A study of narrative identity in the life stories of lesbians aged 60-70 years old

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of East London for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology.

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June 2015

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Abstract

This study examines the narrative identity construction of six self-identified lesbians born between 1945 and1950. This generation of women who are now in their sixties and seventies have lived through immense social change including the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the gay rights movement, civil partnership and gay marriage. They are the first generation to have the opportunity to live openly as lesbians. This study is interested in the impact of such significant social change on their identity construction. The study used semi-structured in-depth interviews to ask six participants how they had experienced living with a lesbian identity. All participants were white and UK born. All were educated to at least degree level and all were in or retired from professional employment. Data was analysed using narrative method grounded in a social constructionist epistemology.

Four themes emerged:

1) Participants reported feeling marginalised as children, and unable or unwilling to fulfil the life trajectory expected of them;

2) Finding a community, usually a feminist or lesbian group enabled the development of a positive lesbian identity;

3) Lesbian identity was constructed as more than a sexual identity, rather as a political identity and a way of life;

4) Participants constructed an overall life-narrative of redemption, a narrative which progressed from struggle to satisfaction.

The study examines the particular discourses used in identity construction. It is argued that participants are influenced by inversion model, feminist, queer and redemptive narrative discourses. The benefits of using a social constructionist approach for LGBT research are discussed in order to offer a critique of psychology's role in constructing subjects as well as to gain a fuller picture of participants' social and political worlds. The implications of this study's findings for counselling psychology are discussed.

Acknowledgements

Chapter 1: Introduction

My own coming out as a lesbian twenty years ago was facilitated by studying queer theory as an undergraduate. Queer theory changed my life; it offered me a movement which was radical, angry and inclusive; it challenged homophobia and the privileging of heterosexuality in new ways. Queer redefined identities as unstable and fluid and so opened up new possibilities for the construction of a queer/lesbian identity. I don't know how I would have constructed my identity without a queer framework; it is so much a part of my narrative. As it is so embedded in my own story, it will undoubtedly be the lens through which I perceive and present this study. That I was fortunate enough to have access to such a lesbian affirmative discourse led me to consider those who did not: how did they see themselves? How have they constructed an identity that they could live in? How was an affirmative identity created?

To answer these questions I chose to look at a cohort of lesbians that lived through a period of immense social change. Born between 1945 and 1950 the participants in this study were young women around the time of the decriminalisation of homosexuality, second wave feminism and the gay liberation movement. I am interested in how social attitudes impact on sense of self and identity. I wanted to know how these social changes had impacted on their lesbian identity; how did their sense of themselves change with societal changes. How did their behaviour and identity change accordingly?

This study asks how lesbians aged between 60 and 70 years old are constructing their narrative identities in the telling of their life stories. Examining the stories that participants tell about their lives has enabled me to understand how they construct and give meaning to their identity and to understand what has been difficult, as well as what has been helpful in living with a lesbian identity.

This study is important for a number of reasons. An ageing population means that there are an estimated one million Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people over 55 years old living in the UK (Doward, 2011). This cohort of ageing LGB people is different from previous generations; they belong to the 'liberation generation', those who fought for gay and women's rights. This generation of older lesbians are less likely – now – to be affected by the stigma and silence around sexual minorities associated with previous generations.

However, though this generation is more likely to be open about their sexuality. Recent research by Stonewall (2011) found that lesbians, gays and bisexuals over the age of 55 years are more vulnerable to social isolation than their heterosexual counterparts. They are more likely to be single and more likely to live alone. 41% of LGBT people live alone compared to 28% of heterosexuals. They are less likely to have children. A quarter of gay and bisexual men and half of lesbians and bisexual women have children compared to almost nine out of ten heterosexuals. They are less likely to see biological family members on a regular basis. Less than a quarter of LGBT people see their family at least once per week compared to half of heterosexuals. These results indicate that there are increased levels of social isolation among older LGBT people.

The research also indicates that older lesbian, gay and bisexual people are more likely to have poorer mental health than heterosexuals of the same age. They are more likely to drink alcohol more often, more likely to take drugs, more likely to have a history of mental ill health and have more concerns about their future mental health. Lesbians and bisexual women are more likely to have ever been diagnosed with depression and anxiety (Stonewall, 2011). It is now widely acknowledged that higher levels of poor mental health among LGBT populations are related to the stress of living with a stigmatised identity in a heterosexist society (BPS, 2012). So with older lesbians more at risk of physical, mental and social problems than heterosexuals of the same age, they continue to be a vulnerable population despite the gains of the last few decades.

However, services for older LGBT communities don't seem to reflect this with many areas providing little or nothing in the way of services. While bigger cities like London offer social groups and befriending services for older LGBT populations (http://openingdoorslondon.org.uk), Lindsay River, convenor of the older LGBT information website www.ageofdiversity.org, notes that services for the older LGBT community are 'very patchy, you might live somewhere where there is nothing for you. It's a bit of a postcode lottery' (www.ageuk.org.uk).

As counselling psychologists who may be working with older lesbians we need to have an understanding of the factors which may influence lesbian identity construction. There is

evidence that psychologists receive insufficient training to prepare them to work with LGBT populations (Shaw et al., 2008; Moon, 2008) and some studies show evidence of poor and harmful practice (Bartlett et al., 2009). At time of writing, this study is the only thesis on identity construction among older lesbians within the discipline of counselling psychology. This study adds to the sparse body of research on older lesbians, in particular the lives and values of the 'liberation generation' of older lesbians. I argue that with its emphasis on the social and political context of peoples' lives, counselling psychology is well placed to develop lesbian affirmative practice.

This study highlights the importance of community for participants and makes suggestions for counselling psychologists to examine an individual's relationship to society particularly in their work with sexual and gender minorities. This study also highlights participants' perceptions of their lesbian identity as fluid, and as a choice based on political values and beliefs. These are important implications for counselling psychologists when much psychological research on sexuality has been steeped in an essentialist framework. I argue that counselling psychology, with its emphasis on reflective practice and personal therapy throughout training, means that we are well placed to reflect on our own sexuality and relationship expectations to better understand our clients' experiences.

Finally, this study argues that a post-positivist framework neglects the social, historical, and political context of lesbian lives and therefore produces data of limited range. Using a social constructionist framework I examine how medical and psychological discourses have historically shaped the lesbian subject. I use queer theory to argue that psychology today supports dominant heteronormative discourses to define what a 'good and healthy' lesbian is. Finally, I recommend that future psychological research on sexual minority populations needs to adopt a social constructionist approach to account for the social, historical and political context of participants' lives and to adopt a critical approach to how psychological research constructs its subjects.

Chapter 2: Literature review

1 Introduction

'A lesbian is a female who expresses romantic or sexual attraction to other females, whether primarily or exclusively, or a female who self-identifies as lesbian.' (Wikipedia accessed 18/6/14).

'I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range - throughout each woman's life history of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman' (Rich, 1980, p.648).

'"Lesbian" is a historical construction of comparatively recent date and… there is no eternal lesbian essence outside the frame of cultural change and historical determination' (Fuss, 1991, p.2).

The three quotes above demonstrate that there are different discourses on what it means to be a lesbian. The first definition by Wikipedia, defines the adoption of a lesbian identity as associated with certain behaviour and feelings; attraction and /or sex with another woman. While in the second definition Rich (1980) equates a lesbian identity with being 'woman identified', for Rich, sex and /or attraction between women is *not* a prerequisite to adopting a lesbian identity. There are differences then between "doing" behaviours associated with lesbianism and "being" a lesbian (Jenness, 1992). So as such, a lesbian identity can be claimed without the claimant ever having had any sexual activity with another woman, likewise, a woman can engage exclusively in same–sex sexual activity but not consider herself as having a lesbian identity. That behaviour and desire are not necessarily correlated with identity is an issue raised by queer theorists who argue that identity categories are instruments of oppressive regulatory regimes which reaffirm heterosexuality as natural and dominant (Butler, 1990). Fuss (1991), in the final quote, also takes a queer/social constructionist perspective in situating lesbian identity as constructed and determined according to a culture and society at a particular time.

The three quotes chosen above illustrate some of the key issues within social science research on the study of lesbian identity: What is a lesbian? How is she defined? Is someone born a

lesbian? Is the construct 'lesbian' a product of a particular time and place?

In agreement with Fuss's (1991) position this study takes a social constructionist epistemological position, so central to my argument is the idea that the word 'lesbian' is a construct whose meaning changes according to time, place and person. This study postulates that participants' identities and stories will be shaped by the available discourses on the meaning of the term 'lesbian'. As Richardson (1981) states: 'The process whereby a woman identifies as a lesbian or not, and (if she does), the meaning and significance such an identification will have for her, will be influenced by the wider social meanings ascribed to lesbianism that she encounters as well as the specific response of significant others to this information' (p.112). In line with this, the current study highlights the influence of the social, historical and political context of the participants' lives on their narrative identities.

This chapter is divided into four sections. In the first section 'discourses about lesbians' I discuss two areas of lesbian history which have been influential in the construction of participants' identities:

In 1.1 I discuss the construction of the sexual invert by nineteenth century sexologists. In 1.2 I discuss the influence of lesbian feminism on reconstructing lesbian identity in the 1970s.

In the second section I critically discuss lesbian identity research within psychology.
In 2.1 I outline some of the stage models of lesbian identity development proposed by psychologists.
In 2.2 I critically discuss four post positivist studies on lesbian identity development.
In 2.3 I examine critical/constructionist lesbian identity research and finally in
2.4 I discuss the work of Celia Kitzinger.

The third section 'lesbians in the therapy room' discusses lesbians' often problematic history and relationship with psychologists.

The fourth and final section in this chapter discusses this study's contribution to counselling psychology.

As I will argue in subsequent chapters, psychology has not always represented lesbians and their interests well (Kitzinger, 1987; Hearty, 2008; Faderman, 1981). In this study I wish to give priority to lesbian voices as far as possible. I address this in the following section 'discourses about lesbians' where I use primarily the writings of lesbian, gay and queer academics to outline some of the ideas and discourses discussed within lesbian communities and wider society.

2 Discourses about lesbians

2.1 The sexologists

Prior to 1970 medicine and the social sciences viewed homosexuality as an illness (Kitzinger, 1987; Faderman, 1991). The medical profession constructed the prototype lesbian in the 19th century when lesbianism was first categorised by sexologists. In 1864, Ulrich, a German sexologist (cited by Healy, 1996), published a pamphlet discussing the idea of a third sex: a male soul trapped in a female body for lesbians, and a female soul trapped in a male body for gay men.

In a continuation of Ulrich's work, another German sexologist, Krafft-Ebing (1886, cited by Newton, 1984) categorised lesbians into four increasingly deviant and masculine types. He also subscribes to the 'congenitally masculine lesbian': 'even in her earliest childhood she preferred playing at soldiers and other boys games: she was bold and tomboyish and even tried to excel her little companions of the other sex' (p.17, cited by Newton, 1984).

In 1897, two British physicians, Havelock Ellis and John Addington-Symonds, published the first English medical textbook on homosexuality, called 'Sexual Inversion'. Ellis and Addington-Symonds (1897) defined lesbians as 'sexual inverts': 'the chief characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity' (p.94). The invert's habits, according to Ellis and Addington-Symonds (1897), include 'a pronounced taste for smoking, but there is also a dislike and sometimes incapacity for needlework and other domestic occupations, while there is often a capacity for athletics' (p.97).

In confounding gender identity and sexual preference, Ellis and Addington-Symonds (1897) arguably construct the first lesbian stereotype of the deep voiced, muscular, invert. As Healy

(1996) put it, 'the sick, sad, lesbian who was doomed to life as a cross-dressing, cigar smoking, pseudo man is born' (p.20).

Newton (1984) notes that the sexologists are conspicuously silent on the topic of feminine female inverts. They are excluded because they do not fit the favoured paradigms of the masculine female invert. She argues that the sexologists had to construct the lesbian as masculine, because in 19th century Europe, women were not deemed to be sexual beings: the only way to infuse the female invert with lust and passion was to make her masculine.

Ellis and Addington-Symonds' (1897) invert was given further mileage when novelist Radclyffe Hall published 'The Well of Loneliness' in 1928. Hall (1992/1928) based her main character Stephen Gordon, on Ellis and Addington-Symonds's (1897) invert. The novel traces the tragic story of Stephen's wretched life of isolation and rejection as a female invert. 'The Well of Loneliness' author, herself a 'tie wearing lesbian' (Newton, 1984, p.9), presents the novel as a plea for acceptance. The book closes with the words: 'Give us also the right to our existence!' (p.447).

Nearly three decades later the lesbian journal 'The Ladder' which started in 1956, was still pleading for acceptance. The publication, produced by lesbians, shows the greatest respect for the 'expert' sexologists and the institutions which produced them. On the inside cover of the magazine it lists its goals:

'The education of the variant with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make adjustments to society in all its civil and economic implications… Participation in research projects by duly authorised and responsible psychologists, sociologists and other such experts directed towards further knowledge of the homosexual.' ('The Ladder', 1956 cited by Faderman, 1981, p.364).

If the 'The Ladder' was a reliable marker of lesbians' self–image in 1950s Britain, then it seems that, many lesbians internalised the 'variant' and 'deviant' invert constructed by the sexologists, perceiving themselves as aberrations of nature, people who could at best apologise and try to fit into society.

Newton (1984) argued that the invert or 'mythic mannish lesbian' in 'The Well of Loneliness' had meaning for lesbians firstly because the book confronts the stigma of lesbianism that most lesbians have had to live with, and second that Stephen Gordon articulates a gender identity with which an important minority of lesbians actively identify. I will argue in subsequent chapters that the discourse of the invert or 'mythic mannish lesbian' (Newton, 1984) looms large in the consciousness of participants I interview as well as some in the psychology profession.

2.2 Lesbian feminists

From the 1950s onwards understandings of homosexuality began to shift from being largely medical and pathological to being seen increasingly as social and political constructs (Plummer, 1992). Particularly influential was sociologist Mary McIntosh's 1968 paper 'The Homosexual Role' in which she argued that homosexuality was a social role rather than a medical condition. Drawing on anthropology and history, she argued that 'the homosexual role' did not exist in all societies and that the role only emerged in England towards the end of the seventeenth century. McIntosh (1968) argued that the construction of homosexuality as a condition operated as a form of social control; 'it helps to provide a clear cut, publicised and recognisable threshold between permissible and impermissible behaviour. This means that people cannot so easily drift into deviant behaviour' (p.183). For McIntosh (1968), the homosexual role served to 'keep the bulk of society pure in rather the same way that the similar treatment of some kinds of criminals helps to keep the rest of society law abiding (p.184).In asserting that the 'conception of homosexuality as a condition is, in itself, a possible object of study' (p.183), in describing homosexuality as a function of social control and concluding that homosexuality is a culturally and historically specific configuration, McIntosh (1968) was an early pioneer in social constructionist approaches to sexuality.

At around the same time the late 1960s and early 1970s saw landmark events in gay rights movements. The Stonewall riots in New York in 1969 and the start of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in London in 1970 produced a tremendous shift in attitudes towards, and the attitudinal choices available for gays and lesbians. Plummer (1995) writes that 'whereas before it [homosexuality] had been largely apologetic, it was now "glad to be gay"; whereas

before it had been secretive, now it was "coming out" Homosexuality drastically increased in visibility, and the language surrounding it began to shift from one of disease to one of politics and rights' (p.90). Partly as a result of these social and political changes, homosexuality officially stopped being defined as an illness in 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association declassified its status as a mental disorder.

For lesbians, this move from the status of pathology (Kitzinger, 1987) to sexual minority was helped by the rise of second-wave feminism (Nestle, 1987; Roof, 1998). The feminist movement which began in the late 1960s produced some ground-breaking critiques of women's place in society and had a profound impact on many lesbians. Faderman (1981) claimed that with the rise of second-wave feminism a new type of lesbian emerged: women who became feminists and then chose to become lesbians because of their feminism. Feminism offered lesbians a community (Faderman, 1981), a political framework, and for many, transformed self-esteem and identity (Wilton, 1995). As MacCowan put it; 'lesbian feminism defined lesbians as the only healthy women in a sick society, and lesbianism as an act of resistance to male domination' (MacCowan, 1992, p.308).

However, the feminist movement in the 1970s was a broad church with many different and overlapping concerns (Zimmerman, 1997) and many in the feminist movement were keen to distance themselves from lesbians. Betty Friedan, in her influential second wave feminist book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), argued that mainstream feminism's association with lesbians could prevent them from achieving serious political change. Friedan famously described the lesbian feminist movement as the 'lavender menace', a term later reclaimed by a lesbian feminist group.

Within the many factions of second wave feminism perhaps what best distinguishes lesbian feminism from other strands of feminism is the notion of the 'political lesbian'. In 1979 the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group published their paper 'Political Lesbianism: The case against heterosexuality'. They argued that serious feminists have no choice but to abandon heterosexuality. They described a political lesbian as 'woman identified woman who does not fuck men. [political lesbianism is] not compulsory sexual activity with a woman' (cited by Wilton, 1995, p. 93).

Lesbian feminism, then, postulates that lesbianism is more than a sexual behaviour or lifestyle, it has political implications: the oppression of women is based fundamentally upon their position in the patriarchal family and heterosexual relationships are structurally unequal, therefore women who opt out of the system (i.e. lesbians) are revolutionary. As patriarchy is rooted in misogyny, women who choose to love women are undermining the fundamental assumptions of society (Zimmerman, 1997). If women were lesbians when they were 'women identified women' then, the idea of lesbianism as simply a sexual preference was questionable. Lesbianism became a political stance against the patriarchy. Women were calling themselves political lesbians without having had any sexual contact with another woman (Faderman, 1981).

This shift in the construction of lesbian identity, from a sexual to a political identity, brought with it some conflict and confusion. Some lesbians argued that lesbian feminists and political lesbians were appropriating and changing the very meaning of the term 'lesbian'. Political lesbians were criticised for 'desexualising' lesbianism. As their concern was with a rejection of the hetero- patriarchy rather than sexual attraction to women, this was seen as devaluing to lesbianism as a positive erotic choice. The debate was further intensified when some feminists constructed lesbian sex as virtuous. One critique viewed heterosexual sex as violence against women. Penetration was viewed as an act of violence, mastery and humiliation against women. In this demonisation of penetration, lesbian sex was glorified *only* as long as penetration was absent (Wilton, 1995). 'What followed,' writes Wilton (1995), 'was a whole catalogue of sexual behaviours defined as essentially male…and hence not really lesbian' (p.100).

As a result, lesbian feminists were criticised for not only policing lesbian desires and sexual practices but also defining who the 'right type' of lesbian was (Healey, 1996). Butch lesbians definitely were not: they were seen as 'a heterosexist imitation of the oppressive gender roles of the patriarchy' (Roof, 1998, p.27). Butches were seen as playing at being men, aping male power and perpetuating the old sexologists' myths of the 'pseudo male' (Healy, 1996). Likewise, femmes were equally frowned upon as women who 'play with notions of the worst sort of female weakness' (Healy, 1996, p.25).With lesbianism being reconstructed as a political rather than a sexual practice, with certain sexual practices being constructed as 'anti-lesbian', and with some lesbians being excluded as 'not the right type of lesbian', some felt

that the liberators were becoming the oppressors (Healy, 1996).

The 1980s saw a backlash against what some considered as the policing of certain lesbian sexual practices. In what has been described as the 'sex wars' (Healey, 1996) feminists were broadly divided into those who held that sexuality in a patriarchal society involved danger: that sexual practices perpetuated violence against women, and in the other camp, those for whom sexuality was the potentially liberating exchange of pleasure between consenting partners (Ferguson, 1984). Lesbian feminist Pat Califia (1996) was firmly in the latter camp, arguing that she had felt oppressed and isolated by feminists because of her preference for sadomasochistic sexual practices. She accused feminists of being 'like Victorian missionaries in Polynesia, they insist on interpreting the sexual behaviour of other people according to their own value systems' (p.231) Sadomasochism *is*, she insisted, congruent with feminism.

Califia (1996) highlighted one the problems of basing politics on identity; that gender of sexual partner, or 'object choice' (Spargo, 1999), is not the crucial factor in perception of sexuality for everyone. It excluded groups which defined sexuality through activities and pleasures rather than gender of sexual partner. Increasingly in the 1980's AIDS crisis, emphasis was placed on sexual practices rather than identity; what you did became more important than what you were (Spargo, 1999).

For lesbians, the AIDS crisis and the debates around safer sex created a context for them to talk about sex. With this new emphasis that lesbianism is after all about sex, came a number of lesbian sex manuals, as well as a plethora of pornography and erotic fiction for lesbians and by lesbians. Richardson (1992) talked about how this move to the celebration of lesbian sex came not only from the alleged desexualisation of lesbianism, but also as a response to the emphasis on the dangers of sexuality for women within feminist discourses

The 1980s saw not only the 'pro-pleasure' (Cameron & Fraser, 1996) lesbians expressing discontent with lesbian feminism but working class and non-white lesbians wrote damning critiques on the intersections of race and class with lesbian feminism and deemed it oppressive, only voicing the needs of certain privileged lesbians (Lorde, 1984; Nestle, 1987). It seemed that by subsuming sexuality, race and other identities under gender, lesbian

feminists problematised the notion of identity (Plummer and Stein, 1994).

Malinowitz (1996) described the two sides of identity politics: 'there are two ways of viewing "identity": as something that can form community and lead to liberatory social change, on the one hand and, on the other, as a construction so particularised and idiosyncratically realised that the notion of "group identity" becomes so diminished to the level of a wistful fiction' (p.264).

The lesbian feminist movement was both sides of the coin that Malinowitz (1996) described: both a revolutionary force for positive change, bringing new ways of thinking about women's position in society as well as lasting social and political changes. However, for others, among them sadomasochistic, butch, femme, bisexual, transgender, working class, and non- white lesbians, lesbian feminism felt dogmatic, excluding and oppressive.

It was in the early 1990s, in this context of dissatisfaction with identity politics and with the media representation of AIDS leading to a homophobic climate, that queer theory and activism emerged (Spargo, 1999). Queer activism mobilised to resist homophobia in radical new ways, rather than aiming for tolerance and assimilation, queer aimed to agitate and transgress. Queer insisted on inclusion; it was anti-separatist, anti-gender, anti-feminist, anti-gay and anti-lesbian, identity categories were considered oppressive, a rejection of sexism, racism and homophobia were priority (Hodges, 2008).

3 Lesbian Research

3.1 Stage Models in Psychology

This sections moves on to examine research on lesbians within the social sciences. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s a number of psychologists and sociologists developed stage model theories of lesbian identity development. (Cass, 1979/1984; Chapman and Brannock, 1987; Cox and Gallois, 1996; Faderman, 1984; McCarn and Fassinger, 1996; Sophie, 1986).

Stage models suggested a linear path to lesbian identity development. Typical is Cass's (1979) model proposing the following six stages of identity development:

Stage 1) is characterised by *Identity confusion* - the individual may experience first awareness of thoughts, feelings and behaviour which may be characterised as homosexual. Inner turmoil and feelings of alienation characterise this stage.

Stage 2) *Identity comparison* - characterised by the individual's increasing awareness of their difference. Some respond positively to difference and accept homosexuality; others find the idea of being homosexual undesirable and try to explain away their feelings and behaviours. Some at this stage stop any behaviour that is considered homosexual; if they are unable to do so mental health can be at risk.

Stage 3) *Identity tolerance* - a sense of alienation is heightened and other sexual minorities are sought out. Crucial to this stage is a positive encounter with other lesbian gay or bisexuals.

Stage 4) *Identity acceptance* - characterised by increased contact with other sexual minorities and LGB subculture. The incongruence between how the self is viewed and how it is perceived that others view the self is heightened.

Stage 5) *Identity pride* - near complete self-acceptance and an awareness of how homosexuals are rejected by mainstream society, often leading to activism.

Stage 6) *Identity synthesis* - the 'them and us' philosophy where all heterosexuals were viewed negatively and all homosexuals positively no longer becomes the case, homosexual identity is integrated with other aspects of identity (Cass, 1979).

Stage models were developed as a tool for psychologists and other health care professionals to better understand and help sexual minorities (Degges-White et al., 2000). Supporters of the models argue that they can help counselling psychologists in their work with lesbian and gay clients because they seek to predict, articulate and normalise common experiences in managing a stigmatised identity (McCarn and Fassinger, 1996). The principles underpinning stage models are that lesbians pass through similar stages in their identity development and arrive at a particular end point of 'synthesis' (Cass, 1979), or 'integration' (Sophie, 1986).

More recently, some researchers have argued that stage models are out dated and inadequate. Cass's model particularly, has been criticised for its minimisation of the political context of developing a lesbian identity (Cox & Gallois, 1996; Landridge, 2008).

Eliason and Schope (2007) argue that stage models ignore cultural differences. They argue that other factors such as race, ethnicity, religion and age will produce different concepts of a gay or lesbian identity. Stage models have also been criticised for failing to account for bisexuality (Langdridge, 2008) and neglecting the socio-historical context in which an individual begins to explore their identity (Degges-White et al., 2000).

Eliason and Schope (2007) note the underlying assumptions of stage models: that most theorists assume that one either is or is not gay or lesbian, so they 'embrace the argument through an essentialist lens, the question for them is the individual's recognition of one's own sexuality and the building of a stable sexual identity based on one's innate physical or emotional attractions' (p.6).

In a yet more radical critique of stage models, Kitzinger (1987) questioned their ideological basis. She argued that stage models are framed in a liberal humanistic ideology which results in 'directing the lesbian's attention away from the outer world of oppression and offering her a satisfying inner world as a substitute, psychology offers salvation through individual change rather than through system change. The individual is responsible for the amelioration of her situation and is urged to find individual solutions to her problems' (p.56).

It may be argued that stage models are another example of the social sciences constructing the subjects they investigate. It is helpful here to consider what Giddens (1990) refers to as modernism's 'expert systems' (p.22). He argued that modernism's social institutions were developed and organised through systems of professional expertise and crucially, that there is a reflexive relationship between knowledge produced within the social sciences and the social world:

'*Sociological knowledge spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process*' (p.15 author's italics).

In considering stage models as examples of Giddens's (1990) expert knowledge systems, they can be seen as discourses situated in a particular period: a modernist era in which there was greater faith in expert systems compared to the post-modern era which is characterised by disillusion with grand narratives. Secondly, in which the knowledge produced about a population, in turn constructs narratives which then influence and shape that population. In

this way stage models affirm the classic lesbian and gay coming out narrative which Plummer (1995) describes as 'suffering, surviving and surpassing'. The stage models therefore could be seen to provide a narrative not only for the healthcare professionals that they were designed to assist, but also they provide a blueprint for lesbian and gay themselves in constructing their own coming out story.

3.2 Post-positivist research

In this section I examine four qualitative psychology pieces of research on lesbian identity development to highlight how a lack of engagement with the social and political context of the participants lives means that they are limited in what they can tell us about lesbian identity.

Fingerhut et al. (2005) divides their 116 lesbian subjects into four categories of relating to heterosexual society. Their findings suggest that lesbians with a greater identification with heterosexual society were correlated with lower levels of discrimination, and conversely, lesbians with less contact with heterosexual society reported higher levels of discrimination. Fingerhut et al. (2005) neglected to mention the social and political context which would account for the privileging of the assimilated lesbian within heterosexual society. It is helpful here to consider Duggan's (2002) concept of 'homonormativity'. Duggan (2002) described homonormativity as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilised constituency' (p.179). A queer reading of Fingerhut et al.'s (2005) findings may be that heterosexual society maintains and bolsters its own power by welcoming the 'homonormative' or assimilated lesbians that do not challenge heterosexual privilege, that minimise the importance of being 'other', and that do not resist heterosexism and homophobia by forming political groups with other lesbians. While the assimilated lesbian is welcomed for embracing heteronormative values and therefore helping maintain heterosexual power and privilege, other lesbians who are likely to be more challenging to heterosexual dominance are punished through more overt forms of discrimination.

In the discussion of their findings, Fingerhut et al. (2005) neglect to consider obvious cultural differences in appearances between 'assimilationist' and lesbian identified women:

that assimilated lesbians who by definition want to 'emphasise similarities between her and heterosexuals' are likely to want to 'look heterosexual' and adapt a straight dress code and therefore pass as heterosexuals. By contrast a lesbian identified woman is less likely to conform to a heteronormative appearance which is more likely to 'out' her as a lesbian and thus leave her more vulnerable to discrimination.

Another study of lesbian 'subtypes' by Diamond (2005) examined the change in sexual identity over an eight year period. Diamond (2005) interviewed 79 non-heterosexual women whom she divided into three groups; 'stable lesbian identity', 'fluid lesbian identity' and 'stable non-lesbian identity'. Diamond (2005) concluded that her study 'demonstrates the inadequacy of straightforward lesbian/bisexual categories for modelling variability in sexual minority women's long-term identity development' (p.125). She even suggests that 'in light of such findings one might argue for an end to sexual categorisation altogether' (p.125).

Surprisingly, however, despite a number of her participants identifying as 'queer' (p.122), she neglects to mention queer theory. Yet queer theory with its insistence on identity as multiple, fluid and fragmented - and its likely influence on her participants - is integral, yet not defined as such, to her research.

A queer approach to the studies by Diamond (2005) and Fingerhut et al. (2005) might question their need to categorise lesbian sexuality. I am reminded of Kraft-Ebbing's (1886, cited by Newton, 1984), categorisation of lesbians into four increasingly deviant and masculine types. The nineteenth century sexologists' obsession with endless measurement to classify and define people into categories led to the construction and pathologisation of the 'lesbian'. Yet it seems that twenty-first century researchers are continuing to demonstrate a failure to consider what Cerulo (1997) referred to as 'the role of power in the classification process' (p.391).

Bringaze and White's (2001) North American study looked at factors contributing to the development of 'a positive lesbian identity' (p.162). They choose to survey 'only leaders and role models in the lesbian community because it is assumed that they have already successfully moved through the coming out process and are therefore well–adjusted' (p.165). Bringaze and White's (2001) study aimed to identify which resources help lesbians to

develop 'positive' identities. However, their underlying assumptions warrant closer inspection. Bringaze and White (2001) assume there is such a thing as a 'positive' lesbian identity which is seen in lesbian community leaders. Their definition of a good lesbian seemed to be in accordance with heteronormative ideals, such as…: 'the participants were listed in the gay and lesbian handbook (1995)… many of the women in this study are recognised leaders of their gay and lesbian movement. They are the women who have lobbied for equal rights and hate crimes legislation, fought for ridding the military of the "don't ask don't tell policy"' (p.165). While the lesbian leaders are to be commended on their efforts, it is notable that Bringaze and White (2001) did not engage with the more radical queer groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation, which formed in North America in the 1990s largely in response to the Reagan administration's silence on the North American AIDS crisis. Bringaze and White (2001) choose to uphold the mostly white, middle class, liberal and educated lesbians as those with a 'positive' identity, thus shaping according to dominant heteronormative values, what makes a 'good lesbian'.

Parks (1999) examined lesbian identity development across generations. Parks (1999) states the 'self-identification and disclosure of a lesbian identity are two developmental events often associated with a 'healthy' self-acceptance. It seems that 20 years on from Cass's (1979) stage development model and the many discussions around its shortcomings (Langdridge, 2008; Kitzinger, 1987; Cox and Galois, 1996; Degges-White, 2000), Parks (1999) is using a similar framework to show there is a 'good' pathway to becoming a lesbian. Through doing this, psychological research insists on a single linear developmental path to become a 'well-adjusted lesbian'. This is reductive and simplistic in the face of what De Lauretis (1994) refers to as the 'dazzling idiosyncrasy of sexual identity' (p.xii). De Lauretis (1994) goes on to warn against 'reducing lesbian subjectivity to a mere matter of sexual behaviour or sexual acts as if these could be isolated from all other aspects, qualities, social determinates and achievements that make up each human being as a complex individual and unique contributor to his or her culture' (p.xiii).

In conclusion, what is most striking about the post-positivist research I have discussed is what is absent. Fingerhut et al (2005) study lacks a discussion of why the assimilated lesbian would be favoured in heterosexual society. Diamond's (2005) study has no discussion of queer theory and its likely impact on participants' identities, and there is no discussion of

power in the process of categorisation and its historical meaning. In Bringaze and White (2000) and Parks (1999) study there is an absence of discussion of power in the process of how and by whom 'healthy, well-adjusted lesbian' is defined. In ignoring heterosexism, power, politics, history and culture and the position they occupy in their participants lives and identities, these researchers offer a one-dimensional decontextualized snap shot of lesbian life and identity which tells us very little about who the participants are.

3.3 Critical/constructionist research on lesbian identity

This section discusses two qualitative studies on lesbian identity and proposes that these studies offer a richer, more detailed account of lesbian lives in their social context. Traies (2014), PhD thesis examined the lives and experiences of over 400 British lesbians over 60. In one of the largest studies of its kind, she gathered data, using a mixed methods design of questionnaire and interview. She found wide variation in how participants constructed their lesbian identity. She also reports that their 'developmental narratives and cultural contexts that fostered the development of their lesbian identities were equally diverse' (p.228). She found that while most participants had their first sexual relationship with a woman in their teens and 20s, for others it was in their 30s, 40s, and 50s and for a few, over 60.

Traies (2014) reports that most of her participants regarded their sexual orientation as a matter of choice and as potentially fluid: they reported that they chose one path over another. She found that early adoption of a lesbian identity was associated with gender non-conformity in childhood and adolescence. However, she also noted that for many of her participants, opposite-sex attraction and relationships as well as heterosexual marriage and motherhood were part of many of their developmental histories. Traies (2014) notes the early difficulties her participants had in making sense of their developing sexuality due to absence of available alternative discourses. When they did become aware of same sex desire, the awareness was inevitably accompanied by the sense that it was 'wrong'.

While there are some overlaps between the current study and Traies (2014) study there are also major differences. Traies (2014) bases her study in an oral history framework, she used

primarily an anonymous online questionnaire asking questions on identity, social life, family relationship, marriage, children, sexual relationships, work, money and health. In addition she did face to face interviews with 34 participants. Her overall research questions ask; how invisible are lesbians? Do they conform to the stereotype of old sad and alone? Is there a personal history specific in lesbians (as opposed to LGBT)? Do older lesbians have anything in common other than a shared sexual orientation? In contrast my study uses in depth interviewing on just six participants with a particular focus on lesbian identity. I use a cohort with a narrower age range of 60-65 years compared to Traies (2014) sample which were aged 60 upwards.

Read (2009) examined the life stories of American lesbians born between 1940 and 1965. She used data from a number of studies conducted between 1985 and 2004. She analysed her narrative data according to three areas: personal, social and political. In the personal realm, Read (2009) identified a number of progressive themes: first, lack of lesbian role models leading to denial of feelings towards other women; second, non-acceptance and dealing with shame, stigma and self-doubt. Participants spoke of the difficulty of acknowledging their attraction to other women given the negative cultural myths and stereotypes about lesbians at the time. Third, acceptance: coming out to oneself though not necessarily to others, and finally, affirmation-celebrating sexuality.

Within the social world, Read (2009) noted that participants valued 'family of choice'. Participants of this generation had often experienced stigma from their family of origin and valued other allegiances and friendships in their lives. Read (2009) also noted that many of her subjects had been politically active in multiple realms, and this political activism was also linked to the development of a lesbian community. Read (2009) writes that 'fundamental to the political life world of baby boom lesbians was the explicit construction of a lesbian community. It was in the community that the women could practice a lesbian identity in the service of social action and change' (p.366).

Read's (2009) research is similar to the present study; it uses a narrative methodology and interviews with the 'baby boomer generation' of lesbians. However, her claim of a homogenous sample of 'midlife lesbians' is questionable. She used research gathered over a 20-year period: 1985-2004. Over that time there were many social changes: from the

installation to the repeal of section 28, to changes in LGBT adoption laws and the introduction of the civil partnership bill (Butler et al., 2010). It can be argued that society was very different for lesbians interviewed in 1985 compared to 2004. Read (2009) states that her participants were born between 1940 and 1965. This leaves not only a potential 25 year age gap but a 20 year period over when the interviews may have taken place.

Both Traies's (2014) and Read's (2009) work offers richer, more detailed view of lesbian life and experience compared to post- positivist studies. However, most importantly, both these studies situate the participant in their social context and acknowledge its crucial role in the development of a lesbian identity. There is a scarcity of qualitative research on older lesbians (Traies, 2014) the current study aims to address the need for further research which can offer a socio-political perspective on the lives of older lesbians.

3.4 Celia Kitzinger and lesbian research

Celia Kitzinger's work is central to the field of lesbian psychology. Kitzinger's (1987) thesis 'The social construction of lesbianism' examines how the discipline of psychology has shaped and constructed the lesbian subject for its own self-serving purposes. In this radical study, she used Q sort methodology to examine 41 participants' accounts of their lesbian identity. Using a social constructionist framework she encouraged a 'move away from the conceptualisation of the account as derived from the psychology of individual lesbians and suggests that the origins might be more readily located in their sociocultural and political contexts' (p.90).

From a factor analysis of 61 Q sort items, Kitzinger identified five different accounts of lesbianism: first, the individual personal fulfilment account, women had previously been married and emphasised the positive effect of transitioning to lesbianism. Second, 'The person not the gender' (p.102) account in which the participants talked about how they just happened to have fallen in love with a woman. These women described their social, emotional and sexual interaction with men favourably and talked about being open to having relationships with men again in the future. Third, lesbianism was talked about as personal sexual orientation; these participants disliked being defined solely in terms of this small part of them. Fourth, participants who presented their lesbianism within the political context of radical feminism; they talked about lesbianism as a choice and heterosexuality as constructed

in a patriarchal society to benefit men. In the final account, participants talked about lesbianism as a 'sorry state' (p.119) as a weakness and personal failing. Kitzinger argued that all the factors with the exception of factor 4 are accounts which are 'borrowed from the dominant order. While such accounts serve the purposes of lesbians by assuring relative social acceptability, by the same token, they serve the purposes of the dominant order by reinforcing and validating its moral rhetoric' (p.123). Kitzinger's (1987) study not only examines how lesbian identities are constructed through discourse, but how psychology creates the very subjects it examines by colluding with these discourses for its own self-serving purposes. She suggested that psychology's promotion of 'gay affirmative' research is at the expense of undermining radical feminist theories of lesbianism.

A later social constructionist study by Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) examined the transition from heterosexuality to lesbianism of 80 adult women with at least 10 years of previously heterosexual identity. They argued that most psychological research on lesbian identity assumes an innate or fixed sexual identity. As a starting point Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) assumed that there is no essential lesbian identity. They assume that 'adult women who make such transitions are no more driven by biology or subconscious urges then they are when they change jobs: such choices could be viewed as influenced by a mixture of personal re-evaluation, practical necessity, political values, chance and opportunity' (p.96). They noted that participants constructed barriers to initially identifying as a lesbian such as compulsory heterosexuality, in which lesbianism was viewed as a negative identity to be avoided. Other participants reported multiple oppressed identities such as class, race or disability, which made a lesbian identity more difficult. Some reported adopting strategies such as denial and minimisation such as 'it's just a phase' or 'we're just good friends' to avoid a lesbian identity. Once the participants have adopted a lesbian identity, Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) argue that they then reconstruct a past to develop and maintain it. For example a 52 year old woman who was married for 22 years remembered her early lesbianism when she became involved with feminist consciousness raising groups. Previously forgotten experiences or unrecognised feelings come to light. Kitzinger's work situates her subjects in their social and political world. Her studies examine how psychology and the social sciences have constructed and shaped lesbian identity in their highlighting of particular discourses and silencing of others.

I now want move away from Kitzinger's empirical research and discuss her *theoretical* critique of the treatment of lesbians in psychological research. In her 1987 book 'The social construction of lesbianism' she notes a shift from a pathological model of homosexuality to a lifestyle model. As she dryly puts it, 'once upon a time, the story goes, researchers thought that homosexuals were sick and perverted. This was because they were blinded by religious prejudice and trapped by social conventions of their time. Their research lacked present day sophistication and objectivity. Now in our sexually liberated age, with the benefit of scientific rigour and clear vision, objective up to date research demonstrates that lesbians and gay men are just as normal, just as healthy and just as valuable members of a pluralistic society as are heterosexual people' (1987, p.8).

Kitzinger (1987) suggests that psychology's *volte-face* in its theorising about homosexuality is 'sufficient to pose a severe threat to the traditional conceptualisation of psychology as a science' (p.188). She argues that science itself is socially constructed and historically determined. Those notions of what constitutes 'good science' (p.188) are products embedded in a particular time, place and culture. She laments that most LGBT research is positivist and therefore unquestioning of the 'facts' it collects, and argues that a positivist research framework is constructed in accordance with liberal humanistic ideology, which constructs lesbians as individuals making private sexual choices. She concludes that in its individualist frame positivist psychology 'cannot contain lesbianism as a political reality' (p.186).

The dismissals of the political aspects of lesbianism continue in the years since Kitzinger's (1987) work. MaCarn and Fassinger (1996) show little understanding of lesbian-feminist politics when they argue that feminism 'probably has little influence on the affective power of internalised homophobia that hinders the development of a positive sexual and relational self-concept' (p.511). I would argue that a feminist perspective on heterosexuality as patriarchal oppression and a construction of lesbianism as a positive choice, rather than a shameful and pathological one, will go some way healing the distress that can be caused by living with a stigmatised identity.   MaCarn and Fassinger (1996) continue to deny and dismiss the political aspects of lesbianism by suggesting that lesbian participants in one study 'may have mistaken politicisation for self-acceptance' (p.514). They also dismiss *three* studies by Chan (1989), Sophie (1986) and Loiacano (1989) as 'unusually political, limiting the generalisability of the findings' (p.514). It is telling that Macarn and Fassinger (1996)

chose to dismiss three studies with similar findings, rather than assume that this was compelling evidence for the instance of politicisation in lesbians.

While post positivist research continues to dominate contemporary psychological research, more recently, a number of psychologists are using queer theory both in the therapy room (Butler and Byrne, 2008; Hodges, 2008) and in psychology research (Moon, 2008; Hegarty, 2008). Queer theory challenges basic assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality including the binaries of heterosexual/homosexual and male/female and allows creative ways of exploring identity and relationships (Butler and Byrne, 2008).

This study uses a social constructionist framework, which argues that the social, political and historical context of the participants' lives will weave and construct their identity. This study also makes use of queer theory's ideas: it takes the position that the participants lives will have been shaped according to the heterosexist and homophobic discourses and institutions present in dominant culture, to a lesser and greater extent throughout the participants lives.

4 Lesbians in the therapy room

Well into the 20th century, the dominant discourse of the pathological lesbian continued within the disciplines of medicine and social sciences. Freud introduced the psychoanalytic theory of homosexuality in which lesbianism was the result of 'arrested development' and later linked to penis envy (Healey, 1996). Later in the early 1960s psychologist Albert Ellis described homosexuals as 'emotionally disturbed individuals who are fetishistically attracted to some particular type of sexual activity' and 'that homosexuality often leads to violent crimes including homicide' (cited by Faderman,1981. p.252).'Treatment' for homosexuality in the UK and US in the 20th century included electric shocks delivered in response to arousal to homoerotic stimuli to 'teach' lesbians and gays to be straight, as well as castration, clitorectomy and lobotomy (Hegarty, 2008).

Even after the social changes of the 1960s and 1970s psychology has not always had an easy relationship with the LGBT community. Kitzinger (1999) tells of a decade of campaigning for the Lesbian and Gay psychology section within the (British Psychological Society (BPS), which was finally founded in 1998. Three proposals were turned down on the grounds that it

was 'too narrow' and 'too political'. Steering group members were sent homophobic hate mail by society members (Kitzinger, 1999).

In recent years a number of prominent psychologists and psychotherapists have aired some questionable views on sexuality. For instance, respected psychologist Oliver James believes that men become gay because they have 'flirtatious' mothers (James, 2002), and North American psychoanalyst Charles Saccharides, who in 1995 was invited as a guest speaker by the association for psychoanalytic psychotherapy, views homosexuality as a form of 'aberrancy' and 'a revision of the basic code and concept of life and biology' and recommends conversion therapies to cure homosexuals (cited by Kitzinger, 1999).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, in light of these pathologising currents in academic psychology's past and present, recent research has shown that a sizeable minority of psychologists and other therapists have behaved in harmful ways towards LGBT clients.
Bartlett et al. (2009) interviewed 1328 therapists, counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists about their views on treatments to change homosexual desire. A sizeable minority of 222 or 17% reported having assisted at least one client to reduce or change his or her gay or lesbian feelings.

Fortunately, in February 2014 a paper called 'Conversion Therapy - Consensus Statement' speaking out against any therapeutic attempts to change sexual orientation was issued by a weighty confederation of institutes: The British Psychological Society (BPS), The UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), The British Psychoanalytic Council, The Royal College of Psychiatrists, The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), The National Counselling Society, Pink Therapy and Stonewall.

However, despite the BPS's recent LGBT affirmative moves such as the anti-conversion therapy statement and the publication of the 2012 'Guidelines for psychologists working with lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans clients', recent research suggests that LGBT issues get little attention in psychology training courses.
Moon (2010), notes that in her research with 70 therapists, sex, gender and sexuality were 'rarely, if ever, addressed in training' (p.76). Shaw et al. (2008) looked at sex and sexuality teaching on clinical psychology training courses and found that there was 'inconsistent

provision in terms of quality and breadth of coverage' (p.7).

Perhaps the inadequate training around sexual identity accounts for the findings in Moon's (2008) research on therapists' constructions of their emotional responses to LGBT clients. She found that sexual identity was a variable that determined how therapists constructed both their clients' emotions and their own emotional response to clients'. Moon (2008) interviewed 30 counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists. 17 identified as heterosexual and 13 were LBGT identified. All were asked to recall lesbian or gay clients that they had worked with and to give examples of the discourses that emerged from the session in relation to their clients' feelings or emotions. Moon (2008) found significant differences in the responses of the heterosexual therapists compared to lesbian and gay therapists. Heterosexual therapists, in ascribing feelings to their lesbian and gay clients, most commonly used the words 'frightened, angry, aggressive, difficult, venomous, rageful, afraid (of heterosexual relationships), misogynistic, sick, shameful and guilty' (Moon, 2008, p.47). Heterosexual therapists were mostly likely to ascribe the following words to their own feelings about the sessions with gay or lesbians: 'anxious, incongruent, angry, afraid, scared, ignorant, rejected, frustrated, and intolerant' (Moon, 2008, p.47).

In comparison, LGBT therapists in ascribing feelings to their lesbian and gay clients most commonly used that words 'assertive, proud, self-responsible, decisive, anarchic, demanding (perfection of themselves), isolated (because of sexuality), sussed, intimate, vulnerable, afraid (of stating their sexuality in public), survivors, open (sexually)'. In terms of their own feelings in working with lesbian and gay clients, LGBT therapists reported feeling 'open (to their clients), questioning, supportive, empowered, congruent, anxious, (for their client), honest, empathetic, trusted, committed, focused and sad (when listening to experiences they could identify with) and respectful' (Moon, 2008, p. 47).

Moon (2008) concludes that 'the dichotomous presentation of emotion words and concepts between the two populations appears to reflect how these different populations engage with cultural discourses about sexuality. However, these findings also indicate that something far more important is taking place – that the choice of emotion word is literally a way of constructing the body of the 'other' in relation to the 'self' (p.47). Moon (2008) suggests that emotions are 'regulatory fictions used to control subjectivity and need to be scrutinised

intensely' (p.48).

In conclusion, then, I have discussed recent research within psychology on lesbian identity development. I have argued that much of it uses a post-positivist framework which ignores social context, political discourses, and which assumes an essentialist origin of sexual identity. This study attempts to bring the social and political context into lesbian research by using a social constructionist and queer framework for analysis. Using a narrative identity method will allow the participants to tell their stories in all their 'dazzling idiosyncrasy' (De Lauretis, 1994, p.xiii), rather than participants being represented by being fitted into neat boxes, sub-categories, or development stages. I have also argued that the discipline of psychology has had a problematic relationship with lesbianism and there is evidence of poor practice, homophobia and ignorance among psychologists working with LGBT clients (Bartlett et al., 2009; Moon, 2008; Shaw et al, 2008).

5. This study's contribution to counselling psychology

The timing of this study is particularly pertinent. As the 'baby boomer' generation reaches retirement age there are an estimated one million lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Britain over the age of 55 (Doward, 2011). This generation of older LGB will be different from previous generations who were born in an era of greater stigma and secrecy, in that the baby boomers are more likely to have lived openly with a sexual minority identity.

Barker (2004) writes that 'Lesbians now at midlife (45-64years) comprise the largest number of out lesbians ever, and this openness has enormous implications for the ways in which this cohort will think and behave as they move into old age' (p.35). Likewise, Ben Summerskill, chief executive of the charity Stonewall, comments that 'for the first time this generation of ageing gay people fully expects to be treated with respect by both public and commercial service providers' (Doward, 2011, p.19).

As lesbians and gay men are frequent users of therapy (Bieschke et al., 2000), it is important that counselling psychologists have some understanding of older lesbians who have lived through this intersection of both a stigmatising and liberationist period in history. It may be argued that psychologists are more likely to see older LGB people as they are a vulnerable

population. Recent research by Stonewall (2011), found that lesbians, gays and bisexuals over the age of 55 years are more likely to be single and more likely to live alone. 41% of LGB people live alone compared to 28% of heterosexuals. They are less likely to have children. A quarter of gay and bisexual men and half of lesbians and bisexual women have children compared to almost nine out of ten heterosexuals. They are less likely to see biological family members on a regular basis. Less than a quarter of LGB people see their family at least once per week compared to half of heterosexuals. These results suggest increased levels of social isolation among older LGB people.

Older lesbian, gay and bisexual people are also more likely to have poorer mental health than heterosexuals of the same age. They are more likely to drink alcohol more often, more likely to take drugs, more likely to have a history of mental ill health and have more concerns about their future mental health. Lesbians and bisexual women are more likely to have ever been diagnosed with depression and anxiety (Stonewall, 2011). It is widely acknowledged that higher levels of poor mental health among LGBT population are related to the stress of living with a stigmatised identity in a heterosexist society (BPS, 2012).

This study assumes that different generations of lesbians will experience their sexual or political identity differently according to the social context of their lives (Plummer, 2009). Therefore this study has chosen a narrow cohort of lesbians as it is particularly interested in this generation who came of age at a time of great social change. Sociologist Ken Plummer (2009), a gay man born in 1946, writes of moving from a 'sick little teenager' to being an 'out proud gay man' (p.1). Plummer, like the participants in this study, grew up at the intersection of pathology and liberation. Plummer (2009) notes this huge social change in his life when he writes that, aged 20, his parents took him to see a psychiatrist when he came out (pathological discourse), then a few years later he attended the first meeting of the GLF (liberation discourse). Like Plummer (2009), I would expect my participants to be similarly influenced by changing social context and discourses in their lives.

To summarise, this study hopes to contribute to counselling psychology knowledge in a number of ways:

1) There is some evidence of poor practice, homophobia and heterosexism among

psychologists working with LGBTQ clients (Bartlett et al., 2009; Moon, 2008). This study hopes to add to the small pool of psychological research on older lesbians and thus increase psychological knowledge of this client group.

2) There is evidence that psychologists have insufficient teaching and support during their training around working with LGBTQ clients (Shaw et al., 2008; Moon, 2010). This study is a resource for trainees and psychologists working with older lesbians.

3) Evidence suggests that older lesbians have poorer mental health compared to heterosexuals (Stonewall, 2011).

4) I have highlighted that the large ageing 'baby boomer' generation are now in their sixties. The 'liberation generation' are the first generation to have lived openly and legally as LGBT citizens and counselling psychologists need to be aware that this generation of lesbians are more likely than previous generations to bring their sexual identity into the therapy room.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the epistemology, methodology and method used in this study to address the research question: 'How have lesbians aged between 60-70 years constructed their narrative identities in the telling of their life stories?' In doing this, I also address in this chapter some of the debates within the topic area, LGBT psychology, as well as discuss reflexivity and validity issues.

3.1 Epistemology

This study takes a social constructionist epistemological approach. Social constructionism takes a critical stance towards our taken for granted ways of understanding the world. It invites us to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based on objective and unbiased, observation of the world. Social constructionism asks the researcher to challenge traditional positivist science and to be suspicious of assumptions of how the world appears to be (Burr, 1995).

A social constructionist approach argues that the ways we commonly understand the world are historically and culturally specific. Not only are ways of understanding historically and culturally specific, they are constructed by a culture and are products of that culture and history. Knowledge is co-constructed between people through language. A social constructionist perspective holds that language provides the basis for all thought. Language provides a system of categories for structuring experience and giving it meaning, so that we ourselves become the products of language (Burr, 1995).

Research from a social constructionist view is concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social reality that are available to a culture, to explore the conditions of their use and their implications for social practice and human experience (Willig, 2013).

In contrast to a positivist approach, social constructionist research regards objectivity in a researcher as impossible; all of us encounter the world from some standpoint or other, no human can step outside their humanity. Similarly, knowledge is never viewed as neutral, rather all claims to truth are attempts to validate some representations about the world and invalidate others. Knowledge then is intrinsically bound up with power because if certain

behaviours, actions and lives are validated, then others are invalidated (Burr, 1995).

In taking a social constructionist framework, this study subscribes to Rosenfeld's (2009) notion that the construction of a lesbian identity 'is an ongoing process of interpreting desires and experiences using existing cultural resources and then situating the self within existing categories of personhood that are both historically and politically contingent' (p.420).

3.2 Epistemological issues within LGBT psychology

Within my research topic area, LGBT psychology, perhaps one of the most fundamental questions confronting any psychologist interested in sexuality and gender is whether we are born with gender and sexuality already intact or whether they are the result of a number of forms of socialisation.

Probyn (1997) argues that if we subscribe to lesbians and gays as a fact of nature, this also presents the idea that we are an aberration of nature. If the elusive gay gene is ever found, it opens the door to eliminating gays and lesbians. An essentialist position also means we ascribe to the idea that gays and lesbians have always existed in the same way as we do now and that homosexuality has much the same meaning in all cultures and societies. We also have to conclude that homosexuality is a category of person rather than a range of varying practices.

The case against essentialism is supported by Alfred Kinsey's famous 1948 findings that only half of the white male US population was exclusively heterosexual. This led Kinsey to conclude that 'individuals should not be characterised as homosexual or heterosexual but as individuals who have had certain amounts of heterosexual experience and certain amounts of homosexual experience' (Kinsey, 1948). Others have challenged essentialist notions on the basis that some people change their sexuality throughout the course of their lives.

As a social constructionist, Kitzinger (1987) takes an anti-essentialist stand, arguing that the nouns 'homosexual' and 'lesbian' are of relatively recent origin. Historically, same gender sexual activity had no particular implications for identity. Thus, the concept of a homosexual or lesbian identity is socially constituted and historically determined.

Furthermore, Kitzinger (1987) argues that social science itself is socially constructed: that which constitutes 'good science' are the products of a particular place, time and culture. With reference to lesbian and gay research in the social sciences Kitzinger (1987) states that the 'pathological model' of homosexuality generated a particular set of research questions prior to 1974, such as 'Are homosexuals sick?', 'How can it be diagnosed?' and 'What causes it?' (p.5). This model was then later rejected as irrelevant by the 'lifestyle model' (p.5) whose alternative questions concern the pathology of the homophobe or the enhancement of intimate gay relationships. Kitzinger (1987) argues then that this poses a threat to the traditional conceptualisation of science by exposing the uncertain nature of knowledge claims and their reliance on *a priori* assumptions. Social science therefore reflects social norms and functions to reinforce and legitimise the ideological hegemony of the powerful.

In her later work, Kitzinger (1999) states that lesbian and gay psychology, is: 'a psychological theory and practice which is explicit about its relevance to lesbians and gay men, which does not assume homosexual pathology and which seeks to counter heterosexist oppression' (p.51). Yet, she argues, lesbian and gay psychology seeks to counter heterosexist oppression using primarily positivist, individualist and essentialist ideas: the very ideas that were so oppressive historically. Thus, Somers (1994) argues that this is tantamount to 'the oppressed using the same theories as the oppressors' (p. 610) and thereby lesbian and gay psychology defeating its own purposes. In accounting for this Kitzinger (1999) suggests that lesbian and gay psychology may favour a positivist paradigm because a constructionist view raises some difficult issues. As one anti-constructionist psychologist argues:

'By deconstructing we have to acknowledge that gay men and lesbians do not exist, they have no innate biological "essence" and thus once more psychology makes them invisible. By deconstructing "lesbian" and "gay" there is no lesbian and gay psychology section' (Rahman 1999, p.9, cited by Kitzinger, 1999).

However, rather than reducing lesbian and gay identities to mere cultural interpretations, Fuss (1989) argues that 'a constructionist view of homosexual identity opens the door to studies of the production of all sexual identities, including (and crucially) heterosexuality: for the constructionist, heterosexuality is not "natural" or "given" any more than non-hegemonic

sexual classifications' (p.108).

So a social constructionist approach, rather than erasing lesbian and gay identities, *denaturalises* heterosexuality. Far from undermining the struggles of oppressed groups, social constructionism questions the power relations of heterosexuality/homosexuality binary. In offering a model of identity which is fluid, multiple and dynamic it is also less likely to exclude and stereotype than identity politics (Wilton, 1995).

Like social constructionist and feminist theory, queer theory (discussed in further detail later in this chapter) also denaturalises heterosexuality (Gautlet, 2002). Queer theory is an approach to sexuality and identity based on the ideas of philosopher Michel Foucault, which takes a radical constructionist approach. Briefly, queer theory holds that nothing within identity is fixed, rather identities are fluid and changeable; all identities are a performance (not necessarily consciously chosen) and therefore can change. Binaries such as gay/straight or feminine/masculine are social constructions, which should be challenged (Gautlet, 2002). Though in the past psychology has largely ignored queer theory (Butler et al., 2010), more recently, there are a growing number of social scientists constructing queer theory as a methodology (Browne and Nash, 2010) and as a therapeutic framework (Moon, 2008; 2010). This study adopts a queer framework in challenging heteronormative power structures. Reciprocally, I also argue that my findings support the queer notion of multiple, fluid and unstable identities.

3.3 Narrative method - concepts

Narrative method is a broad church with many different strands (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013). For this study I am interested in what Andrews et al. (2013) call 'experience centred narratives'. These narratives are concerned with personal narratives and defined by themes rather than structure. Andrews et al. (2013) defines experience centred narratives as 'distinguished by attention to sequencing and progression of themes within interviews, their transformation and resolution' (p.19).

I chose a narrative method for a number of reasons. Firstly, narrative method is concerned

with how participants make sense of their world, through the experiences and the meanings that people give to events in their lives (Crossley, 2007). Narrative method then, fits well with this study's interest in identity construction. Secondly, narrative method is congruent with a social constructionist epistemology in looking at processes of identity construction by focusing on how people use personal and cultural resources in order to make sense of traumatic or transitional life events (Crossley, 2007). Thirdly, narrative method works well in looking retrospectively at life stories as it is useful in understanding how participants construct meaning and make connections between past and present and how this may shape their experience of themselves today (Willig, 2013).

Like this study, narrative method is concerned with the broader socio-cultural context of narratives and their effect on stories told (Murray, 2003), social life and culture are revealed through an individual's story (Reissman, 1993). This makes narrative method useful for looking at the reflexive relationship between the identity and social world of the participants in this study. Linking personal narratives to historical narratives allows for stories to be constantly restructured in the light of new events. Narratives illustrate the temporal notion of experience, recognising that one's understanding of people and events changes (Webster and Mertova, 2007).

This study uses the concept of narrative identity theory, defined by McAdams (2006) as 'people constructing internalised and evolving narratives of the self in order to provide their lives unity and purpose' (p.6). Narrative identity theory postulates that the narrative we forge of our life experience *is* our identity (McAdams, 2006).

Polkinghorne (1990) describes this process: 'We achieve our personal identities and self-concepts through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end: we constantly have to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives. Self then, is not a static thing or substance, but a configuring of personal events into a historical unity, which includes not only what one has been but also anticipations of what one will be' (Polkinghorne, 1990, p.150).

In conclusion, this section makes the case for narrative as the most suitable method in which

to frame this study. Its focus on the meaning participants give to their narratives and its consideration of how the past shapes the present, as well as its attention to the social context of people's lives, make it an ideal framework for this study. Narrative identity theory agrees with a social constructionist view that participants create their identities through the stories they tell about themselves.

3.4 Reflexivity

Narrative method assumes that the researcher can access the cultural meanings, which surround the participant's narratives and use those to analyse the data and provide the researcher's account (Lyons, 2007). My knowledge of lesbian social and political history is useful here. In narrative method the researcher frames the question, picks the participants and interacts with them to produce data for analysis. The researcher then selects and interprets the conclusion and presentation of the analysis (Crossley, 2007). In essence, the researcher constructs the findings of the research (Willig, 2013).

In light of the notion that the researcher is the architect of their research, Wilkinson (1988) argues for the importance of the researcher to articulate the perspective from which they approached their material, including gender, ethnicity, age, and other factors which inform the audience of the position from which the researcher writes. I am a white, educated, urban lesbian. This same demographic tends to dominate both those studied in lesbian research and those who study lesbians in academic institutions. It is likely then that this study will privilege the white, educated urban lesbian as I will inevitably, unintentionally, exclude, omit and overlook others.

In considering how my own assumptions may have impacted on the research, I am left-wing, feminist and often politically active therefore I tend to value these properties in others and have great admiration for the women and men who pioneered social change with gay liberation and feminist groups. This admiration will of course influence my approach to the research and findings, I may tend towards a rose-tinted view of participants who were politically active and as an interviewer I may have particularly sought out stories of struggle and protest against oppressive systems and institutions.

In considering how my construction of the research influenced my findings, in specifying that

participants must identify as lesbian as part of the research criteria I eliminate other non-heterosexual women from my study. Sedgwick (1990) notes the 'terminological complication' in lesbian/gay politics and identities: 'that there are women loving women who think of themselves as lesbians but not as gay, and others who think of themselves as gay women but not as lesbians' (p.17).

In terms of how this impacts on the findings I wonder if those women who prefer to use them term 'lesbian' as an identity category are using, as Hicks and Milton (2010) suggest, 'a socio-political identity rooted in the mid to late twentieth century' (p.262).

If indeed the term 'lesbian' (as opposed to gay, gay woman, bisexual, queer etc.) is rooted in the identity politics of the liberation era then this may have led to the recruitment of a particularly political sample of participants. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the majority of participants were and are political activists. I suspect that, had I recruited a sample that identified as 'gay women' as opposed to 'lesbian', that they would have been less politically active and inclined.

As I discuss in later sections I assumed, perhaps in hindsight wrongly, that the participants I interviewed knew that I was a lesbian. I assumed that they had obtained this knowledge either through snowball sampling, as the participants were often friends of my friends or contacts, or that they had deduced that most researchers on lesbianism are lesbians themselves. I felt that the participants assumed a shared category membership, this was evidenced by an assumption that I had certain knowledge of particular lesbian themed films, books, and television programmes, and that I was familiar with particular feminists and lesbian activists. So participants may have felt safe to share their stories with another lesbian.

I was also asked if I had been to Greenham Common, the nuclear base and site of the women's peace camp protest group of which many lesbians and feminists were involved. This assumption of shared category membership may have led to increased openness and trust between myself and participants, however, my being an 'insider' (Gorman-Muarry, Johnson and Waite, 2010) may have shaped stories in that participants may have felt compelled to tell 'positive' lesbian stories so as not to let the lesbian side down.

Another factor may be that the participants saw themselves as marginalised and silenced and wanted their voice to be heard. Rich (1980) argues that 'Cultural imperialism is the decision

made by one group of people that another shall be cut off from their past, shall be kept from the power of memory, context, continuity. This is why lesbians, meeting, need to retell their stories' (Rich 1980 cited by Plummer, 1995, p.82).

3.5 Queer theory

Given the influence of queer theory on sexuality for me personally it is important to consider it here reflexively. I became interested in lesbian identity formation after my own experience of coming out while at university. During this period I was introduced to queer theory which had a significant influence on how I constructed my own lesbian identity. Queer theory is deliberately difficult to define in its bid to avoid becoming a stable identity category (Browne and Nash, 2010). However, Jagose (1996) offers this description; 'queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also included such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender corrective surgery. Whether as a transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman' (p.3).

Queer theory then emphasises the multi-dimensionality and complexity of sex, gender and desire and consequently draws attention to the limitations of identity categories: that identities are not fixed, static and uniform. Queer theory differs from a social constructionist approach in its particular focus on the boundaries and borders between sexual identities (Namaste, 1994). Whereas a social constructionist may study the construction of homosexual identities and communities, a queer theorist's focus is on the relationship, borders and incongruences between identities (Cronin, 1999).

 Fuss (1991) below provides an example of a queer focus on boundaries and inconsistencies between identities:

'The philosophical position between "heterosexual" and "homosexual" like so many other

conventional boundaries has always been constructed on the foundations of another related opposition: the couple "inside" and "outside". To the extent that the denotation of any term is always dependant on what is exterior to it (heterosexuality for example, typically defines itself in critical opposition to that which it is not: homosexuality), the inside/outside polarity is an indispensable model for helping us to understand the complicated workings of semiosis' (p.1).

In its examination of the borders of sexual identities in particular the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality, queer theory permitted new analysis of identity categories. For example, Fuss (1991) points out that although the production of a homosexual identity allowed for civil rights, it also brought with it the closet: the idea that some people are visible in their sexual identity while others are silent. So the emergence of the homosexual was also accompanied by its disappearance. Fuss (1991) goes on to argue that identifying as gay or lesbian depends on the centrality of heterosexuality. In efforts to declare oneself of a sexuality outside the dominant discourse, one first needs to place oneself inside dominant discourses of sexuality (Namaste, 1994). Thus, queer theory highlights the problematic boundaries defining identity categories as well as the mutual interdependence of the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

However, while queer theory seeks to distance itself from identity categories that does not mean that queer and the category of 'lesbian' are mutually exclusive. Warner (1993) argues the identities of 'lesbian' and 'queer' can be two identities simultaneously held:

'Queer activists are also lesbians and gays in other contexts… through minority-rights discourse or through more gender marked language. Queer politics has not just replaced older modes of lesbian and gay identity; it has come to exist alongside those older modes' (p.xxviii).

Queer theory then, with its focus on the fluidity and instability of identity categories brings freedoms and new possibilities and liberates the identity category 'lesbian' from some of its more problematic features such as exclusion and oppression.

Queer theory fits well with a narrative identity approach in that both conceptualise identity as unstable and fluid, a process in constant flux. Both queer theory and narrative identity theory

allow for an approach to identity in which participants can both accept and reject particular aspects of membership categorisation associated with a lesbian identity. The next chapter demonstrates the ways in which participants situate themselves both inside and outside a number of identity categories.

3.6 Research procedure

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Punch, 2006). I sent an email to friends and acquaintances asking for help finding recruits. My criteria were relatively straightforward: women aged between 60-70 years old and who self-identified as lesbian. They passed on the email to potential participants. I had a good response. I swiftly received emails from over 20 women fitting the criteria saying that they were willing to be interviewed. That the response was so positive may have been for a number of reasons.

First, there may have either been actual knowledge of or an assumption that I was a lesbian; being a member of the same group or an 'insider' (Gorman-Muarry et al., 2010). For this reason I may have been viewed as more empathic and trustworthy with their stories (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1996). Only one participant asked me if I was a lesbian, then stated that she had 'assumed I was, otherwise she wouldn't have agreed to an interview'. Other participants (correctly) assumed that I had a prior knowledge and understanding of lesbian/feminist issues and concluded on the basis of that that I was a lesbian.

Subsequently, I interviewed six participants who were chosen according to geographical convenience. All but one lived in cities, the other in a village. All interviews were in-depth, lasting between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. All interviews were considered suitable for analysis. I had to create an inclusive criterion for subjects in order to access the participants I wanted and I needed to be very careful with terminology I deployed. I struggled with whether I wanted to include the terms 'bisexual women', women who identified as 'queer', 'gay women' or even 'non-heterosexual women' to provide the women with the space to self-define. I eventually stated: 'must self-identify as a lesbian', having considered that there would likely be differences between bisexual, queer, gay and lesbian identified women.

I corresponded by email with a couple of women who were unsure if they fitted my criteria. One of them had been in same-sex relationships for most of her life but did not identify as a lesbian because she had previously been in a heterosexual marriage and had children. (I decided not to interview her.) The second woman I corresponded with said that she was certainly a lesbian but did not 'identify as a lesbian', her argument being that many lesbians and gay men often have straight relationships, herself included. She felt reluctant to 'identify' others as gay or lesbian as she felt this was too restrictive. She preferred the term 'queer', which she felt was more accepting of sexual orientation being more fluid. Given that this woman called herself a lesbian I decided she would meet my criteria and I chose to interview her.

All but one participant were interviewed in their own home. The other was interviewed in a hotel room at both our convenience. All participants were emailed the interview questions three days before the interview took place.

In keeping with a narrative method the interview was predominantly driven by the interviewees' concerns. I initiated the three main topics I wished to cover but used prompts only when necessary. I avoided mining for information (Fraser, 2004) but would ask for clarification on certain points I found interesting. Overall, I tried to let the participants lead as much as possible.

There was a rapport with all participants presumably as a result of a shared lesbian identity and the trust that this inspired. However, there was also a distance in terms of generational difference. I felt this was evidenced by surprised comments sometimes at my lack of knowledge of the period: 'You don't know about consciousness raising groups?' and being reminded that I wasn't there: 'you had to live through it in order understand how bad things were'. However, my main sense was that most participants enjoyed telling their stories to an avid listener and usually gave rich, substantial and personal detail.

The interviews with the six participants were transcribed then analysed individually for thematic content, emotional content and for stories that followed dominant discourses (Fraser, 2004), as well as for stories which did not: known as counter-narratives by Andrews and Bamburg (2004).

To examine my data I was guided primarily by Fraser (2004) who offered practical guidance for a narrative approach to data analysis. Fraser (2004) suggests seven phrases to narrative analysis. Phase one involves hearing the emotional content of the stories. To do this I made notes in a journal immediately after each interview recording my impressions of each participant and their stories. Fraser's (2004) phase two involved transcribing the material. As she suggests, I did this myself which enabled me to get to know the interviews very well, I was able to pick up what participants had found difficult to talk about or what had been brushed over quickly, also, I could see where participants had changed the subject to an easier topic. Fraser's (2004) phase three involves interpreting individual transcripts. As she suggests, I looked at each transcript individually for common themes and main points. In to phase four, scanning across different domains of experience (Fraser, 2004), I separated out these domains into; interpersonal, intrapersonal, cultural, and institutional. In phase five, which Fraser (2004) refers to as 'linking the personal with the political' (p.193), I examined the social world of the women's stories and their relationship to the dominant discourses in the period. In phase six 'looking at commonalities and differences among participants' (p.194), I compared the six transcripts. Finally in phase seven Fraser (2004) advises ensuring that the analysis is relevant to the research question, that interpretations are grounded in the data and that the researcher acknowledges their role in the analysis. These three points were questions I considered throughout the research process and which I have attempted to present in the study.

3.7 Participants

All the participants' interviewed were UK born and currently living in the UK. Though my initial criteria were for lesbians aged between 60-70yrs old, all participants interviewed were born within a five year period between 1945 and 1950. All self-identified as lesbian. The women were all white and educated to at least first degree level. All were professionals or retired professionals. Two participants were single. Three were in long-term relationships and one was in an 'ex-relationship'. One participant had biological children and one participant was a step-parent. One participant was in a civil partnership.

Table 1 Participant demographics

Name	Year of birth	Education	Occupation	Relationship	Children
Rebecca	1947	Degree	Retired social worker.	Single for past 20 yrs.	No
Janet	1945	PhD	Retired senior teacher.	Single	No
Shirley	1950	PhD	Retired education consultant.	Civil Partnership	Yes 1 step daughter
Sally	1950	Degree	Osteopath.	Long term female partner	No
Anna	1949	Degree	Retired lecturer.	In an 'ex relationship'	No
Teresa	1949	Degree	Film editor.	Long term female partner	Yes – two biological children

Perhaps what is most striking here in the demographics is the high level of education achieved by participants, all were degree educated and two had doctoral degrees. Though participants were privileged in terms of education, not all came from privileged backgrounds. Anna was from a working class background, both her parents were factory workers, she described herself as being 'unusual' in that she went to grammar school and then to teacher training college. Janet's parents were 'lower middle class' shopkeepers, also unusually for her background, she won a scholarship to a prestigious university. While three participants didn't mention class background, another, Rebecca was the daughter of a vicar, she discussed that conversely, relative to her background and family expectations, she felt that she had underachieved educationally and professionally. It is important to consider why all the participants in this study were educationally privileged.

As a researcher I was interested in the information which emerged from the data, rather than

in pre-conceived information. So I did not select interviewees for any other demographic information other than age and self-identity as a lesbian. However, it is likely that the snowball sampling method used in this study determined the participant demographics to a large extent. I am a white, educated, urban lesbian from a working class background so it is likely, given that I used contacts, friends and acquaintances to recruit participants, that my participants' demographics would be similar to my own. Had I interviewed lesbians of a similar age who were from black and ethnic minority heritage, or disabled, or with lower levels of educational attainment then their stories would, most likely, be very different.

This study makes no claims to generalisability given that there are only six participants, rather it offers a rich detailed account of the lives and experiences of a small group of women whose lives have spanned a period of great social change for lesbians. They tell their stories, and I offer my analysis, as part of a wider history of under-recorded and under-represented voices in the lesbian world.

The problem of white middle class educated lesbians being over represented in lesbian research is a long standing one. Snowballing recruitment techniques are often used when investigating populations about whom little is known and who have good reason to remain hidden. The issue of representativeness is an ongoing issue for hard to reach populations (Barker, 2004). However, older lesbians are an under-represented research category (Traies, 2014) particularly the 'new' older lesbians of the' liberation generation', and so overall this study contributes to the sparse body of data on older lesbians.

3.8 Validity

Narrative researchers are not tempted to sanitise research by appealing to scientific facts and linear trajectories (Fraser, 2004). They are aware that prevailing concepts of validity tend to rely on realist assumptions and consequently are mostly irrelevant to narrative method. A personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of what happened, as individuals construct very different accounts of the same event. Thus, trustworthiness rather than truth of interpretations is the critical issue (Reissman, 1993).

Trustworthiness in a qualitative constructionist study is evaluated on the basis of a study's

internal coherence, theoretical sophistication and persuasiveness (Willig, 2013). I attempted to build a persuasive case for my interpretations by continually checking evolving interpretations against the materials and actively seeking out contrary cases as advocated by narrative researchers (Andrews et al., 2013). In narrative research the concept of validity generally means being well-grounded and supportable (Polkinghorne, 1990). I attempted to build up arguments and present evidence from the data with comprehensive and coherent interpretations.

Mishler (1990) identifies three actions which he suggests are critical for validation in narrative studies:

1) 'The display of primary texts'
2) 'Specification of analytic categories in terms of discernible features in the texts'
3) 'theoretical interpretations focussed on structures' (p.420).

This study takes Mishler's (1990) use of 'structures' to mean dominant social narratives as well as cultural narratives of particular groups and I have attempted to use this validation criteria.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval has been granted by University of East London's Ethics committee. To meet their approval I applied the British Psychological Society's 'Ethical principles for Conducting Research with human participants' (2009) with attention to the following:

Informed consent: participants were provided with details about the study through a comprehensive information sheet. Prior to the interview the researcher ensured that the information sheet was read and understood by all participants. Participants were encouraged to ask any questions regarding the research prior to interview. All participants were asked to sign a consent form clearly stating that they understood the purpose and procedures of the study, what their involvement entailed as well as their right to withdraw at any point.

The right to withdraw: all participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the

study at any point with no impact on any service that they were attending or receiving.

Confidentiality: participants were interviewed in a quiet space. With the exception of one participant they were interviewed in their own home. One participant was interviewed in a hotel room. In all cases no other people apart from researcher and participant were in the room. Participants are identified by pseudonyms rather than their own names throughout the study. In the preparation and write up of the thesis, all information, recordings and transcribed data were kept securely with no names or identifying information used. No personal details were collected from them during the research.

Personal distress: it was possible that in talking about life events and experience that some participants become distressed. All participants were made aware of therapeutic support available, for example, subsided LGBT counselling provided by PACE and London Friend, should they have felt distressed following the interview.

Debriefing: all participants will be debriefed following the interview and reminded of the aims of the research. They were also asked how they found the interview and will be made aware of support services in the event of distress.

Chapter 4: Data analysis

This section examines common themes found in the interviews of the participants. I identified four themes from the data. In line with narrative methodology and in order to present the data as clearly and accurately as possible, I also identify cases which do not support my themes, for these I will use the term 'counter-narratives' described by Bamberg and Andrews (2004) as those stories which do not support the dominant cultural narratives. Each theme is evidenced by extracts taken from the transcripts of the interviews with participants. I have titled the themes as:

1) Where is my story?
2) Finding a community
3) The personal *is* the political
4) Redemption narratives

Separating out individual themes was a difficult task as the themes and stories told often seem to meld into each other (Fraser, 2004). In line with narrative identity theory (McAdams, 2006), these stories are sequential, they are a process, one theme is a direct consequence of another, for example: in theme 1, Where is my story?, the participants often told stories of feeling like an outsider, thus when they did find a group (theme 2, finding a community) to which they felt they belonged this was of tremendous significance. Similarly, participants told stories of a perception of injustice at the limitations they perceived in being born female (theme 1). Thus when second wave feminism emerged in the 1970s (Faderman, 1981), the participants were drawn to a political movement, which made sense of their experience (theme 3, the personal *is* the political) or alternatively, helped them to retrospectively reconstruct their past.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, due to both empirical and theoretical reasons, I wanted to present the stories from the transcript as authentically as possible and avoid what Mishler (1990) refers to as 'decontextulisation'; that is, taking bits from the transcript out of the process and context of the text. Therefore I have mainly presented longer and coherent but numerically fewer extracts from the text in the analysis. This I felt would do justice to the participants' narratives and better preserve the original meaning they presented me with.

4.1 Theme 1: Where is my story?

I have called this theme Where is my story? as what is striking in the participants' stories of childhood is their sense of bewilderment and confusion. They can see the stories or life trajectories of their peers but they do not have a story of their own. In childhood most of the participants reported feeling different from other girls. They spoke of awareness at a young age of an expected trajectory that girls of their generation would follow; they spoke of feeling that they were unable to or unwilling to follow this route. Their sense of exclusion was prior to any concept or understanding of sexuality or lesbianism. Participants report not conforming to expected gendered behaviour for girls at that time, using words like 'butch' and 'tomboy' to describe themselves as children. They often described their childhood perceptions of life as a girl as 'boring and limited'. Some tell of a punitive response from adults as a consequence of not meeting gender normative expectations.

Rebecca's Story A

1   *I think there's a whole erm, kind of unspoken atmosphere around in relation to gender*
2   *identity that where you sort of pick up things about what you are supposed to do or be and it*
3   *doesn't necessarily have a name, except it's not quite right or people are uncomfortable, so I*
4   *I was a tomboy and ,err, I really I erm, I was really, I can't think of the word, a strong*
5   *enough word, but I hated, I just really didn't want to have anything to do with dolls, and I*
6   *can't remember I don't know how old I was maybe four or three or something and my mother*
7   *gave strict instructions to my paternal grandmother not to give me a doll for Christmas and*
8   *she did. And ,erm, there was something about that that I think because I'm sort of, I've*
9   *looked at it a little bit as a client in a counselling session and it it's been a ,err what came up*
10 *was just feeling that there was something horribly inevitable about having to be a particular*
11 *way that I didn't want to be, erm, and that there was nothing, I don't know if I'm*
12 *exaggerating, but there was nothing anyone could do about it, to help, you know, to support*
13 *me, erm and erm my, I think my mother, I somehow picked up that my mother, I don't know*
14 *about my father, was a bit uneasy about, erm, the fact that I was so, erm, butch, well that was*
15 *the word they would have used at the time, erm, but there was also, there was stuff to do with*
16 *the fact that I'd put on weight and, erm, I think that, so there was a sense that I picked up that*
17 *that I wasn't erm I wasn't attractive to my parents even, and this was like sort of seven eight,*
18 *erm and I, and at primary school ,erm, partic- between, I went to a different school between*
19 *primary school and junior school so from seven to ten erm, was a particularly hard time that*

20 *was when I put on weight, I didn't have any friends I felt, it was a girl's school I felt very*

21 *isolated and ,erm, I definitely had some, made some connection in my mind around, erm,*

22 *being kind of boyish and not wanting to play with dolls and because there was a girl, I*

23 *remember very clearly, there was a girl I thought almost looked like a boy and she loved*

24 *dolls and she kind of brought lots of them to school in a sort of show and tell moment, so I*

25 *found that kind of confusing, erm, so there was sort of stuff in my head, I didn't discuss it*

26 *with anybody about what you know, about what you know, what makes sense and what you're*

27 *supposed to do and I didn't, I didn't have a fellow, I didn't have anybody, sort of, that I could*

28 *identify with or feel the same as.*

In this extract Rebecca seemed to be describing a subtle but pervasive process in which gender non-conformity was punished. Firstly, in the discomfort of others, and then by receiving the despised 'gift', the doll. As an adult in counselling Rebecca describes the meaning of the despised gift as 'feeling that there was something horribly inevitable about having to be a particular way that I didn't want to be, and there was nothing, I don't know if I'm exaggerating, but there was nothing anyone could do about it' (line 10-13). Rebecca creates the sense of a trapped, frightened child being steered towards a way of being with which she resolutely did not identify with. Neither she nor those that loved her could do anything to change this; her sense of powerlessness and lack of agency in her own life trajectory is palpable. Rebecca constructs her 'butchness' and 'weight gain' as 'unattractive' (lines 16-17), which augmented her sense of isolation when she goes to a new school. She created 'rules' for herself in an attempt to make sense of her confusion around gender role behaviours and was left bewildered when she discovers that the boyish girl loves dolls (line 25). Rebecca seemed unable to discuss her confusion with anyone, and at a tender age she talked about being aware in her behaviour and appearance that she has transgressed some 'unspoken' societal expectations. Her response is to hide her confusion and perhaps her instincts, in her words she feels that she is 'not quite right' and may make others' uncomfortable (line 3).

Kilian (2013) in her queer reading of Quentin Crisp's life story described the consequences of Crisp's transgression of gender norms. 'Being placed or placing oneself outside the norm means forfeiting recognition as a full human being. It undermines the capacity to persevere in a liveable life and exposes the subject to the danger of becoming undone. The dissident

individual who defies gender norms risks being stripped of recognition and their right of existence. This risk entails for example, being exposed to acts of ridicule and scorn, or worse violence and threats of elimination' (p.179).

Similarly, Nestle (1987) described the verbal and physical violence which butch lesbians experienced in the 1950s. Transgressing gender norms then was a dangerous practice. While Rebecca's childhood gender non-conformity is mild compared to Crisp's flagrant transgression, her instinct to hide her transgression seems well founded.

Other participants constructed their childhood sense of difference in other ways. Most participants talked about 'being clever' as a feature which singled them out as different. Intelligence was usually constructed negatively. As one participant, Janet, puts it 'because boys don't like clever girls'. Mostly the participants construct difference as shameful and something to be hidden in their childhood and teenage years. Learning to hide aspects of themselves at a young age was difficult at a time when identity and sense of self are in early development.

Anna's Story A

1 *'I didn't have any notion of how I could survive, how I could be, how I could cope, how I*
2 *could be anybody. Because I started from a point that wasn't me really, I didn't -you know, I*
3 *didn't-I know, I'm quite intellect-, you know I'm quite-, I read a lot -all of that stuff - I'm very*
4 *interested in politics or history, world politics - but I never had as a young kid, I was quite*
5 *confident in myself inside, but the world around me was so difficult to deal with that erm, it*
6 *was a struggle, because I had no concept of where would it go, you know, I imagined that the*
7 *people I grew up with had an idea that they would grow up, get married, have a job, have*
8 *children and then they'd have grandchildren and then they'd buy - you know I thought, I*
9 *don't know, but my perception was they would all have a route to go through that would be*
10 *erm understood by everybody, understood by themselves, understood by their family,*
11 *understood by the world, so they would go through that. I didn't have any of that, I had*
12 *nothing to go on. I had no role models, no nothing that would say this is – you could be like*
13 *this, this would be your world, you know, none at all. So I kind of just played it by ear*
14 *(laughs) I just kind of went along with it.'*

When Anna says 'I didn't have any notion of how I could survive, how I could be, how I could cope, how I could be anybody' (line 1) she seems to equate the formation of an identity, 'how I could be' with survival: she cannot survive unless she can be 'somebody'. She 'started from a point that wasn't really her' (line 2). Perhaps here Anna is referring to her lack of a sense of identity; she had no 'route' (line 12), 'no role models' (line 16), and no sense of who she could become. These concepts seem vital to her existence and identity. Though she seems to find it difficult, she eventually says that she is clever. It might be that she mentions this because her cleverness is an identity already established.

Earlier in the transcript she spoke about being from working class factory worker parents and how unusually for a girl of her background, she got a place at grammar school. This is her evidence that she is clever. Perhaps this is important because it allows the young Anna to seize on a sense of identity. This gives her a sense of 'how she could be' (line 1); this identity of a clever girl might be essential to her survival. Indeed, her education gave her access to a professional life with financial and social independence and choices she may not have had, had she followed in her parents footsteps. Perhaps Anna is also indicating that even though she 'read a lot' (line 3) she could not find out who she was. As a girl in the 1950s she was unlikely to find much literature on lesbianism, and if she did it was likely to be in the 'inversion model' discourse (Garnets and Peplau, 2000); the 'sick, sad, cigar- smoking, pseudo-man' (Healey, 1996).

She states that though she was 'quite confident inside myself' (line 6), the world around her was difficult to deal with. Perhaps her confidence came from the identity that she did have: her cleverness, her sense of achievement in getting to grammar school. However, 'the world was a struggle because I had no concept of where it would go' (line 8). Everyone else seemed to have a 'route' (line 9): marriage, children, grandchildren, and a job. She uses the word 'understood' four times (line 10-11): she talks about how everyone else felt understood, indicating that she, Anna, without her route and her map is not understood 'by herself, by her family and by the world'(line 10-11). To be misunderstood in such terms must be a frightening and lonely place for a child. Anna has no concept of who she can be, she has no role models offering what her life may look like so she has to 'go along with it'(line 14), and create her own identity and path. She and many lesbians of her generation did create their own identity and path. My participants describe the impact of a lack of a story and lack of an

identity in a world that did not understand or tolerate difference.

Teresa's Story 2

1   *You know, like with the thing about feeling like a freak and* [trying to] *committing suicide at*
2   *22, did I do that, was it possibly connected because I am a lesbian? Yeah, obviously I think*
3   *sometimes, other times I think, well it's complicated, you know, there's a lot of stuff going on,*
4   *it's not all about sexuality but yeah probably if I'd have grown up in a house where*
5   *everything was acceptable, not just in a house but in a society where everything is*
6   *acceptable, well then yeah I guess it would've been alright probably you know, but there was*
7   *so much about me that wasn't acceptable to people is wasn't just, because they didn't know*
8   *that I was a lesbian did they?*
9   *But you know I was bullied at school and it wasn't because I was a lesbian, but yeah I've got*
10 *strong memories from primary school of erm, you know, of various things which when I look*
11 *back I think, oh yeah, that's, you know, that is somehow related to gender issues, sexuality*
12 *issues all kinds of things like that, but there was a lot of other things you know: I could read*
13 *when I went to school aged four and nobody else could and that made me like their enemy. I*
14 *was enemy to a lot of people, they saw me as their enemy, and it wasn't because they thought*
15 *there was something weird about my sexuality, it was because I could read, because I had*
16 *red socks on, because I didn't say 'thee and thou' until I'd been at school for a few months*
17 *and learned how, you know, and yeah, a pretty quick, alright a few weeks, days, I did pretty*
18 *quickly pick up that you say 'thee and thou' but you know, they could still spot me, they could*
19 *still spot that I was a freak, and yeah, alright it was, there were gender things not, but then is*
20 *it a gender thing or is it a sexuality thing?*

21 *Cos you know like if it's because my little finger is longer on that bit, you know, you know the*
22 *finger thing? Er, I didn't even find out about it until a long time afterwards but yeah, I score*
23 *on the finger thing, and and there is that other thing like, there's that other thing like, when I*
24 *was at school one day we had a pupil teacher who was also actually the first black person I*
25 *ever met in my life, I was about seven and he was a teacher he came as a student teacher you*
26 *know to do his teaching practice with us, Mr M, and he was really great, yeah he was a great*
27 *guy, he was Jamaican, he told us about Jamaica. None of us had ever seen a black person*
28 *before ever at all in real life, only in photographs and in encyclopaedias and stuff like that*
29 *and and when they left him alone with us for the first time he said ok you can ask me any*
30 *question you want and so all the children said Blah, blah, blah, blah – why is your hair like*

31 *that? Why are your teeth like that? You know he just told us everything and just got it all out*

32 *of the way on the first day and erm he was a really intelligent man and he made a big*

33 *impression on me.* (Starts crying)

In this extract Teresa is trying to make sense of her depression that led to her suicide attempt aged 22. She states that this is likely to be connected to her sexuality but also much wider causal factors: 'so much about me wasn't acceptable' (line 7), she says, using the word 'acceptable' three times (lines 5-7). Teresa's distress at this time seems to be about not fitting into her world at a core level rather than about her sexuality. Her distress is with a world in which she was unacceptable, and as she discusses in a second extract presented, the world was unacceptable to her.

She talked about being bullied at school saying initially that 'they', the bullies, did not know she was a lesbian (line 9). She then questions whether the bullying was 'somehow related to gender issues, sexuality issues' (lines 11-13). Teresa mentions 'the finger thing'[1] (line 23) in a light-hearted manner and while she does not explicitly say so, the implication is that this is not an idea she takes seriously. She uses 'the finger thing' as an example of how gender and sexuality are suggested to be linked: if lesbians have 'too much' male hormone as Manning et al. (2007) hypothesise, then gender non-conformity in lesbians would be expected: they would be more likely to conform to expected 'masculine' behaviours.

Teresa goes on to cite other reasons for her being bullied which seem to be unconnected to gender and sexuality. It seems that difference as such, rather than issues of gender and sexuality make her a target for bullies. All her differences make Teresa 'other' and have the same effect on her bullies. As Kalian (2013) writes in her queer essay on Crisp, 'One person's deviation from the norm puts another person's identity at risk. This goes some length to explain why policing the identities of others plays an important role in the stabilisation of one's own' (p.171).

1 Teresa talks about 'the finger thing'(line 23) she is referring here to studies on digital ratio by a group of psychologists (Manning et al., 2007) who were testing a theory that pre-natal exposure to higher levels of androgen in the womb influence both finger length and sexual orientation. They suggest that this would be evidenced by lesbians having longer ring fingers than heterosexual women.

Following all this, Teresa then at first impression seems to move to another story. She goes on to tell a story about her teacher Mr M, a student teacher that she likes and respects. Mr M was the first black man that she and her peers had seen. She tells a touching story of Mr M's patience and understanding of the children's curiosity around difference. The story of Mr M moves Teresa to tears. In considering how the two stories link together Teresa starts by telling her own story about her childhood and being bullied because she is different. Mr M's story then follows; a story about a man who, like herself at that time, is different. While Teresa evokes anger and spite in others for her difference, Mr M evokes curiosity, interest, and learning. Teresa, whose outsider status causes her such distress, is able to witness Mr M, another outsider, carry his difference with strength and resilience. As a young white girl she was able to find a role model in her black student teacher. Mr M emerges as a beacon of hope in Teresa's reflections of feeling to be an outsider. . Mr M shows Teresa that it is possible to be different and to be accepted and it is perhaps this possibility that moves Teresa to tears.

Counter-narratives

While the three participants above have spoken of their feelings of marginalisation as children, three other participants report different stories. Two participants, Sally and Shirley, did not come out until their thirties, one of these women reports being a 'tomboy'; another speaks of a 'rejection of girliness' from a young age. Both Sally and Shirley report long-term relationships with male partners initially; Sally married a man. Neither Sally nor Shirley spoke about feelings of marginalisation as children, both women started their narratives around the time of coming out and spoke little about their childhoods. Janet spoke of her childhood in ways that suggest it was mostly heteronormative: she expected to grow up and get married (to a man), she spoke of being attracted to both boys and girls in adolescence but constructed these feelings in different ways, placing higher value on her attraction to males, and discounting her attraction to females. Only in her late teens when she began a relationship with female friend at university did she consider than she might be a lesbian.

What is striking in this theme is the early age of awareness of dominant discourses around both gender normativity and heteronormativity among the three participants who felt different as children. They view their position outside these dominant frameworks as dangerous, confusing and isolating. They seemed to respond by developing a survival

strategy, which involved hiding their difference: by remaining silent and by changing to fit in. The participants seem to be inclined to search out others also on the margins (Rebecca's boyish girl who loved dolls, Teresa's Jamaican teacher) in their quest for a story, identity or group for themselves.

Theme 2: Finding a community

In contrast to their alienation in childhood, most women talked about subsequently finding a community in which they felt understood and accepted, usually in young adulthood. These communities were not necessarily lesbian and gay communities but they were always political and involved a struggle for social justice. Most of the women came out around the same time as finding a community with which they felt an affinity.

Shirley's Story A

1 *I: Perhaps tell me a little bit more about it [i.e. her lesbian identity] perhaps when it was*
2 *more prominent.*
3 *P: Yeah. When it was most prominent, I think, I think it was bubbling for quite a long time,*
4 *when I was, you know, young, when I was like a young teenager or even younger in some*
5 *form I wouldn't have called it that. It was to do with rejection of girliness I think, that was*
6 *one form it took, but I guess most prominent times would have been erm, when I was – that*
7 *would be – I think 1979/80, and then through the 80s were key sort of feminist, women-*
8 *focused, and lesbian decade for me really. Erm, I was er, you know, I'd had relationships*
9 *with men, but kind a bit of a struggle some sometimes before, you know, in the sort of 70s,*
10 *when I was at university, erm, and I do remember reading 'The Women's Room' in 1979,*
11 *erm, and erm, it was also about where I was in the country, I was up in [city]. I was at [city]*
12 *university and I stayed there for quite a long time. I did post graduate work up there.*

13 *Erm, I suppose the peak of it would be 1982, that's when I had my first relationship with a*
14 *woman, erm, 1982/3 was this great morass of like lesbian, Greenham common, erm, I was*
15 *teaching in WEA, you know, Workers Education Association, women's education in [City]*
16 *and subsequently down here. Erm, and it was, it was – god it was – when I think of that*
17 *lifestyle now, there's no way I'd have the energy to live that lifestyle now, it was so,*
18 *everything seemed sort of full on and there was lots - there was quite a bit of triangular*
19 *relationships, which was exhausting really, I can't imagine that now.*

20 *I'm with my partner who I've been with for 14-15 years now, erm, I can't imagine doing that.*

21 *But it was such a firmament of ideas and questionings, and erm, I was with this man before*

22 *me - and actually they overlap the relationships between this first woman I was with, erm and*

23 *when you say 'Is there one thing you'd change in your life or you'd do differently?' I think I*

24 *would've behaved a bit more adultly with my – I don't know, maybe I wouldn't have - with*

25 *the man that I was two-timing basically for a while. But not only that I was sort of making a*

26 *big shift and finally accepting, realising that I wanted to be with a woman it was - and it was*

27 *ok to do that and it was a sort of - I did experience that sort of coming home feeling and erm,*

28 *I remember it was a peak, a peak on that December '82 Greenham Common, surrounding the*

29 *base, a group of us all went down from [city], miles in the transit van [laughs]. Erm, and it*

30 *was also it was - it wasn't a bed of roses, you know, it was like peaks of ecstasy and troughs*

31 *of despair in terms of emotional - erm the woman that I sort of fell in love with, my first*

32 *woman I was in a relationship, I think she felt that I wasn't leaving the man I was living with*

33 *quick enough and there was quite a lot of tension and I remember them coming to a head at*

34 *Greenham Common, so it was a bit like a drama, you know. Erm, so it's sometimes quite*

35 *painful as well as I sort of thought "this is right, this is what I want to do", and there were so*

36 *many other women surrounding, you know, so symbolic that, surrounding the – I don't know*

37 *if you were there - that Greenham Common moment in December '82, surrounding the base,*

38 *you know, thousands of women, it was fab actually.*

In this extract Shirley's lesbian identity and feminist/political identity are intertwined. Shirley talks about reading 'The Woman's Room' a key third-wave feminist novel by Marilyn French. She then relates having her first relationship with a woman and going to Greenham Common, a protest camp in the 1980s against the deployment of US cruise missiles on the air force base. Shirley describes 'a coming home feeling' (line 27) when she decides that she wants to be with a woman, the story is told with Greenham Common as a catalyst for Shirley's coming out as she thought 'this is right, this is what I want to do, there were so many other women… so symbolic that, the Greenham Common moment in Dec '82 surrounding the base, you know it was fab actually' (lines 37-8). Shirley's story conveys her excitement and enormous energy during this period of her life, it was 'full on' (line 18), 'exhausting' (line 20), 'a firmament of ideas and questionings' (lines 21), exciting to her intellectually, politically and emotionally. So inseparable are her political and lesbian identity that it is difficult to be sure from the text if Shirley's 'this is what I want to do, this is right'(line 35) stands for her relationship with her female lover or the protest action at

Greenham. Shirley presents a love story; though whether the object of her desire is a woman or the thrilling action that December night on Greenham Common is uncertain.

Teresa's story tells of her first encounter with a political group and the impact it had.

<u>Teresa's Story B</u>

1 *I: Did something happen that got you out of that [depression] because you were quite*
2 *specific about the age when you felt better?*
3 *P: Yeah, I felt better when I met people that I felt were, you know a bit like me, I didn't feel*
4 *like a freak anymore, that was basically it, because at university, my last year at university, a*
5 *women's liberation group began, erm, and again it was one of those things like a women's*
6 *liberation group, I don't know what it is, but yeah, that's what I'm in. You know, zoom! And*
7 *er there was like four of us or something, it was still very early days, and it was very new and*
8 *we didn't know what to do next, but we had some ideas and erm, but it wasn't enough to*
9 *make me feel like yeah I've arrived, I belong, but when I finally, erm, when I finally found a*
10 *lot of women's groups in [city) you know, when I'd been in [city] for a year, or two or three,*
11 *I can't remember how long, two or three years, I found that there was not just one little tiny*
12 *group with four people in, but actually there was a whole network of women's groups and*
13 *there was 'Spare Rib' which was a national thing and that, you know, there was a world that*
14 *didn't just consist of Gateways, that there was an actual world I could inhabit, that's when I*
15 *started to feel - oh yeah, alright I'll hang around a bit longer and see what happens next -*
16 *you know. I actually stopped, you know, I actually stopped waking up every morning and*
17 *going to sleep every night going 'what would be the best way to kill myself' which had been*
18 *my first and last thought every day for a decade or more, and without me thinking there was*
19 *anything strange about that you know, and so, yeah, as I say I don't think it was all about*
20 *sexuality but some of it I think was at least.*

21

In this extract Teresa is describing the factors which helped to lift her depression and stop her feeling suicidal. She met people 'a bit like her' (line 3) in a woman's liberation group. As if by instinct she was attracted to the group even before she knew what it was: 'I don't know what it is but yeah I'm in' (line 6). Although the groups are small initially, for Teresa meeting like-minded women has a powerful effect on lifting her mood. When she finds the larger groups she stops feeling actively suicidal. Teresa mentions 'Gateways' earlier in our interview. Gateways was a lesbian nightclub in London in the early 1960s, which featured in

a rather dark film of the period 'The Killing of Sister George' (1968). Teresa jokes earlier in the transcript that the film had painted such a doomed picture of lesbian life that it had served as a powerful disincentive for lesbianism:

The Killing of Sister George' was just so particularly horrible, that was, that came from really, really worse than anywhere sort of thing because you got the – it gave you a sense that if you were going to grow up and be a lesbian it meant you had to spend you know, your social circle would be narrowed to you know, the 21 people who frequented the 'Gateways Club' and you didn't really like any of them.' [Laughs] You know you'd end up in some sort of horrible role-play for the rest of your life.

So for Teresa the first tentative women's liberation groups were a far more appealing group with which to identify than the rather grim representation of lesbianism presented in 'The Killing of Sister George'. For Teresa to find an actual world that she could inhabit that did not just consist of 'Gateways' stopped her feeling suicidal and gave her a sense of future that she might want to be part of again. Teresa's depression seemed to stem from inhabiting a world to which she did not feel she belonged. Crucially it is the feminist (women's liberation) groups that seemed to offer Teresa a world or an idealised world to which she felt she could belong. A world that maybe 'it's worth hanging around for' (line 15). So it is no exaggeration to say that the women's liberation groups saved Teresa's life.

Counter-narratives

Though the value of lesbian and feminist communities is uncontested in enabling participants to develop a sense of identity, to create a way of life that suited them and to meet others with similar values, participants also talked about how these same communities could feel oppressive and excluding at times. For instance, Sally reports:

I can remember going to - is it the women's library or, something like that or – something like that, and asking for, I can't remember which book it was and they were really quite crappy to me because I wasn't wearing dungarees and I didn't work in an alternative book shop [laughs] -I can't remember what I was wearing but I didn't look like, I didn't look like a feminist in particular, a stereotype or, and they were very sniffy so I was really pissed off about that.

Teresa referred to the *intolerant... lesbian police* in the disapproval she faced from some of the lesbian community because of her relationship with the father of her children. Anna talked about some of the in group limitations she experienced:

I found some of it a bit uncomfortable really, there was a big class issue for me in it as well certainly around Greenham stuff erm [laughs] and some very narrow-minded erm stuff, I felt, erm you know, there's a lot of the lesbians that would only do such and such, and you know, you couldn't be this, you couldn't be that, you couldn't be something else.

Sally experienced feeling excluded because she did not conform to expected dress codes, Teresa because of her relationships with men and Anna because of her working class position. Here participants echo the criticisms levelled against lesbian feminists in being seen as reductionist in denying difference in the diverse experience of women (Wilson, 1996).

For four of the participants finding a community seemed to be a catalyst for coming out. For Shirley and Teresa finding a feminist community was for one a life-changing event, and for the other, quite literally, a lifesaving event. Two other participants described finding lesbian communities: Rebecca joined the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Anna became involved in her local women's centre. The two remaining participants did not conform to the dominant theme of the 'finding a community' narrative. Janet settled down with her partner from university, as teachers they both led a closeted life together for many decades, increasingly over the years they came out to more and more people. Sally came out at the age of 39 after she had been married to a man for 11years. At this time she was a mature undergraduate student at university studying psychology where, it may be argued, she found a more liberal community, which may have facilitated her coming out.

This theme of finding a community for four of the participants seemed to have been a way to make sense of their confusion, doubts and isolation. In finding others who were similarly struggling against the dominant narratives available to women and lesbians at that time, they were able to both create an identity for themselves and to create counter-narratives through resistance to those dominant narratives that were so oppressive to them earlier.

4.3 Theme 3: The personal is the political

All the women interviewed identified as feminists and for most, their feminist identity overlapped with their lesbian identity: their sexual attraction towards other women was intrinsically linked to their wider social, cultural and political values. All the women viewed sexuality on a 'continuum' or 'spectrum'. All viewed sexuality as fluid, changeable and interconnected with their beliefs, values and choices.

Sally's Story A

1 *I: And do you take the view retrospectively that you were always a lesbian but hadn't got*
2 *there yet or that you were happily heterosexual but that changed?*
3 *P: I think I was always, I was always lesbian really, erm I do sort of hold with Kinsey, you*
4 *know, that sexuality is sort of on a continuum and we can be anywhere along there at any*
5 *time, sexuality is fluid. But, erm, yeah I mean I would never ever ever go back there, I just*
6 *don't find men attractive at all. I mean, I can admire somebody and say oooh, but it's like*
7 *looking at a picture really, you know you can say that guy has got a nice body, or he's very*
8 *good looking, or you know, he looks great, but kind of that's it. Um there again, I don't hold*
9 *with the notion that sexuality is just who you sleep with. It's a political identity, it's a way of*
10 *life, it's a, it's a personality, well it's a selfhood isn't it? Yeah. So I could say then that I've*
11 *been my complete self since I was about 40 (laughs). That's not long is it?*

As mentioned above, Sally came out at the age of 39 in the late 1980s. She had a number of long-term relationships with men prior to this. She cites Alfred Kinsey (1948) whose research concluded that sexuality is changeable over time and that sexual orientation is less clearly defined than the binary model of homosexual/heterosexual. However, Sally somewhat contradicts the Kinsey model of sexuality as fluid by then saying that she would never go back to men. She states that sexuality is 'not just who you sleep with' (line 9) rather it's a 'political identity, it's a way of life, it's a personality, well it's a selfhood isn't it?' (line 10) She indicates here the wider meaning of her lesbian identity as more than simply about sexuality. She indicates that she was somehow incomplete or not her 'true self 'before she became a lesbian and by coming out she became her 'complete self' (line 11).

1 <u>Rebecca's Story B</u>

2 *I: You've talked quite a bit - sort of - about political stuff, beliefs and values. I'd quite like to*

3 *hear your beliefs about causes and origins about sexual orientation.*

4 *P: Yes [laughs] erm, well, erm I think, you know, I think there's lots of different elements to it*

5 *,erm, and you know there's kind of generations of history, of human existence that we're kind*

6 *of a result of ,er, and I think that, you know the way, oh god, how do I say? Erm [pause], I*

7 *think that that, you know, we're capable of all sorts of kind of different relationships and*

8 *connections but those are obviously, our capabilities and potential are affected by you know,*

9 *our experiences from very early on as well as by history and social pressures, erm, erm, and*

10 *I think that it feels like it's sort of maybe a necessary transition that were having to go*

11 *through with people having to identifying a particular sexual attraction.*

12 *But it obviously doesn't work for everybody to have to define themselves because they aren't*

13 *the same thing throughout their lives, or it doesn't, it feels more limiting than otherwise, erm*

14 *but because, you know for lots of different reasons, there's been, you know, it's been either*

15 *taboo or, in other, in different ways you know, particularly sex between people of the same*

16 *gender has been something that is seen to be, you know, socially dangerous. It's become erm,*

17 *you know groups of people have been badly treated and then in order to sort of stop that bad*

18 *treatment it somehow, I don't know if it was necessary, but it's happened that people have*

19 *kind of then taken on the identity and said it's something positive that needs to be valued.*

20 *But I think it's kind of produced a lot of difficulties as well and rigidities which aren't*

21 *necessarily helpful, erm, but maybe it sort of perhaps loosens things up for everybody. Erm, I*

22 *mean, I think that one of the results of there being gay marriage is that, if there is, all sorts of*

23 *different kinds of social and family relationships will be seen to be possible, and not that*

24 *everybody, you know, wants to spend their life in a couple, erm, I think erm [pause]. Erm, I*

25 *mean there's all sorts of potential reasons why, when, if you grow up in a society where*

26 *certain, a certain way, of being is presented as the way to be, why some people find that um*

27 *problematic and just can't do it, erm, and you know and part of it is where those, where those*

28 *expectations have come from, erm (pause) so erm I don't, I don't think that erm, I'm not*

29 *comfortable when people talk about erm, discovering that they were gay because I'm not sure*

30 *that erm, people are one thing or another erm, and I think that erm, I think that early*

31 *experiences can have quite deep effects, you know, through instances that we don't*

32 *remember, and I also think that sexism plays a big role in making heterosexual relationships*

33 *quite unattractive, particularly for women.*

Rebecca hesitates early on: 'Oh god how do I say?' (line 6). She demonstrates here that she wants to choose her words carefully, perhaps aware that my question is a controversial one, which has historically been a divisive one for lesbians (Kitzinger, 1987; Healy, 1996).

In what follows, Rebecca's focus on a historical view of sexuality seems to take a Foucauldian angle of sexuality as culturally constructed (Foucault, 1979). Her comment, 'we are capable of all sorts of different relationships and connections' (lines 7-8), indicates a constructionist rather than essentialist fixed view of sexuality. Rebecca takes an historical position in speaking of the 'necessary transition' (line 11) of people having to identify a particular sexual attraction, referring perhaps to the identity politics of the 1970s and 1980s. She raised some of the problems in basing an identity on politics. As reviewed in Chapter 2, in a bid to create a community and identity based on shared values, lesbian feminists were criticised for excluding those who did not fit in. As Rebecca puts it, 'it produced difficulties and rigidities, which aren't necessarily helpful' (line 21).

Rebecca seems to describe the history of the gay and lesbian movement from oppression and shame: 'Groups of people have been badly treated' (line18-19), to post-Stonewall and GLF Pride: 'as something positive that needs to be valued' (line 21). She questions 'where a certain way of being is presented as the way to be' (lines 26). Here Rebecca is possibly taking a feminist position to suggest what Rich (1980) called 'compulsory heterosexuality', that is the promotion of the dominant discourse of heterosexuality and the silencing and punishment of alternatives such as lesbianism. Rebecca questions 'where those expectations have come from' (line 28), suggesting perhaps that there are underlying reasons for the promotion of heterosexuality, perhaps the maintenance of power for the hetero-patriarchy. When Rebecca describes her discomfort with 'people "discovering" that they're gay, because I'm not sure that, erm, they're one thing or another' (line 30), she is arguing against a notion of sexuality as fixed state or trait, again supporting feminist and queer ideas of construction rather than essence.

Rebecca also gives some weight to individual experience in identity construction suggesting that 'early experiences that can have quite deep effects, you know, through instances we don't remember' (lines 32-33). She seems to refer here to a psychodynamic idea of

unconscious experiences or beliefs, which might influence either sexuality or ideology. However, Rebecca's final comment 'that heterosexual relationships are quite unattractive for women' (line 33) demonstrates that her beliefs around sexual orientation are being heavily influenced by feminist thought.

Participants constructed their lesbian identities, through feminist and queer discourses. Janet describes her sexual identity development: *'There are people like me who fell into a lesbian life and I think one of the reasons that I stayed in it and it hardened into my identity if you like, is because I was in that very, very long relationship'.* Janet's 'hardened into my identity' account brings to mind Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. Butler (1990) argues that if identity is performed repeatedly, it begins to feel 'natural'. Janet, who reports growing up expecting to marry a man, suggests that had situational circumstances been different, she may not have adopted a lesbian identity. Janet suggests her identity was fluid and took a particular path because of situational circumstances: she 'fell into a lesbian life' suggesting that it was also possible that she could fall into another kind of life.

Teresa also takes a queer stance against stable essential identities, arguing that no one is '100% lesbian'*: 'Just, you can't, it's just so absurd to try and draw a line down people and in fact the most down and out through and through hundred percent lesbians that I know, are the ones that are the most upfront about saying "well yeah there was this man we loved each other but, you know, we couldn't get it together sexually" or "there was this man, he was my best mate you know, we played around a bit but it wasn't like that you know".'*

Here Teresa argues that categorising sexual behaviour and intimate relationships on the basis of the gender of sexual partner are limiting and unrealistic. Teresa brings to mind De Lauretis's (1994) arguments against reducing the 'dazzling idiosyncrasy of sexual identity' to matters of sexual behaviour or sexual acts as if these were somehow separate from all other aspects, qualities and determinates which make up a human being'.

Similarly, Anna remarks on the complexity of sexual identity: *'It's about trying to find out who you isn't it? And who you are attracted to - and it's not simple, it's the most complicated thing ever I think, to both be physically attracted and emotionally attracted and they may be completely different things. I think it's much more complicated than, you know, procreation*

makes you think you've got to have one of them and one of them and that makes one of them [laughs] That's a bit too simple, I think we're more complicated creatures than that.'

Shirley, unlike her brother who is also gay, believes that her sexuality is a choice:
'I have got quite different takes on how you end up gay [laughs], erm. I think I was more of a making a choice, it's making a choice kind of thing, which has got a fair amount of - it's a whole mixture, god knows, political it makes – now you see every sentence needs qualifying now [laugh]. I suppose there's a sort of short hand - but my brother would just go "well I just fancy boys and men" erm, and for me erm, I definitely did fancy women, maybe I was rationalising with a lot of political, I don't know [laugh].

Shirley takes a feminist perspective that sexuality is a choice she made. Her last comment that she may be 'rationalising with a lot of political' suggests that she was constructing her lesbian identity as political at the expense of any analysis of sexual desire. I discuss participants' lack of discussion of sexual desire in more detail in the next chapter.

All the women (except Janet) have been feminist activists at some point in their lives either by participating in feminist groups or being involved in protests with which they linked to their feminist values. Feminist activism spread far and wide in terms of the varying protests the women were involved in. For example protest at Greenham Common was a female-only protest against nuclear warfare. Shirley described the protest as *'taking back the veil of what patriarchy has done to the world'*. Another participant talked about supporting the miners during the 1983-4 strikes through 'Women against pit closures', as Anna puts it *'oppression brings people together to try to fight it, it brought some fantastic alliances'*.

So it seemed that the feminist movement empowered women to activism and protest not only within the realm of traditional feminist issues but in organised protest movements as diverse as women against pit closures, anti-racist organisations and AIDS activist organisations.

Counter-narratives
While most participants described a symbiotic relationship between their lesbian and feminist identity one of them not only left these issues out of her narrative but reported a downright conflict:

<u>Janet's story A</u>

1   *I: You mentioned that you were a feminist, were you sort of erm - were you influenced or*

2   *involved by anyone or anything in particular?*

3   *P: No, we were never activist and I think that was partly perhaps, let me think, I felt, myself,*

4   *that feminism and being a lesbian were conflicting things for me, and I can't quite explain*

5   *that, but I felt rationally, it seemed to me that feminism was obvious and clear and right but*

6   *they weren't necessarily - they were a bit ambivalent about lesbians, the women's movement*

7   *erm, at least the parts of it I saw. I mean I know there was a lot are now, I know there were*

8   *loads of lovely lesbian feminists, but I never knew them. I mean we weren't living in London*

9   *and we weren't into that kind of thing, I mean we'd settled down together very young, you*

10   *know, nice little domestic cosy thing and we both went to work every day and we just got on*

11   *with our little hidden life really so we weren't ever very involved in active politics or*

12   *anything like that. So feminism for me was just a personal belief system as much as anything*

13   *I read, but I never belonged to a group or anything, erm and I just felt it was - cos it was*

14   *partly to do with the lesbian culture of the time which was very very butch-femme and I was*

15   *very femme identified and so I, I was very invested in a version of femininity really, which at*

16   *least on the outside appeared like what as feminists was against so I was quite, you know, my*

17   *head and my erotic identity was in two different places, and that was quite difficult actually ,*

18   *it took years to get that sorted – so I suppose I've just been through my life feeling guilty*

19   *about things, oh dear.'*

Janet talked about her ambivalence towards lesbians within the woman's movement that she saw at the time. Only retrospectively did she 'know' 'that there were loads of lovely lesbian feminists' (line 8). She seemed to suggest that her lived experience of the period is different to the narrative of the lesbian feminist culture of that period: not living in London she was distanced from the dominant lesbian/feminist movements at the time. That Janet was not involved in activism is also likely to be linked to her career. As a head teacher during the years that the Section 28 Act was in place forbidding the 'promotion of homosexuality in schools' (1988-2003), Janet may have feared losing her job and profession if she spoke out. Her decision to remain silent during her teaching years caused her much distress and conflict.

Janet was born in 1945 making her one of the older participants. She began relationships with

women while at university in the early 1960s, making her one of the first participants to come out (to herself). Coming out in the early 1960s was prior to the gay liberation movement in 1970 and prior to the second wave of feminism. This may account for her different experience from the other participants who came out later. While most of the participants in this study became part of the lesbian-feminist culture and ideology that they came of age in, Janet's coming out preceded this, and she was part of a pre lesbian-feminist culture. Janet's lesbian culture was in her words 'very, very butch-femme identified' (lines 14-15).

Roof (1998) argued that in the late 1960s and early 1970s a new generation of young lesbians, influenced by the women's movement, rejected butch-femme culture 'as a heterosexist imitation of the oppressive gender roles of patriarchy' (p.27). Butch-femme had to disappear given its apparent participation 'in the patterns of heterosexual domination that feminism inveighed against' (Roof, 1998, p. 28).

During the interview Janet told me: *'Go read Joan Nestle on butch–femme, she explains it better than I can'*. Nestle (1987) states that butch-femme relationships were 'complex erotic statements not phoney heterosexual replicas' (p.215). She argued that butch-femme lesbians were feminist before the second wave movement in their courage at transgressing heterosexist norms of the time and being 'sexual adventurers' (p.215). They were socially, sexually and economically independent women in the lives that they led. Nestle (1987) further argues that the real reason that lesbian feminists dislike the butch-femme visual image is because they 'made lesbians culturally visible – a terrifying act for the 1950s' (p.216).

Roof (1998) argued that lesbian-feminists in the 1970s constructed all maleness and masculinities as oppressive to women. This essentialist notion of gender and sex made butch-femme 'a political no no' (p.27). In the 1970s Janet saw her femme identity as incompatible with her feminist identity. This perceived incongruent femme-feminist identity is likely to have been less problematic a few years on in the 1990s with a shift by academic writers from lesbianism to queer theory. Queer theory allowed for 'the acknowledgement of multiple, co-existing differences and set the stage for the re-entry of butch-femme' (Roof, 1998, p.33).

Queer theorist Judith Butler (1990) argued that the idea of a binary biological sex is socially constructed. In particular, she argued that gender is performative rather than a biological

certainty. The performativity of gender gives possibilities to play with gender as a political and erotic option (Butler, 1990).

 A lesbian-feminist's view on Janet's positioning of herself as femme may have seen her as appropriating a heterosexual relationship model and viewed her butch lover's masculinity as oppressive and sexist. A queer perspective would view a butch-femme relationship as performing gender and subverting gender boundaries in ways that are both politically challenging and personally freeing. Janet says of her femme-feminist conflict 'it took me years to get that sorted'; it may be that a queer framework helped her to do so.

In summary, most of the participants viewed their lesbian identity as much more than a sexual identity, as Sally put it, 'it is a way of life, a selfhood'. Whilst most view their lesbian identity as interconnected with their political and value system, *all of them* seemed to believe that their sexual identity is fluid and all the women tend to construct their lesbian identity through feminist and queer frameworks.

4.4. Theme 4: Redemption

Unpacking this last theme, I use narrative identity theory to argue that participants construct their narrative endings according to what Bauer, Mcadams and Pals (2008) refer to as the redemption narrative. Their definition of redemption differed from the traditional religious one. Rather, they emphasise meaningfulness and growth. They suggest that life stories which fit the redemptive narrative frame difficult experiences as transformative. These redemption narratives - moving from suffering to an enhanced state - often follow a script of atonement, liberation, recovery or self-actualisation.

There is a powerful dominant discourse of the redemptive story. These are seen in novels, television shows and classic Hollywood movies, narratives which usually chart the movement from suffering to an enhanced state (Bauer et al., 2008). This discourse of redemption which values the overcoming of adversity, personal growth, and hard work, is present in the narratives of my participants.

In line with this, most of the women constructed their life stories to a positive conclusion. There was often an overall narrative of having passed through difficult times and come out of

the other end. These difficulties were related to both heterosexism and homophobia but also to other common life events such as bereavement, loss, relationship break-ups and serious health issues.

Janet's story was one of atonement. She was a head teacher for many years and felt unable to come out under the section 28 legislation, which from 1988-2003 forbade the 'promotion of homosexuality in schools' (Weeks, 2007). Janet came out at her retirement party and has gone on to do post-graduate research in lesbian and gay studies, also advising statutory agencies on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans issues. From being silenced and stigmatised, she is now an advocate for LGBT rights and through her research is giving voice to sexual minorities. Janet finished her interview with this story.

Janet's Story 2

1 *P: Oh, let me tell you that story because that's a good quote.*

2 *I: Mmmm.*

3 *P: I think, it wasn't this year, it was last year, went to Brighton Pride, and I've told you about*

4 *being in the closet as a teacher and all the stress and conflict it gave me, and I was standing*

5 *on the pavement watching the parade, and they all went by and my heart swelled with delight*

6 *because I saw all these lovely young people. For instance, in uniform there were the forces,*

7 *there were the police, and there they were and they were able to wear their uniforms and*

8 *march in the parade. And I thought "this is so wonderful", I always get a bit emotional at*

9 *Pride anyway, and then towards the end there came the bus that was, I think it was the NUT,*

10 *may have been the NUS, it was one of the teachers' unions anyway maybe it was the NUT,*

11 *and it was a double decker bus and on the top of it were all these out teachers in the parade,*

12 *and that was really emotional for me. But the point at which I completely lost it was I looked*

13 *at them and I realised, not only were they young people in teaching who were able to be out*

14 *and models to their pupils, but that there were 'out' pupils on the bus with them. And that*

15 *was so far from anything that I could ever have imagined and it made me cry. And I'll tell*

16 *you the other thing was, it made me very angry and I realised that I hadn't allowed myself to*

17 *be angry about it. I'd been sad and philosophical and "how good it is that things have*

18 *changed" but I was angry, I was really angry.*

19 *I stood on the pavement and I thought "all those years of total crap we put up with, we put up*

20 *with that, why did we put up with it?" And we could've been like that, well of course we*

21 *couldn't, but you know what I mean. So yes, yeah, teachers, cos we wouldn't have thought it*

22 *was right to be out to our pupils, you know to have a friendly relationship particularly with a*

23 *gay pupil because there were all those overtones of sort of abuse of power and I still have*

24 *very strong feelings about the responsibilities of people who have, you know, responsibilities*

25 *for children, and I don't believe in - you know - people having relationships with their pupils*

26 *and things, but to be able to be a role model to a pupil who was obviously gay, that's so*

27 *beyond anything I could've imagined, but I mean its brilliant isn't it? It's just brilliant. So*

28 *good.*

In this extract Janet begins by stating that her story 'will make a good quote' (line 1). This suggests that she is consciously constructing a 'redemptive ending', moving from the bad old days to today's relative freedom. However, Janet is also herself a researcher, and has an eye for what makes a useful narrative. Besides, she is also being mindful to be helpful to me as a fellow researcher by handing me a good story.

Janet tells the story with dramatic revelation. She begins by talking about her pleasure in seeing the uniformed police and armed forces at gay pride and then the teacher on the NUT float, but she 'completely loses it'(line 12) when she sees that there are pupils with their teachers on the float. She juxtaposes this against her own closeted, frightened experience as a teacher and is overwhelmed: 'this is so far from anything I could ever have imagined' (line 15). Janet allows herself to be angry that things could have been different; she could have been a role model to her pupils instead she was forced to remain silent by an oppressive law which forbade her to support and affirm her LGBT pupils who may have been struggling with their identity. What is redemptive for Janet here is that she has lived to see times when it is possible to be all the things that she herself could not be. This moving story combines sadness, regret and an acknowledgement of what she did not have, with a joy at seeing these younger teachers and pupils able to do things differently. The themes in this story (from anger and sadness at past oppression to joy and relief at the relative freedom of recent times) are Janet's own story. From being silenced and oppressed as a head teacher in fear of losing her career if she spoke out, Janet has found her voice as a researcher, and LGBT spokesperson on legislative, academic and community matters.

Hard work is an important aspect in redemption narratives and Bauer et al. (2008) duly discuss the importance of generativity in redemptive life stories. 'Generativity' is taken to mean the successful engagement of developmental tasks' (p.97). They go on to state that the

imagery and rhetoric of generativity are an appealing way to conceive the end. By suggesting that one's own efforts may generate products and outcomes that will outlast the self, by framing a life story in terms of those good things, provides stories with what may be perceived as good endings' (p.97).

All participants report 'generativity'; that is, being involved in activities that are meaningful to them: these included their work, voluntary or paid, their studies, creative projects, community groups, sports and social groups. Perhaps the roots of their generativity come from what was for many a lifelong involvement with grass roots activism and its accompanying values: community, social justice and a desire to create better world.

In Shirley's story, she talks about her transition to retirement:

Shirley's Story 2

1   *P: Yeah ok. Feeling that I – my life is useful and purposeful and I have purposeful activity in*
2   *each day and each week is really important to me, and er, I've been quite erm focused on this*
3   *whole question about what people call work/life balance. You know, and what is work now is*
4   *different for me erm, so what I'm doing at the moment I'm doing a little bit of part-time*
5   *teaching at [name] college and – which I really like cos it sort of – its about – its working on*
6   *the Masters programme in [subject] so it's about working with teams and groups, it's*
7   *working with people who have to work with teams and groups and promote learning in their*
8   *organisation.*
9   *So it helps - that it's away from - it helps me to make sense of all my experience, my work*
10   *experience, it brings it together and kind of validates it in a way that I find really good and*
11   *I'm also doing some voluntary work, erm I do some voluntary reading help for a local*
12   *primary school and voluntary work at the [name] museum, in [city], which is great, and I'm*
13   *doing a bit of voluntary one-to-one coaching with erm, a social worker, erm, seeing her later*
14   *today and we've got an allotment as well so I do stuff down there erm so, in the early part of*
15   *the winter/early spring I was struggling a bit with 'what am I doing?' you know, why - is it ok*
16   *for me to have this time and be erm, there's a thing about sort of deserving and earning free*
17   *time that's quite strong in my mind. Erm, in fact I did a - I ran a workshop around these*
18   *questions you know about work/life balance for the erm [name of organisation] cos I thought*

19 *it's a good way to explore the issues is to create a workshop with people around it, erm, and*

20 *over then sort of spring/summer I really got to a place where I felt, yeah, I got the blend of*

21 *things in my life that I want now.*

22 *I was, you know, as I say, a bit apart, teaching, marking, voluntary work, being out in the -*

23 *yeah growing stuff and things out there, and also I did a book review for [organisation], this*

24 *association that I mentioned, about a whole different sphere of life which is about money and*

25 *sustainability, a book review and a review of debate about the City of London and is it*

26 *socially useful? And so I'm quite - erm, I'm sort of outraged at the bankers and all of that*

27 *erm and it was very interesting to just be like a curious layperson. I don't know much about*

28 *economics I find it's difficult to understand I think some of it is deliberately obfuscating.*

29 *Anyway, doing that book review I've really felt, yes this is really – I'm really enjoying doing*

30 *this, just taking my curiosity and questions into readings, some of it quite hard to understand*

31 *book about money and sustainability. And then summer holidays and then post summer*

32 *holidays, I think I've had a bit more of a feeling of 'What am I doing?' 'Am I being useful*

33 *enough? [Laughs).*

34 *I: So it's important to you to be useful?*

35 *P: Yeah*

36 *I: Yeah*

37 *P: Yeah and to kind of put to good use the resources that I have and the tax payer's money*

38 *that's been spent on me over the years to put it baldly, you know, erm, erm. There is a couple*

39 *of friends who are having a hard time at the moment, one of them is sort of terminally ill and*

40 *his daughter is, erm, – her Mum [i.e. his wife] died of the same cancer 10 years ago and*

41 *she's, she's struggling so I give them quite a bit of my time erm so, so, in terms of lesbian*

42 *identity you can see that that's not in the foreground, it's more like about living a good life*

43 *really, erm, which is what we talked about in that workshop that I was telling you that I ran*

44 *about work/life balance erm.*

In this extract, Shirley begins by expressing some concern about having enough purpose and meaning in her life, having recently retired. She then lists a huge range of activities that she is involved in including university lecturing, voluntary work at a primary school voluntary work at a museum, one-to-one coaching, and managing an allotment and writing book reviews and taking care of a terminally ill friend and his daughter. Yet still Shirley asks herself: am I being useful enough? (line 33).

Shirley's life story describes her passion for education and learning, and her commitment to her community throughout her life. From the Greenham Common peace protest communities, to the workers education association and her involvement in green politics. Her focus on purpose and utility fits into Bauer et al.'s (2008) emphasis on meaningfulness in the redemption narrative. For Shirley, meaningfulness is concerned with being useful and purposeful. Her worries that 'the tax payer's money that has been spent on her is being put to good use' (line 37-38) (she relates this to a number of post-graduate degrees at a time when education was state subsidised) are telling. Her identity as a useful, purposeful citizen: educator and activist are so important to her that retirement is threatening. Shirley's solution is to keep very busy and preserve her utility with a large number of community projects. This is in keeping with (Bauer et al., 2008) notion of generativity as:

'One's own efforts may generate products and outcomes that will outlast the self, by framing a life story in terms of those good things, provides stories with what may be perceived as good endings'(p.97).

Also in keeping with Bauer et al. (2008), the redemption theme in Anna's story focuses on self-actualisation:

1 Anna's story B

2 *I: How would you describe yourself now?*

3 *P: Short. [Laughs] Grey and short. Erm how would I describe myself now erm [pause] I'm*

4 *learning a lot now I think. Learning a lot about myself and about stuff that I haven't really*

5 *had time to think about really. It could be therapy of course couldn't it? I know some of it is*

6 *therapy. I think there's a luxury actually about having time to think and I think what the*

7 *therapy does erm and it's very light touch you know, it's very light touch, we get on really*

8 *well, and it is about, it's space for me to think about me and to think about you know how I*

9 *cope with the world and you know deal with some of the stuff that's been difficult for me and*

10 *erm there's a luxury in that, there's a luxury in not going to work, because it's scary, is really*

11 *scary actually stopping and thinking isn't it? Cos generally you go on and do stuff, so while*

12 *you're doing stuff you don't think about anything. You can stress, you know but things*

13 *happen and it just happens, when you can stop I think that's really difficult but I think it's a*

14 *luxury as well because then you really do think "what is stuff about?"?*

15   *I: Yeah.*

16   *P: I like walking you see, I like going outside, the river is round the corner, which nearly*

17   *flooded last week, and there's a pond behind there and I go and walk around the pond a lot*

18   *and it's beautiful. They're building a tram round it [laughs] but then it's a town so, you*

19   *know, for me, I grew up next to the [name] river you see, and now I live on the [name] river,*

20   *for me the river and the countryside is really important, but living in a town is important. I*

21   *think I never wanted to live in a village again because as I say I escaped that, not good for*

22   *somebody like me, totally isolating, so I've got here the town and all that offers, and then the*

23   *river and the countryside and all that offers for me, so you know what I think now is that, by*

24   *complete chance, complete chance, this place is the right place for me to be. Even when we*

25   *bought this house it was only half built, we were desperate to get here we were both living in*

26   *[name of city] - that's me and my cousin and I'd got a job here you know, a teaching job*

27   *which was paying well so we were going to move here, we bought this house and didn't even*

28   *know the river was round the corner when we bought it. Can you imagine? You can imagine?*

29   *I: It has turned out to be the perfect place.*

30   *P: As it happens: it's town, station, free bus pass, river, so for me the location plus the fact*

31   *that the 80s, 90s and now there's a whole lesbian and women's community here for me too, I*

32   *ended up in an appropriate place but it wasn't by design - I didn't design any of it like that,*

33   *so that's the other thing for me looking back, there was no design in it at all, it's you know,*

34   *got a job, did this, got a job, did that, erm, but from my point of view this is now the ideal*

35   *place for me to be.*

36   *I: you've ended up where you need to be.*

37   *P: yes. By pure chance really, I suppose that's what life is isn't it? It's the sequence of*

38   *chances and stuff isn't it really? But it's hard when you've always worked and always*

39   *stressed out about everything to stop and think oh actually maybe it's not too bad after all.*

40   *Cos I have a thing about surviving, cos you can imagine you know erm surviving is an odd*

41   *concept, cos everybody wants to survive I think when you've actually got experience of*

42   *surviving things from my perspective it kind of looks slightly different. Cos I don't know now*

43   *what it would be like not to be like that, you don't know do you, you can't be what you were*

44   *before. You can't be, you know I can't now be before the cancer or before the bereavement or*

45   *before the – you know you don't go back anywhere.*

In this extract, Anna talks about gaining self-knowledge through therapy. In her retirement she has time to think about how she copes with the world. She describes her retirement time as 'a luxury in having time to think' (line 6), yet also acknowledges that this is 'scary' (line12) because you think 'what is stuff about?' (line14) At this point Anna abruptly changes the focus to 'I like walking you see' (line16). Perhaps she needs to move quickly from the 'scary' place of thinking and wondering 'what it's all about?' with its suggestion of futility. In moving to talk about an activity she enjoys 'I like walking you see'. She goes on to describe how her home town is the right place for her compared to the isolation of the village she grew up in for someone like her who was different.

There seemed to be something very symbolic about Anna's 'not know[ing] that the river was round the corner' (line 27-28). Anna's life story involves some difficult life events; the death of a long-term partner at a young age, Anna had recovered from breast cancer twice, a nervous breakdown and an alcohol problem. There is perhaps a link with not knowing about the river with not knowing what is around the corner in life which may sweep one away. Her security is her home and town and her close-knit lesbian community in a life and though 'none of it was her design' (line 33) it became 'the ideal place' (line 34-35) for her to be. Anna speaks of her home town as being the ideal place for her (line 35) suggesting that she was able to see the positives in her life despite the struggles she has faced. So reflecting on Bauer et al.'s (2008) redemptive narrative, here Anna emphasises personal growth in her therapy and recovery from illness and addiction to being a survivor. She charts her movement through difficult times to resilience, recovery, survival and self-knowledge.

The redemption theme continued in different ways in most of the women's stories. Rebecca, who also reported mental health problems at difficult times in her life, has also found self-awareness and self-acceptance through counselling. Teresa, who was depressed and suicidal in adolescence through feeling that she was unacceptable, now makes LGBT affirmative films for and about LGBT teenagers. Sally and Shirley, who came out in their thirties, both report this as a positive and life enriching transition. They are now both in committed intimate relationships and both report rich and fulfilling lives now in their sixties Most of the women were retired but as in their earlier lives they were community focused, most engaging with feminist and women's organisations and doing voluntary work. Most participants' spoke positively about the future, half of the participants had long-term partners; the others spoke

about strong lesbian friendship networks. Most participants welcomed and expressed surprise at the massive legislative changes across their lifetimes for LGBT communities, mentioning civil partnership particularly. Overall the participants expressed satisfaction with their current lives and spoke positively of their current position. Most were financially solvent and enjoying retirement where they felt they had time to pursue their particular interests.

Counter-narratives

Both Sally and Shirley transitioned to a lesbian identity in their thirties. Their narratives are less redemptive in that they report less of a struggle with a stigmatised identity. They both reported a sense of dissatisfaction with a heterosexual identity, and some initial trepidation in adopting a lesbian identity; however, this is mild compared to the distress reported by other participants.

In conclusion, then, in theme four I have described how participants overall life stories are congruent with the Bauer et al. (2008) notion of the redemptive life story, which emphasises personal growth, hard work and framing difficult experiences as transformative and resilience through adversity. The three stories I have looked at use respectively Bauer et al. (2008) narratives of atonement, generativity and self-actualisation in constructing a personal growth narrative.

In summary of the chapter, then, I have highlighted four themes in my analysis and supported my arguments with data transcribed through interviews with participants. In order to present the findings as clearly and accurately as possible I have also described 'counter-narratives'; that is, those participants whose narratives do not fit in with the themes. The four themes were as follows:

1) Where's my story? – Participants reported feeling outsiders as children, this left them feeling isolated and bewildered, feeling that they were unable to fulfil the life trajectory expected of them.
2) Finding a community – as young adults many of the participants found political (and/or social) communities where they felt able to come out and establish an identity.
3) The personal *is* the political - the participants viewed their lesbian identity as more than a

sexual identity, it was intrinsically linked to their political beliefs and value system.

4) Redemption - despite the turmoil's of life due to homophobia and heterosexism, as well as other difficult life events, most participants at the time of interview, were satisfied with their lives.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this section I will first discuss the results by each of the four themes individually before going on to compare my results with the findings of other research on lesbian identity. The final section will be given to discussing the limitations of this study, suggested directions for future research, implications for counselling psychology, and an overall conclusion.

5.1 Theme 1) Where's my story?

Most participants talked about being a 'tomboy' as a child. This has been found in other studies such as Garnets and Peplau (2000) review of retrospective studies, lesbians are more likely than heterosexuals to remember being a tomboy as a child. They argue that these studies are inconclusive because memories of childhood maybe coloured by adult experiences. They also highlighted that most tomboys grow up to be heterosexuals.

The inversion model proposed by the early sexologists Ellis and Addington-Symonds (1897) and Krafft-Ebing (1908/1950 cited by Garnets and Peplau, 2000) constructed the idea that sexual orientation was closely tied to gender. They proposed that heterosexual women were feminine in their physiology, personality and attractions to men, and lesbians were sexual inverts: women who are masculine in their physiology, personality and attractions to men. It may be argued that that 'inversion model' of sexuality was one of the few available discourses for participants around lesbian identity during their childhood. Lesbian discourses would have been scarce for my participants growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, but they may have come across for instance Hall's novel, 'Well of Loneliness' published in 1928 which continued the discourse originally constructed by the19th century sexologists of the 'mythic, mannish lesbian' (Newton 1984),

Perhaps participants' construction of a tomboy identity comes from the inversion model or 'mythic, mannish lesbian' (Newton, 1984) discourse. Participants were accessing one of the few available lesbian discourses available to them.

Kitzinger (1987) argued that researchers perpetuate 'the inversion model' by 'accepting as unproblematic their findings that more lesbians than heterosexual women reconstruct their

childhoods as containing an element of gender non-conformity' (p.69). She argues that researchers ignore the fact that the tomboy theory of lesbianism is now well established in popular culture. She suggests that this retrospective account is translated unquestioningly into literal historical truth and even taken to have diagnostic implications for the future.

Feminism and queer theory may also be influential discourses on the participants' childhood gender non-conformity. The participants' adult feminist and lesbian identities are important aspects of themselves. It is likely then that stories with meaning related to these identities are more likely to be remembered and recalled. As all participants described themselves as feminists, it may be that they are retrospectively adopting the feminist discourse of a lifelong sense of oppression on the basis of gender. This may be manifested in their childhood memories of feeling constrained by the narrow set of behaviours deemed acceptable for girls. Narrative identity theory would propose that the stories we tell of our lives *are* our identity. We create ourselves through our narratives (McAdams, 2006). As life stories are always retrospective, we may story our childhoods according to our adult life. Participants may be creating a childhood 'tomboy' in response to their adult identity. As Munt and Smyth (1998) put it, 'history is often deployed as a narrativised explanation of our adult sexualities' (p.1)

However, it is important to highlight that many lesbians are butch or masculine identified (Newton, 1984) and many have been so since childhood. My argument is that it is curious that so many of the participants report being a tomboy. I suggest two reasons for this. First that the tomboy and the mythic, mannish lesbian (Newton, 1984) loom large in lesbian narrative identity because they were a popular dominant discourse of lesbians for the greater part of the 20th century and one of the few discourses available to my participants in their childhoods. Second, that 'tomboy' seems to be a term adopted by my participants to mean any girl who does not conform to the narrow and restrictive set of behaviours expected for them. The tomboy then, in resisting oppression on the basis of gender, is a young feminist and in subverting gender normative discourses is also queer hero. In storying themselves as tomboys participants may be constructing their narrative identities built on feminist, queer and inversion model discourses.

However as seen in the women's stories the reasons for feeling different as children were not always about gender. Rebecca and Janet report that being clever separated them out as being

different. Similarly, Teresa and Anna report that their intellectual abilities mark them out as different: Anna was one of only two children per year who went to grammar school from her village, while Teresa reports being the only one able to read in her class aged four. Social class is indicated as another difference: Rebecca describes being upper middle class compared to the lower class majority at her school. Anna was one of the few working class girls to make it to grammar school. Teresa did not say 'thee and thou' in her Northern school indicating perhaps a class difference between her and the majority of other children.

Teresa mentioned 'the finger thing' several times throughout the interview. She seemed to be referring to the studies on digital ratio by Manning et al., (2007) who were testing a theory that pre-natal exposure to higher levels of androgen in the womb influence both finger length and sexual orientation. Their study concludes that there is no evidence for this. The Manning et al. (2007) studies are based on the inversion model premise that lesbians are somehow defective masculine women because they have an incorrect hormone level. Teresa seemed to use these studies to suggest a link between gender and sexuality: that lesbians are more like men, using this to explain her gender non-conformity and her feeling of difference as a child. She describes herself as 'queer' suggesting she holds a non-essentialist approach to sexual orientation. It seems incongruent then that she would give attention to such a biological and 'inversion model' premise of sexual orientation. Perhaps, as Kitzinger (1987) argued of one of her participants who exhibited both radical feminist and pathological beliefs about lesbianism, Teresa has been exposed to a range of discourses about lesbianism from pathological to queer theory. While she may have reconstructed her lesbian identity more recently in the light of queer theory, she may have only partially relinquished her earlier inversion model construction.

The participants talked about their difficulties negotiating identity, particularly as children when they were confused and bewildered by the absence of alternative discourses other than a heterosexual trajectory of marriage and children. They talked about having no role models or stories of who they were or could be. This need to create a new, shared identity is seen in the participants' accounts of being part of a generation of women who formed communities based on identity, such as the various feminist networks and the gay liberation front of the 1960s and 1970s. It seems that the shame, isolation and bewilderment caused by having no role models and no affirmation that being different was acceptable, meant that identity and

community became vital for these women.

To summarize, research has shown that lesbians are more likely to report being tomboys than heterosexual women (Garnets and Peplau, 2000). However, accounts are always retrospective and it has been argued that the tomboy theory is a well-established popular discourse (Kitzinger, 1987). The tomboy theory may stem from the inversion model of sexual identity proposed by 19th century sexologists. Inversion theory continues to be perpetuated by scientists who continue to confound sexuality and gender, such as Manning et al. (2007), in their unsubstantiated hypothesis that lesbians have too many male hormones.

Feminist discourse may have influenced participants' narrative of being a tomboy. In the accounts, this seemed to a form of resisting oppression on the basis of gender by which the tomboy becomes a young feminist. Queer theory may also welcome the tomboy as subverting gender normative discourses. Narrative identity theory states that we create our identities through the stories we tell. This was seen in the participants' account of childhood stories that were congruent with their adult feminist, queer and lesbian identities.

5.2 Theme 2: Finding a community

The majority of participants talked about finding either gay or lesbian or feminist groups as young adults. These communities had a transformative effect on their identity, self-esteem and sense of belonging. This period tended to coincide with coming out as a lesbian. In both Teresa and Shirley's extracts in the analysis, they both find feminist groups. Teresa in the late 1960s while at university describes attending the first tentative women's liberation groups. Shirley in the early 1980s describes attending Greenham Common peace camp with a feminist group. For both of these women it seems that the value systems of the groups were more important and wider reaching than the matter of sexual orientation. Richardson (1992) notes, and as covered in more detail in the literature review in Chapter 2, that during the 1970s there was a decreasing emphasis placed on lesbianism as a sexual and erotic experience. Instead, there was greater emphasis on understanding lesbianism in political terms. Lesbian feminists asserted that lesbianism is not simply a sexual practice but a way of life, a political struggle, and a challenge to heterosexuality. The slogan 'Feminism is the theory, lesbianism the practice' (Sedgewick, 1990) was adopted by some lesbian feminists. The view that lesbians are a group with a sexual preference was questioned. Women are

lesbians when they are 'woman identified'. One could still be a political lesbian without ever having had the slightest erotic exchange with another woman (Faderman, 1981). This much wider concept of lesbianism as an ideology and alternative way of life rather than a sexual identity seems to fit with both Shirley's and Teresa's story.

Some of the participants involved in these feminist groups talked about how they were involved in triangular relationships and open relationships. While most participants talked about relationships with women only after adopting a lesbian identity, one participant Teresa, had a long-term sexual relationship with a man, the father of her two children, while she also had relationships with women. Jackson and Scott (2004) suggest that feminists generally agreed that the privatised monogamous couple and nuclear family diverted attention away from wider political issues and struggles and broader social relationships. They argue that feminist critiques of monogamy were not concerned with sexual exclusivity but with 'the institutionalisation of coupledom and the ownership of another individual'. They suggest that this was not an individual matter but part of a collective understanding forged through overlapping political friendship and sexual networks which enabled discussion and challenged emotions such as jealousy and insecurity which were seen as socially constructed.

The communities with which participants became involved facilitated their adopting a lesbian identity. These communities were as likely to be feminist communities as lesbian communities. For most participants, feminist and lesbian identities are overlapping and interlinked. Feminist discourse was influential on participants' values and sexual behaviour, as exampled by their dismissal of traditional monogamous relationships. However, as exampled in the previous chapter, participants also tell stories of how they felt excluded from feminism. This reflects wider criticisms levelled against identity categories as excluding and limiting, these criticisms in turn became part the narrative of identity politics, so it is not surprising to see the criticisms echoed in the participants' narratives.

5.3 Theme 3: The personal is the political

In Sally's description of coming out aged 39, she talks about 'becoming her complete self - aged 40'. This may suggest that Sally viewed her lesbian identity as an essence waiting to emerge. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) study of women who transition to lesbianism after a

long period of heterosexuality, argued that once the participants have adopted a lesbian identity, they then reconstruct a past to develop and maintain their lesbian identity. Previously forgotten experiences or unrecognised feelings come to light. In line with the findings in this study Sally reconstructed a lesbian past once she had adopted a lesbian identity.

With regard to the two participants who transitioned to a lesbian identity after a long period of heterosexuality, both cases would support Kitzinger and Wilkinson's (1995) theory of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Both women talked about dissatisfaction with their heterosexual relationships, both talked about periods where they struggled with adopting a lesbian identity. This suggests that the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian identity as negative, delayed their transition to lesbianism.

However, strikingly absent in the data is participants' views on sex and desire. It seemed they were more comfortable talking about politics than sex. In considering why lesbian sex and desire may be difficult to talk about, one explanation might be its location in lesbian feminist discourse. A number of issues seem to conspire to keep lesbians silent on sex. For example, Hart and Dale (1997) argue that 19th century sexologists pathologised lesbians for their sexual proclivities. This led many lesbian feminists to downplay or deny that sex was an important part of what gave lesbians their identity. Lesbian feminism appropriated lesbianism as a political response to hetero-patriarchal oppression rather than a sexual identity (Roof, 1998). This focus on the political and consequent silence on lesbian desire led to criticisms of desexualising lesbianism (Healey, 1996).

Furthermore, feminist discourses of the period highlighted male on female sexual oppression. One mode of oppression is through sexual exploitation and objectification. Lesbian feminists of this period struggled to find a way to conceptualise desire between women for fear of objectifying and thus sexually exploiting other women. Healy (1996) states that lesbian feminists saw fancying women as based on rules about physical perfection which were seen as discriminatory and reflecting a construction of sexuality which were hostile to women's interest. She goes on to suggest women are socialised not to talk about sexual feelings and desires that lesbian feminists failed to find a language for sex beyond 'mutual, equal and woman–centred' (p.75). Farquhar (2000) argued that past conflicts around lesbian identity as political vs sexual silenced debates and discussion around lesbian sexual practices for fear

of further conflict 'which may have closed down opportunities for the (re) negotiation of lesbian sexual meanings' (p.271).

It seems that narratives of lesbianism have shifted from pathologising lesbian sex, to ignoring it, and finally policing it for power differences, it is little wonder that lesbians have difficulty articulating desire.

To summarise, the participants adopted queer and feminist discourses in the construction of their lesbian identities. For example, the stories emphasised the fluidity and complexity of sexuality in seeing it as a choice rather than an essence. In the past they adopted sexual behaviours proposed by feminist ideology such as non-monogamy. as seen in their accounts in which there was little said about sex and desire. The reasons for this may partly be located in feminist discourses around the sexual oppression of women and the consequent difficulty of finding a language articulating lesbian desire which is non-oppressive.

5.4 Theme 4: Redemption

The participants' narratives were seen to generally fit with what narrative identity theorists call a redemption narrative (Bauer et al., 2008). Redemption refers to a sense of having overcome difficulties and to now be in a place where they are satisfied with life. This is not claiming a perfect happy ending for participants, rather it seemed that they had developed strategies to manage their life stressors such as loss, bereavement and illness. Participants often expressed gratitude for their health, for being financially comfortable at retirement and for their friendships and relationships.

McAdam's (2006) suggests that 'it is in the nature of stories that beginnings and middles lead inevitably to ending and that ending provides a sense of closure and resolution' (p.57). This seemed to be how the participants told their life stories. The research of Bauer et al. (2008) highlighted the importance in the narrative identity process of creating a well-integrated and complete story of a difficult life experience that concludes with a positive ending and emphasis on how emotional wellbeing was restored in a person's life.

Similar to Bauer et al.'s (2008) findings, the participants described actions they had taken to overcome difficulties. Three talked about finding therapy helpful, one participant embarked on an MA then PhD when her long-term relationship ended. Another talked about the importance of living a full life after a number of bereavements which helped her to honour those she had lost. All women talked about their future plans and all reported leading full lives.

Bauer et al. (2008) discuss the importance of generativity in life stories, which demonstrate high levels of well-being. 'Generativity' is taken to mean the successful engagement of developmental tasks' (p.97). They go on to state that the imagery and rhetoric of generativity are an appealing way to conceive the end. By suggesting that one's own efforts may generate products and outcomes that will outlast the self, by framing a life story in terms of those good things, provides stories with what may be perceived as good endings.

All participants reported 'generativity' that is, being involved in activities that are meaningful to them: these included their work, voluntary or paid, their studies, creative projects, community groups, sports and social groups. Bauer et al. (2008) noted that people with high levels of personal well-being emphasise personal growth in their life stories. In these types of stories, difficult life experiences are framed as transformative, whereby they suffered but then gained new insights about themselves, finally they move from suffering to recovery, atonement, resolution or self-actualisation. In considering Bauer et al. (2008) point that framing the difficult as transformative leads to high levels of well-being, it maybe that my sample was self-selecting. That is, my study attracted participants who had a redemptive or positive story to tell about their lesbian lives. It may be that those women with less positive stories were less willing to volunteer.

Another possible explanation of the participants' redemptive narratives is that they are presenting a rose-tinted representation of their lives. The participants are all activist political women who have lived through and experienced first-hand the negative discourses around lesbianism and the damage done to them and others by these discourses. Many told stories about fighting for lesbian rights to combat negative discourses and legitimise lesbian discourses. The stories told could be part of this process of fighting to reverse the negative by presenting lesbians in a positive light. They may have viewed their participation in the

research as an opportunity to reverse the negative discourses perpetuated in the past by psychology (Kitzinger, 1987) and by the social sciences (Plummer, 2009).

The final theme found that participants tended to end their narratives in resolution. They named strategies and told stories of how they have overcome their lives difficulties. This narrative identity style fits into Bauer et al. (2008) concept framing difficulties as ultimately leading to growth and change. I have discussed factors, which may lead to participants to co-construct a good lesbian life in the telling of their life stories.

5.5. Future lesbian identity research

This section will draw some conclusions from previous research on lesbian identity and make suggestions for the future of lesbian research as well as therapeutic practice with lesbians. Given the diversity of experience in developing a lesbian identity amongst my participants, it is unsurprising that in general they did not concur with stage model theory. According to Cass's (1979) model all of the participants, as LGB activists, would have remained in stage 5 (i.e. the activist stage) rather than progressing to the final stage (i.e. identity synthesis). Cass (1979) appears to construct political activism as a stage which is progressed through. it may be argued that she is at best minimising the importance of political values in relation to lesbian identity, at worst she is constructing political activism as an immature phase on the way to becoming a healthy well-rounded lesbian: that is, a lesbian who does not engage with politics.

Given the extent of the influence of political context on the identity development of the participants, future research on lesbian identity could use a qualitative social constructionist approach to better examine issues of power and influence in the research process as well as the socio-political context of participant's lives.

The participants' identity development seemed to concur with Sophie's (1986) looser, less rigid model which includes four stages: 1) First awareness; 2) testing and exploration; 3) identity acceptance; and 4) identity integration. At the same time, condensing the experiences of the participants to these four stages would be crude and reductive. What is notable however is the similarity between stage model narratives and the redemptive narrative of

Bauer et al. (2008). Like the stage models, and the redemptive narrative, the participants' narratives presented a difficult beginning and a substantially better middle and end. This 'struggle to satisfaction' narrative storied in stage models and the redemptive model is perhaps another instance of psychology constructing the subjects it studies by creating a prototype lesbian narrative.

Given the limitations of stages models and their failure to accurately capture the broad range of experiences amongst lesbians, it may be more helpful to think about this as themes or positions, rather than stages, may be more helpful to practitioners requiring guidance on LGBT populations. The BPS guidelines 'Working therapeutically with sexual and gender minority clients' (2012) offer guidance for practitioners on working with LGBT populations. Rather than the pathway formula that stage models subscribe to, this model makes overall recommendations for practice and covers common difficulties experienced by particular sexual minority clients. The guidelines acknowledge diversity amongst sexual minority clients and account for individual differences. For further guidance Byrne and Butler's (2008) work on incorporating queer theory into systemic therapeutic framework in order to deconstruct dominant heterosexual practices, challenge oppressive narratives and to create new perspectives for clients.

In considering future research directions for lesbian identity research, I also want to discuss differences in my findings compared to Kitzinger's (1987) study. Like some of her participants, mine who had previously been in heterosexual relationships emphasised the positive effect of transitioning to lesbianism. Also in agreement with Kitzinger's (1987) study, my participants presented lesbianism within the political context of feminism. All reported that their feminist values were interlinked with their lesbian identity. However, unlike Kitzinger (1987), I did not see depoliticised and pathological accounts in my participants. It is 30 years since Kitzinger gathered her data for 1987 study. It is likely that the older participants in her study would have been influenced by more pathological discourses of lesbianism and as Kitzinger (1987) argues, influenced by the depoliticised 'lifestyle' accounts promoted by psychology and other institutions. My, likely younger, participants were a political cohort, influenced by gay liberation and lesbian feminism, rather than by the pathological and depoliticised identity discourses. This evidences the constructionist notion that identity is shaped by the socio-political context that produces it.

Future social constructionist research is needed to examine which discourses influence younger generations of lesbians in their identity development.

My findings support Read's (2009) narrative identity study of North American lesbians born between 1940 and1965. Like her participants, mine report a lack of lesbian role models leading to denial of feelings towards other women, they discuss non-acceptance and dealing with shame, stigma and self-doubt. Both our groups of participants spoke of the difficulty of acknowledging their attraction to other women given the negative cultural myths and stereotypes about lesbians at the time. Like Read's (2009) participants, mine talked about finally reaching acceptance and affirmation of their sexuality. Both our participants valued 'family of choice', participants of this generation had often experienced stigma from their family of origin and valued other allegiances and friendships in their lives. Like her participants, mine often report a small group of long-term, usually lesbian friends, who are often closer than blood relatives. Read (2009) also noted that many of her subjects had been politically active in multiple realms. This political activism was also linked to the development of a lesbian community'. Read (2009) writes that 'fundamental to the political life world of baby boom lesbians was the explicit construction of a lesbian community. It was within the community that the women could practice a lesbian identity in the service of social action and change' (p.366). This sense of community, either lesbian or feminist, was similarly fundamental to my participants. Future research would be valuable to consider the importance of communities political or otherwise, and their relationship to well-being and identity formation of younger cohorts of lesbians.

Similarly, my findings support Traies (2014) study of the lives and experiences of older lesbians in the UK. She notes the instance of gender non-conformity in participants as children, the inter-linking of a lesbian identity with feminism as well as the reporting of general life satisfaction at time of interview. Traies's (2014) study also highlights the diverse constructions of identity among older lesbians as well as their multiple and overlapping identities within and outside of a lesbian identity.

In conclusion, two key findings in the current study have been the transformative effect of community on the participants as well as the considerable influence of particular discourses (feminist and queer) on their narrative identities. Given the importance of communities and

key influential discourses for my participants, further research could examine their impact on younger lesbian cohorts.

This study has argued that post –positivist frameworks provide limited one dimensional data in their study of lesbians. I have demonstrated some of the problems in using a post positivist framework in the in study of such a diverse group: namely that social, cultural and political context is absent. Future research on lesbians could use a social constructionist epistemology to situate the lesbian subject in context and to provide a critical lens for an examination of psychology's role in constructing its subjects. This could include the further development of queer theory as both a methodological tool and a framework to use in the therapy room.

5.6 Limitations of this study

With only six participants, this study makes no claims to the generalisability of its findings. What is more, like much other LGBT research my participants' were the usual suspects: white, educated and urban. It is acknowledged by LGBT researchers that it is hard to reach participants outside this demographic (Barker, 2004).

The white/educated/urban participants issue is likely to be related to snowball sampling: when a white/educated/urban researcher emails friends and contacts for help recruiting participants, contacts and (email using) participants are likely to conform to the same demographic. That the participants were self-selecting is also likely to have influenced the findings: women ill-at-ease with a lesbian identity would be less likely to volunteer to an in-depth interview on their lesbian life. Indeed, I declined to interview one woman who expressed unease with lesbian identity.

As the researcher, I may also have a vested interest in constructing the life stories as 'good' lesbian lives. I identify as a lesbian and want to represent sexual minorities in a positive way. Barker (2004), reports that much lesbian research suffers from having 'a truncated set of interests, focusing on topics like life satisfaction, morale, adjustment, loneliness, social isolation and particularly sexual habits and desires. This has resulted in large part because of the authors' sincere wish to examine and dispel harmful myths and stereotypes about sexual minorities' (p.38).

To circumvent Barker's critique of lesbian research I have chosen to look at identity construction rather than the topics which Barker (2004) argues have a 'truncated set of interests'. Though I wish to respect, and represent participants and their stories as best I can in this study, in using a social constructionist framework I am less interested in what Barker (2004) describes as 'dispelling harmful myths and stereotypes about sexual minorities' than in examining the construction and consequences of particular discourses about sexual minorities.

Another factor I did not account for in the initial planning of the study was that participants developed a lesbian identity at different times in their lives. The range was from an awareness of attraction to other girls in early childhood to adopting a lesbian identity aged 39. In hindsight it would have been useful to consider the division between what Rosenfeld (2003) refers to as 'birth cohort' and 'identity cohort'; the latter referring to when participants first adopted a lesbian identity. There were significant differences between those participants who adopted a lesbian identity as young adults and the two who transitioned a lesbian identity after lengthy heterosexual relationships in their thirties. These differences are likely to have been due to a changing social context as well as age factors.

Another possible limitation is one found with any research study asking participants about their past: it is reliant on memories. While narrative method is concerned with the meaning of the memory rather than its accuracy, as Willig (2013) asks 'to what extent can a memory produced *now* ever capture what was *then*?' (p.142). Meaning of a memory will change over time, narrative identity construction then is a process constantly in flux.

5.7 Implications for Counselling Psychology

Considering the first theme identified 'Where is my story? I discussed how participants had a very early awareness of dominant discourses around gender and heteronormativity. While still young children, they had placed themselves outside these dominant frameworks which felt confusing, unsafe and isolating. While social attitudes to sexual minorities have improved considerably since participants in this study were young, dominant culture continues to promote heterosexual and gender normative discourses as superior to sexual and gender minority discourses (Butler et al., 2010).

It is important therefore that counselling psychologists are able to offer affirmative discourses and narratives for gender and sexual minorities by stepping out of dominant ideologies and creatively engaging with alternative lesbian theories, stories and possible life trajectories.

Counselling psychology is well placed to lead on this sexual minority affirmative approach with its grounding in a humanistic value base rather than a medical model (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2010). Unlike clinical psychology, psychoanalytic and psychodynamic approaches, counselling psychology does not have the same history of oppressive practice towards sexual minorities (Hicks and Milton, 2010). Counselling psychology highlights the importance of the social and political context of people's lives (Strawbridge and Woolfe, 2010). Such values make a good grounding for affirmative practice, for example, a social and political awareness means counselling psychologists can offer a critique of the effects of heterosexism and homophobia. Counselling psychology's commitment to reflexive practice and personal therapy whilst in training means that counselling psychologists are well positioned to reflect on their own sexuality, their expectations of relationships and their future life trajectories to better enable them to help those sexual minorities who might struggle to see a positive future self.

The second theme identified the importance of community. Participants tended to actively seek out others who held shared values and beliefs to create a safe community. Then, within the safety and affirmation of the community they were able to develop a positive lesbian identity. The actions and values of participants in this theme have close parallels with the actions and values of what Kagan, Tindall and Robinson (2010) describe as 'community counselling psychology' (p.485). Community counselling psychologists have a particular emphasis on social justice and working with the marginalized and disenfranchised in society to collectively resist oppression.

Moaned (1999) describes three different levels in the process of resisting oppression and affecting change. The first level, the personal, is concerned with building strengths such as assertiveness, positive images and role models. The second level, interpersonal, refers to making connections including support, solidarity, handling conflict and cultivating community. Finally, the political level is about taking action, including developing analysis,

exploring options and working towards a vision of a different future. In applying these levels of change to the participants in this study, they were often involved in gay liberation, feminist, and other social justice seeking groups. In terms of personal strengths, the groups allowed participants to build positive images which in turn led to a more positive lesbian identity. Participants made important connections and were often involved in a number of social justice projects, not just feminist or lesbian focused. This created a sense of belonging, strength and solidarity both within communities as well as between communities. Politically, the gay liberation and feminist movements led to huge positive social changes thus demonstrating that vision and mobilisation *en masse* can change society for the better. In line with a community psychology approach, the participants in this study in their community focused analysis and action used collaboration and collective empowerment to effect personal, interpersonal and political change.

Counselling psychologists tend to focus in individualism rather than systems and communities (Kagan et al., 2010). The enormous therapeutic value of finding a like- minded community has long been known by community psychologists and the findings in this study highlight the importance of such communities. The implications here for counselling psychologists are to be mindful of the benefits of contact for clients with likeminded communities which can empower disenfranchised individuals, particularly sexual minorities.

The third theme 'the personal is political' identified that participants viewed their lesbian identity as overlapping with a feminist and political identity, all viewed sexuality as fluid. This is a long way from the essentialist narrative that has dominated mainstream academic discourse on sexual minorities (Hicks and Milton, 2010). It is important for counselling psychologists working with older lesbians to understand that these women may view their lesbian identity as a based on political values and beliefs rather than any innate sexual orientation. Again, counselling psychology's reflective values mean that we are well positioned as therapeutic practitioners to consider our own beliefs about sexual identities, their origins, and how sexual identities may overlap with other identities we value. Crucially, we need to consider how our beliefs about sexual identity may impact on our clients.

The final theme highlights the redemptive narrative within the participants' life stories. This highlights the value for counselling psychologists of the framing of difficulties as

transformative and leading to personal growth. As Bauer et al (2008) noted, people with high levels of well-being emphasise personal growth in their life stories, though they suffered, they gained new insights about themselves and moved from suffering, to recovery and resolution.

Finally, this study highlights the diversity in behaviours among participants; though all identified as lesbian, one had been celibate for twenty years, others had long term loving relationships with men and some were mothers. It seems that adopting a lesbian identity does not predict behaviours or attractions. Counselling psychologists need to be aware that the term 'lesbian' as an identity does not necessarily correspond to a particular lived experience, rather sexuality encapsulates many dimensions including the social, emotional and political. As Hicks and Milton (2010) put it:

'The challenge for counselling psychologists is to recognise that assumptions cannot be made regarding the congruence of a person's sexuality, nor should clients be pushed towards identity foreclosure or the belief that identity, behaviour and attraction have to map onto the sex of a person and be consistent with each other. Instead, our role must be to work towards providing an environment in which an individual can explore different ways of constructing their own unique experiences and identity' (p.260).

It is important that professionals working with older lesbians have an understanding of these women's lives. As far as I am aware this research is the only counselling psychology study looking at the identity construction of this generation of lesbians. This study then is a valuable resource for counselling psychologists and other professionals for understanding the lives and values of the new generation of older lesbians.

5.8 Conclusion

To return to my research question, how have lesbians aged between 60 and 70 constructed their narrative identities in the telling of their life stories? The short answer is similarly and yet differently too.

The similarities I have discussed in the themes I identified:

1) An early sense of feeling different, not feeling that they were able to or wanted to meet others' expectations of them.

2) The importance of finding a community where they felt understood and accepted, this was

often a catalyst in adopting a lesbian identity.

3) A strong feminist and political framework which often constructed a lesbian identity as a belief system and a way of life rather than a sexual identity. Most participants viewed their identity as fluid, as a choice and as changeable.

4) The redemption narrative was present in the life stories of most participants, a story told of a journey from struggle to satisfaction.

While I have argued that participants' identities have been shaped by available discourses, they are not determined by them. Participants reshape their meaning and claims to fit their own stories (Rosenfeld, 2009). This is evident in the many differences between participants: a lesbian identity was adopted at different ages, some reported that they knew that they were lesbians as children, while others were in their 30s before adopting a lesbian identity. Some never had sexual relationships with men, some had important long-term relationships with men and continued to do so while identifying as a lesbian. Some had children and step-children, while others were childless. Some welcomed the advent of civil partnership (interviews were conducted prior to the Same Sex Couples Marriage Act, 2013) as key event for LGBT rights, others saw such changes as a form of surveillance by heterosexual institutions.

I have presented evidence for how participants' narrative identities have been shaped by particular discourses: the inversion model, feminism, queer theory and the redemptive narrative. I have also argued for the importance of a social constructionist and queer epistemology for lesbian research to enable an examination of the social context of lesbian lives, as well as a tool to critique psychology's role in shaping its subjects. This study provides additional counselling psychological knowledge in the under researched area of older lesbians. By using a narrative method I hope I have given older lesbians a voice which has seldom been heard within the discipline of psychology.

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Research Questions.

Life story How have you experienced living with a lesbian identity?

This section of the interview will explore your life story with particular reference to your sexual identity. I am interested in what has been important for you so I will be guided by what you would like to talk about. Things you may want to discuss include: Your early awareness and experiences of same sex attraction

Notable events in childhood or youth around same sex attraction.

How your sexual identity has impacted on your life and how that may or may not have changed over time.

Notable turning points in your life.

How you would describe your younger self.

How you would describe yourself now.

Have you changed over the years?

Happy times.

Difficult times.

What does your life look like from where you are now?

If you could live your life again what would you do differently?

The most important people/places or things in your life.

Values and Belief show do your beliefs and values impact on the way you live?

This section of the interview is interested in the values and beliefs that are important to you. I am interested in how these beliefs and values have shaped your life. Again I will be guided by what you want to talk about. You may want to include:

Your beliefs about causes and origins of sexual orientation.

Beliefs and values that you are important to you- i.e.-political/spiritual

Experiences through which these values and beliefs developed.

How they may or may not have changed over time.

How they have impacted on your life.

What gives your life meaning?

Social -How has society impacted on your life as a lesbian?

In this section I'm interested in broader influences that may have shaped your life and how societal factors have changed throughout your lifetime. You may wish to discuss:

Wider social, cultural and political events that may have impacted on you.

Changes in wider society, particularly related to sexual orientation, which may have impacted on you.

Role models or inspirations.

Positive or negative aspects of living with your sexual identity.

Other identities that are important to you. EG Class/ Ethnicity/ Motherhood/ Professional/Partner/Daughter

How do you think that your experience was different or similar to that of a young lesbian today?

ETHICAL PRACTICE CHECKLIST (Professional Doctorates)

SUPERVISOR: David Kaposi   **ASSESSOR:** Amanda Roberts

STUDENT: Hannah Sale   **DATE (sent to assessor):** 22/11/2011

Proposed research topic: A study of narrative identity in the life stories of lesbians aged 55-65 years.

Course: Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

1. Will free and informed consent of participants be obtained?   YES

2. If there is any deception is it justified?   N/A

3. Will information obtained remain confidential?   YES

4. Will participants be made aware of their right to withdraw at any time? YES

5. Will participants be adequately debriefed?   YES

6. If this study involves observation does it respect participants' privacy? NA

7. If the proposal involves participants who's free and informed
    consent may be in question (e.g. for reasons of age, mental or
    emotional incapacity), are they treated ethically?   NA

8. Is procedure that might cause distress to participants ethical?   NA

9. If there are inducements to take part in the project is this ethical?   NA

10. If there are any other ethical issues involved, are they a problem?   NO

APPROVED

YES

REASONS FOR NON APPROVAL:

Assessor initials: AR   Date: 29/11/11

RESEARCHER RISK ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST (BSc/MSc/MA)

SUPERVISOR: David Kaposi   **ASSESSOR:** Amanda Roberts

STUDENT: Hannah Sale   **DATE (sent to assessor):** 22/11/2011

Proposed research topic: A study of narrative identity in the life stories of lesbians aged 55-65yrs.

Course: Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

Would the proposed project expose the <u>researcher</u> to any of the following kinds of hazard?

1   Emotional   NO

2.   Physical   NO

3.   Other   NO
         (e.g. health & safety issues)

If you've answered YES to any of the above please estimate the chance of the researcher
being harmed as: HIGH / MED / LOW

APPROVED

YES

Assessor initials: AR   Date: 29/11/11

Please return the completed checklists by e-mail to the Helpdesk within 1 week.

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

School of Psychology

Stratford Campus

Water Lane

London E15 4LZ

The Principal Investigator

Hannah Sale.

Contact Details: email – sale_hannah@yahoo.co.uk

Mobile -07867864938

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate a research study. The study is being conducted as part of my Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the University of East London.

Project Title

A study of narrative identity in the life stories of lesbians aged 60-70 years.

Project Description

The purpose of this study is to examine the life stories of lesbians aged 60-70 years.

Lesbian women in this age group have lived through a period of immense social and cultural change in terms of attitudes towards lesbians. This study is interested in how these changes have impacted on the lives of these women. The aim of this study is to equip psychologists with a better understanding of the lives and issues facing older lesbians.

The study requires participants to take part in an interview lasting between 1-3 hours. The interview will be audio-recorded. Participants will be asked questions about important events, memories and people throughout their lives as well as stresses, personal ideology and themes throughout their lives.

In the event that talking about their past causes distress, all participants will be provided with details of local, subsidized, lesbian affirmative counselling.

Confidentiality of the Data

To ensure the confidentiality of the interview data, participants will be identified by a number rather than a name in the preparation and write up of the thesis. All information, recordings and transcribed data will be kept securely with no names or identifying information used. No personal details will be collected from them during the research. Any identifying references will be changed in the transcribing of interviews. Participants should be aware that that the researcher's supervisor and examiners will be able to read extracts from the anonymised transcriptions of interviews.
The audio recordings will be erased on completion of the study. However, the researcher may choose to develop the study for publication in the future. In this case the anonymised transcripts will be kept for further analysis.

Location

The interviews will be carried out at a time and location convenient to the participant. The researcher is flexible about location and is happy to visit the participant at her own home.

Remuneration

There will be no financial gain from taking part in this study.

Disclaimer

You are not obliged to take part in this study and should not feel coerced. You are free to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to withdraw from the study you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason. Please feel free to ask me any questions. If you are happy to continue you will be asked to sign a consent form prior to your participation. Please retain this invitation letter for reference.

If you have any questions or concerns about how the study has been conducted, please contact the study's supervisor, David Kaposi, School of Psychology, University of East London, and Water Lane, London E15 4LZ. Email d.kaposi@uel.ac.uk
or Chair of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Sub-committee: Dr. Mark Finn, School of Psychology, University of East London, and Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.

(Tel: 020 8223 4493. Email: m.finn@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely,

Hannah Sale 13/11/11

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

Consent to participate in a research study

A study of narrative identity in the life stories of lesbians aged 55-65yrs.

I have the read the information sheet relating to the above research study and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.

I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only the researcher(s) involved in the study will have access to identifying data. It has been explained to me what will happen once the research study has been completed.

I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason. [Include if relevant: I also understand that should I withdraw, the researcher reserves the right to use my anonymous data in the write-up of the study and in any further analysis that may be conducted by the researcher].

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

………………………………………………………………………………………….

Participant's Signature

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Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS) HANNAH SALE

………………………………………………………………………………………..

Researcher's Signature

Hannah Sale

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Date: …………………….………

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