's it.'

After a lifetime in banking, a change in job roles brought about by an organisational focus on gender equality issues, brought Nell into a sphere where, for the first time, she was working alongside other women. Her relief was palpable:

That brought me in to a women's world. And I was mixing with women's organisations and everything obviously and so it brought me into a world of work-women's world.[…] I worked in equal opportunities. It, it, was the most… I think probably it's the most exciting time of my life really.

Louise, Brenda, Edie, Gillian, Minerva and Brenda took up positions in conventionally 'masculine' occupations. They experienced sexism but not overt homophobia as none of them felt safe enough to come out at work. Brenda suggests that while lesbian police officers faced harassment if they could not 'pass' as straight, the penalties were far worse for gay men in the police force:

> I mean there's gay police association *now*. I mean *gay men* could *not* come out in the police force. They'd have been *sacked*. Legally, you know. There were a few *known* lesbians; they didn't come out but folk *knew*. 'Butch' they'd say, 'oh she's butch'.

Almost without exception these older women remained closeted on the job regardless of whether their work was professional, white or blue collar. Living and working in a state of concealment often meant taking risks. Although, lesbianism in the armed forces was pretty much an open secret that 'everybody knew', those in the military faced dismissal if found to be a lesbian. Here Minerva recounts how she and her friends used pseudonyms to avoid being caught:

> I always used to use [name] as sort of a name when we used to book into the clubs. […] So if you used to book into the Gates, you know, being in the military if you got caught somewhere like that you lost your job; you lost everything.
> Minerva (born 1945) retired Army personnel and bank worker.

Working in a garage in Australia, Edie was paid 'a man's wages'. Her financial equality did not prevent her from experiencing sexism so pervasive that she initially failed to recognise it. Having initially said that she 'didn't have anything to complain about', when pressed to talk about her job she revealed:

> I got groped all the time. […] I'd avoid it but then in certain areas you can't avoid it and I must admit if you're in a *big office environment* working with some men that are like that well, you're not going to be

heard and you either put up with it, shut up or get out. And most women end up probably getting out.
Edie (born 1955) retired garage worker.

Even in jobs where women were in the majority, encounters with sexism had to be carefully weighed up in case they provoked a backlash of homophobia. Although Lilia challenged the crude sexism in her school staffroom, many women decided to keep quiet, even in the face of overt practices:

> [T]he men's corner bordered on the porn corner – it was *horrible*, it really was. Nobody'd been able to get a grip on it. You know, I'm talking about such things like a washing line going across the men's corner, a certain group of men that – it tended to be the PE blokes - and they'd a washing line and the idea was who could come in after their weekend of activity to hang as many knickers on the line as they could to show how many conquests they had. […] I did tend to think I was a bit on my own, speaking out against it, despite 180 odd staff…
> Lilia, retired teacher.

It wasn't only male sexism making some women feel out of place. For women resisting and challenging the dominant gender norms, everyday encounters were sometimes enough to set them apart from their work colleagues:

> And one of the reasons I *went* from primary to secondary […] I felt *stifled* in the primary school - it was a *small* primary school – and I felt stifled… like being… they were *all married* again, and although I was technically straight, the lunchtime discussions, what they were going to cook their husbands for tea and things like that and I felt absolutely stifled.
> Rosie, retired teacher.

The effects of homophobia were far more tangible and damaging for some women than their encounters with sexism or isolation in male dominated fields. McDermott's (2006) study of social class, sexual identity and well-being in the workplace identifies the risks of a lesbian identity and points to several conditions under which sexual identity disclosure at work is more likely, these include: employer policies; the presence of other gay (or

female) workers; being in a position of power or authority; perceived employer supportiveness and self-acceptance. McDermott's study also concludes that the risks to women in middle-class occupations are minimalised whereas working-class participants were more likely to be 'employed in settings where heterosexuality was heavily regulated' (p.205) necessitating 'practices of survival' including pretending to be straight or running the risk of bullying and job loss.

McDermott's participants were significantly younger than mine; the eldest was 56 and many were in their twenties, thirties and forties. It seems probable that, even in middle-class settings, the majority of women entering the workplace in the 1960s and 1970s did not have supportive employers or co-workers, neither were they protected by legislation, leaving them with little option but to manage the additional pressures of concealment or deal with the threat (and realities) of disclosure. Four participants, who started their careers as teachers, talked about how transgressing heterosexuality impacted on their lives at a time when fear of exposure to students or the authorities was a real and ever-present threat. Bina not only lost her job when she was outed in the early 1990s, but her health was jeopardised by the realisation that she could never work in a school again:

> Well my mode of dress and everything changed you see, within the school. And then I was going through a very bad time. It wasn't a good place and so I ended up ill and I think, at the time, very scared. I still hadn't got to where I wanted to get to and, very, very scared. And actually scared of going back to teaching…
> Bina, retired teacher and counsellor.

The head teacher in a previous job had warned Lilia that she could not be an out lesbian because 'the [Muslim] community' would 'take out every

child'. She was out in her final job but was relieved when she had the opportunity to take early retirement from the hostility she experienced:

> I was out in my final sort of years at work, but it's not going to be a *positive* when you've got a group of stroppy 15 year old lads saying to you, to quote and unquote, 'Oh we don't want to be taught by a fucking lesbian anyway.' So if you're dealing with people you know might *be* like that then you're not going to want to be shouting about it from the top of the roof are you? […] I wish I could have been braver when I was younger.

Catherine and Shirley also worked in education. Although she was not harassed at work, Catherine was unwilling to seek legal protection from her homophobic neighbour because she worked in a school and feared exposure; she eventually left teaching to work in a health-related job:

> We had windows broken, we had our car windows broken, we had every panel on my car scratched, we had indentations with his hammer on the front door, he threatened us with knives […] and lots and lots of things and the difficulty was because I worked with children, we were really reluctant to go to court.
> Catherine, retired teacher and sexual health worker.

Following the collapse of her marriage, Shirley trained as a teacher in order to support her daughter. Unfortunately, her career was disrupted by homophobia, which had far-reaching emotional and financial consequences. Her interview revealed several instances of intersections between her female gender, 'alternative' sexual identity and working-class origins. Here she discusses how revealing her sexual identity resulted in a hostility that destroyed her career and put her mental health and future financial security in jeopardy:

> I enjoyed the job and got on well with all my colleagues, and so, feeling so confident, I decided to come out at work. But what a mistake that was! I was sent to Coventry and subsequently I had a breakdown and ended up leaving my job. Now of course I would have a case against my treatment, but it was different then. I went through a traumatic few months but as soon as I was well again I obtained a position of Deputy Officer at a care home and I have since

done some part-time teaching. But that experience of having that breakdown has had devastating and long lasting consequences for me.
Shirley, still working as an adult foster carer.

This section has probed the nexus of sexual identity, gender and employment to reveal some of the risks and costs of disclosure or threatened exposure in the workplace. Many participants went to great lengths to conceal their sexual identity, either because they were exhausted by dealing with everyday sexism or because they were mindful of the risks that a lesbian identity at work would entail. It is noteworthy that those risks remain; in 2013 17% of LGBT individuals surveyed had experienced hate crime. One in ten of these crimes was perpetrated by a work colleague.[30] The following section explores how, and under what circumstances, women did feel able to perform their lesbian identity and the complexities of embodied habitus.

5.5   Fish out of water: Adult lesbian identity as uncharted territory

Performativity and physical embodiment

By the very fact of their lesbian or bisexual identity and its intersection with the post-war era, all participants entered into a field where they had no words with which to describe themselves and their feelings, nor 'dispositions or embodied behaviours' to guide them once they had come out. The dispositions and practices acquired in their early lives were misaligned with their new identities as aspiring lesbian and bisexual women and, in the 1950s and 1960s there were few opportunities for education or guidance. Arena 3, the first lesbian newsletter with a country-wide circulation was not

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[30] Stonewall (2013)
https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/Homophobic_Hate_Crime__2013_.pdf
[Accessed 13.6.16]

published until 1964, the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (hereafter

CHE) established at the end of the 1960s and the Gay Liberation Front

(hereafter GLF) in 1970. It is also notable that only two films are referenced

in the interviews; *The Killing of Sister George* (1968), which was intended as

a parody, and *Desert Hearts*, the first film to offer a positive portrayal of

lesbian characters, which was not released until 1985, by which time my

participants were aged between 29 and 45. Unsurprisingly, the interviews

revealed many iterations of the ways that women negotiated the physical

manifestation of their lesbian (or feminist) identities; how they used their

appearance, even their posture, to signal their departure from dominant

gendered norms and heterosexual femininities.

Bourdieu (1990) describes bodily hexis as an aspect of habitus, operating at

a subconscious level:

> [A] permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking,
> walking and thereby of feeling and thinking. The opposition between
> male and female is realized in posture, in the gestures and
> movements of the body… (p.70)

For many participants, rejection of heterosexuality and the 'feminine' gender

role prompted the *conscious* undoing of a 'feminine' bodily hexis and the

purposeful embodiment of a new set of cultural norms. Several women

talked about the physical constraints imposed on girls and women by the

fashion of the 1950s and 1960s. Lovell (2000) suggests that habitus is

'indicated in the bearing of the body' (p.27) while Taylor (2007) notes the

significance of appearance as a signifier of sexuality and class; her

interviewees learnt 'codes of dress and identity' (p.145) in order to 'fit in' to

sexual spaces. Appearance featured in the interviews as an arena of

change and difference. Narratives revealed the significance of dress and

hairstyles as participants described the steps they took to reflect emerging

sexual identities in bodily hexis. Their linguistic and bodily acts of

performativity (Butler, 1990), while offering a degree of identity and

liberation, also set women apart from heterosexual friends, siblings and

work colleagues. Several participants, who came out at a time when the

butch/femme bar scene was still prevalent, struggled to identify with this

strictly demarcated cultural norm, finding it hard to relate to, even if they

themselves eschewed 'feminine' expression:

> I started to go out and then I found out about the pubs in [place
> name]. But me and S used to always say 'where do all the *nice* girls
> go?' 'Cause I never really kind of felt that I kind of *fit in* to it, but that's
> what there *were*.
> Gillian.

Drawing on Bourdieu, Rooke's (2007) ethnographic study investigates the

performativity of lesbian and gay identities. She suggests that the 'lesbian

habitus' - a 'visible expression of embodied lesbian cultural capital' is

performed and expressed in a variety of ways including deportment, sexual

confidence and 'embodied expressions of lesbian distinction, for example,

wearing one's hair, clothes or accessories' (p.232). Gillian's cropped hair

and masculine style of dress are not the only aspects of her identity making

her a target for heteronormative censure:

> [T]hey're always trying to stop me going in the ladies' toilets […] For
> *years* I've got called *sir* even though I don't have a masculine voice
> but obviously I've got a short haircut but I don't think it's that… I think
> it's kind of a way, the way I *move about*, the way I *am* in the world
> that people would think that.

When Bina came out in her forties, she had never knowingly met another

lesbian and had no knowledge of how she wanted to present herself as a

lesbian. However, she recognised that her new sexual identity warranted some alteration to her physical appearance:

> I *transformed* overnight, everything about me […] my clothes, my dress, my whole being changed, which was very difficult for my kids. My daughter was fantastic, she said, 'Would you like to wear *this*? Is *this* what you'd like to wear?' you know, we'd go round shops and she's be trying to figure out who I was. […] Such a transformation, unbelievable transformation.

Louise's involvement with the women's movement, while she was still married, empowered her to radically change her appearance, cutting her hair short because it was 'a blooming nuisance':

> I'd stopped wearing make up by the time I was about 20 and probably very rarely wore a dress or a skirt after that. Not that that's part of lesbianism, I know that, but it was part of *me* deciding who *I* was and what I wanted to do.

Abandoning short skirts and high heels in favour of trousers and flat shoes and cutting one's hair were signifiers of both gender *and* sexual identity transgressions although hair and clothing were complex and contested sites for lesbian and feminist discussion. Whereas some women were making active choices about their appearance and as a way of rejecting gendered expectations of femininity, others felt controlled and censored by the lesbian and feminist groups they aspired to be part of. Rooke (2007) suggests that the lesbian habitus makes lesbian identity visible and may offer a form of belonging; in addition it is field-specific as Gina's interview demonstrates. Happy to wear a skirt and colourful beads to be interviewed in her home, she confessed that her social group had expectations around the 'correct' embodiment of lesbian identity:

> I wouldn't be *seen dead* at *[name of group]* in a pink skirt I have to say. […] I wouldn't even wear a skirt to [name of group] let alone a pink skirt. Because there are some very… old school, hard core sort of… I've never ever… I've been going to [name of group] for I don't

know, eight, nine years… I've never ever seen anybody in a skirt there, ever. Including me.
Gina (born 1952) never married. She is the adoptive parent of two children. She was single and lived alone.

Although Gina came out at the age of 19 and has identified as a lesbian ever since, she inhabits two separate social and cultural environments, necessitating her conscious evaluation of the suitability of her bodily hexis for each sphere and her awareness of the unceasing appraisal of others in her older lesbian group. For Gina this need to 'manage' the embodiment of her sexual identity in order to gain acceptance in lesbian and feminist groups has a long history:

> When I was a young dyke… firstly nobody who was in GLF or women's liberation would have been *seen dead* wearing a skirt. Partly the *social pressure* and partly you'd get such shit for trying to pass as *straight*. That was a really big deal when I was young. You just were not allowed to even faintly pass as straight. And I had long hair, which in the end I chopped off […] partly I wanted to and partly just the pressure. And it was kind of *active pressure*, it wasn't just people kind of looking at you. You got accused of trying to pass as straight.

Having lived as a separatist for many years, Kate was equally aware of the 'rule keepers' but, unlike Gina, had managed to create a social family where she could dress as she pleased:

> I *cannot live* in Calderdale in the middle of a group of *rules* […] I want to be *deviant* within my rule group.
>
> Jill: Where do those rules emanate from?
>
> Well the ones that would call themselves *the* lesbian feminists; they're the old *rule keepers*. The ones where you wouldn't have dared wear a skirt or even a jacket like you're wearing now or a pretty shirt like I'm wearing now, you know. The ones that would still dress… go to a wedding dressed as lumberjacks. [Laughs] I've been to a couple of really posh weddings in Devon where a couple of the lesbians came *as* lumberjacks in their Doc Martens. We were all in our *gorgeous* stuff and I *don't want* that. I don't want the rules but I *understand* them.

Other women encountered similar censure from lesbian groups where length of her hair was viewed as synonymous with lesbian identity. For women who were just acknowledging their sexuality and reaching out to groups where they hoped to feel validated, these debates were serious and disconcerting. Aarseth et al. (2016) suggest that mobility produces 'misfit between embodied practices and social requirements' (p.148). Shirley's testimony reveals her 'misfit'. Initially unaware that her conventional feminine style, although culturally appropriate to her straight marriage, was not universal; she was ignorant of the 'rules of the game' when she first entered a lesbian space in her mid-twenties:

> 'She said, "You'll never meet anybody looking like that" because I was dressed in traditional hetero style, with long hair and make up, and I'd never owned a pair of jeans.'

Now in her sixties, Shirley is still conscious of the dislocations caused by her appearance and behaviour; while they are now in line with the expectations of her early lesbian mentor and feminist beliefs, they are a marker of difference that set her apart from her heterosexual friends and family, leaving her uneasily placed between the two cultural groups:

> I *did* have my hair cut after I'd met my partner and all the rest of it. I started to dress like that, I felt *comfortable* and the women's movement was happening at the same time so it was like a natural evolvement or whatever you might say for *me* but whether if I'd have *stayed* hetero, if I'd *been* hetero, I would *probably* still be wearing *skirts.*

Relationships and losses

For many women the discovery of an alternative sexual identity forced gender role transgressions which set them apart from their peers and societal expectations; the absence of straight marriage, the virtual impossibility of being a parent, the difficulty of making and maintaining

195

relationships were seen as an inevitable consequence of their lesbian identity, one of the 'prices you paid' for stepping outside of the charmed circle of heteronormative expectations in an era where civil partnerships, IVF and LGBT adoption were still a lifetime's struggle away. Pamela had had a close relationship with her female partner's son but, in 1984, when their relationship ended she lost access to him, a traumatic loss she treated 'like a death':

> It was just *dreadful*. I felt like my guts were being torn out. So *dreadful*. And I had a mini breakdown but I was determined I wasn't going to hospital […] I was in such a state – a *terrible* state.

Now the presence of grandchildren in the lives of her sister and her 'later-life lesbian' contemporaries leaves her feeling 'out of step':

> I haven't got grandchildren […] I find that somehow I notice it *more* with the peer group, the age peer group. That everyone's into their grandchildren […] a lot of the women in [name of group] are you know… when they were about 50 or 45 or something discovered their lesbian identity or *re*-discovered it and *have* got grandchildren. My *sister*, who's heterosexual, *she's* just had her first grandchild. So I do feel that you're a bit *out of step…* […] I can feel a bit *annoyed* actually. *Actually* I do feel *bloody pissed off* and think well 'you *have* got a grandchild'.

Robin's husband of seventeen years beat her up when she tried to tell him of her feelings of love for the women she had met at Greenham. His violence was shocking but his disclosure to her family led to other, more lasting injuries including familial estrangement and the loss of contact with her brothers' children:

> [I]t was difficult and of course then he went round to talk to my *brothers* and then they wouldn't let me anywhere near my nieces and nephews of course; when you're *gay* you can't be near children. Robin (born 1949) married and had one child. She was single and lived alone.

For Robin and Kate, deep dissatisfaction with patriarchy and male violence led to them becoming separatists. The decision came at a price; Kate made the difficult decision to leave her male children to live on wimmin's land:

> I left *two boys* to be a lesbian separatist; I left them with their father *because* they were boys. […] I mean *when I came out* there wasn't a lesbian that would look after my children. […] I *understood that*. I *accepted it*.

Robin still chooses to maintain a separatist life, which sets her apart from men but also puts stress on some of her relationships with women as well as making everyday practices and decisions more complex:

> I describe myself as a *lesbian separatist*. I *love women*; I have *loving relationships* with women. They're my *total* identity. I very rarely interact with *men* and when I *choose* to interact; […] it's *difficult* because like trying to find a female urologist to do your surgery is impossible, there isn't one. So I have to really think *hard* and consider whether I will you know, *allow* and there's certain procedures I *won't* have done unless I'm anaesthetised, because I don't like, I don't like men's hands on my *body*.

In the 1960s and 1970s, lone parenthood of any form was heavily stigmatised. Joyce didn't realise that it was possible for her to have children via any other means than marriage:

> And I *thought* that, yes you had these really close relationships with *women* – they were always going to be your best friends, they were always going to be the people you had in your *life* – but you had to marry a *man* to get *children*.
> Joyce (born 1946) married and had children. She was in a relationship and lived with her partner.

Children of lesbian parents were also exposed to the homophobia and stigma that their mothers experienced, as Clary's son found out after her husband died and she decided to pursue her lesbian feelings:

> [W]hen he got a little bit older and he was going to go to high school he definitely didn't want to tell his friends but they used to say 'your mum's a lezzie' 'cause… 'cause you know, I looked like one if you like. I had a shaven head and, and I wore waistcoats! […] He always

denied it until he went to Sixth Form College. I was ok with him denying it, why would he want to put himself through so much grief? I understood that.

Although adoption and fostering has never been illegal for LGBT people in this country, in practice, before the Adoption Act of 2002, it was very hard for lesbian and bisexual women to adopt. Nora, while benefiting from earlier changes to the law and more progressive social attitudes, still struggled to adopt in the face of prejudice and humiliation as late as 1988:

> I think I was responding to a particular ad that Barnet were advertising and they went 'Ok. Are you married?' […] So of course I had to say 'Well no, because we're lesbians.' So your woman – I could almost hear her freeze at the end of the phone – said 'I'll just have to go off and check' and she came back and Barnet's policy then was you had to be married. […] And we went *on* and *on* like this. Nora (born 1954) never married. She is the adoptive parent of three children. She was single and lived alone.

In 2013, when the average age of the participants was 64, over two thirds of them were single and another was widowed. The majority of these women lived alone or with lodgers or family members. Just nine women were in long-term committed relationships where they lived with their partners and one was in a newish relationship and lived alone. In comparison to other research this is an unusually low figure. Averett et al. (2011) surveyed 456 similarly aged lesbians (over 90% of whom saw themselves as 'out') and found that sixty per cent were involved in an emotional, physical, or sexual relationship with a woman who they regarded as a lifetime partner. Heaphy et al. (2004) reported similar figures but note that younger participants were more likely than older ones to be in relationships. It is possible that recruiting women who attend social groups may have skewed the chances of my participants being single, but it is also conceivable that years of concealment have made it both practically and emotionally difficult for some

lesbian and bisexual women born in this era to make and sustain intimate relationships. Frances certainly believed that to be true for her younger self; she describes here how she was caught between 'trying to be heterosexual' and 'trying to be lesbian':

> I didn't think that I was managing either very well, you know; either trying to be a heterosexual or trying to be a lesbian, it didn't seem to be working all that easily, I think it was just lack of confidence in my *ability* to have a relationship I think. […] I kind of decided that I wasn't very good at them, at relationships. And then, sort of, not really knowing whether I could… what I could *bring* to a relationship. And then I think the longer I've lived on my own the less likely I am to want to compromise and, you know, I actually find it quite difficult I think.

Clary also attributed being single to the difficulties of being a lesbian:

> Cause you're always up against society. […] I've never *hidden* my relationships but I think you've got to be quite *bold*. It certainly depends where you are really. It *is* more difficult 'cause there are times when I even think to myself 'Oh God, I wish I had a nice man!' And it *would* be easier. It would.

Pamela's distress at losing access to her partner's child had deterred her from pursuing another relationship since they broke up over thirty years ago. Val had a two-year relationship when she was in her thirties but felt that her life had been affected by her own lack of self-esteem and confidence:

> And really the relationship I had was […] more her idea than mine shall we say. I was sort of timid but anxious to get on with it! [Laughter] and it was a revelation, it was lovely. But I do think I was affected by not having that experience beforehand.

One woman's fear of rejection and 'negative comments' was sufficient to keep her in the closet for over forty years. Despite being certain of her same-sex attraction and feelings for over forty years, Gwennie, aged 60 at the time of her interview, has never had an intimate relationship:

> I've always *known* who I was; that I was a lesbian. […] certainly in my early teens. I've always *known*. Although you try to *conform*. […] It's

made me a bit of a loner. I've always been a bit of a loner. […] But there's still this fear of rejection from certain people who I have had negative comments or who have made negative comments in the past.

Gwennie (born 1953) never married or had children. She was single and lived with her nephew.

This chapter has traced the participants' journeys through the life course looking particularly at the impact of their transgressions of dominant gender and sexuality norms and the intersections within and between them and other mobilities. The narratives reveal that the refusal of heterosexuality, the pursuit of jobs and careers, and the development of lesbian or bisexual identity, have set some participants aside from their contemporaries and continue to do in their older age. Schneider and Lang (2014) suggest that those who are socially mobile take a lead in highlighting boundaries and their permeability and I would suggest that this argument can be extended to include those who traversed gender and sexual norms in the twentieth century, establishing a path for future generations through their resistance. However, those mobilities came at a price and this chapter exposes the fragility of some participants' gendered experiences as wives (or not wives), mothers (or not mothers). It demonstrates the social and economic impact of the low expectations held by parents and education and legislative systems that were changing but not sufficiently fast to impact their lives as workers in a male-dominated society exposed to sexism frequently underscored by the threat of homophobia. All the participants were born during a period where there was little validation of their sexual and emotional feelings. They understand and express their lesbian or bisexual identity in vastly different ways, from Esther and Nancy who have led nationally recognised LGBT organisations to Gwennie who 'admits' her

feelings only within the safety of her social group. I suggest that the complexities of developing a positive sexual identity in the face of societal heteronormativity, familial opposition and in the absence of role models or words with which to describe your emotions and desires has, inevitably left its mark on these women. For some this may be in the form of increased resilience and activism; for others there have been periods of intense loneliness, depression and even mental ill health that may be attributed, in part, to the disequilibrium they experienced as they traversed new social and cultural milieu.

This contemporary social transgression to 'deviant' sexual identity is a child of its time, fixed in a history that no longer exists in the UK. Younger lesbians, gay men and trans individuals in this country have more access to guiding dispositions than ever before. 'Alternative' sexualities and gender fluidity are discussed in many families, in the media and in education. Schools and universities have support agencies for those questioning their sexual and gender identity, reducing the sense of difference they experience and acknowledging their feelings as valid and, for the most part, without shame.

It is clear that the participants in this study are not without agency and self-determination. Indeed the very fact that they were (eventually) able to pursue their sexual and emotional feelings and are, as older adults both leaders of and participants in groups for lesbian and bisexual women pays testament to their shaking off of sexual orthodoxy - the sexual doxa of their generation was at once powerful and narrowly constrained. However, for many participants, the profound and frightening sense of their own

difference experienced since their childhood, combined with the extended

period before which they were able to acknowledge their sexuality and have

a same-sex relationship has rendered them out of place for much of their

adult life, neither belonging fully to the heterosexual world inhabited by their

families and childhood friends nor feeling completely at ease in lesbian

scene space. They cannot move with the freedom and fluency of today's

younger generation between heterosexual and lesbian or bisexual fields,

they are uncomfortable in both.

Regardless of whether they have been socially mobile or eschewed

traditional life course gender roles and norms, the development of a lesbian

or bisexual identity positioned all participants as 'deviant' at some point in

their life course and remains a signifier of difference today. This chapter,

and the one before it, have demonstrated that a combination of social class,

gender and sexual mobilities or transgressions have generated feelings of

'getting it wrong' and being out of place, resulting in a sedimentation of

difference that has resided in some participants all their lives and continues

to shadow their later years. It is my contention that these factors combine to

create habitus dislocation that saturates many aspects of participants' lives,

motivating them to set up and participate in social groups with 'likeminded'

people, which provide refuge from these dislocations by creating a space

where they can 'be themselves'. As Weeks (2010) points out:

> [A] precondition for attaining a secure sense of personal identity and
> belonging has been the development of wider social networks, […] of
> establishing sexual communities and social worlds, of telling their
> stories in ways which could make for mutual recognition and support.
> (p.85)

The following chapters explore some of the wider social networks to which

the women in the study belonged, looking at their composition and organisation and critically evaluating their ability to offer a sense of belonging to all who take part in them as well as their impact on loneliness and isolation in the older lesbian and bisexual community.

Chapter Six: Identity building as women and lesbians: Creating communities of belonging and resistance across the life course

6.0   Introduction

The previous chapters document how being caught in the intersection of gender role, sexual identity and classed transgressions, creates, to a greater or lesser degree, a habitus dislocation that never fully adapts itself to the practices of the new fields it is called upon to navigate and which may be further exacerbated by other transgressions and signifiers of difference. Becoming socially mobile in the 1950s and 1960s, and eschewing traditional sexual and gender norms, my participants had little historical experience or cultural markers to guide them. Many of them expressed feelings of isolation, loneliness and a sense of 'not fitting'. A few experienced severe emotional crises; several sought therapy. This chapter starts by attending to those feelings of dislocation and considers the juxtaposition of loneliness and resilience as possible outcomes of non-normative sexuality. I then examine the various ways in which participants have adapted to their new gender, class and sexual locations; becoming part of communities and networks which contributed to the rebuilding of habitus by validating their developing identities and offering places of resilience at a time and in a climate where traditional or mainstream locations of affirmation were off limits or merely served to reinforce their feelings of isolations and being out of place.

6.1   Loneliness, isolation and a sense of being different

Studies suggest that cleft habitus is not always problematic and can promote adaptability and resilience as individuals attempt to negotiate new fields (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). I propose that my participants' habitus

dislocation, formed at the intersection of gender, class and sexual identity transgressions within a specific temporal location, places them uniquely. As individuals creating social networks, participating in political activism, demanding funding for public identity-based groups and establishing families of choice and sexual-identity communities they have contributed towards the empowerment of their own and future generations of lesbians and bisexual women. Yet, many participants have also been lonely or fear future loneliness and isolation.

It is imperative to reiterate my genuine intent that this thesis does not adopt a deficit view of lesbian and bisexual identity. I do not subscribe to the belief that individuals with 'minority sexualities' are automatically damaged, lonely and isolated; I recognise the flaws in research purporting to demonstrate this and this study contributes to the body of research querying the inevitable story of lesbian loneliness. It is extremely important however, to be able to recognise the prejudice and discrimination faced by many older LGBT individuals, acknowledge that loneliness in the lesbian and gay community is an issue and to look at the factors surrounding sexuality that have contributed to this. A fifth of lesbian and bisexual women in Heaphy et al.'s (2004) study of non-heterosexual ageing reported feelings of isolation and loneliness and almost a third felt that their sexual identity had a negative effect on their well-being. Meyer (2007) identifies four external stressful events experienced by LGB individuals, which contribute to the negative consequences of 'minority stress'. They include actual rejection or violence, the expectation of those events, concealment and internalised homonegativity.

I have argued that because of the particular historical context within which they were born and came of age, my participants have unique experiences; many have traversed several major life changes including social class, gender and sexual identity mobilities that have rendered them 'fish out of water' lacking the automatic cultural dispositions of a coherent habitus to guide their practices. These dislocations of class, gender and sexual identity may be experienced as isolation and loneliness, further exacerbated by the fact that many women felt unable to live openly as lesbian or bisexual women making it harder to share these feelings. My research also uncovered an element of 'learned loneliness', whereby some participants had busy lives with a significant degree of social contact but still expressed feelings of loneliness or anticipated and feared being lonely, probably as a consequence of significant periods of isolation in their formative years. This corresponds to previous research (Browne, 2007) which showed that even LGBT individuals living in areas where visibility, acceptance and support is higher than average, are not exempt from feelings of loneliness. In Brighton and Hove (where an estimated 14% of the population are LGBT), 34% of respondents reported that they felt isolated, with the percentage increasing with age. Significantly, this isolation was associated with emotional distress, depression and anxiety as well as low self-esteem and confidence issues. Yet, 90% of these respondents had attended Brighton Pride and 78% reported that living there was easy.

Feelings of past loneliness were more likely to be expressed by people who were socially mobile. Louise was the only participant with a stable social class to feel lonely and she attributed that to geographical isolation. She

was also the only middle-class participant who married; the other three came out in their early to mid-twenties and were involved in feminism, perhaps indicating a greater degree of ease and openness in their formative years. However, I do not offer a quantitative analysis of the incidence of loneliness, class and mobility; this is a qualitative study and these observations perhaps indicate an area of future research.

Some participants attributed past feelings of loneliness to the lengthy concealment of their sexual identity. Ivy often felt 'desperately lonely':

> I think I am quite a private person. […] I think I've been actively aware of not *wanting* to; that when something was painful and difficult that I would keep it to myself. Where I've *learned* that from I don't know, I really don't know. And how much it's tied up with my sexuality. I'm not sure, perhaps it is, yes. […] Perhaps looking back on it, perhaps there are connections between having lots of feelings as a teenager that I was not free to discuss.
> Ivy (born 1955).

Gwennie has never fully 'come out'. Members of her social group are the only people aware of her lesbian identity. Her family, including her nephew who lives with her, are still unaware of her sexuality. Here she recalls the isolation of her working life:

> I did feel a certain isolation. Because of my sexuality really and the fact that I was *hidden*. I didn't feel able to talk with my colleagues […] there was always that *fear*. Would I be accepted? To be honest, I don't think I would have been accepted, knowing the people that I was working with.
> Gwennie (born 1953).

Meyer (2003) attributed the fact that gay men and lesbians were approximately twice as likely to experience mental health issues as their heterosexual contemporaries, to 'minority stress'. Pamela was one of five participants who experienced severe mental health crises:

I was twenty-six and I had this break down. But in this *group*, […] I used to sit there like that with my hair dropping down and I used to say 'I think I'm queer' […] It used to be a terrible struggle. […] It was *terribly lonely* and I think lonely for a lot of people, in the past, before things altered. Before I was *thirty* and I was thinking *all those years*, so I was ten years behind at least. That was very lonely, really. That was *desperate* actually.
Pamela (born 1945).

For some women, the most severe periods of loneliness occurred during their marriage to men:

I was just lonely in my marriage. My whole thing was repressed so I was lonely. I felt the loneliness but didn't know what it was about.
Bina (born 1947).

I was a young mother […] feeling a very strange sort of loneliness and I think it was the loneliness that comes of not being able to be your true self, of not, you know of having to live in roles that are put upon you rather than being able to develop your own way through life.
Alison (born 1952).

When describing feelings connected to sexual identity, participants were more likely to use the descriptors of loneliness and isolation. Class differences were framed in terms of 'not-fitting'. As Chapter Four showed, social mobility left several working-class educated participants feeling 'out of place'. Ivy was unable to distinguish the loneliness she felt as a 'class outsider' from that which was connected to her sexual feelings for women. Lilia perceives loneliness as being connected to her sense of difference:

I have often felt lonely and that loneliness comes about by feeling you're very different to everybody you associate with.
Lilia (born 1952).

As Chapter Two revealed, studies of older LGB populations attribute their vulnerability to loneliness and isolation to several factors including their socialisation in a period when homosexuality was stigmatised, prolonged concealment of sexual identity, lowered self-esteem as a consequence of

'minority stress', lack of social embeddedness and being single (Fokkema and Kuyper, 2009; Kuyper and Fokkema, 2010; Traies, 2012). These are undoubtedly valid reasons, which explain certain aspects of the sense of isolation and 'difference' experienced across the life course. However, I offer an alternative explanation for the feelings of loneliness and isolation associated with their uneasy positioning as socially mobile women, many of whom eschewed 'feminine' gender norms along with heterosexuality: that of habitus dislocation.

Almost two-thirds of participants said that they had feelings of loneliness, difference or not fitting in at some point in their lives. Where some researchers have indicated habitus' potential to adapt or reconcile to misalignment between fields (Ingram, 2011; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013), I suggest that multiple field transgressions create pressure on the habitus' ability to modify leaving many with a residual element of social and emotional disequilibrium. The resulting feelings, which may be experienced as loneliness as the individuals never feel to 'fit' in either the field of departure or arrival, motivate individuals to find others with whom they may derive a sense of belonging. It is my belief that the social and support groups of lesbian and bisexual women offer safe spaces to try out new practices and ways of being that embody sexual identity and, to a lesser extent, flexible gender roles. The predominance of working-class educated over 'true' middle-class women in this study may indicate that the group organisation and membership of such groups also contributes to the reconciliation of some social class transgressions, although there are enduring class divisions, to which I attend in Chapter Seven.

Resilience

For many people a sense of belonging to a given society, community or group is axiomatic. McLaren's (2006; 2009) research demonstrates that this is not always the case for sexual minorities; lesbian women feel less sense of belonging to the general community than their heterosexual counterparts. Weeks (1996) believes this has provided a motivating factor for the emergence of 'a sense of community' since the 1960s:

> The strongest sense of community is in fact likely to come from those groups who find the premises of their collective existence threatened, and who construct out of this a community of identity which provides a strong sense of resistance and empowerment. (p.72)

Research indicates that, in addition to individuals' own agency, adaptability and resilience (Barranti and Cohen, 2000; Balsam and D'Augelli, 2006), a sense of belonging to a lesbian community may counter feelings of exclusion, ameliorate feelings of belonging to the wider community, protect against the loneliness caused by minority stress and buffer against depression (Phelan, 1989; McLaren, 2009; Kuyper and Fokkema, 2010).

Orel's (2006) focus group study of LGB elders with an average age of 72, reports that many of them felt that they had developed resilience as a consequence of dealing with the coming out process. Orel suggests that the disclosure of sexual identification and accompanying 'deconstruction of negative images' leads to the development of adaptive coping mechanisms which are suited to dealing with stigma - including that surrounding ageing. Vanessa believed this was the 'advantage' of her generation:

> I think some of the young people could get a rude awakening 'cause I don't think it's *gone*, homophobia or whatever else. There *is* more acceptability but I mean if there was a backlash or whatever at any time I think they'd get a very rude awakening. Where, you know, I think to a certain extent we've had an *advantage* in the fact that

we've had that and now we've got this freedom. […] I *have* had homophobic reactions and it's still a shock but it's not as big a shock as if I was brought up in this period and then you get it, it would be horrific.
Vanessa (born 1947).

Kate's concern was for the resilience and visibility of older lesbians to be maintained for the benefit of the next generation:

I *can't bear* the fact that we might have to go back to being *invisible* […] I haven't really thought it through Jill but *politically* we need this visibility because we don't want to lose lesbianism as an issue in Britain, you know. I have a *big picture* […] which is that we have all these wonderful Ofsted schools, all outstanding, and all of them have a programme whereby they look at *lesbian* families and *gay* families and *different* families and they say to everybody 'what you can do when you grow up is choose one of these' and it's *open* and *big*. When we get to *that*, I'll *relax* and until then I want us to be *visible* and *fighting*.
Kate (born 1946).

Nancy warns that such resources and resilience may be jeopardised by the ageing process:

I think, for a lot of people, it only just *dawns* on you as you begin to accept the fact that you are not as young or able or as energetic as you used to be. Or as *resilient* or whatever. Because by the time you're in your early sixties there's *no way* that life isn't showing you that things are *different*. And even if you are lucky to be *very* healthy, it's *still different*.
Nancy (born 1951).

Crisp et al. (2008) report that lesbians, gay men and bisexuals of the 'baby boomer' generation feel their sexual orientation has enhanced their resilience and ability to create support networks. This chapter now moves on to examine some groups, movements and 'communities' and consider the degree of belongingness and other benefits they offer, starting with the experiences of those women who were impacted, in differing ways and to different extents, by feminism.

6.2   Organising and belonging to groups across the life course: Feminist groups and Greenham Common Peace Camp.

> Whenever women come together to create community, a profound imbalance in society is lessened just a bit.
> (Rabin and Slater, 2005:170)

This section probes the actuality of second wave feminism for the women in this study almost all of whom are contained within the age cohort identified. Although not initially a main research focus, narratives around feminism threw up, 'flashes of depth and colour as well as patches of shadow' (Mason, 2011:77) as women discussed the influences of feminism and the Women's Liberation Movement (hereafter WLM) both in their early adulthood and now. Roseneil et al. (2012) use the term 'movements for gender and sexual equality and change' to encompass women's movements, feminists movements, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movements (p.68). Their investigation of the impact of such movements on the intimate lives and experiences of 67 'non-activists' living 'unconventional' intimate lives found some evidence of impact in over 80% of interviewees. Roseneil et al. conclude that in these cases, 'such lives would not have been possible without these movements' (p.48). My participants lived through an era where legal advances gradually enhanced their employment rights, increased their chances of becoming adoptive parents and reduced their fear of hospitalisation or losing their children as a consequence of being outed. They were involved in legal and political campaigns for a range of equalities and human rights. What I am particularly interested in here however, is their subjective experience of feminism and the extent to which it was a transformative force in their lives;

did it validate and support their choices or did it become yet another restriction creating feelings of exclusion or difference?

Although we must be mindful that the term feminism conflates divergent practices, theories and issues into a convenient if unwieldy umbrella, there is general agreement that second wave of feminism as a mass social movement peaked in the mid-1970s (Segal, 1999). Raphael and Cruikshank (2015) observe variations in the degree to which old lesbians identify with or reject the label 'feminist':

> Both the women's liberation movement and lesbian/gay liberation had a huge impact, giving lesbians the psychic space to claim their identities and come out. It must also be acknowledged that some women now in their 80s or 90s, whose life history of loving women encourages us to consider them lesbians, vociferously, even angrily, reject the label. (p.3)

Despite being aged between 19 and 35 in the mid-1970s, many of my participants had had little awareness of feminism at the time, while others rejected it as being too restrictive or overly heterosexual and chose to align themselves with other campaigns instead, including those around AIDS and Clause 28. Those who did engage with feminism didn't necessarily do so during the 'second wave' although it had a profound and lasting effect on those who did, creating personal and political transformation and offering a sense of belonging. Nancy, who grew up in the States, was an early feminist, and found it gave her a powerful voice with which to challenge inequality:

> We actually went on *strike* in my school because, [name of town] very cold in the winter and we got fed up with being told that you could wear trousers to school but you had to *bring your skirt with you* and then *change*! And it was… *stuff this*! And we had several, *very well* supported strikes and I *do believe* that was feminism.

Unlike Nancy, the majority of women were not feminists in the seventies; some came to it after marriage and/or children, others following adult education or taking part in Greenham in the early to mid-eighties. Anne felt that being a mother took her attention away from the feminist movement and Annie recalls how it was something that arrived gradually, creeping up on her consciousness:

> Right, in the feminist era, I would say I *wasn't* a feminist but I wouldn't say I *was* either. So I was having kids, I was busy. I was busy trying to get through work and small children and whatever, so I wasn't *active*.
> Anne (born 1954).

> I don't think that I was *consciously* aware of feminism and what it was called and why it was for a while. I *didn't do* the *political journey* that a lot of lesbians have done. So for me it was something that arrived gradually [laughing] and like 'Of course! Stupid! Why didn't I think of that?
> Annie (born 1951).

Narratives of feminism and lesbianism were often intertwined, conflated into one and neither the narrators, nor I, am able to distinguish clearly the two parts. Gina reflects the narrative of several participants who talked about both as a single entity:

> I think that they are *intertwined inextricably* and if feminism didn't embrace lesbianism then what's the point of calling it feminism? And I wish all lesbians were feminists but they're not and you know, that's the nature of the world really.
> Gina (born 1952).

As well as differences in *when* women had engaged with feminism, there was also a continuum of responses about its significance and impact on their lives, ranging from Alison who 'disliked the concept' to Joyce who felt it had changed her life. Although it is commonly assumed that feminism was a liberating force for lesbianism, empowering many women to come out, only three of Markowe's (2002) sample of forty women came to identify as

lesbian through involvement with feminism; neither was it the experience of the majority of my participants. Munt (1998) highlights the role of class in this, suggesting that the 'lesbian feminist revolution' and the 'totalizing gesture of separatism' (p.157) in particular was available only to middle-class women. A close look at the early WLM reveals facets that may have rendered it an uncomfortable place for working-class educated aspiring lesbians unless they were already politically motivated and confident. hooks (2000) suggests that 'exclusionary practices' within feminism serve to ostracize and silence those who seek a different perspective (p.9). The conferences organised by the WLM between 1970 and 1978 were often held in imposing university buildings (the first was in the Oxford University Union). The elite surroundings, coupled with an overwhelmingly middle-class attendance and a focus on predominantly heterosexual issues including contraception, abortion and childcare would perhaps have been alien and alienating for many women.

Podmore and Tremblay (2015) suggest that lesbians in the 1970s were not only dealing with heterosexism in the feminist movement but were also 'invisible' within the gay liberation movement. The older lesbian group that Val belonged to had been set up as a direct consequence of women rejecting feminist groups as 'too heterosexual':

> And you know you couldn't sit down and talk about being a lesbian *comfortably* with women who were saying 'Oh *sometimes*, I go out on my *own*, you know. Without my *husband*.'
> Val (born 1940).

Gina's experience was similar. In 1971, as a 19 year old feminist and lesbian undergraduate seeking to find a political outlet, she moved away

from the GLF, which she experienced as male-dominated, rejected the WLM as being 'too heterosexual' and transferred her political activism to Women's Aid, in an attempt to escape what Podmore and Tremblay (2015) describe the 'double marginalization' of lesbian women from these movements:

> [T]he women in the women's liberation group were all heterosexual and we perceived it as all they talked about was abortion and child care and you know, and what do you call it, self-examination, which we thought were entirely heterosexual topics. […] We thought feminism was great but we certainly didn't want to be in this heterosexual… CR group really […] after two three years maybe, the *women* in Gay Liberation Front got *really* fed up with the *men* […] So we […] started doing Women's Aid, we just started doing more and more different things and stopped going to gay liberation and we did a women's sexuality group.

When the question of sexuality was directly addressed at the 1974 Edinburgh conference with the demand for the end of discrimination against lesbians added to the platform, the debate quickly became antagonistic, particularly with respect to bisexuality:

> People had to choose. They had to be one or the other. They couldn't be both. […] Sexuality very quickly became a very problematic area within the women's movement. (Delmar)[31]

Alison, who identifies as bisexual, polyamorous and submissive, held the most critical view of feminism, although the 'allure' of housewifery she expresses here was shared by Shirley. Although both women recognised the positive impact of feminism on women's lives generally, they did not personally identify with the collective desire for the transformation of women's role, expressing a wistfulness for a different life; one they were denied by the ideological and financial imperative to work:

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[31] Rosalind Delmar in an interview for the British Library's 'Sisterhood and after' project. http://www.bl.uk/sisterhood/articles/womens-liberation-a-national-movement [Accessed 22.1.16]

I'm not a feminist; I dislike the concept intensely. Mainly I think because my first awareness of it would have been in the days when it also went hand-in-hand with lesbian separatism […] So no I'm not really a poster girl for feminism, sorry. I'd have been a 1950s housewife.
Alison.

Several women, while recognizing the gains and changes brought about by the WLM, felt that feminism had, at times, been too extreme, too 'strident' for their liking. Lilia outlined some of the restrictions she felt feminism imposed on her already censured life:

I think that strand that existed became negative and also, it took on its own real set of rules, you know, there was this whole set of rules […] if it was considered that that this had come about by men, or to the benefit of men, then you don't touch it. Right so, therefore, there's no way were you a feminist if you wore a skirt. No way could you be a feminist if you put make up on. […] I'd say it's been important where it's fought for the *rights* of women but I do think it went too far […] when you get certain people telling me I was an insult to the feminist movement to put make up on I thought, 'now you're doing *exactly* what I would accuse anybody who creates something to put restrictions on you' and for me that was *too* far.

The label 'feminist' was seen by several participants as something else to resist, an unwanted constraint in a patriarchal world where there were already too many controls on female identity, behaviour, education and employment:

I'm *reluctant* to call myself a feminist. I have feminist *views* and there are those who would *call me* a feminist but […] I just feel the *label* restricts me and I don't want the restriction. […] some of the feminists I know make assumptions about […] what *your* life's like, what *you* believe and what *you* do and it can *feel*, at times, like if you step outside that box – for instance, if I were to say, you know, not all men are the same – that I *know* there are people who would, you know, want to burn me at the stake and I *feel* that I can't say those things in some settings.
Clary (born 1951).

I was never a card-carrying feminist. […] I'm not quite sure how I missed, all the card-carrying feminist things! […] I *am* a feminist and I *was* a feminist but again, without the label.
Vanessa

Bindell (1999) suggests that feminist groups in the 1970s were hard places to be; unless you were middle-class and educated with some experience of left politics they were almost inevitably alienating spaces. Some women in my study who found such groups frightening or restrictive were either working-class, (Frances and Denny) or working-class educated (Clary, Ivy, Bina and Lilia) and, as such, lacked the cultural dispositions necessary to feel at ease in such spaces. Here Bina describes how the feminism of the 1970s, perhaps necessarily, lacked the inclusivity, compassion and belongingness she sought:

> In the past there was a very strong kind of feminism that I didn't agree with really, […] I think if you're a feminist, you're *for* women, basically. And you never criticise a woman, or be nasty to a woman. 'Cause that's where it starts, it's not out there it's *here*. And that kind of feminism I didn't like. […] I don't understand aspects, certain aspects, of the feminism that was prevalent in the 70s. I don't understand it. Even though *those* women really got us to where we are today. They really did and I'm aware of that as well. But I think, somehow, as you're coming out at different times […] I think that those women who had to steel themselves, you know, to break, to go forward, they did it in a certain way. They have to be commended for it. But I think it kind of lost its way.

As well as the feelings expressed here about the label 'feminist', participants often referred to the physical embodiment seen as necessary to the identity of a 'real' lesbian/feminist. As discussed in Chapter Five, several women felt the need to modify their appearance in order to gain acceptance in groups; often these narratives do not distinguish between feminist and lesbian 'rules':

> [I]t was in the days when how you *looked*, you know, if you didn't *look* like a lesbian, *were* you a lesbian? We even had *debates* on this. And if you didn't have a *relationship, were* you a lesbian? You know we had all sorts of talks […] I had long hair at that time and I used to wear plaits and I had dungarees […] we had this talk about long hair somebody said, 'How can you possibly be a lesbian with long hair?' and I can remember thinking 'Shit! I need to leave, you know, I can't possibly be a lesbian, I've got long hair.' So they were *really* quite

oppressive, you know, some of these, these *political* women and it *was* a *scary* place, you know, for a *time*; it became a very scary place.
Frances (born 1952).

Frances was not the only woman whose embodied lesbian identity was impacted by these debates. Feminist groups, while offering affirmation, also had the power to exclude or marginalise those who did not 'fit'. Denny ran nightclubs in the 1970s and 1980s. She derived no sense of belonging from feminist groups and remembered them predominantly for their censure of the sexual practices and appearance of 'S&M lesbians':

> It was a time of S&M as well as well as feminism so the two were clashing with each other or colliding with each other. So the pub used to be such a mixture of different women. You'd have S&M women come in and you'd have the feminist type of women coming in and the feminists used to object to the S&M women […] I love women and care about them but I don't think feminism's *really* had that big a wow impact on me that I want to sit in all these bloody political meetings all the time talking about it forever and ever. […] I was more out having fun I think.
> Denny (born 1953).

Appearance aside, other markers of difference included ethnicity and social class. As Segal (1999) points out, feminist groups in the 1970s were 'overwhelmingly white and predominantly middle class' (p.23). While offering support for gender role transgression and emerging sexual identities it would seem that they provided little validation for working-class women or women of colour. Bindell's descriptions of the non-impact of 1970s feminist activism on working-class culture in the north-east of England strikes a chord with some narratives in this study:

> While women in dungarees wearing women's symbols on their earrings debated whether heterosexuality was bad for women, my mother cleaned up after her sons and husband, got up at 5.30 when Dad was on the early shift to make his sandwiches and went to work at the local shop. (1999:69)

Two participants suggested that employment in traditionally male jobs took up the space and energy that feminist participation demanded; their narratives indicate a classed aspect to this experience. Gillian spent much of her life working in factories only encountering feminism when she met middle-class feminists through lesbian groups. Here she articulates how she experienced the divide between 'lived feminism' and 'talking about politics':

> I used to say I don't think I really knew anything about it really but then in some way I did didn't I because *I were there doing it all*. […] I don't remember anything about it at all; I were busy working in mill then. So I didn't really *know anything*. […] When they were all talking about politics - I didn't really know what they were on about – this is in the lesbian community – so I used to say I weren't political 'cause I didn't really know what it were! […] I didn't really think about it but in a way I were *living it* weren't I?
> Gillian (born 1944).

Brenda offered a similar narrative. She felt she had been to busy pushing for workplace equality to engage with feminism 'in the abstract' concluding 'I was working too hard for that'. Ironically, Brenda's career was transformed by the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) as, after many years of frustration, she was finally allowed to apply to become a mounted policewoman - the first in the country. These interviews suggest that, in the 1970s, while feminist debate was at its peak, some working-class women were too preoccupied with surviving oppressively sexist workplace environments to engage with it.

For other participants feminism was a central, guiding principle. For Gina, it was axiomatic; when asked whether feminism had been important, her response was, 'Such a stupid question! […] It certainly has!' Jacqueline and Joyce use similar language to express the centrality of feminism in shaping their lives and identity as women and lesbians. For them and others

including Louise, feminism enabled the development of a lesbian identity:

> [I]t was the *height* of women's liberation, so we had *consciousness raising* groups, we had *health* groups, we had *campaign* groups, we had *reclaim the night* groups, we had *equal pay* groups, we had a women's *centre*, we had *the lot*! And that became my *life*. So *women* became my life. So consequently, they became my lovers. […] Feminism is the only politics that ever made any sense to me. The *only* politics.
> Jacqueline (born 1944).

Attending her first feminist group was equally affirming for Joyce. It corroborated her life choices, her sexual and emotional behaviour, validating her whole identity as a working-class educated lesbian resisting the dominant gender norms demanded by her marriage and mothering; ultimately, it shifted her world view, making sense of her feeling of being 'different' and offering her a political structure to wrap around the choices she was already making:

> I felt I began to understand the *world*. Why it acted and why we women were constantly saying I don't know why I'm not *happy*, I don't know why I'm not quite *fitting* in here. Politics and my sexuality *completely* liberated me from that notion. […] It's like a *language* that I didn't know existed and made sense of my life. […] So things that I had decided for *myself*, like *not* to *service* this whole *family*, to do that a bit *differently*, to not use the name *mother* - those *little things* that I'd stuck out a *mile,* but, they were important to me - *other women were doing it*! But had a *reason*! And suddenly, the *reasons* they were saying they were doing it were *exactly* what I'd felt but didn't know how to articulate […] it *completely, totally changed my life.* And as I say, having the *two* things - it sort of gave me *permission* really to be a *lesbian* in a way that made total sense to me.
> Joyce (born 1946).

Greenham Common Peace Camp

The combination of political argument and direct action offered by the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp was meaningful and accessible to Robin as a young, working-class woman. Her previous encounters with activism had proved disappointing; trade union activism had been

patriarchal and disempowering, feminism middle-class and elitist.

Greenham was a turning point in her life after which, everything changed.

She has maintained a lesbian separatist life ever since:

> Feminism gave my politics a structure. I was already involved in trade union/anti Vietnam war stuff in the late sixties and was made very aware what my role, as a womon, should be - do the typing, make the tea, be emotional, someone to drink with and have sex with. Early politics gave me a voice but one that was not going to be listened to. My first encounters with feminism in the early seventies were disappointing. The groups was middle-class wimmin, professionals, educated. Their language was elitist and I despaired of thinking I would find a group to work in. […] Greenham changed all of that. It changed my world and life, not without some difficulties and trauma though. I am a firm believer that the change to fighting for 'equality' meant that we were not fighting for 'liberation' in the feminist movement, that was a detrimental move and means that we have left millions of wimmin without a voice, a place, a belonging. Robin (born 1949).

Several other women discussed the significance of Greenham in raising their feminist/lesbian confidence in the 1980s. Roseneil (1995) suggests that the peace camp offered a space in which, 'lesbian identities were 'normalized' and lesbianism 'became a "thinkable" practice and identity available to all women at Greenham' (p.158). Jolly (2006) argues that the camp owed far more to the women's liberation movement of the 1970s than was apparent at the time and offered a unique fusion whereby, 'the highs of direct action brought out the links between sexuality and liberation alongside those of gender and war'.[32]

As well as affirming Robin's gender politics, the experience of living communally with women impacted on a deeply personal level. Following a

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[32] Jolly, M. (2006) *Writing the web: Letters from the women's peace movement*. [Online]
http://www.feministseventies.net/Greenham.html
[Accessed 19.10.15]

childhood rape, Robin was sexually vulnerable. The community of women at

Greenham showed her an alternative way of life:

> I had a certain kind of thing in my head – if somebody *touches you* then you know, you just *wait* for what they *want* and if they want anything then you give it to 'em. […] Greenham taught me that actually I can sit by a fire and be *held* and nobody wants *anything else* and it took me *months* and *months* and *months* to learn that and that that was *ok*. […] Greenham taught me that you can say no to *everything* you know. There we were *saying no* to the mightiest military force in the *world* and so it was like well if I can say *no* to *them* I can say no to anything that I *didn't like…*

Spending time at Greenham with other women showed Ivy, at that point

married with two children, that she could be a lesbian – a future she had not

imagined was possible up to this point. Again it represented a turning point,

after which a new lesbian consciousness and identity became a reality:

> I suppose it was a bit of a continuum from seeking out close friendships with women and then […] becoming more politically involved and aware in the feminist movement and spending time with feminist women which inevitably led to spending time with lesbians and an awareness phase when I thought, 'if I *ever* were to come out of this marriage, I would be with a *woman*' and that didn't seem possible because who would want to be with a woman with children anyway? And I didn't perceive lesbians as being women with children. I perceived lesbians as being childless and therefore, may as well stick with what I *had* than go it alone; that seemed even lonelier and then you know, the sort of realisation happens that, actually it can be more and you can have relationships and with children as well. So almost inevitably really my marriage broke down and I never looked back.

Louise directly links the decision to end her marriage and become a lesbian

in 1980 with her feminist politics and spending time at Greenham:

> It was becoming a feminist, spending most of me time with other women and developing strong relationships with other women.
> Louise (born 1949).

Greenham's impact is still being discussed in older lesbian/feminist groups

today. Nancy applauds the endurance of its powerful unifying effect;

ironically most participants in this study are not part of the shared history

she assumes here:

> It's a common history, 'cause we can all laugh about having been…
> you know, even if we didn't know each other, *we were all at
> Greenham*. We were all holding hands round the perimeter of
> Greenham. […] It was really quite a significant thing and it did unite
> us and it united us wider than for example, sort of lesbian politics in
> terms of feminism.

Feminism now

The sense of relative equality achieved within some lesbian relationships

reduced the need to remain active in the feminist movement for some

women:

> [W]hen I was *married* it was a point of principle and I tried very *hard*,
> with varying levels of success, to have an equal relationship and it
> mattered *desperately* that we split housework and things like that.
> […] If you were railing against patriarchy and you were in a
> heterosexual relationship there was plenty to rail *against*. […]
> Whereas in a lesbian relationship, there is not that pressure.
> Ivy.

For others, being retired has freed up more time to offer feminist groups and

events, giving them increased importance. Val became a feminist through

her awareness of the gender inequalities in her family life and saw her

feminism spanning '*all my life*'. As she ages, her feminist beliefs are

becoming stronger and more significant; her awareness of time ebbing

away influencing who she chooses to spend time with:

> I think other people might say I'm a separatist and *now*, now I'm *my*
> age I feel I've only got a certain amount of time and why, you know,
> why socialise with *men* when I could socialise with *women*?

Several women in London, including Nora, Nancy, Val, Gina and Joyce,

remain active in feminist groups and activities, including the formation of a

relatively recent online group, [London feminist group]. This network of

second wave feminists operates through an active email list, generating

hundreds of emails a month discussing diverse topics including refugees,

prostitution, pornography, abortion, politics and international peace

initiatives. Mehra et al.'s (2004) study of an LGBT electronic mailing list

hosted by the University of Illinois revealed that it was used as an

information resource that also helped to promote the political participation of

individuals and generated social and psychological support to members.

These functions are all evident in the London feminist group network.

Feminist 'duty of care' is demonstrated with the sharing of information about

women needing support following illness or surgery, obituaries and offers of

free and cheap lodging to feminist women. The network is also setting up a

Feminist Forum with the aim of increased political participation. Mehra et al.

suggest the significance of 'cultural empowerment' and this too is evident

with several women using the list to publicise their own art and literature

events. The network not only operates through Riseup mailings but also

aims to meet physically biannually. When the group met in the Feminist

Library in 2014, the response was overwhelming:

> [T]hey put out *35 chairs*, *120 women came*. That said everything to
> *me*. But what I thought was so wonderful was so many people used
> the word *hope*. It wasn't just *need* or *fear* or *loss*; loads of people
> talked in loads of different ways about *hope*. And I thought that was
> *fantastic*.
> Nancy.

London feminist group has generated many small local groups using

Consciousness Raising (CR) as a form of activism. These are often

selective and close their membership when they feel they have reached the

'right balance'. Many are located in and around North London although

there are also a number of regional groups. Like Nora, several women felt

excited, and somewhat nostalgic, at the prospect of re-engaging with CR:

> [I]t's *shared experience*. And *that's* what's so exciting about those groups and what it *also* is, is we *are* doing what we were doing in the seventies; we've started doing consciousness raising.
> Nora (born 1954).

These groups may be modelled along the old lines of CR but the topics under discussion have moved to reflect, 'what we are experiencing now: ageing, loss, death, pleasures, politics'.[33] Nancy discusses how her 'solid closed committed' CR group of seven feminist lesbian women are dealing with the issues they are now facing:

> [T]here's huge amounts of discussion between you know, those people who will be able to rely on biological children who will support them and those of us who do not have that. […] What are we all doing, even those of us who are in partnership, you know, acknowledging the fact that at *some point* one of us *goes* and the other gets *left,* in all of those long-term partnerships and the idea that you, you know, some people are lucky enough to be close to biological family who will acknowledge that *loss* as being you know a widowhood as such but there's lots of people who will not be afforded the *dignity* of that *recognition*.

As she approaches her seventies, Jacqueline finds her (predominantly straight) friends as important as ever. She places great importance on the longevity of the relationships generated by her early engagement with feminist groups in Leeds:

> Those women that I met in women's liberation, the early days, I still know masses of them. That's why I'm in Leeds. We still meet. I mean now we don't go to discos or whatever but we still meet, we still see each other, we're still *interested*. […] I went to book club yesterday, […] Choir, two of the women there I've known for 25 years; I'm going on holiday with one of them. […] So, women's liberation is my family, feminists are my family.

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33 Amanda Sebestyen (March 2016) http://discoversociety.org/2016/03/01/focus-the-difference-between-feminism-and-womens-liberation/
[Accessed 3.5.16]

Whereas feminist and lesbian communities have remained a constant, perhaps increasing, source of support and political connectivity for some, Esther's experience is one of fragmentation of the older lesbian and feminist movements, which she attributed to the issue of trans exclusion. An active feminist since the 1970s, she had always imagined her later life being sustained by an older feminist lesbian community; a community she now feels no longer exists in a way that she can identify with or be part of, to the point where she has rejected the identification of lesbian in favour of queer. Her sense of loss is palpable:

> I come from the time when […] women and organising around woman and trying to make new ways for women *was everything* […] That's what my seventies was about and it never occurred to me that it wouldn't always be there like that, as a priority for many of us. […] I saw these older women there and kind of imagined that there would be this really important and vibrant older feminist lesbian world when I was old.
> Esther (born 1947).

It can be seen that participants' relationship with feminism was varied and complex. For some it offered a way of becoming lesbian, was identity affirming and empowering. For others, it was too strident, too rule-bound, too middle-class. Its impact evaded many participants altogether, particularly those engaged in workplace struggle, heterosexual marriage and child-rearing. Some women eschewed feminist groups in favour of setting up their own organisations to affirm and validate their burgeoning identities in the resistance of gender norms and as bisexual women and lesbians; the significance of these as a source of belonging and resilience across the life course are discussed in the next section.

6.3 Organising and belonging to groups across the life course: Lesbian groups.

> Finally, there are back places, where persons of the individual's kind stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigmata…
> (Goffman, 1963:102)

The establishment of connections to the LGBT community offers invaluable support through individuals' coming out processes as well as lessening internalised homophobia (Frost and Meyer, 2012). It was evident that participants did not only *belong* to groups in their older age but had been instrumental in *organising* them across their life course. The majority of the groups set up or attended by participants hinged on their gender; virtually all were predicated on sexual identity - groups run *by* lesbian women *for* lesbian women. Women had participated in staffing Lesbian Line, run lesbian dining groups, organised lesbian walking groups, meditation groups, reading groups and film groups, choirs and lesbian history groups. Meyer (2007) suggests that one of the functions of LGB communities is the creation of institutions where 'LGB identities and relationships are acknowledged, supported and respected' (p.242). Several participants had been instrumental in setting up important organisations across the decades; contributing significantly to the establishment of A Woman's Place (1977), the Camden Lesbian Centre and Black Lesbian Group (1983), the Equity Partnership (2006) and the first lesbian Alcoholics Anonymous group. There were no apparent differences in patterns of group organisation and memberships between the two geographical samples within the study; women from all cohorts had been active in establishing and belonging to a diverse range of groups. The only geographical difference to emerge was in relation to the commercial club scene with several women (including Gillian,

Minerva and Gina who was then living in the north-west) talking about travelling 'down' to the Gateways club in the days before Leeds and Bradford had a significant lesbian social scene.

I first met Minerva through her role in a lesbian identity project in West Yorkshire that brought several women together to produce a series of four booklets documenting twentieth century lesbian history. Like many women I interviewed, Minerva is part of a women-only walking group that has run as a self-organised, women-led group for over 20 years. The majority of members are lesbian identified. For Minerva, the attraction lies in 'having a laugh' in all-female company:

> There's generally anything between *twelve* to *thirty odd* women on walks. More frequently, there's about twelve fifteen sort of twenty but, you know, sometime there's been as many as thirty odd. […] We go walking every other Sunday […] it's a great group, get out, enjoy lots of company, lots of laughs.
> Minerva (born 1945) talking about the Yorkshire walking group.

Joan organised the group for over 12 years. It had been a source of informal support across the years and offered the added possibility of meeting 'somebody new':

> [I]f there are nice people there and you're in trouble, then they'll usually rally round. I mean there are people that like you particularly and you like them and you might see them for a drink in the pub separately to the walking group. […] You don't see them very often but they just come up and give you a hug if they knew you'd been upset by… the latest disaster! [laughs] So yes they're important.
> Joan (born 1946) talking about the Yorkshire walking group.

The potential of women-only or lesbian walking groups as a source of belonging and support is not always so straightforward. As Esther's previous narrative indicated, the complexity of transgender lesbian identification continues to be played out in groups in a multiplicity of ways.

Vanessa, a self-identified 'non-joiner', describes how rather than being

offered affirmation, one woman found herself further marginalised and

described in 'vile' terms in her attempts to be included:

> [T]hey wanted to have this rule that they weren't allowed in because they weren't lesbians. Well this transsexual was identified as a lesbian. It was a blooming walking group; did it matter?

Several women referenced the existence of a lesbian-run café that operated

in West Yorkshire in the 1980s and led to several other groups being set up.

In fact, a lesbian and bisexual women's dining group still exists in the same

area, although now its members go to pubs and restaurants rather than

cooking for themselves. Bina was one of the founding members of the café:

> We did [name of group] – myself and 3 or 4 others. And there was lots of well really, kind of split off groups from it like dinner parties and things like that. Did a lot of that kind of thing. [Name of group] was the biggest thing 'cause that ran for about two years I think or more. […] Everybody loved it and it was great food at very low cost. And we met twice a month to plan the menus. We made the food. […] It was just fantastic!

Vanessa volunteered to be interviewed, stating in her application that

groups were 'not her thing'. As her interview unfolded however, it became

very clear that group membership was, and continued to be, an essential

part of her life:

> [I]t started with a small group and what we did was we organised events, so we would go go-kart racing […] paintballing, laser, bowling, to the dogs. […] Now, I suppose this is where I am different from some of the others, or have the opportunity to, is the fact that this group was of multi age; from 20 to I probably was one of the older ones although I started the thing. But it *grew*, I mean there could be some weeks when there were 30 of us in this local pub and it *grew*.

Not all of the groups established by the participants have been lesbian

groups. Rothblum (2010) found that bisexual women faced unique issues

and felt excluded from and marginalised by lesbian groups. Indeed, one of the longest established older lesbian groups in central London has a 'no bi, no trans' policy.[34] Two bisexual participants expressed their preference for socialising in mixed or bisexual company and have also been instrumental in creating groups - still based on sexual identity but with different remit; Esther founded an organisation campaigning for more inclusive services for older LGBT people in the 1990s and also acts as an 'expert by experience' for ODL and Alison has, more recently, set up a group for bisexuals aged 55 and over.[35]

6.4   Other ways of belonging

Digital spaces and online communities

Most participants did not regard the internet as a source of community, although they were competent users, able to send and receive emails and research events online. For a few women, it was more significant; Clary had her own tarot casting website and Val visited the library every day to connect with her online lesbian and feminist community. For Esther it held tremendous importance; her account confirms the research of Sum et al. (2008) who found associations between using the internet for communication and lower levels of social and emotional loneliness:

> I don't feel lonely because I have an enormously vivid Facebook life […] I get loads of response to things I write and appreciation and I really appreciate that I get that so, I do feel that social media have changed things for me and it has, to a certain extent, replaced and improved on the kind of living in communes or living in a lesbian housing co-op and having neighbours and all that kind of thing. It means that I can, every single day, interact with people who I like […] it's really important to me. […] It's *really, really* important to me.

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[34] London social group 1
[35] London bisexual group

Rothblum (2010) suggests that the relatively small size of the bisexual community and its lack of power in comparison to the lesbian and gay communities may account for the reliance of bisexuals on the internet for community support. Rodríguez Rust (2012) highlights the importance of the internet for those belonging to 'small minorities' as a way to 'find others like themselves for the first time' (p.182). Alison sees it as essential to connect to her 'niche' bisexual, polyamorous, and submissive community:

> It's vital. That has transformed my *life*. Because there is no way I could have formed those connections without the Internet. And there's certainly no way I could *sustain* them. […] It's absolutely vital. I would never move anywhere that didn't have broadband. Never! It would have been so difficult to form links into the kink community and poly community without it.

Esther and Alison did not enjoy women-only company and were less drawn to groups for lesbian and bisexual women, preferring gender-mixed or queer identified gatherings whether face-to-face at events such as BiCon or online. Both Susan and Edie were very lonely for 'likeminded' company but were unable to use technology to access it. Edie's response to being asked whether she used the internet was a dismissive, 'Do I heck as like'. Susan was isolated, both geographically and digitally:

> I don't have a computer […] You'd probably learn a lot off that wouldn't you? You know, you can meet up with people, talk to people can't you? I could go to the library I suppose but I don't know if that would be any good. I'm not right good on the Internet. Keep trying a little bit you know.
> Susan (born 1947).

Neither Susan nor Edie had been socially mobile; unlike those in professions such as teaching and nursing, their work had not required them to use digital technology. Their lack of access and technological confidence in older age reveals an intersection between social class and isolation not

immediately apparent in discussions of community and belonging.

Families we choose

Vanessa's social group was disrupted by the persistent attendance of a 'few odd characters' and eventually disbanded. However, from its ashes was formed a close-knit group of five women who she now describes as her social family. The group, which has met every week for over seven years, takes precedence over other relationships:

> [I]t's quite funny because it, some of them have had a few relationships since we've been going […] but they point out to their partners that this Wednesday is a no no! You know that they can't do anything on a Wednesday, if they're still seeing them and not living with them at this stage, that Wednesday's out! Funny! But it's obviously fulfilling the same function for the other four as it is for me. That it's actually our, wherever you are in your life, relationship-wise or whatever else, you've got one solid.

Vanessa defined this group as her social family - and recognised the positive contribution of the other four members in warding off a sense of isolation that could easily be the consequence of living, and spending the majority of time, alone:

> It wouldn't be fine if I didn't have a circle of people around me. Who I don't actually have to *see* but they're there. So I have a sense, I *do* have a sense of belonging although I'd like a bigger sense of belonging […] It's a level of security… and some weeks it's the focus of the week. Not very often but it is sometimes, it can be.

Social or chosen families often developed out of self-organised groups, sometimes replacing them as sources of affirmation in participants' lives. Weeks et al. (2001) suggest that they provide; 'a powerful affirmation of a new sense of belonging, and an essential part of asserting the validity of homosexual identities and ways of life' (p.46). One of the key differences observed in my research between social families and organised groups was

the fact that participants had absolute control over who to include in their chosen family whereas organised groups are either regulated (if funded) or, at the very least public, meaning that commonly excluded and unwanted individuals, including trans women and those with mental health issues, have to be admitted (or considerable energy expended on keeping them out). Conceptualisations of social families revealed enormous diversity supporting Weeks et al.'s findings of 'fluid boundaries and varying membership' (p.62) and highlighting the continued relevance of Weston's (1991) observation:

> The subjective agency implicit in gay kinship surfaced in the very labels developed to describe it: "families *we* choose," "families *we* create." (p.109)

Chosen families took on particular significance where participants were single and also where relationships with families of origin had been severed or disrupted by their mobilities through class, gender and sexual identity. For some women, this association was probably the most important connection in their lives. Robin's biological family not only rejected her but were politically alien; she described them as 'racist and homophobes'. Her social family offered her spiritual and political support; their plans to raise the funds to secure her housing situation thus safeguarding Robin's position in their community, exemplified feminist notions of 'duty of care':

> My *social* family are all *lesbian* […] I'm probably with them 4 times a week, 4 or 5 times a week. […] I know that they *care* you know; now they're all trying to put money together to buy a *house* that I can live in 'cause they're fed up of moving me!

Joyce's lesbian identity had fractured relationships with her birth family as well as distancing her from one of her daughters. Her social family emerged directly from her CR group and had several practical and emotional

functions:

> It's my *chosen* family […] we've discussed and written our power of attorneys. We haven't necessarily chosen our *chosen* family, sometimes we've chosen our *biological* family to be the executors, but we've *discussed* it as a group, eight of us here. We've done our *living* wills with discussion with that *chosen* family *and* we've done our *actual* wills. So they're the people I have an emotional, a really powerful emotional relationship with […] there's about 8 of *us*. […] They're very much chosen family.

Not having children or being partnered are practical realities for many older lesbian and bisexual women. For some, this made chosen families all the more important:

> I would consider that the friends that I've got - the vast majority of them would be woman and lesbian women - would be like a family. […] That's very important. I think it's probably more important because of not having kids, never having had kids.
> Catherine (born 1950).

Being single and having lived with a disability for many years, Gina recognised the importance of her social family in providing her with a sense of continuity and community. Her conceptualisation of her social family was of a much larger, looser knit group than Robin's, but no less important in imbuing her with a sense of belonging:

> Well my friends have always been more important to me than my birth family for the reasons I was saying earlier. In [place name] we had a *really* strong sense of community because… because we fought for gay liberation and women's liberation really […] So *I do absolutely feel* a sense of community depending on the occasion. Like somebody's funeral or some big, wonderful conference or the seventies feminist thing […] I do have a sense of community […] And there you see familiar faces, people I've known for years or en masse thousands of people I've never set eyes on - how fantastic – and all of that really. So I *do have*… I feel I have a social family. I *don't really* feel like I have a family family.

Clary has a number of serious health issues. She uses a wheelchair and has home care in the mornings and evenings. Although she didn't like the

term 'social family' her network clearly had an important role to play in her life:

> It is a network because the various things I'm involved in, there are overlaps between them all so there is that *powerful* sense of network where you go to one group and there'll be one or two people there that you're friends with; go to *another* one and there might be one or two *other* people or one person from the first group so there's definitely a network, yeah. […] I think that offers me a sense of *belonging* and feeling I've got someone I can call on. […] So very, very supportive in that way and I've had lots of support over the years from them and although I can't… the only *physical* thing I can do for them is drive them somewhere if they want to go or you know, they can't take *themselves* and they all know that they can ask me and if I'm able I will. But I can *offer* a lot of *emotional* support so there's a sense of give and take and a flow – an ebb and flow – with friendships.

The majority of participants had to some greater or lesser extent constructed 'self-described families' that had social, emotional and practical functions, offered them support and a sense of belonging. Lilia was herself recovering from major surgery when I interviewed her and benefitting from the ministrations of her support network, which emanated from an organised social group. Her interview made clear the continued importance of this support in older age:

> I think [it] is exceptionally meaningful for a lot of people, not just because they meet there on every other Wednesday but it's become a family, basically.
> Lilia, talking about Yorkshire social group 1.

Faith and spirituality

The interviews touched on other ways in which women found a sense of belonging, practical and emotional support and affirmation for their sexual identity. Because of the era into which they were born, many of these women were brought up in Church of England or Catholic families, which was cited by some as a reason for their prolonged concealment and

internalised homophobia. Here Edie discusses religion's influence on

Susan, her ex-partner:

> She's hid it all her life. Yeah. That's her big problem. Even though
> everybody *knows*! She still kind of can't… she's *Catholic* and she
> said that makes all the difference. I said 'Well you don't *believe* in it
> anymore' but she was, you know, brought up as a Catholic. […] You
> *don't do* things like that, that's not right.
> Edie (born 1944).

While Taylor (2016) notes that in relation to religion and religious music

'young queers' do not necessarily 'feel ill at ease with tradition' (p.43), other

research has indicated that many LGB Christians move away from 'religious

authority structures' toward 'individual spirituality' (Yip, 2002). Orel (2006)

found that older LGB individuals' involvement in organised religion was

curtailed because of the bias against their sexuality. Consequently, they

actively sought alternative ways of participating, which included attending

gay-friendly religious organisations and showed an increased interest in

spiritual beliefs as they aged.

In line with the findings of Averett et al. (2011), moving away from religion,

whether because of severance from families of origin or the anti-gay

doctrine of many organised religions, left a void in the lives of some

participants, another field in which they were positioned as outsiders. Two

women sought to reconcile the doctrine of the Church with their sexuality by

becoming members of Quest, an organisation for lesbian and gay Catholics.

Although a few participants were atheist or humanist, women were more

likely to find spirituality important; as well as those who took up meditation,

Tai Chi and Qi-Gon, and a few who followed Buddhism, many women had

developed alternative faiths often to do with nature, the passing of the

seasons and goddess-loving; thus congruent with their new lesbian identity. Spiritualism, paganism and witchcraft seen by the mainstream as 'alternative' invested as they are in nature and womanhood, offer another way of belonging to some lesbians and bisexual women. A third of my participants identified as 'spiritual' in some way with a further three women self-defining as witches. Kate, a 'very experienced ritual witch', describes the pull towards faith:

> I was brought up religious so the spirituality's just moved over to that really. It's a big hole if it's not there. And there have been a couple of times when I've been in places like Chartres with the light and the candles and thought 'I'm going to become a Catholic' which is total rubbish! And it isn't going to happen but […] it was like *ahhh* I *need this*. So it's a *recognition* and a childhood memory of stained glass windows and candles and *some* incense but not very much.

Meichenbaum (2008) suggests that faith and spirituality may be a source of resilience, offering ways of coping, protecting against depression and supporting 'victimised individuals' from negative self-disdain by offering emotional expression and social connection. Clary has previously suffered from depression. She has been socially mobile and rejected conventional gender norms and sexual identity; her spirituality gives her life a structure and connects her with others:

> I'm a witch and I worship a Goddess and a God and it's a nature-based religion and it's not just something I do when it's festival time, it's part of my everyday life. I feel like I've got a *connection*. […] It gives my life a *rhythm*. It gives the *month* a rhythm and it gives the *year* a rhythm. […] It's also a really good way of being in touch with a number of friends at once and you know, connecting with each other and making arrangements to do things. […] It's really important; I use it all the time. Every day.

Pride

The first officially recognised Gay Pride march in the UK, was held in London in 1972 and attracted around 700 people.[36] Now Pride events take place in many UK cities including Manchester, Brighton, Edinburgh, Leicester and Leeds with additional Trans and Black Pride events. Weeks (1996) views such events as an avenue for the expression of sexual identity and community; I was interested to see the extent to which my participants derived a sense of community and belonging. Like feminism, the importance of Pride and women's investment in it was an area of great division for my participants, confirming Johnstone and Waitt's (2015) findings of a 'messy ambivalent politics' (p.117) surrounding Pride festivals. While it still retained significance for some women, others found it male-dominated and yearned nostalgically for the days where lesbian strength marches had equal billing:

> Well it's got very commercialised so I don't *bother* with it. I think the last time I went was in the 90s […] They used to have Lesbian Strength march and then there was all the controversy between the S&M dykes and the vanilla dykes and, inevitably, I see that politically like all small groups have in-fighting so it didn't happen but I *liked* that when they had the *lesbian* march.
> Pamela.

> *Lesbian Strength* that's what we *used* to have. […] There used to be *Gay Pride* march in *London* and *Lesbian Strength* march in *London*. It was *huge*. It used to be *huge*.
> Robin.

In Yorkshire, there was a similar degree of wistfulness amongst some of the women for lesbian events such as the Pink Picnic in Leeds' Hyde Park:

> [It] wasn't a march or a procession or anything noisy, it was just you went and took your picnic and had it all together in the park. And there were stalls and things around. It was very *gentle*.
> Louise.

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36 Stonewall (2015) http://www.stonewall.org.uk/events/pride-2015
 [Accessed 24 January 2016]

> [It] was a much more […] friendly and local community, it seemed to me […] I'd never done *anything* like that before in my life. That was fine, I sprayed my hair pink and enjoyed what there was but it wasn't high pressure, show biz, loud noise…
> Joan.

For Ivy, Pride is still significant and also offers an important way of signalling

lesbian visibility to young people:

> I *love* to go to Pride and see young people there. […] I would like to feel more community across a greater age range. And so I *love* to see young people celebrating at Pride and I *love* being visible and I *love* seeing increasingly, year on year, more straight people wandering through looking - well I assume that they're straight, straight-looking people - you know, 'cause that would've been me, 35 years ago I'd have been wandering through it going, 'Wow!'

Minerva enjoyed Pride and commented on the importance of Bradford Pride

being held in the town centre:

> [*W]hat's great* is despite it being a great public space is the fact that there's never been any problem there. And people just walk through; people seem quite *accepting*. And especially when you think of the cultural diversity of Bradford and the Muslim population.

Emily also recognised the importance of Pride in maintaining visibility,

particularly that of older lesbians. However, she seemed to regard

attendance more as a duty than a pleasure:

> I *go*. I don't desperately enjoy it. […] But it's good to have a presence and it's interesting to see people's reaction when they walk through; some people are just walking through and they couldn't care less and then there's some people you see, they look a bit disgusted round the edges. But I think it's a good thing because it *is* public, it is right in the middle of [name of place] which I think's *fantastic* – and it's all part of being accepted, people seeing that you're there. Because people don't really always believe you *are* there. […] I hope it continues. But I'm not actually very bothered about it; I wouldn't miss it if it wasn't there.
> Emily (born 1949).

Pride festivals have been taking place in Leeds, Bradford and Calderdale for

almost a decade. For some women, the fact that Pride has extended to

cities in the north of England was a mixed blessing; their pleasure tinged with shame and the fear of being recognised at more local events. Johnstone and Waitt (2015) perceive the politics of gay pride parades and festivals as dynamic and audience-specific, provoking a complicated mix of pride and shame. Gillian had been to London Pride on several occasions and enjoyed it, but ruled out attending the Pride closest to home:

> I don't like it 'cause it's a bit *near home*. That's probably *my own* internalised homophobia, I don't know. Like down in London it's like you're a *long way* and *everybody were there* and there's *loads* of *you*.

The most common response to my questions about Pride's potential to offer a sense of belonging centred around its perceived dominance by the performativity of gay men 'dressing up':

> It has less and less meaning. […] I go now and all I see are drag queens and they've *taken over* Pride. You see the adverts for Pride and all you see are *blokes* in dresses and that's not *me*. […] Pride to me started off as a *gay* thing and is *now,* it's almost making fun out of *itself*. And I *don't like* that.
> Brenda (born 1950).

> I get very upset about some of these drag queens because I think they're *so* anti-women and the stuff they come out with is obnoxious and offensive.
> Frances.

My study confirms that while Pride was important for some women, offering visibility and a sense of community, for others it represented a noisy, male-dominated carnival that had lost its political significance. Even those who attended and enjoyed Pride derived only a loose sense of belonging from the events. In the same way that some women regarded feminism as something they 'did' rather than campaigned for, Kate felt that she was 'doing Pride' in her ordinary, 'everyday life'. Appalled by her own admission that she 'couldn't be arsed' with Pride, she also felt that at the age of 68,

public marches and carnivals were no longer necessary:

> I'm *kind of* doing Pride *every day* because I'm *out and about* with Annie, I will *hug her* in the drive even though she'll say 'oh', you know…

This chapter has demonstrated both the loneliness and the resilience of lesbian and bisexual women born in the 1940s and 1950s. It has explored some of the groups and movements they have created and participated in across the life course, noting the diversity of their meaning and significance for different women and the preference for mixed groups expressed by two of the bisexual participants. Whereas feminism was life changing for some, it had little relevance for others. Similarly other potential sources of support and belonging including social groups, Pride and families of choice, had varying degrees of importance for different individuals. However, it is clear that for most women some form of group or network has been significant in her lifetime, offering support, validation or political liberation; places where feelings of acceptance and belonging alleviate the habitus dislocation caused by multiple transgressions and mobilities across the life course. The following chapter looks more closely at the groups women are attending now in their late fifties, sixties and early seventies, establishing their benefits, focussing on participants' preferences and looking closely at the exclusions and hierarchies that threaten these 'safe spaces'.

Chapter Seven: Affinity groups and safe spaces: Creating support networks and resisting heteronormativity in older age

7.0   Introduction

Having explored the diversity of groups, movements and alternative ways of belonging that have supported my participants through their life course journey of multiple mobilities, this chapter closely examines what it means to my participants to be old and why groups continue to be significant in their older age. I attend to the types of groups participants attend or would like to attend, their benefits and potential for promoting the social and emotional support necessary for successful ageing. However beneficial the groups, there is no doubt that almost without exception, they are also riven with hierarchy and operate to exclude some individuals and sub-groups, either formally through exclusion policies or informally through practices which privilege some but leave others feeling on the outside.

This chapter starts by exploring the participants' lived experience of older age. As with so many aspects of their lives, there was a continuum of responses to my questions about ageing. Broadly these included accounts of physical deterioration, experiences of ageism, gains in confidence and fears for the future that might be expressed by anyone in the UK aged sixty and over. However, a closer analysis reveals some relational aspects of ageing; contingent on aspects of gender and, often concealed, sexual identities created by my participants, further shaped by the classed situations their mobile lives have generated. The exceptional life course of lesbians and bisexual women born in the 1940s and 1950s culminates in a unique and fascinating older age.

7.1 The cumulative effect of multiple mobilities in older age

In older age, one's income, health and functional ability can either facilitate choices or become constraints (Arber, 2006). With age, the impact of class as an agent of change or immobility is fully revealed. In addition to the social, cultural and educational differences between the participants there were very real economic differences, some of which stemmed from education and career opportunities, others from health and issues of disability. Housing was one area where classed differences were very apparent and while some women owned homes in affluent neighbourhoods, others were in sheltered accommodation or renting in the private sector. A lifetime of precarious employment has rendered Robin vulnerable in terms of her housing situation too. She wanted to continue to live in an area with her social family, in the form of a large lesbian community, but she was forced to move from place to place:

> This is *cold* and *wet* and *damp* […] I've been in H over three years so I've had *three* dwellings; I'm just about to start moving again or trying to look for a place to live *again*. […] I want to stay in H and that's very difficult to *rent* because it's expensive. So […] it's a matter of going where there's a *place* that you can *afford* and also renting's difficult because *now* it's like *no* housing benefit; most private landlords are saying *no* housing benefit *now* because of this universal credit thing that's coming through. So even people like me who are living on a *pension*, can't find private landlords.
> Robin (then aged 64).

Robin's work in the voluntary sector was often based on short-term, poorly paid contracts, which left her without financial security as she became older:

> I've always been in jobs where I didn't *earn* very much and finding contracts became *more difficult* – I don't know whether that was because I was older – but also there was work I *knew* I wouldn't be able to *do* 'cause I was older.

Another key difference was the age and manner of retirement; while several participants were very positive about this, for others it was not the end of paid work:

> Annie and I - we've got enough money to live on if we don't want holidays, but if we want holidays, we *work*.
> Kate (then aged 67).

Some participants had no option but to keep working. Here Sofia, still teaching aged 67, reveals her financially precarious position:

> Well I've worked […] for the voluntary sector which is why I don't have a nice pension and couldn't afford to buy my house until I had some job that I could say was mortgageable. And that only lasted three years!

Discussions of retirement often revealed material differences and cultural competencies, which questions about class, answered with a focus on subjective experience, feelings and allegiances, had elided. Many participants experienced greater confidence as older, mostly single, women, liberated from work and making choices about how to spend their time. For those in favourable financial circumstances, retirement offered release from constraint:

> I still can't believe I get paid every month for doing precisely nothing! Yeah, being able to make me own choices, what I do and probably being more sure of who I am and what I want to do. Caring less about what other people think.
> Louise (then aged 64).

Release from the sexual concealment demanded by employment was as important to Edie as the financial benefit:

> You don't have to hide yourself anymore. You're a free person because you're on a pension – nobody keeps you anymore, you keep yourself. You don't have to kowtow to anybody. […] I think age *and retirement* – only because we live where we live and that we do get a pension to keep us – that's a positive in one way. It gives you that independence.

Edie (then aged 69).

Conversations about housing, pensions and retirement revealed the cumulative nature of (dis)advantage. The lives of working-class women were not transformed by early education and, while social mixing may have brought them into middle-class circles, it did not change their financial circumstances, leaving them insufficient economic capital as older women:

> Cause the *physical work* you can't keep doing it. You can't really do it when you're getting… it's really hard work you know, humping stuff about and everything. So when I got the state pension […] I couldn't really live on *that* so I decided I'd just start to wind the work down so I gave up a lot of work and then just carried on working two days until… there was a change when you got to be *sixty five*, […] I think you could get some sort of *benefits* or summat like that […] so I kind of worked up to that. So it was more about the *money*, it was just about the *money* and just stopping as soon as…
> Gillian (then aged 69).

By contrast, the habitus dislocation of working-class educated participants left them socially and culturally insecure but, economically advantaged. Some participants gave up work well before their retirement age by having the confidence and ability to work the system. Vanessa, for example, retired at the age of 52 and Nell at 50:

> There was no way was I going to work until I was *60*, no way. Then they brought in a new regulation to say that you couldn't get early retirement as a teacher. […] And luckily, I had had problems with my hearing, with pain when they were playing their saxophones and things so I'd gone to the doctor […] and it turned out I had got noise-related damage to my hearing at certain pitches. And so, with a great struggle, I managed to get out on ill health.
> Vanessa (then aged 66).

> Because I worked for [name of bank] and when I joined, in 1959, their terms and conditions were so discriminatory you couldn't believe it, which were: women couldn't join the pension scheme until they were 25; women had to *leave* the pension scheme if they got married. […] *However*, there was this other requirement which again was discriminatory, but in the end worked in my favour, which was women would have the right to choose to leave at the age of 50 with no

actuarial reduction in their pension. Not well known at all I have to say, but when I *discovered* this, I thought, 'Right I'm going!'
Nell (then aged 71).

Six participants retired prematurely because of ill health and many others referenced health conditions and concerns:

It's just that *physically,* it's… I get *annoyed* with meself that I can't do the things I used to, 'cause I used to be *really* active
Brenda (then aged 63, living in sheltered accommodation).

I can't do the things I used to do; I don't have the energy that I used to have. All the physical infirmities that seem to happen the older you are; things *wear* out and go with gravity and all that kind of thing, you know. I mean, the only time I ever have pert breasts these days is if I swim in cold water!
Frances (then aged 61, registered disabled).

Although this chapter does not offer an analysis of disability and health in relation to group membership, it was evident that several women in their sixties were already experiencing health problems. The relationship between health status and occupational class is known to be 'enduringly strong' (Walker and Foster, 2006 p.50). Furthermore, there may be intersections with sexual identity and gender; lesbians may not access a full range of health care services, including screening, because of previous adverse experiences (Fish, 2006). Statistically significant disparities exist between the health of lesbian and bisexual women and their heterosexual counterparts (Simoni et al., 2016).

Women expressed frustration with the gendered aspects of ageing; being made to feel invisible and patronised in a way they have resisted most of their adult lives. Resisting the designation of old as 'Other' can be wearisome; Robin's narrative exemplifies the feelings of several women who resented the way they are perceived as older citizens:

[Y]our world starts to *change* at 60 because people *see you differently*. You know, they start calling you '*dear*' and you don't know them, really *silly* things. […] You start not being *seen*, you start being *walked at* as if you're totally invisible and nobody sees you. Just *odd* things like that that I *never*, ever noticed before; and that increases as you get older so you know, you either have to use up all your energy being more *stroppy*, which I *tend* to do […] but you know, it takes a lot of energy and you end up *arguing* or stating your *case* or you know. I was at the hospital and somebody called me 'dear' and I said, '*Do I know you*? Because I *can't remember* who *you are*, calling me dear!' Or they call you Mrs; you've got to be Mrs if you've got grey hair. Just the silly things that kind of just build up.

Life experience has brought some women greater confidence in older age, often extending to their sexual identity, and many felt that they no longer needed to hide, particularly post-retirement, although other participants are still wary of disclosure. Research indicates that lesbians may face ageing with a greater sense of freedom than when they were young, possibly founded on their 'diverse circles of friends and families' (Jones and Nystrom, 2002). Frances, described herself as being 'much more playful now', attributing her confidence gains to mixing with other lesbians.

Probably having more *confidence* and mixing… you know, the community. Because when I was younger I wasn't part of a lesbian community so I was always very scared and on the outside, you know.

For some, older age confidence was due in part to relief from the pressure caused by being 'closet' at work. Annie felt restrained by her career in social work and Minerva was initially in the military where disclosure meant 'you lost your job; you lost everything' and then in banking:

It's you know 'when I am old'; it's that kind of 'fuck off attitude' really. 'Cause I can do that *now* and it's great! 'Cause I've always had jobs where I've *had to have* a *certain restraint* in terms of *how* I behaved. Annie (then aged 63)

My view now is I think 'God I'm sixty-eight. If people can't take me as I am and *accept* me […] *tough luck*. That's *their problem* not *mine*.' And I think that's one of the things I think *age* does actually give you

> is a liberating thing as you can say 'Well *my view* is. I'm this age now. *I am* who *I am*. I'm *not going to change* and *why should I*? Why should I *pretend* any more? […] It's nice to just think 'Oh I'm going to be just myself.'
> Minerva.

Denny's interview offered a similar message; a lifetime of dealing with heterosexuality compounded by ageism has left her feeling defiant about the future:

> I'm not going to sort of *deny* I'm gay 'cause it doesn't suit other people. Fuck 'em. If they can't handle it… I've had to handle their heterosexuality all me fucking life! They can handle my gayness! I've had to put up with them and their bloody attitudes and their homophobia and everything else.
> Denny (then aged 60).

However, such confidence is rare; usually it is tempered with caution, mediated by 'knowing the boundaries' as Kate and Annie have found on their allotment. Annie feels accepted by male heterosexual allotment user 'Daz' and values his reference to Kate as 'her missus', seeing it as positive and affirming. However, Kate's narrative demonstrates the precarity of that acceptance. Kate remains ever watchful, careful of using language that might 'rock the boat':

> I would equally well say to them 'you do know that we're not equal these days, don't you Daz?' you know. 'Are you telling your granddaughter that she can *be one of us*' - I wouldn't say the word lesbian - 'women like us when she grows up then?'
>
> Jill: Why wouldn't you say lesbian?
>
> Oh because that would be too inflammatory there. They will cope with us if we don't cross… we're *so educated* as to where the boundaries are.

Old age is relatively uncharted for *all* individuals. However, for those who have lived life outside of the narrow margins of heteronormativity, it presents additional challenges. Affinity groups offer a way of addressing these:

> I think that that in some ways it's good to be able to be around people and see them […] it's like a *learning* space as well. I mean just like in women's liberation, the young women - we used to talk about the *men* to learn to manage and then their *kids* - to *help* each other. We don't *talk* about it but we *live* it so we show each other how to *survive* or, if people are down, there's that sense of, 'yeah, it is hard'. I think it's very *moving.*
> Jacqueline (then aged 69)

Jacqueline's narrative conveys the significance of groups, particularly their use of established, feminist practices to provide a space where older lesbian and bisexual women can teach each other how to 'survive' ageing. The next section explores this issue further, looking at why this generation of lesbian and bisexual women continue to need same-sex, same-sexuality, same-generation groups in their older age.

7.2 Establishing the continued need for affinity groups in older age: resisting heteronormativity and ageism

It is my contention that groups comprised of coetaneous lesbian and bisexual women offer a refuge from ageism and, as Jacqueline indicates, a way of learning how to age for those who 'stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women' (Lorde, 1984:112). Lorde suggests that such women survive by making a common cause with those identified as outside the structures' (p.112), a sentiment echoed here by Nancy:

> Belonging is hugely important and I think it is something that we all have in common, is searching for that sense of belonging…
> Nancy (then aged 62) attends London feminist group.

As the previous chapters have shown, many women in this study have been socially mobile as well as experiencing other, more contemporary, mobilities such as gender role and sexual identity transgressions. The intersection of these marginalised identities has resulted in habitus dislocation leaving

250

some women positioned 'neither here nor there'. Although it would seem that, potentially, they have access to a diverse range of groups as they can attend generic groups for older individuals as well as having access to LGBT scene space, their feelings of loneliness and difference, of being 'out of place' can make both of these options unsatisfactory. Few participants talked about socialising in commercial LGBT venues as older women. For some, the attraction of social groups is primarily because they are *not* scene space. Several participants remarked on the absence of alcohol in social groups:

> [T]he [Yorkshire group 2] group was very important because it wasn't commercial, it wasn't the scene, it wasn't pubs, it wasn't alcohol based, all of that stuff.
> Catherine (then aged 63) attends Yorkshire social group 1.

For those who *do* enjoy socialising in LGBT space, ageism presents new threats to older lesbians, bisexuals and gay men (Heaphy et al., 2004). Shirley and Brenda felt excluded by the focus on youth in clubs and bars. Brenda's solution was to eschew clubs in favour of meeting people her own age in lesbian social groups:

> It's like say you go, if you go clubbing, you know, you feel like a blooming *paedophile.*
> Brenda attends Yorkshire social group 1.

Shirley continued to socialise on the scene but feared that ageism within the gay community would soon make it an uncomfortable space:

> [T]here's some *good pubs* […] and I've got some people, *women and* gay men, who I meet up with *there*, which is a good thing for me, I *enjoy that* on a Saturday night […] So I've got *that,* but once again, because I'm getting *older,* to go to a pub when you're *25*, but to go to a pub when you're *66*, there's going to be a *limit* when I get to an *age* where I feel *absolutely stupid* going to a pub you know […] But if, for instance, I felt too old to go to pubs well *then* I would feel that my world was *closing in*, closing *down*. Without my sexual identity i.e.

being a lesbian and *socialising as a lesbian* I'd be losing a *big part* of *my life.*
Shirley (then aged 66) attends Yorkshire social group 1.

Denny also liked clubbing but was economically excluded as well as feeling 'too old':

I used to *love* club music, you know? And I looked at it and I thought 'I'm not paying sixty quid to get in' but also looking at the young people I thought 'I'm too old for that now'. […] It's horrible to feel that way.
Denny attends London social group 1.

Mainstream groups for older adults, however well intentioned, may exacerbate feelings of loneliness, leaving people feeling even more isolated. Bereavement and retirement left Catherine lonely so she sought groups and activities:

[T]here's this group for activities for older people […] which has been very interesting at times. […] And then you get the mailing and they're doing a speed-dating! So I contacted and said 'how's this going to be organised, you know, is it going to be like just men and women or are you going to run it also for women who are into women?' […] Knowing very well that there wouldn't have been even a thought some women might be wanting to meet women. And it was the 'oh I'm sorry no, we hadn't actually planned that. We'll look at it in the future.'

[I]n some heterosexual groups, you feel excluded. Or you're on the edges 'cause you can't talk about what they're talking about or I'm just not interested.
Emily (then aged 64) attends Yorkshire social group 1, Yorkshire social group 2, Yorkshire craft group and Yorkshire choir group.

Research conducted by Haslam et al. (2016) indicates that while all group ties enhance social and intellectual engagement, membership of groups which are 'valued and meaningful' (p.262) and where members see the group as an important part of who they are, offers distinctive benefits in older age. Participants' sense of difference, of being out of place in mainstream groups is a consequence of many years of concealment, transgression and mobility resulting in habitus dislocation. While they have

252

other flaws, affinity groups are not based on the heterosexual assumption exemplified in Catherine's narrative, nor are they centred exclusively on heteronormative topics and activities, (although as observed previously, some women resent discussions of grandchildren among those who had children). The following section examines how participants feel about the composition, structure and purpose of the groups they attend.

7.3   Affinity groups close up

Groups aimed at 'older' sexual minorities turn out to be open to a fairly diverse age-range. Yorkshire social group 1 is open to lesbians and bisexual women aged 55 and over, the London bisexual group is aimed at the over-fifties and London social group 1 has a lower age limit of 40. Because of the age at which they came out, and changing attitudes towards ageing, many participants' total experience has been of affinity groups predicated on 'older age':

> There was over-35 lesbians' group in Leeds […]. It was a bit of a damp squib but it was lesbians! […] And over-35s in those days, was considered for *older* lesbians! Those were the days!
> Louise attends Yorkshire social group 1.

Inevitably, in the same way that they had different reasons for attending older lesbian and bisexual groups, the participants had diverse opinions about group type and composition. Clunis et al. (2005) suggest that lesbians are more likely to have an affiliation with straight women than they are with gay men indicating that gender-based commonalities are stronger than those based on sexual orientation. As discussed previously, bisexual or queer-identified participants were more likely than lesbians to choose mixed or inter-generational groups:

253

It feels like home. It feels like family. It feels like tribe. These are my people!
Alison (then aged 60) talking about BiCon. She also attends London bisexual group.

Most lesbian women however, particularly those who attended Yorkshire social group 1, stated a firm preference for same-sex, same-sexuality, same-generation groups where they could find political affiliation and commonality with other women:

It's *completely different*. The *jokes*, the *innuendos*, the *sexual* joking, the *understanding* […] the *lesbian* gaze: lesbian *literature*; lesbian *culture*; the sense that despite all our diversity, within the lesbian community we have done something very special. *We're special*.
Kate attends Yorkshire social group 1, Yorkshire craft group.

I *want*, if I'm talking really in depth about my most innermost feelings, I want to talk to women who are really, profoundly interested in women. Joyce (then aged 67) attends London feminist group and a London CR group.

It's because you feel *comfortable*. You can *say* anything and, you know, if you're with a *mixed* group and there's some straight people there – men or women – you're careful what you say, I think. I think you watch what you say. […] It's *easier* to *talk*, to be *yourself*. You've got more in common.
Michelle (then aged 57) attends Yorkshire social group 1.

Catherine had recently attended an older mixed (LGBT and allies) group. She was reluctant to criticise the group because they did 'a lot of good work' but I pressed her to articulate the difference created by the presence of straight people. It became obvious that rather than feeling like an equal participant in a social group, she felt like a *good cause*:

I happened to go to the session where they were having their Christmas meal […] and the gentleman who was sat opposite me was not gay. And it was his *wife* I learned who was sat next door to me and he was very much going on in terms of like, diversity and educating groups and I thought, 'I don't want this, I want a social group.'

Confirming the findings of Knocker et al. (2012), several lesbian women fear that the sense of affinity and safety they seek would be fractured by mixed groups:

> It would alter the whole atmosphere and ethos of the whole place because your conversations are all around what *women* and *lesbians* of our age would have and it would not involve… we've got a completely different set of needs than a bloke would have.
> Lilia (then aged 61) attends Yorkshire social group 1.

> I *wouldn't go* because I wouldn't want to share that space with them, gay men. I think it would *completely* change the dynamics, *completely* change the dynamics. I don't think it would feel for me as *safe*. I think it would be a case of *men* taking over *again* [laughs] and we'd *lose*, we'd *lose* what we *have.*
> Frances attends Yorkshire social group 1.

Participants were also divided on the issue of inter-generational groups. Some women wanted more inter-generational contact, mainly as a way of 'growing' the existing groups and keeping them strong and self-organised. While some women acknowledged the importance of engaging with younger women they resisted their inclusion in the groups:

> I feel like being with older women is a blessing […] there's something different about women who've got to their sixties and have a lot of shared experiences. It just feels good.
> Clary (then aged 62) attends Lancashire social group.

> I wouldn't like *all* young people, then I *wouldn't* feel relaxed. […] But a *mixture* where young people get reminded what old people look like, old people can join in the conversation, it's interesting.
> Sofia attends London ballroom dancing group, London Meet-Up groups.

Brenda sums up what the majority of women wanted with regard to group membership. While they were happy to have inter-generational and mixed membership in *additional* groups they wanted their *core* group to be composed of women of the same age and sexuality:

> I want people who've been brought up in my *generation*, who *know* the pop songs of that day, who know what's happened, who know… you

know, as in any walk of life. So that's why it's important and they're all women. I wouldn't want a mixed group. Because I don't wanna mix wi' men, I wanna mix wi' women, you know. That's what *I* want to do; that's what I've *chosen*.

The purpose of groups was another area of discussion. With the exception of groups such as the London ballroom dancing group, the groups I recruited from were social groups meeting monthly or fortnightly during the day, where socialising and information sharing were the main objectives. This model seemed to suit most members although a few people preferred more purposeful networks:

> I *like* groups which are working towards a particular end or are there for a particular *purpose*. So I go to *choir* and I enjoy *choir*. I've been going to the *craft group* that runs the alternate week and I'm actually more comfortable there where you're doing a bit of sewing or knitting and there's an actual… a focus.
> Ivy (then aged 58) talking about Yorkshire social group 1. She prefers to attend Yorkshire craft group.

Annie also got more benefit from groups with a shared purpose and felt that groups composed solely of older people had an obsolescence she named the 'dinosaur effect':

> [B]y *definition*, the numbers in that group will diminish because of age and maybe illness […] There *are* some new women but I don't think they're *very many* and I think that the *dinosaur effect* might well kill it off. […] So, for *me*, I'd rather do me [fund-raising group] and be with people I *know* and *trust* where we have a purpose that is *shared*.
> Annie talking about Yorkshire social group 1 and her preference for a women-only, fund-raising group.

Some participants felt there was a greater focus on ageing and ill health than they themselves wanted or needed. Louise regretted the fact that ageing and illness had reduced the political activism of groups:

> I still think it's a bit sad that it's not much more than chat and we don't do any sort of active, try to change the world, sort of things outside. But I also think that's partly because quite a lot of the women are getting health problems now; they're able to do *less.* Yeah, a lot of

> the chat is about women's health now and the ones who have problems are supporting each other, which is *good*. But… I'd like to do more.
> Louise talking about Yorkshire group 1.

Denny found the activities enjoyed by her group staid and unexciting. Her interview suggests that they were also very middle-class.

> We don't all want to go line-dancing or cowboy dancing or whatever - *ballroom* fucking dancing! I'm not into it; it's not me. I'm a different type of woman to that. It's not really me. […] The only thing they want to do is go for meals, go to the theatre or go to the pictures. Or some of them are into opera and you think 'Oh God I don't want to go to bloody opera all the time', you know, I want to do things a bit more adventurous.
> Denny talking about London social group 1.

Although she was one of the oldest participants, Gillian found the focus on old-age and ill health alienating and, after a couple of visits, did not return to the group, preferring to walk or go on motorcycle ride-outs:

> They're all *too old*. […] The walking group really I like *better* because it's more - the people I've got a bit more in common with 'cause we're *doing* something. Whereas I didn't really like any of the things they did. […] And also a lot of them have got stuff up with them… *poorly*.
> Gillian talking about Yorkshire social group 1 and the Yorkshire walking group.

Sofia found lesbian groups essential to stave off loneliness. She enjoyed her ballroom dancing and Meet-Up groups but, at the age of 67, felt that she was 'too young' for London social group 1:

> I was *taken* there once and I thought 'I am twenty years too young really.' I mean when I'm in my eighties, in that bathchair and if my memory is still there and I *can* play scrabble, that will be *lovely*.

If there was little consensus on the preferred composition and purpose of the groups other than the strong preference shown by lesbian women for same-sexuality, women-only groups, discussion of group venues revealed far greater agreement and indicated that dedicated spaces may offer an

additional sense of connectedness or belonging. Rose (1995) identifies this need for place as a response to the process of Otherisation and the sense of exclusion from other groups and places. Lewis et al.'s (2015) study of feminist same-sex spaces describes them as offering places of safety where those marginalised and Othered can be 'fully human' (5.1) *safe from* constraint and *safe to* express themselves emotionally and intellectually. My participants expressed similar views; the sentiments of safety, privacy and visibility in these extracts from interviewees who met at Yorkshire social group 1, located within a dedicated LGBT centre, were frequently reiterated:

> It's a private room. No men are going to walk in. It's not licenced premises. There's no pressure to *do* or *be* anything except ourselves...
> Joan (then aged 67) also attends the Yorkshire walking group.

> I mean we *feel safe*. You know, it's like we've tried meeting in *pubs* […] we tried to *have* socials in *different other places* and you always felt like you were in a *zoo* you know, people walked through so they could have a *look* at you.
> Robin.

> I actually feel it's *great* to actually have your own *place*, your own *centre* and you know the staff work there *are* LGBT.
> Minerva also attends the Yorkshire walking group, the craft group and the history group.

These narratives of place emphasise the psychological significance of privacy, safety, freedom from heteronormativity - particularly a male, ageist gaze - and the sense of worth engendered by designated, non-commercial spaces. Unfortunately, this is not the experience for all groups. Almost half of the 114 London-based LGBT organisations who contributed to the 2014 LGBT Almanac survey, reported that they do not have a 'regular and reliable' office or space in which to meet.[37] It was noticeable that participants who met in space that was attached to health facilities or shared

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[37] 46% of organisations surveyed.

with other community groups spoke less positively about their surroundings and did not express the same sense of belonging or safety. I attended a mixed bisexual group, where participants specifically referenced not wanting to attend the groups run by Age Concern in Southwark because of their proximity to clients who were visibly unwell or old and using mobility aids such as Zimmer frames or wheelchairs. Lesbian women attending a group that met in a multi-use centre expressed similar feelings:

> I'm only a little bit not bothered but I *know* that for quite a lot of women who go to [name of group] it's like all the Zimmer frames around and the kind of rails by the toilets and all that stuff, I guess it's sort of too near the bone. And the pictures are sort of group outings of the people who go to the day centre.
> Gina (then aged 61) attends London feminist group and London social group 1.

> It's a children's crèche isn't it or something. I don't know what it is. Resource centre or something yeah. I just think it's sad. […] It seems we have less and less and less.
> Denny.

The location of groups is equally important. Women in the north of England were mostly drawn from two social groups (one in Yorkshire and one in Lancashire) whereas participants in the south were mostly from London and attended a wide range of (mostly free) activities - many going to several groups including lesbian ballroom dancing, book and film groups and social events. Several women in the Yorkshire group travelled between 12 and 16 miles to get to their fortnightly lunch meeting whereas in London, the volume of groups, the availability of public transport combined with the 60+ London Oyster or Freedom Pass made accessing social and support activities less of an issue. People's concern about access was also connected to ageing and retirement; their requirement to be close to a lesbian community and the cost of 'desirable' areas such as Brighton and Hebden Bridge, reducing

the options people saw as being available to them, particularly if they were financially constrained or in sheltered, social or rented accommodation which did not afford the luxury of 'shopping around'. Brenda had recently moved into sheltered accommodation on account of her 'dicky hips'. She chose the flat because it was the only one that would allow her to keep her dog. By chance it has given her access to a community she could never have afforded in the private sector:

> I mean it's just such a buzz that it's actually in Hebden Bridge! 'Cause I couldn't afford to live in Hebden Bridge! But I chose it 'cause it was the only place that'd take a dog.
> Brenda.

Rosie had recently retired from London to a small coastal town about forty miles from Brighton where she found the lack of access to lesbian groups isolating; her feelings were compounded by the fact that all the lesbian women she met were in couples, often 'too middle-class' for her to feel comfortable with and lacking the feminist politics of her previous network in London:

> [W]hen I lived in *London*, when there were people that were *single*, […] I made a *point* of saying to them 'Do you want to come along?' 'Cause actually, having been single *a lot* of my life, when you are single and there's all couples around you, *I think* it's important. […] If you're a *feminist* you actually reach out to other women and you actually reach out according to, to their *general* position in life.
> Rosie (then aged 64) does not currently attend a group.

Although discussions about access to groups often highlighted practical considerations such as transport links and mobility, alongside this for some women was the desire to live in a culturally desirable area. This was often framed in terms of access to groups and LGBT communities but the interviews hinted at the privilege and cultural awareness of some working-class educated participants. Those with more economic, and perhaps

cultural capital, were actively planning to retire to gay-friendly areas where

they could be sure of access to groups and networks:

> I think we are lucky being, as lesbians, you know, if you're going to be in England, you know, there's London, there's Brighton but there's not that many places. We think about, for example, we often think about 'shall we move?' We say we're not going anywhere if there's not lesbians there.
> Nell attends London ballroom dancing group.

> Well it's nice to know that you can find groups of like-minded people and if we think about moving within the UK we tend to think of things like the south coast, somewhere within easy access of Brighton or somewhere where there's a good queer culture going on.
> Alison.

Transport issues are likely to become even more important as this

generation of women ages and becomes less mobile:

> The fact that we've got a very strong *local* group, like we meet ten minutes away, there's good local transport to places that we meet. We meet on a Sunday. For those that *drive*, the parking's *free*, for those that *don't* it's very easy to get to and it's *accessible*. I think that choice of group […] *has* to be tied in with the ageing process and *possible* isolation.
> Annie, talking about meeting up with her social family.

> London is good for socialising. […] The *transport's* good. I like it now. I don't want to be bothered with driving a car anymore, I got rid of it ages ago.
> Sofia.

The importance of dedicated spaces with good public transport links cannot

be underestimated. A Newham ODL group was set up in a relatively

inaccessible area with the intention that participants would use community

transport. Due to small numbers it closed in November 2013. Given

participants' feelings about age-identified venues, it seems reasonable to

assume that prospective participants' feelings about using community

transport may have contributed to its dwindling attendance and closure,

rather than an absence of real need.

In later life, group attendance can be disrupted by disability and illness, leading to isolation (Traies, 2015). My participants expressed concern that difficulties with travel (particularly in the North where groups were often accessed by car) combined with the same-age membership of many groups created a built-in obsolescence, which would render the group ineffective or even close it at a time when it was needed more than ever:

> I think it will become more difficult for people to get there and therefore we have to think again. […] It really can happen to that group. 'Cause they travel such distances.
> Bina (then aged 66) attends Yorkshire social group 1.

> It's like why haven't we got more seventy, seventy-five, eighty year old lesbians? Cause they must be around; they've not all died off. So why don't they come? Is it mobility problems? Is it just the fact that you know, they haven't got a car and they find public transport difficult?
> Minerva.

Proposed solutions varied, with some women seeing funded groups with paid leaders as the way to future-proof organisations as well as being more likely to maintain impartiality and prevent cliques and hierarchies from forming. Others, like Annie, preferred to maintain grassroots traditions with the involvement of younger women:

> I go back to the whole thing around the need to bring in… to attract younger people. […] We're going to need them. I think it needs to be kind of as local as you can make it really. And/or younger people need to be embraced and encouraged.

7.4   Support and belongingness

Hughes' (2010) analysis of 371 lesbian and gay adults using secondary data reveals that most people expect their future financial, emotional and physical support needs to be met primarily by partners and their LGBT friends. Lesbians were particularly likely to expect emotional support to be provided by a partner. Yet in my sample, the majority of women were single

and three-quarters of them lived alone. In the absence of a partner, what role do social families, friendships and groups assume? Kate and Annie are now in a relationship but when Kate was living alone, groups were her 'lifeline':

> You know, it was *friends*, it was *politically active*, it was all of that *stuff* and I think for people that are single women I think it's *probably* more important. 'Cause I'm just casting me mind as to how many *couples* actually go and it's probably not that many. Probably not that many. Count them on one hand.

The emotional benefits afforded by groups included psychological safety, a sense of belonging and acceptance and a validation of lesbian sexuality that was particularly when people first came out:

> I *do* see myself as *part* of something and not on my *own*. […] I feel I can *be* who I am.
> Frances.

Although older lesbians may turn to biological families for support with physical needs, only 3% will go to a family member if they require help with emotional or mental health (Traies, 2015). Catherine and Clary have both faced mental health difficulties in the past. Catherine had been bereaved around the same time she retired.

> I can't imagine what it would be like if I didn't have that group […] Because of the nature of the age range that it covers, because it's all women who relate to women and because it's big enough to have the shared experience of people who've had, you know, they've lost partners, you know, they've had separations or you know, bereavements and things, then there is an understanding of those experiences. [Name of group] gives you a greater sense of belonging; of closeness and at times intimacy.

Clary finds affirmation in groups but, as her testimony indicates, being approached as a potential participant is a sensitive issue:

> I think it *affirms* your own identity and gives you more confidence in that to think 'yeah it's ok; I'm ok'. […] When they said we've got this

new group starting for people who are socially isolated, in a way I was a little bit *insulted*. The person who rang […] didn't know me very well, but part of me wanted to laugh and the other part thought you know, 'What do they think I am? A poor… a poor older lesbian that can't get friends?

Maintaining good mental health is a key issue for lesbian and bisexual women given that they are twice as likely to have long-standing psychological or emotional conditions than their heterosexual counterparts (Elliot et al., 2014). McLaren's (2009) study of 178 lesbians suggests that sense of belonging is an important predictor of mental well-being:

> Lesbians who reported feeling valued and who felt that they fit within the lesbian community reported higher levels of sense of belonging to the general community, which in turn was associated with lower levels of depression. (p.10)

I suggest that spending time in affinity groups with other 'likeminded women' provides a place of belonging; a space where habitus repair or *rebalance* is possible. The importance of belongingness was cited again and again as a benefit of group membership:

> The people were lovely and I didn't have intense conversations I just sat in the warm bath of belonging.
> Jacqueline attends Yorkshire social group 1.

> [B]elonging, a sense of belonging. It was a forum for talking about all manner of things. It was […] a way of learning, interacting, and also having fun with people, you know? Yeah I think the main thing was the sense of belonging.
> Frances.

For a few people, lesbian only space provided psychological safety; the only place where they could 'be themselves'. Gwennie was not 'out' to anyone outside the group:

> I don't have to say that I'm a lesbian because people know. I don't have to make any excuses because we're all the same. That's why we come.

Gwennie (then aged 60) attends Yorkshire social group 1.

A certain level of *trust*. You've got a shared sexuality so the chances are that you're all gonna have *some* history of *struggling* with your sexuality or having been in straight relationships. […] An understanding… *knowing* that it can be difficult in society.
Clary.

I think it offers you something to be *yourself,* you know. […] You're doing *like-minded* things and you can go to *like-minded* social activities. […] You talk about *different* things. 'Cause my mate'll see somebody on the telly and she'll say, 'look at the bum on that', you *know*. You don't feel like saying that in other situations and it's not appropriate – not you're *frightened* but you just *don't*… you're not *doing* it. So it *is* very different.
Brenda.

As discussed previously, being single and childless made loneliness a practical and emotional reality for many of my participants. Wenger's (2009) study of childless older adults living in rural areas found that twice the percentage of child-free respondents as parents was 'very isolated', with those who had never-married most likely to be socially isolated. Like many lesbians born in the 1940s and 50s, making and maintaining friendships had been particularly difficult as they were forced to conceal their true feelings and sexual identity at school and in the workplace. Group membership was viewed positively as an antidote to feelings of loneliness and isolation:

Well it's always nice to feel as though you belong isn't it? It's like a family. If you've got a really close family and you feel like you're *wanted* and you feel like you *belong* and you feel like you're *loved* and it's *important*, you know because it's something that you *need* and it's *important*, it helps you carry on, it helps you get through the bad times, I think. […] When I am on my own and I'm feeling a bit down, *thinking* about the group and thinking about some of the things that we've done makes me feel better. So that *belonging* […] stops me, I suppose, feeling alone. Stops me feeling lonely even when I'm not there because you can think about things that you've *done* and that.
Michelle.

It's nice to actually have that *core* that you can actually identify with. And as long as that *core's there* I think that *feeling of isolation* won't… isn't as *strong*. That feeling of isolation is actually *removed* because of, if you like, the core group.

Minerva.

Heaphy et al.'s (2004) study of LGB ageing revealed that the majority of lesbian and bisexual women anticipated that their partner would care for them in the event of chronic illness. Similarly, partners were the expected primary source of care in older age. For the majority of participants in this study, this is not an option and they must rely on kin, families of choice and their networks for support.

Confirming the findings of Traies (2015), even when they had large and supportive friendship/social family networks, participants with biological families would often turn to them in extreme crisis. Despite an extensive network of friends and social family built up through their shared love of women-only ballroom dancing, when Anne and Nell had an accident in France, it was Anne's brother-in-law they called on for help. Esther has a strong mixed network of friends who had offered her to come with her to hospital but ultimately she opted for kinship care:

> [I]n the end my niece who's a nurse […] actually took me into hospital as well and my brother had me go and stay in his place afterwards… Esther (then aged 66) attends London group 2.

Other women like Frances, whose disclosure of sexual identity fractured biological family ties many years ago, know that they are totally reliant on groups and the friendships that extend from them for their practical support:

> I had a breast cancer scare not so long ago and, once I'd sort of gotten over the *shock* of having had to have a biopsy and all of this sort of thing, I thought, 'Right, what do I *do now*?' So I *did* contact one of the women from *that* group […] So it *did* make a difference and I think that - I mean I have had offers of 'you ring at any time' and - I think that there are those that I probably would.

As this generation cohort ages, so does the focus of the groups the women

belong to. Recent topics on the agenda at Yorkshire social group 1 include

an Age UK presentation on utilities and a talk from the emergency services.

Some of the social family networks and groups predicated on older age are

beginning to recognise the need for practical care and support of members.

The size and intimacy of CR groups means that they are well-suited for

meeting emotional support needs and some of them are set up around

topics far removed from the 1970s focus on political analysis and self-

examination:

> I feel *confident* that people will be *honest* with me. If they can give me
> help, if I need it, they'll say so and if they can't… there's *enough* of us
> *aware* of each other that there'll be some *support* and *challenges* if
> they think we're wrong. We've talked a lot in our group, our ageing
> group – well it's 'ageing, death and dying' is the name of our group
> and we've talked quite a lot about responsibilities of friendship…
> Joyce.

Although group participation offered many people emotional support and

short-term help, for example, shopping and visiting when a group member

was unwell or in hospital, there was less sense that practical assistance

would be forthcoming in the event of a long-term illness or other situations

where personal care was needed. This distinction can be articulated as

being between 'caring for' and 'caring about' (Finch and Groves, 1983).

However, this may change. Yorkshire social group 1 has recently created a

'telephone tree' for members to sign up to in order to indicate their

willingness to offer practical help such as shopping or lifts to hospital for ill

or incapacitated women, as well as being available for emotional support:

> V's in hospital […] and they've all set up a rota to make sure that
> person is not on their own - ever. […] And that's happening for a lot
> of people. I think it's grown into a nice family.
> Lilia, talking about Yorkshire social group 1.

Another member of the same group confirmed this:

> And it's supportive to people who are not having a good time, like, someone was mentioned as being ill [at the meeting the previous day] and I've got on me little notepad, you know, to give her a ring. So there's a lot of care shown.
> Catherine.

Perhaps surprisingly, London participants were as likely as those in Yorkshire to see geographical distance as a barrier to such practical support. Val had appointed someone from her group as executor of her will but doubted that *physical* support would be forthcoming:

> I think you know, if I need physical support or whatever, I'll be hard pressed to find any of them really because *geographically* it's so difficult. You know when you're *all older* you know, you've all got your own needs.
> Val (then aged 73) talking about London social group 1.

Gina's group had not offered much support following her major surgery. She felt that the south London counterpart to her group was more nurturing but admitted that it was partly due to her inability to break her lifetime habit of independence to ask for help:

> It's partly… it *doesn't have* a sense of community in a way that it ought to. […] It's partly about me not *asking* for help and partly, I think, *emotionally*… they're better at it emotionally actually, than practically.
> Gina, talking about London social group 1.

Whereas the rota initiated by Yorkshire social group 1 was not based on particular friendships or allegiances, some people felt that, in the event of crisis or need, they would turn to close friends from the group before they used the 'telephone tree'. Anne too suggests that support was more likely to come from friendships that form within and extend beyond the groups:

> J from dancing had both her hips replaced within 6, 8 weeks – and we went over to her once a week and so did a couple of other people […] but it wasn't an *organised* support, it was more like friends would

do anyway. There's a difference. There's individuals offer the support I think, it's not built into it.
Anne (then aged 60) talking about London ballroom dancing group.

One of the dangers of social and support groups founded on limited characteristics such as the intersection of sexuality, gender and older age, is that whilst they offer a high degree of psychological safety, they may also become quite insular. As individuals in generation cohort groups age, their support needs become greater while their potential to offer physical or practical support necessarily diminishes, threatening the stability and continuation of the group. While Minerva jokes about her group entering older age care together, she knows it is unlikely to happen:

> We all joke about being in the old dykes' home type of thing, you know, all being - none of us want to go into a nursing home but if we're going to go at least - we always joke we'll go in there together. The *reality* of the situation is that, you know, that *never* happens.
> Minerva, talking about Yorkshire social group 1.

So far, this chapter has established why sexual minority women need their own groups, looked at the kind of groups they want and explored the benefits of group membership. The following section investigates some of the difficulties participants have experienced or witnessed in lesbian and bisexual groups where not everyone is equally welcome.

7.5   Not all rosy: hierarchies and exclusions

> There is no space, in a hierarchical society, which is not hierarchized… (Bourdieu, 1995:13)

It would not do justice to the honesty of my participants to represent groups as idyllic havens. Some groups bore the hallmarks of what Brown (1993) describes as 'wounded attachments' whereby one's 'injury' becomes the basis of identity. Just as groups of the past have been riven with debate and conflict, groups of the present were equally split about topics including the

inclusion and exclusion of various sub-groups including bisexual women, trans women and younger feminists and lesbians. As mentioned previously, one of the key differences between friendship groups and organised groups is that the latter are regulated, particularly if funded, thus necessitating either the admission of otherwise excluded or marginalised individuals and groups, or requiring a lot of energy and creativity to keep them out.

Classed exclusions

Rabin and Slater's (2004) study of three separate lesbian communities identified class as an issue. Although they found much evidence of positivity, mutual support and 'connecting and sharing', they also uncovered social class and political differences. One of the communities in southern Arizona, had been so disrupted by social class issues that, in order to address the perceived entitlement of middle-class women, the community had implemented a system whereby decision making could only be made by 'women who were raised poor' (p.173). Rabin and Slater also found that an atmosphere of emotional openness fostered by a lesbian community in Florida did not work for everyone. It was based on middle-class assumptions about sharing emotional feeling and, 'less articulate women felt crushed by the group' (p.175).

A similar issue raised by this study is how the working-class educated women address the psychological and social tensions generated by occupying the field of middle-class groups when they lack the appropriate dispositions. The class differential persists as these groups are unremittingly middle-class. The majority of the groups and organisations are built around

sexual identity and/or gender, offering opportunities to meet with 'like-minded women' in this respect but not necessarily creating spaces for women who may have experienced habitus dislocation as a consequence of class transgressions. Class is not an overtly talked about marker of exclusion; whereas many women talked at length about reasons for not wanting trans women to be in their groups, no one ever said that they didn't want women of a certain class to be present. This form of 'exclusion' operates on a more subtle level; making it elusive, impossible to prove or legislate against.

Pamela was one of the people who talked at length about her feelings of class difference having attended a grammar school where she felt her working-class origins marked her out. Describing herself as never having been 'particularly socially fluent' her experience at an established group for older lesbians was less than satisfactory:

> I found the people – some people were really *nice* on a surface level then there were undercurrents, which you didn't know about, you know? I don't know what it is; I've never felt that it's how it should be quite.
> Pamela (then aged 68) talking about London social group 1.

Denny attends the same group and found some of the women unfriendly:

> I'm sorry I have to say it but some of them are a bit cliquey. They stick in their own little circle you know. I mix with most of them but you do get some that are a bit sort of you know, 'we've known each other for years we don't talk to other women'.
> Denny, talking about London social group 1.

Pamela and Denny were right to pick up the sense of cliquishness. The following extract is from a woman who attends the same group but asked

me not to attribute the quote to her because she was concerned that she would be recognisable:

> [T]here are […] *some* women who go there who only go because the crème de la crème - as we call ourselves – go. And [name of group] is very difficult 'cause it is a kind of microcosm of society really and a lot of women who go there are really not – this sounds awful – really not very interesting. And I wouldn't necessarily choose to hang out with.

Another participant found the same group 'pretty hostile' while she 'embraced' her small CR group, which she found 'so welcoming'. Here she hints at the essential difference between the two groups, the ability to control membership:

> My little group […] we will decide – because it's this whole debate if you're having a consciousness raising group – we took a decision that we would close.
> Nora (then aged 60) talking about the difference between London social group 1 and her CR group (an offshoot of London feminist group).

Creating smaller CR groups away from the bigger organisation allows the women to regulate membership. Several women referenced having 'closed groups' some, after a period of informally 'trying out' new members:

> So, we set up the group […] and people came; we weren't sure how *big* we wanted it to be so we, we didn't define it at that point. A couple of people *left*, 'cause it didn't quite *work* for them and new people *came*. And when it got to – there was 8 of us – and we started to do a bit more *deep* work and then we decided as a group that we would *close* it at that point.
> Joyce, talking about her CR group (an offshoot of London feminist group).

Middle-class privilege carries an invisible sense of entitlement and a belief in one's own efforts, often unrecognised by those who possess it. Robin, 'working-class and proud' was alert to classed tensions within the (open-

access) group she attended. Unlike her friend who had stopped coming,

Robin continued attending but recognised the boundaries:

> There's a lot of women [there] that are *quite privileged*, in fact some of them are *very privileged* but they *actually* won't talk about that. They *are that* because they've '*earned it*' by having '*good jobs*' and you know, if a woman doesn't have that, 'cause we were trying to talk about *choices* you know, about *women's choices* you know, their thing is 'if you *work hard enough* you get… you get a *good living*', if you're not as good as *them* then it's because you've *not worked hard enough*. You know, this woman said I come from a working-class background I said 'your father *owned a bloody butcher's shop*, that's not a *working-class background.*
> Robin, talking about Yorkshire social group 1.

Two women who identified as middle-class had felt excluded from a group

that they'd attended as younger lesbians. Frances found the group

genuinely intimidating but concluded that a scary community was better

than 'no community at all':

> In the early days of [name of group] when it was very political I can remember this woman saying to me […] you know, asking me that very question [about social class]. I didn't know what she was talking about. I *really* didn't know what she was talking about. And I can *remember feeling*, oh how do I describe it? I ended up in *tears* as a result because I thought, 'is she *attacking me*?' you know, it *felt* like she was *attacking me.*
> Frances, talking about Yorkshire social group 2.

> I found after a while that they got, I got, what did I get… well it was again a place that I got a lot of discrimination because they decided I was middle-class. I got a lot of classism.
> Vanessa, talking about Yorkshire social group 2.

Space invaders: trans exclusion

Although women-only space has the potential to create the conditions

whereby women can express themselves intellectually and emotionally; safe

to engage in 'constructive disagreement' (Lewis et al., 2015), it is evident

that not everyone is welcomed into the 'warm bath of belonging' and my

participants offered accounts of rules, hierarchies and exclusions in both

feminist and lesbian groups across the years. Many participants referenced the fact that recently, these arguments have centred on the inclusion of trans women. There has been much public debate about trans exclusion by lesbians mostly focused on TERFs - trans excluding radical feminists. In a small-scale qualitative study McDonald (2006) found that male-to-female trans lesbians did not experience a sense of exclusion or not belonging to lesbian communities. She suggests that it may be pertinent to ask why the mainstream and LGBT media continue to focus on conflict between lesbian and trans communities. However, my study revealed that while several women were able to identify empathically with trans women's situation in the abstract, they constructed them as 'Other' and their inclusion in groups threatened the sense of safety, creating feelings of conflict and compromise as indicated by this small selection of narratives:

> *Don't ask me* to give up my space. I'm very, very jealous of my space because it's hard fought for. […] They're talking about things that *concern them* and *very rightly* and they *need* that group. But *we need our group*. We *don't want to be*, you know… I mean the *last* transgender person who came to [name of group] was dressed in a *dress*.
> Val.

> So I don't like being in the same room as some of the transgendered women that I know. I call them women; I respect them. Their journey *breaks my heart* and I've got *such compassion - but -* I still feel funny about… the *physicality* of it. […] They're *so angry*; they're at the stage we were at when we were trying to get women-only stuff. I *understand* their anger but *hell* we've had a hard time, you know.
> Kate.

> I have *no empathy at all* with somebody who's transgender. I don't *feel* as though that is my territory and I wouldn't want it, really wouldn't. […] I want to be with *women* who were *born* as *women*, who've had the same problems as me…
> Brenda.

One organisation's decision to include transgender individuals, following a democratic vote, had challenged some women's sense of ease within their group:

> What I actually find is some of the *traits*, some of the *male traits* they actually then *bring across* and they still come across as being *male traits*. I mean I'm not saying that, you know, *every lesbian* is necessarily somebody who doesn't have some of those sort of *forceful* traits but somehow it does seem to come across more - the *masculine attitude*. So I can certainly understand how that can create problems.
> Minerva.

The policy change disrupted separatist Robin's sense of safety in the group. She stopped attending regularly, turning instead to her social family for support:

> I *stopped going* every other week then. 'Cause I went one week and […] there was this *guy* there […] I'd been away, and *nobody'd asked me*. So they'd kind of had a *policy change* or whatever and I couldn't make 'em understand that… we're not dealing with *sexuality* here we're talking *gender* you know, and [the group] is about *lesbians*. […] It impacted *a lot*.
> Robin.

Some organisations manage the need for 'exclusive' space by offering discrete sessions for different groups; older lesbians, gay men and trans service users. While meeting the needs of some, this solution presents its own difficulties. Funding constraints mean it is not a feasible option for most groups, while others view or experience it as politically and ideologically undesirable. For some bi or queer-identified individuals such as Alison and Esther, women-only lesbian groups can be uncomfortable spaces. The issue has the potential to fragment even longstanding groups and organisations, creating schisms that may be hard to repair. Older Lesbians Organizing for Change, an organisation of over 25 years' standing, recently cancelled an international event planned for October 2016, citing

'irreconcilable differences' about how to advertise the event.[38] The steering

committee failed to reach agreement about the inclusion of self-identified

lesbians, with half the membership wanting to restrict conference

attendance to female-born lesbians. McDonald (2006) suggests that the

relationship between trans and lesbian is 'complex and evolving' (p.212)

and it may be that, in the future, trans inclusion in groups for older lesbians

and bisexual women will be less threatening to their stability and sense of

safety. In the meantime, like the class issue, there is no easy solution.

7.6   Affinity groups close down

In the current political and economic climate, organisations supporting

sexual and other minorities are under increasing threat. A range of venues,

services and groups for LGBT people in the UK have proved themselves to

be vulnerable to financial cuts and shifting priorities. The contribution of

public sector funding for London-based LGBT groups and organisations was

reduced from 61% in 2012 to 42% of total income in 2014.[39] Mitchell et al.

(2013) suggest that such organisations are particularly vulnerable because

LGBT services are seen as 'a nice thing to do' rather than being viewed as

core business. There is tangible evidence of the decline in funding; although

ODL continues to offer a range of services for LGBT elders following a Big

Lottery award of £497,445 in January 2016, it still has to find match-

funding.[40] Commercial LGBT spaces are also at risk with the closure of

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[38]Old Lesbians Organizing for Change. www.facebook.com/NationalOLOC
   [Accessed 3.6.16]
[39] The London LGBTQ Voluntary and Community Sector Almanac (2014)
http://www.centred.org.uk
[Accessed 9.2.16]

[40] ODL events listings February 2016.
http://issuu.com/openingdoorsldn/docs/february_2016_opening_doors_london_?e=11476267/32930
368 [Accessed 11.2.16]

London venues such as First Out and The Glass Bar (2011) and Soho's Candy Bar (2013) in the past few years as property prices escalate and the demand for LGBT commercial venues wanes. Social and support groups are also vulnerable, particularly those that are externally funded with one-off lottery grants. Mitchell et al. (2013) report a 'deprioritsation of LGBT services' resulting in some LGBT people feeling: 'guilty about asking for their needs to be met; others felt more isolation as community resources were reduced' (p.10).

LGBT organisations have seen a decrease in the numbers of paid staff and are increasingly reliant on volunteers; a survey of 114 organisations conducted for the London LGBT Almanac (2014) reports that there has been a decline in the number of paid staff (particularly full-time workers) and a corresponding 8% increase in the number of volunteers since 2012. Yorkshire social group 1 has already survived one funding crisis. In 2012, its main funding stream came to an end and the partnership was forced to restructure. Whilst the group still continues to meet at the centre, it is no longer subsidised by the partnership or co-ordinated by the centre staff, due to financial restrictions leading to a reduction in staff hours. The participants now run the group themselves, contributing financially towards room hire and bringing food for a shared lunch. Although this group manages to exist, even thrive, its future is not guaranteed and its unofficial 'leaders' are unpaid, untrained and already in their mid to late sixties. One positive outcome is that several participants felt that it had brought benefits to the group and its members:

> I think it's *nicer* in a way, I actually *prefer it*. I think it was *great* that there was a co-ordinator there to begin with and *sometime* it is nice

to just go along and just think 'Oh I've not got anything to organise.' That's the good bit about it where you've got a co-ordinator. But also, at the same time it's actually quite nice for us to do things for ourselves.
Minerva.

I think we had to *grow up*. I think some of us had worked *so hard* for *so long* in our lives and done *so much stuff* around enabling for other people, finding resources, getting funding bids, doing *all sorts* of stuff, organising conferences […] that we just went there and thought 'Ohhh. Thank God for *this*.' So it was very relaxing and you could dip in or dip out and *then* we had to pull ourselves together and say 'Hang on'.
Kate.

One participant felt she had been bullied in her group. Claiming that the small and insular nature of the 'gay community' made it more important for the groups to be regulated; her interview kept returning to the need for paid leaders and moderators. However, she asked not to be quoted on this topic. There were other oblique references to bullying and difficulties in groups where 'leaders' were untrained or unskilled. Edie was 'lonely for *communication* [and] *intelligent* conversation'. She made a 28 mile round journey to the 'emotional safety' of a monthly lesbian group, but felt it didn't meet her needs. After her interview, Edie stopped attending the group; her narrative attests to the need for trained leaders:

[Name of person] who's running it, is really a lovely person, don't get me wrong. But she doesn't… she likes to kind of please everybody but by pleasing everybody you're doing nothing if you know what I mean? There's nothing co-ordinated. […] Half of them I've never spoken to them because they just don't speak. They'll sit and talk to *one* that they *know* but not to others.
Edie, talking about the Lancashire social group.

As Chapter Six demonstrated, many participants had a long tradition of organising and participating in their own groups; over a third had been instrumental in setting up feminist, lesbian-only or lesbian and bisexual women's groups across the years, some eventually obtaining funding.

Although several women still led groups, particularly where funding had come to an end, it was noticeable that others felt they had 'done their bit' over the years and were now looking to someone else to take over:

> And I don't want to volunteer because I did *so much* volunteering… Oh God, *I've done that*. […] Nobody's prepared to do *anything*. And you think I've been doing this *all this time*. And *do* they want it to continue or *don't* they?
> Val, talking about London social group 1.

> I have decided, this year, to give up another major responsibility, which is organising the walking group. I resigned a month ago. […] I just thought it was time to stop.
> Joan.

It is inevitable that participants' ability and willingness to take on group organisation and leadership will decline with age, indicating that the recruitment of younger members alongside the employment of paid and trained staff may be the only way to 'future-proof' such groups and minimise bullying and exclusion. However, with continued funding cuts, this seems unlikely. As this research has demonstrated, lesbians and bisexual women are vulnerable to feelings of isolation and loneliness, partly because of factors including being single, childless and contact with families of origin; sometimes as a consequence of multiple mobilities which leave them feeling different or out of place. It is evident that, to a greater or lesser extent, friendship, formal and informal support networks are beneficial to positive mental health and feelings of well-being. For some women groups are vital; these participants talking about what life would be like if groups ceased to exist, speak for most women in this study:

> Well I think it would just be much bleaker and lacking options for social interaction with people. I really don't feel at all attracted to going to mainstream older people's things. I used to do archery, for instance, and I didn't feel particularly safe or happy socially there.
> Esther.

> I think it would be quite devastating. […] It would be a *huge* loss in my
> life if it wasn't there.
> Frances.

Mitchell et al. (2013) suggest that LGBT service users would be reluctant to access mainstream services if their provision were to be cut. My study corroborates this finding; no participants suggested that they would turn to a mainstream group, instead, showing a characteristic resilience, several women suggested that if their group were to close, they would simply start another one:

> I think someone would come up with something else and we'd go
> somewhere else and […] carry on in some form. I *don't think* it would
> *die* completely.
> Gwennie.

> It would be a loss and I'm sure that if it couldn't continue, for whatever
> reason, there would be those amongst us who would try and start up
> something else. I'm sure we would.
> Joan.

Kate felt strongly that the closure of groups for older lesbian and bisexual women would have far-reaching political implications in addition to individuals' loss of social and emotional connectivity. Her fears echo the findings of Mitchell et al. (2013) who reported greater feelings of marginalisation and invisibility where services are lost:

> I think, for *me*, it would be a *poignant politics* - that's the phrase - that
> *politically* it would have happened *because* nobody cares about us as
> older lesbians anymore and *that* is *awful*. […] I *can't bear* the fact that
> we might have to go back to being *invisible* and it gives us a *visibility.*

This chapter has outlined some of the paradoxes of older age; physical decline juxtaposed against greater confidence and diminished concern for the regard of others, the liberation of retirement for some set against the financial economies and restrictions of others. The contradictions are

complex and overlaid with a network of structural and personal intersections, some rooted in childhood, others in education and employment differentials, all creating unique experiences and dislocations. I have offered a critical examination of the role of affinity groups in older age, evaluating their potential to alleviate the habitus dislocation of the majority of their members.

It is immediately obvious that the practice of forging alliances with other 'likeminded' women remains as important to this generation in their older age as it has across the life course. Groups where sexual identity is known, affirmed and shared, offer many benefits, although I acknowledge that participants expressed a broad range of preferences regarding their composition, frequency, leadership and location. Regardless of the limitations of 'restricted groups' (Wenger et al., 1997), while some women prefer mixed gender and inter-generational groups, the majority of older lesbian-identified women in this study wanted a primary group composed of same sexuality, same age women, preferably one that met in a dedicated LGBT space. There is some tension between women's preferences for grassroots groups which are self-funded and organised and those which have obtained funding and staffing. While self-organised groups may offer their members more engagement, they require a level of volunteering and commitment that may prove too taxing as this generation cohort ages. Such groups are also able to regulate their membership; many groups, while offering a space where women can be themselves, are striated by conflict and segregation. The most notable divisions occur in relation to transgender

exclusion, which operates at an overt level, and class differences that are more oblique and harder to identify.

Regardless of issues of class, transgender and other hierarchies and exclusions, irrespective of discussions of place, frequency and purpose, it is overwhelmingly evident from the interviews that social groups offer a place of safety to many participants; one that is highly valued and contributes significantly to their well-being. Such groups have a valuable role to play in offsetting the emotional pain of the habitus dislocation that has dogged these women across their life course and continues to threaten them in older age. Sharing social space with others who have similarly transgressed social, gender and sexual borders provides mutually satisfying relationships which have the capacity to sustain their participants in the present moment, although the longer-term future of such groups and their members is less assured, an issue that will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Eight: Looking back, looking forward

8.0   Summary of findings

In this thesis I have explored the lives of thirty-five women, born between 1940 and 1956, who have come to identify as lesbian or bisexual at some point in their life course. The concept of habitus dislocation was used to show how participants have been rendered out of place by multiple mobilities; specifically the intersection of their social mobility, and sexual and gender non-conformity within a specific generational cohort. This study has revealed the fundamental significance of affinity groups and other ways of belonging as spaces where, outside the reach of heteronormative gaze and regulation, participants feel they can be themselves.

Within this concluding chapter, I discuss my main theoretical findings; articulating the contribution this study makes to existing research as well as highlighting the strengths and limitations of the methodology used. I explore the significance of this study, not only for lesbian and bisexual women, but also others who have experienced dislocation through mobility. I look at the implications of my study for future research, policy and practice and conclude by looking at participants' fears for the future and the very real dangers posed to this generation of elders by funding cuts and assumed equalities.

Participants talked extensively about the lives they have led, offering a rich narrative of social, political, gendered, sexual history that has a multiplicity of stories to tell and which exemplifies Plummer's (2015) assertion that, 'for a short while before we die, we are the carriers of history' (p.339). Stories

about how they felt as girls and young women when the realisation of their true sexual feelings first dawned on them (mostly scared). Stories of the power of education as a social mobiliser; grammar school scholarships propelling many women into a different life but never quite far enough to eradicate feelings of self-doubt, exacerbated by working-class origins, poverty, second hand school coats and hand-me-down dresses. Stories about how they feel as older women (more confident, often invisible and somewhat fearful of the future). Their past lives and futures have undoubtedly been influenced and shaped by the social, political and economic circumstances as well as the moral constraints that structured and shaped the historic era in which they were born:

> How we remember and interpret the past influences how we live in the present and anticipate the future. (Weeks, 2014)

Social class has played a significant role in the lives of a substantial majority of the women in this research. Almost three-quarters of participants have been socially mobile through the vehicle of further or higher education, placing them in a category of working-class educated. This movement while offering long-lasting and cumulative economic benefit has had an equally long-lasting impact on their sense of 'fit' in the middle-class schools, universities, professions and social and cultural groups that they have inhabited somewhat uneasily:

> So I would say I've grown up with an *enormous* class chip on my shoulder, which amuses me now 'cause I can talk about it; I can look at it and it's a green eyed monster, it don't go away.
> Kate.

> So I always felt like working-class trash at school and that's never left basically.
> Gina.

In addition to their social mobility and the transgression of sexual norms through the rejection of heterosexuality, many participants have also resisted conventional notions of femininity and the roles of wife and mother. The intersections of these multiple mobilities and long periods of identity-concealment set against the backdrop of rapidly changing attitudes, legislation and possibilities has contrived to create habitus dislocation, a powerful and pervasive feeling of being 'out of step', that persists into older age.

The extant literature on LGB ageing is frequently polarised between the twin, but opposing, pillars of loneliness and resilience; similarly, this thesis has revealed evidence of both states. Although three-quarters of women in my study lived alone and less than half were parents, it is my contention that the loneliness experienced by many participants and expressed here by Sofia, has less to do with practical factors such as childlessness, and more to do with the psychological distress invoked by protracted habitus dislocation and concealment:

> [I]t's difficult for me to think of *emotional* things because… just associate emotional with *upsetting* and well of loneliness really. […] I do recognise that I have it and this is another reason… this is the *main* reason really for going out so much.
> Sofia.

While loneliness was evident in narratives of past experiences, the present day and future fears, it was frequently seen as being kept at bay; counteracted by the resilience generated by social support, friendship and networking:

> [I]n terms of sort of loneliness *it is* important to be with a group, it is important to be with a group of like-minded people – I would say *initially* politics-wise, feminist-wise. If you can have sexuality-wise as

> well that's good because you can then share some jokes that you wouldn't necessarily share with a straight woman.
> Rosie.

The flexibility of their gendered and sexual roles, their financially and socially independent lives and their capacity to join and create thriving networks across the life course has undoubtedly given most participants a robust toolkit for dealing with the challenges of older age, although some were already beset by health issues and others were experiencing financial constraint. For many years these women have been organising and organised into affinity groups, clustered around age (remember the over-35 'older lesbian' group in Leeds) and now, in retirement, they are able to draw on and develop these friendships and activities:

> I've been able to develop lots of friendships in the area. Well *some* special ones. And all the groups that I've joined in the last couple of years. I couldn't have done that if I was still at work
> Clary.

This research demonstrates the significance of affinity groups for older lesbian and bisexual women. For many women a same-sex, same-age lesbian or bisexual social group, is one place where they feel they can be themselves and shake off those feelings of disequilibrium. Jacqueline felt that her social group offered her a space to observe and learn about ageing:

> I think my age at the moment, just on the brink of 70, which is quite a big deal in some ways, is both to be aware of what might be considered 'the norm' and to be neither thinking I have to *be part* of it or that I have to *resist* it but rather to just find out what it is for *me.*

All participants, even those who did not currently attend groups, valued their existence. They were viewed as a key mechanism for reducing isolation and maintaining well-being in the future:

> If all this crumbled I think there would be a few people that wouldn't know what to do with themselves. Who could become very lonely and very isolated and very dependent and could be ringing people up and hoping that they have got time or can spare some time and I do think it's unbelievably important that it exists and continues to exist.
> Lilia.

The majority of women who participated in this research spoke warmly of the benefits they derived from groups, although as you would expect, group membership was more significant for some than others. Mainly, groups were experienced as safe spaces offering friendship and company, acting as forums for socialising, affirmation, belonging and the alleviation of loneliness and isolation. Whereas lesbian women expressed an overwhelming preference for lesbian and bisexual women-only company, two bisexual women indicated that they preferred mixed groups to women-only gatherings. Most women preferred coetaneous groups although there were many women who stated that they would enjoy inter-generational interaction provided their core group remained exclusive to same-age women. Crucially, these choices extend to other areas of life; in Almack's (2015) research, a significant number of women expressed a preference for women-only care and end of life services.

8.1   Methodology revisited: Strengths and limitations

Looking back, it is clear that my participants themselves are the greatest strength of this research. Recruiting thirty-five participants was serendipitous; a happy accident that resulted in the astonishingly rich and diverse narrative that forms the backbone of this work. A triad of approaches were brought together harmoniously to frame the work: Socialist-feminist constructivism led to me being attentive to class and other

inequalities, mindful of my intent for my research to *benefit* women as well as feature them. My intersectional analysis required me to focus on the subtle, sometimes intangible ways that inequalities connected and collided, which when combined with a life course approach revealed a pattern of mobilities and dislocations that often started in adolescence and persist to this day. Using qualitative research resulted in nuanced, subjective narratives telling the diverse stories of older lesbian and bisexual women; a sharp, and hopefully welcome, contrast to the current emphasis on statistically based studies prevalent in this field.

Despite my genuine intention and best efforts to recruit a sample group that was culturally and class-diverse, this study does not speak to the experience of women of colour nor can it shed much light on the experience of working-class women who have not been socially mobile; only five participants fall into this category. Much is written about the difficulties of recruiting those participants who are 'hard to reach' and I have given an account of my own struggles in Chapter Three. These absent identities are a loss to my work and to the groups from which my research is drawn.

My early decision not to seek the voices of lesbian-identified trans women means that they are not represented in this research. However, I hypothesise that they have experienced multiple marginalisation and habitus dislocation in the same way as the women in this study; perhaps feeling an even great displacement and sense of being out of balance, partially because of their multiple marginalisation,[41] and partly because of

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[41] Norton and Herek (2012) found that while U.S. heterosexual adults' attitudes towards transgender people were strongly correlated with their attitudes towards LGB individuals, attitudes

their exclusion from older lesbian groups where, if accepted, they might derive similar benefit to their cis-gendered counterparts.

8.2 So what? *(Informal, what importance does that have)?* [42]
The significance of this work

> Study of social support for lesbians and gay men also carries the promise of theoretically enlarging our understanding of social support as a general phenomenon.
> Barker, Herdt, de Vries (2006:2)

My research sheds light on the experience of mobilities and their potential to disrupt the guiding dispositions of habitus, rendering individuals 'fish out of water'. Previous studies of cleft habitus have focussed on one aspect and period of mobility, often that of elite education or migration, whereas the use of an intersectional, life course approach enables my research to highlight the collision and subsequent impact of multiple transgressions across the lifetime of my participants. This understanding of how habitus dislocation positions older lesbian and bisexual women not only has resonance for my participants but others who are similarly positioned.

This study has also explored the potential of groups and movements of equality and change to offer belongingness to those rendered out of place by mobility and heteronormativity. This aspect of my research has brought to light an understanding of the way in which older lesbian and bisexual women perceive events such as Pride, commonly believed to offer affirmation to the LGBT 'community', but in fact alienating many of my participants. Similarly, talking to women who lived through the second wave

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toward transgender people were significantly more negative than attitudes towards sexual minorities.
42 Collins English Dictionary. http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/ [Accessed 14.6.16]

of feminism reveals the rich diversity of their experience. In 1972, when Spare Rib was launched in the UK, my participants were aged between 16 and 32. It is often assumed that many women, who became lesbians in or following the sixties and seventies, came to sexual politics through feminism, experiencing the WLM as a place of refuge and enlightenment. This was true for a small number of participants; women such as Joyce and Jacqueline made sense of their worlds and lives through feminism. However, for the majority, feminism had little to offer. Some, like Gina, who were already lesbian or bisexual identified, found the WLM too heterosexual. For others, it was too rule bound and lacked compassion and flexibility. Those working in mills or factories or bringing up families were almost unaware of it, even when, like Brenda, they were excluded from jobs and opportunities. This is a less familiar account of the relationship between feminism and sexual identity and one that deserves to be heard.

As stated previously, part of my socialist-feminist commitment was to make this research matter - not merely to study women's lives but also to enrich them. To these ends I have spoken at a number of academic conferences, but these are select events, the audiences are small, often educated and invariably straight. At a recent free event for a small, self-identified 'older lesbian' audience at Leeds Beckett university, I presented my work on habitus dislocation and the significance of affinity groups. Following the talk, an unknown woman approached me. She was visibly emotional, with tears welling in her eyes. 'You told my life.' she said. I've never had the words for it but you've told my life'. Several other women commented that the research and my use of habitus dislocation as a theoretical tool to describe

the feelings of being out of place chimed with their experience, one stating that it confirmed 'one's own experiences as a lesbian'. Speaking at events such as this fulfils my aim to produce research with a purpose. The next step is to produce a summary of the research and its findings and distribute it to the participating groups to form part of their evidence base for future funding rounds and to offer a continued connection with the research prohibited by the high cost of published academic work.

8.3   Future perfect: Recommendations for research, policy and practice

It is evident from the limitations identified in 8.1, that future research into habitus dislocation in trans individuals would be beneficial, as would a study that incorporated BME participants. Such research would not only substantially enrich the extant academic literature but could usefully inform the shape of service provision for LGBT and/or BME elders.

This study signposts the need for further qualitative research looking at the intersections of health and disability with group membership in older LGBT individuals. This study lacked the scope to explore the significance of the relatively high number of participants with disabilities or health issues. Similarly, I did not set out to investigate groups' capacity to support members with these issues, although it is clear that as coetaneous groups age, health and disability will become more pressing concerns. There is an urgent need for timely research identifying the significance of older LGBT social networks in maintaining the physical and mental well-being of their members.

I suggest that the deployment of habitus dislocation as a conceptual tool with which to explore the hidden costs of multiple mobilities could be usefully extended to other contexts. Migration is an obvious field, particularly when it intersects with other potential fields of dislocation such as sexual identity, disability or education. I plan to develop the concept further, using an action research framework to explore habitus dislocation in mature, non-traditional tertiary education students, with a focus on the provision colleges and universities can make to ease the passage of such students, particularly as they are now the government's priority for social mobility and widening participation.[43]

It may be particularly important for funders to consider the nature of the space where groups are located; dedicated LGBT accessible space near transport links and not attached to health facilities being the ideal. While non-accessible space renders people with disabilities even further 'out of place', space adjacent to or part of health care facilities makes some people very uncomfortable. This research reveals that groups such as London social group 1, meeting in space shared with other groups and organisations, do not offer the same experience as that of women meeting in space that is marked out for lesbian and bisexual women; shared space does not have the capacity to offer the same level of cognitive and emotional safety.

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[43] *Success as a knowledge economy* (May 2016) sets out two specific, clear goals on widening participation in higher education: to double the proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering university in 2020 compared to 2009, and to increase the number of black BME students going to university by 20% by 2020. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523396/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf [Accessed 22.6.16]

Despite the increased engagement discussed by members of Yorkshire social group 1 as a consequence of losing an external co-ordinator and being forced to return to their grassroots traditions of self-organisation and food sharing, the employment of paid LGBT group leaders/co-ordinators may also become a priority as this generation of women become less inclined or able to continue organising grassroots groups. One example of good practice identified in this study, is offered by a centre that has employed staff specifically to increase and support the participation of excluded communities including Black and minority ethnic and trans individuals. Such initiatives need to be underpinned by further research incorporating the narratives of women of colour, trans identified lesbians and bisexual women and an older cohort in order to consider the complexities and nuances of group membership and belonging.

My study indicates that women in the category oldest old (75-85) participate far less in social groups than those in their fifties and sixties. Traies' (2012) study (mostly conducted by online questionnaire) attracted 45 women aged 70 and over (12% of her sample) whereas my research, drawing on participants actively attending groups recruited only 2 women in their early seventies (6% of my sample). This could be because of mobility, transport or health reasons or simply because older women - born before 1945 into the 'silent generation' (Morales et al., 2014) - have missed out on the major cultural shift experienced by their younger counterparts and consequently had less opportunity to live their lives openly, including the risk of attending a lesbian or bisexual group. Such women, who are also likely to be digitally

excluded,[44] may be at particular risk of loneliness and social isolation. Although accessing them will undoubtedly be challenging, research into the social and emotional needs of this cohort is particularly urgent. In addition to the obvious temporal imperative, this study indicates their absence from social groups and illustrates the intense fear of future care options expressed by their slightly younger counterparts; a fear they are likely to share, possibly without the support of a social network. A follow-up study of these particular participants as they reach their seventies and beyond would shed much light on many of these issues.

Wenger (1997) predicted that while communities based on friendship have the capacity to offer emotional support they are not able to cope with health issues associated with older age such as dementia or incontinence. Several of my participants offered stories of caring for and caring about group members that reveal a mixed picture. As predicted by Traies (2015), some participants had turned to their family of origin in the event of a health crisis or emergency situation while others doubted the capacity of the social group to meet their needs or were reluctant to ask for help. However, Yorkshire social group 1 demonstrated an informal capacity to support its members that was in the process of becoming formalised through the development of a contact list where members could state the level and type of help they felt able to offer.

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44 Individuals aged 75 and over are over five times more likely not to be using the internet than those aged 55 to 64. Green, M. and Rossall, P. (2013) Age UK Digital Inclusion Evidence Report 2013. www.ageuk.org.uk [Accessed 6.6.16]

The extent and duration of such support networks are untested and their potential to endure will obviously be limited by the ageing and frailty of other members in coetaneous groups. Research suggests that private or restricted networks offer the least benefit to their members (e.g. Wenger, 1997; Fiori and Jager, 2011; Stephens et al., 2011) although none of these studies have included LGBT networks in their research. When members of different groups or organisations come together they can share resources and expertise and may be better positioned to withstand or defend themselves against further austerity measures or future unsympathetic funding. Similarly, staff may be able to skill share.

While it is clear that coetaneous social and support groups offer many lesbian and bisexual women a high degree of psychological safety, they carry an inherent risk of obsolescence and may also become quite insular. Multigenerational membership/friendships prevent the simultaneous ageing of one's social family, which may jeopardise instrumental and possibly emotional support in later years as well as facilitating the sharing of life course experiences offering benefit to younger members as well as elders. Although future generation LGBT elders will almost certainly have different demographics with regards to partnerships and parenthood, it is important not to assume that the more positive approach to sexual and gender identity experienced by the younger generation will empower them to be more confident and assertive when it comes to stating their own needs and preferences.[45] Social and support groups which bring generations together

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[45] It is important not to overstate the case for LGBT 'ordinariness'. Despite changing social attitudes and legislative gains in the UK, 16% of lesbians and 20% of gay men aged 18-24 experience homophobic hate crime, leading to some avoiding gay venues and/or modifying their behaviour and

to share skills and experiences, as well as further recognition of the similarities and differences within and between LGBT communities can offer mutual support as well as helping to build resilience for both parties, providing that they are mindful of the need to retain homophilous primary groups.

Fish (2012) suggests that it is essential that social care workers recognise and seek to validate the personal networks of LGBT elders. However, although 'families of choice' and lesbian communities, friendships and support networks are rightly applauded as sources of support and belongingness, it is important to acknowledge that not all lesbians share these experiences of friendships and community. To date, little research has addressed the needs of older lesbians who do not experience the support of a network or community. Adelman et al. (2006) note that 14% of gay men and just under 10% of lesbians who participated in their openhouse survey located in San Francisco did not have anyone to turn to in time of crisis. Similarly, in the UK, Browne (2007) reports that 11% of her respondents in Brighton and Hove had no regular support, a figure which is likely to be higher in older age particularly for certain groups, e.g. transgender individuals and those living in rural areas. I suggest that as well as validating these existing support and social networks (both personal and in the community/voluntary sector), the establishment of strong cross-sexuality, cross-gender and multi-generation alliances could prove to be beneficial in multiple ways; to the well-being of participants, to younger LGBT individuals

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appearance. (Stonewall, 2013)
https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/Homophobic_Hate_Crime__2013_.pdf
[Accessed 13.6.16]

who currently lack role models for ageing, and politically and economically advantageous to the organisations that make them.

8.4   Future imperfect

The sense of an ending

Despite increased interest in the ageing needs of LGBT individuals, evidenced in projects such as *The Last Outing* funded by Marie Cure Cancer Care and focussed on end of life care (Almack, 2015), constraints on public spending alongside closure and homogenisation of LGBT venues and services threaten the benefits offered to older lesbian and bisexual women, rendering their future as perilous as their past.

Although ageism and economic concerns mean that the commercial scene does not always meet the needs of many older lesbian and bisexual women, it is still enjoyed by some of my participants. Much of this provision is under threat, particularly in London, where the recent closure of many venues has been framed by competing narratives; in one view, such closures are seen in terms of a financial gain for property developers while others propose the law of 'supply and demand' suggesting that such venues are no longer needed as people move online.[46] While this may suit some, Shirley was frightened by the prospect:

> I feel if I didn't go along to these things that I would close down. It's a frightening feeling and though I'd have all my other interests and other hetero people that I know, to be… not have the lesbian contacts to me would be like a form of closing down you know.
> Shirley.

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[46] Webber, E. (2015) Why are London's gay bars disappearing?

Asking how people would feel if the time came when they could no longer

attend groups was a sensitive and ethically challenging question. It

provoked strong emotional responses from many participants:

> Well that's one of my worries. I really don't know. People become
> older, they're less able to actually go to groups. […] So how it would
> work if we didn't actually, if we weren't able to get to a place, it may be
> like ageing in a heterosexual world has similar problems doesn't it,
> your world shrinks as you can't move about in it so much.
> Louise.

Austerity measures at local and national level continue to change the UK's

LGBT service landscape. In January 2016, the LGBT charity PACE closed

after 31 years of service provision that included counselling, advocacy,

training and research. Local authority budget cuts meant that it could no

longer survive.[47] There appears to be an economic argument for 'blending'

groups and organisations emanating from the government's 'austerity

agenda'. Essentially, whilst all community and voluntary organisations are at

risk, organisations that focus on intersectional issues, e.g. Black, Deaf

groups or groups for older lesbians may be more likely to lose funding

whereas 'single strand' or more mainstream LGBT organisations may fare

better. It is suggested that, currently, intersectional organisations or

'community of identity' groups such as those representing older or BME

LGBT people receive significantly lower funding than other LGBT

organisations.[48]

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[47] Duffy, N. (2016) LGBT+ mental health charity shutting down after 31 years.
[48] The London LGBT Voluntary and Community Sector Almanac (2011) suggests that the average annual income of these organisations is £26,030 compared with the £134,633 average annual income of all LGBT organisations. These figures are, in fact, skewed by an unusually large young people's charity. If removed, the figure for 'community of identity' groups falls to £10,276 per annum.

The negative aspects of such organisational 'homogenisation' is that it renders specific aspects or attributes invisible, thus conflating identities. Groups predicated on specific issues or membership characteristics offer a high degree of psychological safety and members may be very unwilling to lose their core group to meet with others who do not share those characteristics although, as this study demonstrates, if the primary group is retained there is a genuine desire for more mixed (particularly intergenerational) contact in secondary groups.

Brave new worlds?

There is evidence that access to online communities can help to minimise the risk of social isolation (Minocha et al., 2015). This study has shown that for some women such as Esther and Sofia, the internet was one way of maintaining connection with a lesbian or bisexual community, and for many others it was a key mechanism for finding out about events and groups. However, some women, already at increased risk of isolation for geographical reasons, were digitally excluded meaning that they could not find out about the (few) LGBT events nearby or connect with an online community. As LGBT groups and events are increasingly advertised online, other means of promotion dwindle, reducing the access of the digitally excluded even further. In the course of this study one group has gone from being paper-based to having its own website, as its leader who retired and was replaced explains here:

> I took over organising the programmes and the distribution of everything nearly 12 years ago, in 2002, when it was a very small group and just based in Leeds and you got your programme in the pub or through the door. And now there's 120 people on my distribution list. […] I'm not doing it anymore […] I decided that it had become too much work at certain times and I was learning to look

after myself more. […] They'll do it *differently* and some people will want to develop a website and I don't want to know about that. I'm a techno-twit!
Joan (talking about the Yorkshire walking group).

Increased age and mobility issues will exacerbate the potential isolation and by the time they recognise the need to upskill it could be significantly harder for them to learn the basics. Edie, aged 69 at the time of her interview, seemed confident that, in the event of her becoming housebound, she would meet the technological challenge:

I'm ignoring this new world. I'm ignoring it not at my peril – I understand it, I know what goes on. I know the basics. […] I think if you're housebound or something like that, the Internet, I mean they can *make friends* on that. You know, they can *make friends*, they can *relate to people*, they can *talk to people*; they might never *physically* meet them but they feel as though they've got *somebody* there at the end of the line. To them it's a blessing; it must be. It's *not* for *me*. If I want to meet somebody I meet them in *person*, you know. I don't want to meet them at the other end of a *line*. If I was in that position, well I'd be using the Internet now. Yeah I would.

However, the reality may be different. Minocha et al. (2015) suggest that, while getting online has the potential to reduce loneliness, which may be particularly significant to older lesbian and bisexual women facing residential care or supported living, older age brings additional challenges including the need for on-going support rather than one-off training, and cost implications such as the need to invest in Tablet devices (favoured for their intuitive interface). In addition, training may be delayed or prolonged by age-related difficulties including memory, vision and hearing problems and loss of manual dexterity. A key mechanism for older-age learning is through inter-generational contact, which is an option denied many older lesbian and bisexual women. Their report also suggests that older learners may prefer to learn from each other and benefit from 'sharing knowledge and swapping

tips' (p.28). This is the strongest possibility for the digital education of older LGBT individuals. With appropriate equipment and leaders, affinity groups could provide an ideal safe space for this learning and sharing of knowledge; this thesis recommends that groups train up their members as a matter of priority.

Imagined futures

In England and Wales, 3.7% of the population aged 65 and over were living in 'communal establishments' in 2011.[49] This study did not set out to look at housing or care but some participants talked about their concerns for the future. One participant already had domiciliary care to assist with washing and dressing; although she had now come to terms with having a male carer she recounted being '*horrified* to begin with…' Other concerns for the future included loneliness, isolation, living in close proximity to men and life in a care setting where sexual identity would have to be hidden or become a source of harassment.

Although living alongside men was a shared concern regardless of separatist or feminist allegiances, few participants referred to the heteronormativity and discrimination they may face in future housing or health and care situations. This is an area that may present the biggest challenge to positive ageing for this group of elders. A recent Stonewall (2015) report based on a survey of 3001 health and social care workers reveals that 57% of practitioners didn't consider sexual orientation to be relevant to health. Less than 30% of patient-facing staff had received

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[49] Changes in the older resident care home population between 2001 and 2011. www.ons.gov.uk [Accessed 14.6.16]

training on issues affecting LGBT service-users, including health needs,

legal rights and inclusive language and some respondents indicated that

when training occurred it was ineffective and tokenistic. LGBT- specific

housing projects such as Tonic Housing[50] are still in their infancy in the UK

and are likely to be developed along an inter-generational, mixed sexuality

model, similar to Lebensort Vielfalt in Berlin, which would not necessarily

meet the needs of older lesbians

The older age confidence gains seen at the start of Chapter Seven were

often tainted by fear of a future where loss of control over personal

circumstances would mean a return to the closet. The intersection of non-

normative sexuality and older age has left some participants feeling anxious

about their future and the ability of mainstream organisations to meet their

care needs appropriately. Bina's 'imagined' future' typifies the anxieties of

many women:

> And you can imagine ending up in an old people's home, how that
> isolation will impact and how that person would revert back to where
> they were, you know, before coming out really. And how sad it would
> be. How it would affect their mental health.
> Bina.

These fears are likely to be compounded by socio-economic positioning.

Esther, aged 66 at the time of her interview, had heart problems; she was

living alone in a housing association flat but was fearful for the future and

concerned that traditional care settings would not meet her needs:

> I feel vulnerable as a pagan as well as a queer person and so I don't
> feel like mainstream older people's things are going to work for me.

Brenda expressed similar concerns. Living in sheltered accommodation with

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50 Tonic Housing. http://www.tonichousing.org.uk [Accessed 14 June 2016]

access to groups for older lesbians and a network of friends, she had no immediate reason to need increased care; however, her future was clearly a concern:

> Because… my worst nightmare would be to end up in a heterosexual home or nursing home and that's the option really, if you can't live on your own. […] The other thing I've always worried about is *mixed* wards in hospitals […] I've never been on one – but I don't know how I'd cope. With that close proximity, you know. It sounds daft but it's even the *smell*, I can't stand… you know, anything. Apart from people I know but… so I don't know how, I don't know how I'd cope with that, being wi' *blokes* who are… who you *live with* – you'd be *living with* a bloke wouldn't you? And I just *couldn't do it.* Don't *know*, don't know what I'd do…

So, even as elders in the twenty-first century with legal recognition and protection and networks of friendship and support, a lifetime of prejudice and concealment, mobility and transgression continues to impose limits on the confidence and liberation of many women. Brenda had dealt with class prejudice at school, faced sexism and homophobia at work and encountered ageism on the gay scene. At the age of 63, she reflects on how she feels as an older sexual citizen in the twenty-first century:

> I think we're just *so grateful* that *we can be who we are, now.* I mean some of the younger ones, you see them and they're all sort of… I don't know, if you look in Diva and things you see them and they all look so *confident* and they're all you know, 'I kissed a girl and I liked it' and *nobody cares* and all this whereas it's *taken so long for us* to, to be able to *be us* that, you know, […] it's just *such a relief* that you can *finally be who you are* when there's been *nothing, nothing for years*.

Endnote

It is my contention that the groups explored in this study and others like them have the capacity to provide comfort, support and resilience in the older age of their members, lessening the impact of the habitus dislocation generated by multiple mobilities, reducing loneliness and isolation and the potential mental and physical ill health that accompany these conditions.

However, in the current political and economic climate, such groups, networks and venues are increasingly under threat. While many groups continue to be self-led and funded, this small-scale research demonstrates that as members age they do not always wish to continue organising and leading these networks, even if they have the capacity to do so. LGB (and T) social and support groups, along with future housing and care needs, are complex subjects and there is no 'one size fits all' solution. I suggest that this should be a priority for local authorities, community and voluntary organisations; in addition to our moral imperative to ensure equity and dignity, the long-term emotional and financial costs of not meeting the needs of this generation of LGBT elders are unthinkable.

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Appendix One: Interview Schedule

> Introduction to the interview, thanking the participant for taking part, reminding them of the purpose/use of the research and reiterating their right to withdraw from the research at any point. They will already have had a copy of the **information sheet** but have some spare copies to hand and check if they have any questions before you begin. Talk through the **consent form** (if this has not been done previously) and ask the participant to sign this.

Introductory question

While we are getting set up and comfortable, perhaps you could tell me a bit about why you wanted to take part in this research?

Questions about you

What is your age/date of birth?
Check they fit the age profile.

What does your age mean to you?
(Prompt Who is 'old'? What is 'old'? Who is 'young'? What is 'young'?)

How does it impact on your life?

How would you describe your ethnicity? Tell me a bit about that.
Prompt (What is the impact of ethnicity/region on identity, community, belongingness?)

Does religion or faith play a part in your life, or has it ever done so? Tell me about this.

How do you prefer to describe your sexual identity? Tell me about this.

Do you consider yourself to have a disability? Are you happy to talk about this?

Are you currently in a relationship?
Prompt (How would you describe your current relationship status)

How would you describe your current living arrangements?

When did you recognise your sexual identity/come out to yourself?

To what extent do you consider yourself 'out' now? Tell me a bit about that/about the process of coming out.
(Prompt At what age? Out to whom/when?)

Can you tell me a bit about your previous / current relationships?

Do you consider yourself to be a parent?

Can you tell me a bit about your relationship with your blood/given family?
Prompt (What was your childhood like? What job/s did parent/s have? Get a sense of family's class/capital.)

Tell me about your education?
Prompt (what was the participant's highest level and subject?)

How would you describe your social class? Tell me a bit about that.
Prompt (How/why do you define like that? Can you articulate the factors you are taking into account? Has this description changed over time? Can you describe a person who is x class?)

To what extent do you see your social class as inherited, transferred or passed on to you? Are you aware that your class impacts on you now or has done, in any particular way?

Do you consider yourself to be retired? When/why did you retire?
Prompt (Can you tell me about your previous/current job/career? Do you do any voluntary work? Tell me a bit about that.)

How did you experience the transition from work to retirement?

How long have you lived in [name of] area?
Prompt (Do you choose to live here? What is it about [name of area] that you like?)

Do you consider that you have a social network/social family/family of choice? Please tell me a bit about this.

How do you imagine that ageing as a lesbian differs from ageing as a heterosexual woman?

Questions about the group/s you belong to/have belonged to

What impact (if any) has feminism had on your life?

How regularly have you been attending [name of group]?
Prompt (How did you hear about [name of group]?)

How far do you travel to get to the group?

What made you decide to attend/keep attending?

What have you got from coming to [name of group]?
Prompt (what specifically does it offer you? intimacy, relationships, independence, dependence, family, friends, practical support, affirmation of identities, happiness)

[If friendship is not discussed in answer to the previous question]

Have you made friendships or relationships within the group?
Prompt (Do these extend outside the group – what benefit do these friendships confer?)

[If support is not discussed in answer to the previous question]
Prompt (Does this group or its members offer you support? What form does this take?)

Has anything changed for you as a result of attending [name of group]?
Prompt (self-image, attitudes about sexuality, acceptance of self, feelings about sexual identity relationships with family, relationships with others)

How significant is it to you that [name of group] is a same sexuality group?

Why is this?

How significant is the location/space/place in which groups are held?

[For lesbian groups only]

How important is it to you that [name of group] is a women only group? Why is this?

How important is it to you that [name of group] is for people of similar ages? Why is this?

How do you imagine the group would be different if it had a broader membership?
Prompt (e.g. if younger lesbians were invited to attend?)

Do you use the Internet/social media?
Prompt (how do you use it? What part does it play in your social relationships?)

Does Gay Pride have a significance to you?

Questions about loneliness, isolation and belonging

Have there been times in your life when you have felt lonely? Can you tell me about this?

Have there been times in your life when you have felt isolated? Can you tell me about this?

To what extent do you perceive the loneliness and/or isolation that you have described to be connected to your sexual/ identity and/or your lifestyle as a lesbian?

Does being part of the group offer you a sense of belongingness? Can you articulate what this is? How does it feel? How does it impact on you?

Has belonging to a group impacted on these issues for you?

How do you think your life would be different if [name of group] were to close or you could no longer access it?

In an ideal world, what changes/developments would you like to see in groups?

Have you belonged/do you belong to other groups and networks? Tell me a bit about these.

Do you access any other LGBT services? Tell me a bit about these.

Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that I haven't asked you?

Have you taken part in research before? What was it?

Thank the participant for the interview. Offer them the **support/information sheet**. Give them an idea of when the transcript will be returned to them for checking. Check that they do not require anything further before you leave.

Appendix Two: Participants' appearances in analysis chapters

	Chapter Four	Chapter Five	Chapter Six	Chapter Seven
Alison	WHITE	WHITE	GREEN	BLUE
Anne	BLUE	WHITE	BLUE	BLUE
Annie	BLUE	WHITE	BLUE	RED
Bina	WHITE	GREEN	GREEN	BLUE
Brenda	BLUE	RED	BLUE	RED
Catherine	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE	RED
Clary	RED	GREEN	GREEN	GREEN
Denny	WHITE	WHITE	BLUE	RED
Edie	WHITE	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE
Emily	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE
Esther	WHITE	WHITE	BLUE	BLUE
Frances	BLUE	GREEN	BLUE	RED
Gillian	WHITE	RED	BLUE	BLUE
Gina	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE
Gwennie	WHITE	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE
Ivy	RED	WHITE	RED	BLUE
Jacqueline	GREEN	GREEN	BLUE	BLUE
Joan	WHITE	GREEN	BLUE	GREEN
Joyce	GREEN	BLUE	BLUE	GREEN
Kate	GREEN	GREEN	GREEN	RED
Lilia	WHITE	GREEN	GREEN	BLUE
Louise	WHITE	RED	BLUE	GREEN
Michelle	BLUE	BLUE	WHITE	BLUE
Minerva	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE	RED
Nancy	WHITE	BLUE	RED	BLUE
Nell	BLUE	GREEN	WHITE	BLUE
Nora	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE
Pamela	BLUE	RED	BLUE	BLUE
Robin	BLUE	BLUE	GREEN	RED
Rosie	BLUE	BLUE	WHITE	BLUE
Shirley	BLUE	GREEN	WHITE	BLUE
Sofia	WHITE	BLUE	WHITE	GREEN
Susan	BLUE	GREEN	BLUE	WHITE
Val	BLUE	BLUE	BLUE	GREEN
Vanessa	BLUE	BLUE	RED	BLUE
	23	29	30	34

RED 5 or more quotes
GREEN 3/4 quotes
BLUE 1/2 quotes
WHITE 0 quote

Appendix Three: Information sheet for potential participants

London South Bank University | Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research

Information sheet for potential interview participants

Exploring the significance of groups and networks in the lives of older lesbians and bisexual women

Thank you for your interest in this study. This information sheet provides important information about the study that you should know before you make a decision about whether to take part. It describes what the research is about and what it involves.

You will also be given the opportunity to discuss any questions you have or clarify anything written here that you don't feel clear about.

About the researcher
I am a PhD student at London South Bank University. I am a 51 year old woman, in a same-sex relationship.

Purpose of the research
This research is being carried out as part of a sociological PhD study. My focus is to look at the reasons people have for attending social and support groups and the benefits those groups offer.
We would discuss what kind of group you are attending and whether you feel that it has had any impact on your life, particularly with regard to feelings of loneliness and isolation. We will also talk about social class and whether your class background has any influence on this.

Who can take part?
I would like to hear from anyone who was born in or before 1953/ aged 60 or over, and identifies as a lesbian or bisexual woman in the UK.

The interviews will be conducted in English so participants will need to be able to express themselves in this language.

What happens if you take part in the research?
Your participation will involve answering some questions about your experiences as described in the section 'Purpose of the Research'. The interview can take place where you live or a public venue if preferred. The session should last between an hour and two hours. The interview will be recorded on a dictaphone and typed up to be used in the research. The typed transcript will be emailed to you for checking. At this point you can correct, delete or add any thoughts/comments to the transcript.

Will taking part in the research be kept confidential?
Your identity will be kept confidential* and a pseudonym will be used to ensure your anonymity. The anonymised findings will be presented in written form as part of the PhD study and may be used for subsequent publications. Findings may also be shared at academic conferences and/or journal articles.

*Whilst confidentiality is a key principle of research ethics, it is also recognised that confidentiality may be limited in some cases, for example, if I am concerned that someone is at risk or harm. As part of the consent procedure, I will explain that if I become aware of something that gives cause for concern, I have a duty to act, but will talk with the participant first about what to do.

The data will be stored in a secure location and kept for approximately five years after the PhD thesis has been successfully submitted and approved.

What will you get if you decide to take part?
The interview sessions offer an opportunity to share your thoughts and opinions about ageing, loneliness, social support and belonging.

What happens if you begin the study but no longer want to take part?
Participation in the study is voluntary. You can stop the interview for whatever reason, without having to provide any justification.
Once you have given an interview, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason, up until the point where the thesis is submitted or any articles derived from it are published.

Who has reviewed the study?
The research has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) which aims to protect your rights and dignity. Any queries about the conduct of the research can be addressed to UREC at ethics@lsbu.ac.uk or Prof. Yvette Taylor at taylory@lsbu.ac.uk or Dr. Chamion Caballero at c.caballero@lsbu.ac.uk

I hope you are willing to participate in this work. If you have any further questions, please email me at wilkensj@lsbu.ac.uk

Thank you for your time.

Jill Wilkens

Research Student
Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research
Faculty of Arts & Human Sciences
London South Bank University
103 Borough Road
London, SE1 OAA

Appendix Four: Participant Information Form

London South Bank University | **Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research**

UREC application Number 1346
Research Participant Information Form

Please complete this form to express your interest in taking part in the research.
Please note that all information will be held in the strictest confidence.
Full details of research are available on the separate information sheet accompanying this form.

Your contact details:

Name:	
Address including postcode:	
Phone number/s:	
Email address:	
Please state whether you prefer email or phone contact:	

Things about you:

How do you describe your gender?	
How do you describe your sexuality?	
How do you describe your class?	
How do you describe your ethnicity?	
How do you describe your employment situation? (e.g. retired, employed full time or part time, unemployed, student, etc.)	
What is your age?	

If selected for interview would you be happy for an interview to take place in your home? (Note that alternative places such as LGBT centres will be sought if preferred)
Is there anything else you'd like me to know about you?
After you have completed this form, please return where possible via email to wilkensj@lsbu.ac.uk Alternatively please post to: Jill Wilkens Research Student Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences 103 Borough Road London, SE1 OAA

Please sign below to indicate that you understand how any information generated by your participation in this study will be used. This will be discussed again before interview, with an opportunity for questions, and you will be asked to confirm your informed consent at this time.

_____

Appendix Five: Consent Form

London South Bank University | Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research

<u>Research Participation Consent Form 2013/14</u>

Loneliness, isolation and the role of groups in the lives of older lesbians and bisexual women

I have read the information sheet provided regarding this research and had the opportunity to discuss and ask questions about the purpose of the research and how it will be used.

From this information and discussion I feel I understand the nature of this research and why I am being invited to participate.

I understand that:

- I will not be personally identified as a research participant in the study or any subsequent publications.
- In order to maintain my confidentiality an agreed pseudonym will be used in place of my name.
- Only the researcher will have access to the data.
- The data collected will be used only for this study and subsequent academic publications.
- My data will be kept after the completion of this PhD study for no longer than five years.
- Data will be stored securely in line with the principles of the Data Protection Act (1998, 2003). This Act, which includes electronic data, requires that data be kept for no longer than necessary and kept secure, for example, on a computer that is password protected.

I have been informed that the interview will be audio recorded and consent to it being recorded. I have understood this information, received satisfactory answers to all of my questions and freely consent to participate in the study. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason for withdrawing

_____

I have read the above and the participation sheet and am willing to participate in the research.

Signed: Print name:

Date:

Researcher counter signature: Date:

Thank you for your participation in the research.

Appendix Six: Note sent to participants with their transcript

Dear [name of participant]

Please find attached the transcript of your interview. I would like you to check it for accuracy and whether you want to add, change or delete anything.

I will be giving every participant a pseudonym automatically which you can choose if you have a preference. You may wish to change the names of other people you've referenced in your interview.

Thanks very much for giving such an incredibly frank and honest interview. I very much appreciate it.

Warm wishes, Jill

Appendix Seven: The groups anonymised

The partnership:
████████████████████████ A charity established in 2004 to support LGB (and now T) people in Bradford and the West Yorkshire area

Yorkshire social group 1:
████████████ West Yorkshire, lesbian & bisexual, over 55s fortnightly social group meeting at the partnership building

Yorkshire craft group:
████████████ Offshoot of Yorkshire social group 1, meets fortnightly in the winter months at the partnership building

Yorkshire social group 2:
██████████████████ West Yorkshire, monthly lesbian social group meeting at the partnership building

Yorkshire walking group:
██████████████ North and West Yorkshire, twice-monthly lesbian walking group

Yorkshire choir group:
████████████ West Yorkshire, lesbian and gay, weekly choir meeting at the partnership building

Lancashire social group:
████████████ Lancashire and Yorkshire, older lesbian, monthly social and befriending meeting a village hall

London feminist group:
████████████████████ London, feminist, social and activist group meeting at various locations including the Feminist Library

London social group 1:
██████████████████ London, lesbian, over 40s monthly social group meeting at a resource centre in central London

London group 2:
████████████████████ London, a mixture mostly mixed social groups, various venues all over London

London ballroom dancing group:
████████████████ London, women-only, monthly dancing meeting in north London

London Lesbian book group:
London, women only, largely friendship group meeting in members' homes mostly in north London

London bisexual group:

██████████ London, mixed gender bisexual, over-50s monthly social group meeting at Age UK

London CR groups:

London feminist group spin-off groups, including groups about ageing and dying meeting in various locations mostly in north London

London Meetup groups:

Meetup helps groups of people with shared interests plan events and facilitates off line group meetings in various localities around the world

BiCon:

Annual bisexuality convention

Appendix Eight: Support and information sheets

Further Support and Information

The organisations listed here may be of help if you feel you would like some support about any of the issues you discussed in your interview today or would like to spend more time with other lesbians.

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard
Providing free & confidential support & information to lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgendered communities throughout the UK.
Telephone: 0300 330 0630 (staffed daily 10.00am – 11.00pm, 7 days a week)
Email: chris@llgs.org.uk

Opening Doors London
The Opening Doors London project, led by Age UK Camden, provides a range of services and activities for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people over 50 in London.
Women's co-ordinator
Telephone: 020 7239 0447
Email: odl.women@ageukcamden.org.uk
Befriending co-ordinator
Telephone: 020 7239 0442
Email: odl.befriending@ageukcamden.org.uk

The Labrys Trust
The Labrys Trust telephone line is a confidential information and signposting service for older lesbians in the Bradford and Calderdale area mainly.
Telephone: 07907 469927 (staffed every Wednesday evening, 7.00pm to 9.00pm)

The Lesbian & Gay Foundation (LGF)
The Lesbian & Gay Foundation (LGF) is a charity offering well-established services and a range of new initiatives aimed at meeting the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual people.
Website: http://www.lgf.org.uk
Telephone: 0845 330 3030 (staffed between 9am until 5pm on a week day, excluding bank holidays and religious festivals)
Email: info@lgf.org.uk

The Samaritans
The Samaritans provide confidential emotional support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress, despair or suicidal thoughts.
Telephone: 08457 90 90 90 (staffed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year)

Other regional social and support groups are also available
Website: http://www.ageofdiversity.org.uk/older-lgbt-groups

Further Support and Information

The organisations listed here may be of help if you feel you would like some support about any of the issues you discussed in your interview today or would like to spend more time with other lesbians.

Older and Wilder
Older and Wilder is a social group of older lesbian and bisexual women (aged 50 upwards) who live, work or socialise in the Bradford district. They meet every fortnight in an exclusive social space at the Equity Centre in Bradford on a Wednesday afternoon from 1pm to 3pm. Members each bring a small amount of food and share a meal together.
Halyna: 07990 587030   Sue: 0113 2623298
olderandwilder@yahoo.co.uk
http://olderandwilder.weebly.com

The Labrys Trust
The Labrys Trust telephone line is a confidential information and signposting service for older lesbians in the Bradford and Calderdale area mainly. Telephone: 07907 469927 (staffed every Wednesday evening, 7.00pm to 9.00pm)

Calderdale Social Group for Older Lesbians (Todmorden)
The Labrys Trust now hosts a social group for older lesbians and bisexual women, which meets between 2.30 and 4.30 pm on the last Friday of the month at:
Community Resource Centre (CRC), George Street, Todmorden (near Lever Street car park),
Yvonne on 01422 845106
Website: www.thelabrystrust.com

The Lesbian & Gay Foundation (LGF)
The Lesbian & Gay Foundation (LGF) is a charity offering well-established services and a range of new initiatives aimed at meeting the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual people.
Website: http://www.lgf.org.uk
Telephone: 0845 3 30 30 30 (staffed between 9am until 5pm on a week day).
Email: info@lgf.org.uk

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard
Providing free & confidential support & information to lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgendered communities throughout the UK.
Telephone: 0300 330 0630 (staffed daily 10.00am – 11.00pm, 7 days a week)
Email: chris@llgs.org.uk

Other regional social and support groups are also available
Website: http://www.ageofdiversity.org.uk/older-lgbt-groups

Appendix Nine: Participant Biographies

The youngest participant was born in 1956 and was aged 57 at the time of the interview. The eldest was 73; she had been born in 1940. The mean average age of the participants was 64 (as was the median).

Thirty-four of the participants have pseudonyms, some self-chosen some assigned by me. Further discussion of the rationale behind this is given in section 3.4.

1. Alison

Alison was the second participant to be interviewed. I met her at the London bisexual group and her interview took place in the Age UK office in Camden in December 2013. I have subsequently met her at several conferences and seminars concerned with LGBT ageing. Alison identified as White British, bisexual, polyamorous and submissive. She was 60 at the time of the interview and was retired from her job as a librarian. She described herself as 'comfortable' when asked about her social class and talked about her parents' struggle and sacrifice. Alison lived in a poly triad and was a biological parent. She talked passionately about BiCon as safe space. Alison had thought about leaving London to retire but felt that it would need to be, 'somewhere within easy access of Brighton or somewhere where there's a good queer culture going on.'
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Alison in the social class category 'working class educated'.

2. Anne

Anne was the instigator of several other interviews. She herself was alerted to the research by a friend of mine who participates in a lesbian Jewish reading group. Anne not only participated in the research herself but persuaded a number of other people to do so too; these include her partner Nell, and friends Sofia and Rosie. These participants are different from all the others in the sense that they do not have one single, regularly attended group in common, although most of them had attended the London ballroom dancing group at some point and all had attended various but different reading groups over the years.

Anne (60) was born in 1954. She lived in North London with her partner Nell. They had been together for 14 years and were civilly partnered in 2008, for predominantly 'legal and financial' reasons. Anne saw herself as White UK/English and was happy with the descriptors lesbian or gay. Anne self-identified as straight until she was 40. She was previously married to a man and had two grown up children. Anne was semi-retired but still taught yoga three times a week. She talked quite emotionally about ageing as a series of losses and viewed it as, 'a cusp time; it's a transition time and it's not really clear, totally, what's going to happen.' Anne identified as lower middle class and was another participant with a narrative about the classed journey from working class parents via grammar school to a middle class lifestyle: 'And I suppose I see myself somewhere round the middle and very happy to be there. I'm glad I'm not at the bottom. I'm glad that we have a choice of where to live. […] I feel happy; I feel comfortable where I am.' Anne was another participant who felt that she would not want to live somewhere where she couldn't access LGBT groups or services. 'It's

affecting our choice of if we leave London where will we go. We've sort of got to go near Brighton 'cause there's a Brighton group that's big and active. I don't know that I'd be happy to go somewhere where there wasn't.'

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Anne in the social class category 'working class educated'.

3. Annie

Annie's interview took place at her home, which she shares with her civil partner, Kate Elliott. Annie was 63 when I interviewed her in May 2014 and had retired from her job as a children's advocate the previous August. Annie grew up in Wales and saw this as an essential part of her identity and sense of belonging, 'it is *absolutely* who I am.' Annie didn't enjoy groups like Yorkshire group 1 where Kate went - she saw them as *social* hubs; she felt the need for a shared purpose and felt passionately that older lesbian groups need to 'embrace and encourage' younger women in order to create a broader membership for future sustainability.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Annie in the social class category 'working class educated'.

4. Bina

Bina was the second participant from Yorkshire social group 1. She was interviewed in a friend's house in Halifax. Bina was 66 and described herself as Irish, an identity which resonated with meaning for her, 'it's just where your heart is I think', although her sexual identity as a lesbian made it difficult for her to live there permanently. Bina did not become a lesbian until she was in her mid-forties despite 'coming out' to her parents at 16 about her feelings for a friend. She experienced the change to her sexual identity as an, 'unbelievable transformation' which was, for her, a totally embodied experience. Bina described herself as lower middle class. She had worked as a teacher for many years but retrained as a counselling supervisor after experiencing homophobia at school when her physical appearance and mode of dress changed. She saw the group as a way to connect with friends, 'I meet up with friends and the benefits of contact, not being isolated. You can very easily become isolated.' Bina spoke passionately of her love for Ireland where she had a house but, ultimately, felt that having a lesbian community here in the UK, 'is more important for your… the reason I'll be back is for my mental health. It's for me, it's for my centre.'

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Bina in the social class category 'working class educated'.

5. Brenda

Brenda was born in 1951 and was aged 63 at the time of the interview. She attends Yorkshire social group 1. She recently moved into a sheltered flat in Calderdale as she has problems with her hips that were making it difficult for her to negotiate the steep stairs in her previous house. She is single and lives alone with her dog. Brenda was previously married to a man and has an adult son from that relationship. She retired at the age of 60. Prior to this she had several jobs including working for the police force where she fought sexism in order to become the UK's first mounted police woman. Although Brenda identified unequivocally as working class, using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places her in the social class category 'working class educated'.

6. Catherine

Catherine was my third interviewee and the first person to be recruited from Yorkshire social group 1 where I spoke about my research in January 2014. Her interview took place in January 2014 in the living room of her house in Halifax surrounded by her dogs and cats. Catherine was 63 and identified as White British. She had only recently retired from her job in sexual health services and had suffered a major bereavement around the same time. Catherine lived with her sister. They both identified as lesbian. She was single and did not identify as a parent. She had strong allegiance to her parents' working class roots but acknowledged that she probably could no longer be described as working class – she attributed this to the fact that she had travelled extensively and been educated. She saw the 'emotional part' of class as inherited, 'that sense of identity'. Catherine had spent quite a lot of her life closeted – particularly when she worked as a teacher around the time of Section 28. She saw groups as offering 'friendship, support, further contacts […] a connecting with other lesbian women'.
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Catherine in the social class category 'working class educated'.

7. Clary

I interviewed Clary in her home after meeting her once at the Lancashire social group. Clary was 62 when I interviewed her. She identifies as a lesbian and is disabled with severe mobility issues, diabetes and a recent mini-stroke. She has also experienced mental health issues and has been retired since her 50s. Clary was married with a child and did not have a lesbian relationship until her late thirties. She described herself as working class and talked eloquently about her experiences as a working class child going to grammar school in the 1960s where she was perceived as poor. Clary was concerned that her failing health would jeopardise her ability to live independently:

> I've gradually got less and less mobility. I've had things, adaptations in my house so that I can *stay* here and I'm *hoping* that I can stay for a long time but I don't know if I *will*.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Clary in the social class category 'working class educated'.

8. Denny

Denny was forced to give up her job running nightclubs in 1986 following a serious car accident that left her with brain damage. Now aged 60, single and living alone, she was bored with 'age-appropriate' activities and talked of the cultural isolation she experienced with other women of her age who attended older lesbian groups such as London social group 1 where I recruited her:

> It's nice to be with older women of your own age or… as long as they're not *too* old. 'Cause they get set in their ways. The only thing they want to do is go for meals, go to the theatre or go to the pictures. Or some of them are into opera and you think 'Oh God I don't want to go to bloody opera all the time', you know, I want to do things a bit more adventurous.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Denny in the social class category 'working class'.

9. Edie

Edie was born in 1944 and, at 69, was one of the eldest participants. She was born in Lancashire but lived most of her life in Australia coming back in her fifties to set up a 'new life' with a woman (Susan). Homosexuality was 'not tolerated' in Australia and both Edie - and her brother who was also gay - seem to have led virtually asexual lives there. I met Edie at the Lancashire social group which had just started up. It was the first lesbian group she had attended, motivated by loneliness and a desire for communication with people of the 'same mindset'. She was not finding it particularly satisfactory. Edie described herself as being in an on/off relationship with another participant, Susan, 'we're awful apart and we're terrible together', but Susan's interview revealed that she didn't see herself as being in a relationship. In a letter to me after she had checked her transcript, Edie said that she had stopped attending the group.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Edie in the social class category 'working class'.

10. Emily

Emily was born in 1949 and was 64 at the time of the interview. She had previously been interviewed in 2011 as part of my MA research when she was fairly recently bereaved. On both occasions she was interviewed in her own home in a suburb outside Leeds. Emily said on a number of occasions that she felt that she was 'different' to other people. She regularly attended Yorkshire social group 1 as well as the Yorkshire lesbian and gay choir and the Yorkshire craft group. She derived some sense of belonging from group membership but felt it did not always offer her the level of practical or emotional support she would have liked.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Emily in the social class category 'working class educated'.

11. Esther

Esther was the first participant I interviewed. The interview took place in December 2013 in the living room of her small house in Hackney. Born in 1947, Esther was 66 at the time of the interview and identified as White British, pagan and queer. She saw herself as middle class and had a strong sense of the privilege that and her nationality conferred, for example, receiving a pension. Esther was single and did not identify as a parent. Esther was retired, previously she had worked in homeopathy and, more recently, had led an LGBT organisation. She had previously identified as a lesbian feminist but fractures and divisions within the older lesbian feminist community, particularly around her bisexuality and, what she perceived as an anti-trans stance, had rendered her feeling separate from this identity. She attended several mixed groups under the umbrella of London group 2. Esther lived alone but had been having a relationship with a man. She had no children.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Esther in the social class category 'middle class'.

12. Frances

Frances was born in 1952 and was 61 at the time of the interview. I interviewed her in February 2014 in her small sheltered flat on the outskirts

of Halifax. Frances is single and lives alone with her dog. Frances suffers from severe arthritis which restricts her mobility and she uses a frame or mobility scooter to get round. She retired from her job as an administrator in the NHS because of her health. Frances identifies as a lesbian and feels that her upbringing was 'probably middle class' as she was sent to boarding school although her lack of university education has often left her feeling out of place in middle class groups. She attends Yorkshire social group 1 and some of the spin-offs such as the monthly pub-meal group if they are held in an accessible pub. Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Frances in the social class category 'working class'.

13. Gillian

I interviewed Gillian at the home of a mutual friend's just outside Bradford at the end of February 2014. She had agreed to participate in the research as a non-group goer. Gillian was born in 1944 and was aged 69 when I interviewed her. Gillian saw herself as a working class lesbian. She had left school at 15 and had had a variety of jobs including factory work, chimney sweeping and gardening. Gillian is in a relatively new relationship although she prefers to live alone and always has done. She was a friend of a participant in my MA research who had invited her to be interviewed as I had said that I would be interested in talking to women who did *not* attend groups. She has attended Yorkshire social group 1 and Yorkshire walking group on a handful of occasions.
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Gillian in the social class category 'working class'.

14. Gina

Gina was 61 and still worked full-time as a counsellor and social worker in a hospice. She lived in a privately owned apartment in North London. She was single and the adoptive parent of two children. Gina talked extensively about the London social group 1, outlining the quite rigid hierarchies that existed, dividing the women into socially desirable and undesirable groups. She herself was near the top of this social hierarchy. Gina redacted much of what she had said about this when she received her interview transcript for checking saying:

> 'My major concern is that there is a lot that will make me instantly recognisable, which I wouldn't want, particularly given some of what I say about [name of group]'

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Gina in the social class category 'working class educated'.

15. Gwennie

Born in 1953, Gwennie was 60 at the time of the interview, which took place in a room adjacent to Yorkshire social group 1's meeting place. She had retired at the age of 51 on the grounds of ill-health. Gwennie had never had a relationship with a woman. She had only recently started to come out and was still semi-closeted:

> 'And to be honest I've been *hiding* for a *long time*. And it's only in the last couple of years that I've sort of *admitted* to people *who* and *what* I am. But not to everybody; there's quite a few of my friends who *don't* know. They may *suspect* but I've never actually come out and said anything.'

Gwennie found the group a safe place, where she could be accepted. Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Gwennie in the social class category 'working class educated'.

16. Ivy

Ivy was 58 at the time of the interview in February 2014 and had recently been made redundant. Her redundancy had given her the opportunity to attend Yorkshire social group 1 in which her partner Lilia is very active. Ivy is the biological mother to three grown-up children and she and Lilia now have grandchildren. Ivy's redundancy had impacted on how people saw her, many perceiving her to be retired and causing her to re-assess her self-image and relationship to the world of work. Ivy had lived in Yorkshire all her life and her regional identity as a Yorkshire-woman gave her a sense of belonging. Many years ago when she was coming out as a lesbian and feminist Ivy attended Yorkshire social group 2 and found it oppressive and rigid.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Ivy in the social class category 'working class educated'.

17. Jacqueline

Knowing that I was interviewing in her village, Jacqueline, one of the participants opened a room in her house for the day so that I could stay in one place and the participants came to me. In addition, she provided myself and the participants with coffee, biscuits and homemade soup for lunch. This gesture was typical of the generosity of the vast majority of participants and made a long day considerably easier.

Jacqueline was 69 at the time of interview. She was a retired teacher and therapist. Jacqueline was single and did not identify as a parent. Jacqueline was one of a group of women living in the same village outside Leeds, who often travelled together to Yorkshire social group 1. Jacqueline spoke about the challenges of ageing. She saw Women's Liberation and feminism as her family and said of the group she attended, 'I don't feel odd when I'm there and I often do feel odd.'

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Jacqueline in the social class category 'working class educated'.

18. Joan

Joan attended Yorkshire social group 1 and was interviewed along with three other women in February 2014. Born in 1946, Joan was one of the women I had interviewed in 2011 for my MA research. She was now 68, still single and living alone. Joan, a humanist, describes herself as White British. She came out as a lesbian in her late forties after many years of straight marriage. Joan has no children. She was a businesswoman but retired to Yorkshire a number of years ago when she met her then partner. In the three years since I last interviewed her, Joan has noticed her stamina dwindling and when I interviewed her she had just resigned from the position of organising Yorkshire walking group, a role she had held for 12 years. Joan stayed in Yorkshire despite the break-up of her relationship; she attends a number of lesbian groups and events as well as singing in folk clubs:

'I like it here. There's a lesbian, I'm going to call it community, network. There are lots of gay women in [name of village] and Leeds and all around and the countryside is marvellous.'

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Joan in the social class category 'working class educated'.

19. Joyce

I recruited Joyce after a meeting of the London Feminist group at which she spoke about her small CR group. Joyce was interviewed at her home in north London, which she shared with her partner of 27 years. She was retired from her job as a housing manager and had become very active in the Feminist Library and participating in small CR type groups. She was the biological parent of three children from a straight marriage and talked about how feminism had given her a parenting and other life choices a framework. Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Joyce in the social class category 'working class educated'.

20. Kate

Kate's interview took place at her home in West Yorkshire in May 2014. Kate was two weeks' shy of her 68th birthday and described herself as being in her 'probationary year' for being that age and being retired along with her civil partner Annie because, 'neither of us know how to do it.' She attended Yorkshire social group 1 as well as having a strong lesbian social family, which met regularly. Kate had previously been a separatist for some years, leaving her male children for a while but she was now reconciled with them and took an active role in grandparenting. Kate described her lesbian identity as being,'in the middle of my bones like Brighton rock. It says lesbian all the way through my bones.'

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Kate in the social class category 'working class educated'.

21. Lilia

Lilia was 61 when I interviewed her in February 2014. She identifies as lesbian and lives with Ivy in a large house in West Yorkshire. They have been in a relationship for over twenty years. At the time of the interview Lilia had recently had a bad fall causing her to be immobilised in a leg brace. She already suffers from osteoporosis and is awaiting knee replacements. Despite her physical vulnerability Lilia had recently taken on a huge organisational role for Yorkshire social group 1 following the reorganisation of the partnership that supports it. The existence of the group and the partnership was of fundamental importance to Lilia.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Lilia in the social class category 'working class educated'.

22. Louise

Louise was aged 64 at the time of the interview and was one of the participants I had previously interviewed for my MA research. Born in 1949, she is a retired building surveyor, single with no children. Louise attended Yorkshire social group 1 – she had been a long-term member of Yorkshire social group 2 and mourned the lack of political activism in her life now. As a young, married woman Louise had encountered feminism, which she saw

as a major force in her life providing a large and supportive friendship network. She attributed her lesbian identity to feminism:

> It was becoming a feminist, spending most of me time with other women and developing strong relationships with other women.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Louise in the social class category 'middle class'.

23. Michelle

Born in 1956 and aged 57 at the time of the interview, Michelle was the youngest of my participants. She was the eleventh person to be interviewed. She started attending Yorkshire social group 1 following a period of ill-health and a break up with her partner of nearly twenty years. She is the co-parent of her ex-partner's teenaged daughter and they currently share child-care. Michelle had done O and A Levels as an adult and then progressed to do a degree. She felt that she had encountered (and herself become) middle-class through meeting lesbians at social groups in her thirties. However, using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places her in the social class category 'working class educated'.

24. Minerva

I interviewed Minerva in her home at the end of May 2014. She was 68. Minerva had spent many years in the military and spoke of how 'discovery' would have cost her her job. She and her friends in the forces had pseudonyms that they used to book into clubs such as The Gateways - in fact 'Minerva' was her clubbing identity. Minerva felt liberated from her 'closet' now that she was no longer working and was thoroughly enjoying her retirement attending Yorkshire social group 1, Yorkshire walking and craft groups, as well as learning to do a range of activities including skiing and cycling.
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Minerva in the social class category 'working class educated'.

25. Nancy

I interviewed Nancy in April 2014 in her home in north London, which she shares with her civil partner. Nancy was sixty-two at the time of the interview and had recently retired from her job as CEO for a large LGBT organisation. Born and raised in America, Nancy described herself as White, British and a 'very heartfelt' Londoner. She and her partner are both feminists and Nancy had recently formed a CR group with several other women following a meeting of over a hundred London feminist group members in January 2014.
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Nancy in the social class category 'middle class'.

26. Nell

Nell was born in 1942 and was aged 71 when I interviewed her – the second eldest of the participants. She was civilly partnered to Anne and they lived in a house they bought together in North London. She describes herself as a lesbian. Nell had retired from her job in banking when she was 50 but then pursued a career as a trainer and psychotherapist until she was 64. She identified as White British but felt that her regional identity was more significant, 'basically, my identity in that sort of term is Lancashire,

Baptist, working class.' Although she was happy to claim a working class background and values she felt that her lifestyle excluded her from still describing herself as working class. Nell's attendance at grammar school had propelled her into middle class circles but without the financial wherewithal of her peers. Nell was a member of the London ballroom dancing group and also attended the London lesbian reading group as well as a lesbian walking group. Like many others, proximity to these groups restricted her choices of where to live:

> 'We said "where shall we go? We can't go further than Brighton" you know. Which'd be just the same [as north London]. So I think that's true. I think it's perhaps the location more than anything else.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Nell in the social class category 'working class educated'.

27. Nora
Nora was 60 at the time of her interview. An adoptive parent of three children, she lived alone in north London, renting out her spare room to lodgers. Nora was a teacher, still working part-time when she could get supply work. Nora talked about the difficulties she had encountered trying to adopt in the 1980s. Like Val, she had been instrumental in the setting up of the Camden Lesbian Centre and she attended London social group 1 and was part of a CR group.
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Nora in the social class category 'working class educated'.

28. Pamela
I interviewed Pamela in April 2014 the day before her 69th birthday. Pamela lived alone and was semi-retired from her job as a psychotherapist. She had been single for over thirty years following a traumatic break-up with a partner in which she lost contact with her partner's child whom she had co-parented for almost two years. Pamela talked openly about issues with alcohol and had been instrumental in setting up a lesbian group of AA. She described the sixties and seventies as 'terribly lonely' and 'desperate'. Pamela believes she has witnessed (and contributed to) a revolution in her lifetime. She attended a lesbian reading group and had attended various other groups including Daytime Dykes in the past.
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Pamela in the social class category 'working class educated'.

29. Robin
Robin was born in 1949 and was aged 64 at the time of the research. She was living in a small rented flat known as an 'under-dwelling' which was where I interviewed her. Robin identified as a separatist, 'I *love women*; I have *loving relationships* with women. They're my *total* identity.'
She had been involved in wimmin's politics for most of her life, including spending time at Greenham. Robin was retired from her job working with abuse survivors. She attended Yorkshire social group 1 and had a large lesbian community around her, which she valued enormously.
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Robin in the social class category 'working class educated'.

30. Rosie

Rosie was 64 at the time of the interview. She travelled up to London from the south coast where she moved following her retirement from her teaching job in London and the interview took place at a room in the university. Rosie has found the move to 'small town life' challenging and sometimes lonely. Along with Jacqueline she had believed in (and practiced) a kind of feminist 'duty of care' to reach out to single women and was surprised not to find the hand of friendship being extended to her in the same way. She had undertaken a significant amount of voluntary work since her move, declaring, 'I can tell you what *retirement* means to me. Retirement means I don't have a purpose in life.'

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Rosie in the social class category 'working class educated'.

31. Shirley

Shirley was born in 1948 and was aged 66 when I interviewed her in her home in a Leeds suburb in February 2014. She was still working as an adult foster carer having given up teaching after experiencing homophobia that led to a breakdown. She had an adult daughter. As well as enjoying the pub scene in Leeds, she had been attending Yorkshire social group 1 but felt that she wasn't coping well with ageing:

> I think some people seem to be coping with you know being *my age* better than *I am* in that when I was in my 40s I felt you know, just as young as ever but when I turned 50 and now I'm 66, *I feel* I'm on the downward slope. So basically I do feel now that I'm more vulnerable as a person, even though I'm still working and I've got a lot of responsibilities – family and I'm involved in the community.

Shirley was one of the few interviewees to redact some of her narrative. She also asked me to correct her grammar to 'the Queen's English'.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Shirley in the social class category 'working class educated'.

32. Sofia

Sofia was born in 1946 and was 67 at the time of the interview in March 2014. She lived alone in North London, renting out her spare room to lodgers. Sofia still worked four days a week as an adult education teacher; previously she had been an actress. Sofia identifies as a lesbian. She has a grown up daughter who lives abroad. She felt that living in London where she had a good choice of lesbian groups and activities was vital for her well-being and could not easily envisage a future in which she could not access them:

> 'I'd be *dead*. I *would* be. I, I... Well I would just be *sitting here* drinking you know, Tennents at 11.00 in the morning or something like that.'

As well as attending the London ballroom dancing group, at the time of the interview, Sofia had started to attend 'meetup' groups, which she felt had re-vitalised her social life. Since the interview she has met a new, much younger, girlfriend – a fact she shared in a recent email.

Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Sofia in the social class category 'working class educated'.

33. Susan

Susan's interview took place in Edie's home and was the shortest of all the interviews. Susan had jokily indicated that she didn't really want to be interviewed but, despite my suggestion that we didn't have to proceed, she said she wanted to go ahead. Susan was 66 at the time of the interview. She was also present at the new Lancashire social group where she had gone with Edie. Susan had left school at fifteen and worked as a machinist in a factory for most of her life. Unlike many of the other participants of working class origin she had not returned to any kind of adult or 'second chance' education. Susan was still pretty much closeted and not having access to the Internet rendered both her and Edie unaware of the many lesbian groups and events nearby. Edie had suggested that she was still in a relationship with Susan but Susan's narrative suggested otherwise. Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Susan in the social class category 'working class'.

34. Val

At the age of 73 Val was the oldest of the participants. She lived alone in a small rented flat in North London where she had lived for 36 years. Lesbian groups were a central part of her identity and she was a founder member of the Camden Lesbian Centre and London social group 2. Val felt that her parents had held lowered expectations of her as one of twin girls born into an already financially insecure family in the immediate post-war period; a legacy she felt had filtered into her self-esteem. Lesbianism and feminism had altered her life-course and she now chose to spend her time mainly with women, concluding, 'you could say feminism is my religion!'
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Val in the social class category 'working class educated'.

35. Vanessa

Vanessa was born in 1947. She was a friend and ex-partner of Jacqueline who had invited her to participate as I indicated my interest in interviewing women who did *not* attend groups. In the course of her interview however, it emerged that groups *were* and *had been* a significant part of her life! Vanessa was 66 at the time of the interview. She did not like to categorise her sexual identity although she had previously identified as a lesbian. She retired from her job as a music teacher at the age of 52. Vanessa was single and had no children. She felt that she had been discriminated against in lesbian groups for being too middle class.
Using an adaptation of McDermott's analysis places Vanessa in the social class category 'middle class'.

Postscript

There are many women whose voices are not represented in this thesis, but two in particular stand out in my mind; one would not be interviewed on the grounds that she 'had nothing to say' and one who is unknown to me, other than through a letter she sent to a group I was visiting. I have tried to include them here by adding brief notes compiled from my research diary.

Emma: January 2014

Some women's voices will never be heard. I fear that their stories may be typical of many women of their generation who are either present in LGB groups but choose not to participate in the research or are not aware of/present in LGB groups at all.

Today at Yorkshire social group 1, at the shared lunch I sat with Emma who is 75. She is deaf and finds it hard to hear and communicate in the group. She sits alone and does not share in the communal lunch. Emma only found out about the group by chance, as she enquired at her local Age UK about finding a cheap plumber.

Emma has been on her own for 46 years. No one in her life knows she's a lesbian. She used to go to a club called 'The Junction' but she hasn't attended any lesbian venues since this closed down. I found out later that this closure was in 1975…

Emma is not her real name – just one she uses to access the group. She doesn't tell anyone where she lives either and refuses offers of lifts. Emma does have a computer but she refuses to use it to receive information about the group or find LGBT events because her son set her password, she doesn't know how to change it and she's frightened that he'll see her emails.

Emma declined to be interviewed on the grounds that she 'had nothing to say'.

Update 1: May 2014
The good news is that Emma continues to attend the group and when I was there in May, she brought food to share. She still hasn't told anyone her real name though.

Update 2: April 2016
Emma continues to attend Yorkshire social group 1 and she has started to attend a few of the spin-off events too. She has disclosed to the group that she is Austrian and she came to the UK to escape the war. She had to marry to stay in the country. She has made small concessions to friendship such as accepting a lift home when it is dark. However, she still won't receive emails from the group and relies on someone to print out information for her. She still won't come out because she feels that it would upset her children too much. Emma is now 78.

The woman from Ipswich: London social group 1, May 2014.
This group have a tradition of a formal meeting after lunch where correspondence to the group is read out, and minutes, reluctantly taken. This month's 'correspondence' to the group is a hand-written letter with a limp five-pound note enclosed. It is from a woman in Ipswich, an amputee, she says, so she cannot travel the 80 odd miles to where the group meets in central London and she has no computer skills so she cannot access the group's website or information about nearer, more accessible groups. She encloses the five pounds in the hope that the group will send her its newsletter.

Despite the laborious taking of notes in the group, there is no newsletter and the women in the group argue over who will respond to the woman's request and return her money. One woman calls out that she should access IT courses. Eventually the person chairing the meeting takes the letter and the money and stuffs it angrily into her pocket. The meeting carries on.