

**Life After Death: Experiences of Sibling Bereavement Over the Life Course**

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# Abstract

The sibling relationship is one of the longest and possibly most intimate relationships of a lifetime, capable of informing our sense of self and guiding how we are perceived by others. Due to the likely generational closeness of siblings and unique opportunity for shared familial experiences, brothers and sisters can be inimitably positioned within a person’s relational web. It therefore follows that the death of a sibling can have profound implications for any surviving brothers and/or sisters, initiating a bereavement experience unlike any other. Yet despite its potential significance, the sibling relationship is often overlooked within sociological study and the sibling bereavement experience is largely under studied in comparison to other familial relations. Consequently, it is important to acquire a far greater understanding than currently exists. This thesis therefore prioritises lived experiences of sibling bereavement, as articulated by the 36 participants interviewed. These rich narratives will complement the, currently dominant, medicalised understandings of bereavement by recognising the long-term, relational complexities of life following a death. By acknowledging that people are embedded in time and networks of relationships, bereavement is conceptualised as a highly relational experience, rather than a purely individual, psychological process. This thesis therefore positions itself at the intersection of death, identity, family and personal life literature, in order to enhance current understandings in each field by merging together these, usually separate, bodies of work, thus offering new insight and ideas.

**Key Words**: Siblings, bereavement, grief, identity, relationality, time

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# Chapter One: Introduction

“How many are you, then,” said I,

“If they two are in heaven?”

Quick was the little Maid’s reply,

“O Master! We are seven.”

“But they are dead; those two are dead!

Their spirits are in heaven!”

’Twas throwing words away; for still

The little Maid would have her will,

And said, “Nay, we are seven!”

This extract is taken from a much longer poem published in 1798, titled ‘We Are Seven’ by William Wordsworth (see appendix 1), in which a narrator questions a young maid about the number of siblings that she has. Throughout the dialogue, she consistently states ‘we are seven’, much to the frustration of the narrator, who repeatedly reminds her that two of her siblings are dead. As can be seen in these final two stanzas, the little girl will not be swayed and defiantly includes her deceased siblings in the count. Written during the Romantic period, this era is recognised for its rejection of a reliance on rationality, instead focusing on internal sources for guidance and inspiration whilst placing ‘love at the forefront of human endeavors’ (Stroebe et al., 1996, p.37). With its emphasis on close personal relationships came the understanding that the death of a significant other would have a profound impact upon one’s sense of self; to deny this would undermine the value of the relationship, as well as the spiritual element of death (Stroebe et al., 1996). Consequently, those bereaved would describe their overwhelming grief and the desire to reunite with the deceased in the afterlife and so ‘writings of the time provide some of the most dramatic expressions of the broken heart mentality’ (ibid, p.38).

Interestingly for this thesis, Wordsworth highlights the social nature of grief by demonstrating how those bereaved must interact with others, making decisions about what to say, to whom and when. He also emphasises that personal identity and sense of self are connected to the sibling relationship, particularly the sibling birth order and feelings of belonging linked to being one of a pair or group. As will become clear, these ideas are central to the everyday lived experience of sibling bereavement and so this poem is introduced here as it encapsulates in 69 lines what this thesis explores in depth across the total 8 chapters.

## Defining Key Concepts

Researchers within the field of death and dying often use the terms ‘grief’, ‘mourning’ and ‘bereavement’ interchangeably within their work (Stroebe et al., 2001). By doing this, often without clarifying how these are to be understood, the intended meaning can become confused. As these concepts are referred to frequently throughout this thesis, it is therefore essential to briefly stipulate what is meant by each to ensure clarity of expression, particularly as they are experienced in different ways following a death.

To begin with, mourning is discussed the least within death and bereavement literature, often inaccurately referred to as grief instead. It is most commonly associated with the period of time immediately following a death as it ‘denotes the actions and manner of expressing grief’ (Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson, 1993, p.5). Mourning is therefore the outward reflection of inner feelings (Hagman, 2001) and so it is expected that individuals will mourn largely within the parameters of each society’s norms and values, whether these be geographical, familial or religious social groupings (Stroebe et al., 2001). In contrast to these public displays of mourning, grief is the emotional response to a death (Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson, 1993). Vital to this research, however, is the recognition that grief is ‘a lifelong companion’ (Marwit and Klass, 1996, p. 325), experienced not as one loss but ‘a sequence, perhaps extending over one’s lifetime, of new losses or new realizations of loss’ (Rosenblatt, 1996, p. 50). Grief is therefore the ongoing emotional response to the death of a significant other and whilst it remains over the life course, it is intermittently experienced by the individual according to context.

There are several proposed definitions of bereavement but often these are limited by the assumption that it is a condition to be treated rather than an integral aspect of life (Valentine, 2008). As such, the most useful and relevant conceptualisation of bereavement to this thesis is the idea that it is ‘the entire experience of family members and friends in the anticipation, death, and subsequent adjustment to living following the death of a loved one’ (Christ et al., 2003, p.554)**.** Although seemingly broad and complex, this explanation offers three important points for consideration. Firstly, by specifically identifying friends, as well as family, it highlights that bereavement affects a range of kin beyond family members. Secondly, it acknowledges the complexities of bereavement by suggesting that it can begin prior to the moment of death, such as when a terminal diagnosis has been given[[1]](#footnote-1). Finally, and most importantly for this piece of work, it describes bereavement as an ‘adjustment to living’ rather than a ‘condition’ to be overcome. This reflects a core tenet of this research that bereavement can and should be acknowledged in a non-medicalised way. As Silverman and Klass (1996, p.19) note, ‘people are changed by the experience; they do not get over it’ and therefore it is most appropriate to recognise individuals as accommodating, rather than recovering.

While the above definitions may appear universal, there is great variation in how different cultural and ethnic groups experience grief and mourning. For example, Walter (2017, p. 94) suggests that ‘compared to those who have lived in other societies, contemporary westerners have considerable freedom to grieve who and how they want’. Yet comparison between cultures is problematic due to a lack of insight, as academics have typically focused on ritual when studying non-Western societies and concentrated on emotion when exploring Western societies (Hockey, 2001). According to Walter (1999, p.xiv), this is because there is an assumption that, unlike ‘other’ cultures, ‘mainline white culture’ requires no explanation. Indeed, Ribbens McCarthy (2013, p. p.337) acknowledges that ‘it can be very difficult to see beyond the limits of one’s ‘own’ taken-for-granted cultural assumptions’, and in particular ‘thinking beyond a concept such as ‘bereavement’ may be a hard task for those of us from European and New World societies’. As such, it is recognised that this thesis is very much located within a Western framework of grief, drawing heavily upon literature that relies on Western understandings of grief, mourning and bereavement. Harris (2009, p. 241) conceptualises the West not in geographical terms but takes a ‘philosophical stance that is deemed as “Western oriented”’. A similar approach is adopted in this thesis, used to denote countries which demonstrate an affiliation with typically Western ways of grieving. These will be outlined further within the literature review chapter.

Within this section, the core concepts of bereavement, grief and mourning have been introduced and a selective summary of their core definitions have been reviewed. It was recognised that these definitions should be understood within the Western context in which this study was conducted and an explanation was presented regarding how the term ‘Western’ is to be applied throughout. As this has been established, it is now possible to offer an overview of background information to the research, as well as a summary of the study itself and an outline of the thesis structure.

## Background to the Study

Within academic and non-academic understanding, siblings are most commonly thought of as ‘the biological offspring of the same parents’ (Robinson and Mahon, 1997, p.486), but Gillies and Lucey (2006, p.484) note that a ‘flexible technical definition’, which encompasses the diverse range of sibling relationships visible within increasingly varied family structures, is more appropriate. Indeed, there is more to the sibling relationship than simply the status of being someone’s brother or sister (Davies, 1999). As Davies (Ibid, p.2) notes, it is about ‘so many memories. So many thoughts and feelings – happiness, surprise, frustration, anger, sadness. Brothers and sisters have the capacity to love and to annoy, to comfort and tease, to seethe with anger and to cry with compassion’. As such, the sibling relationship is commonly conceptualised as challenging; simultaneously providing love and support whilst being a source of much anger and frustration (Gillies and Lucey, 2006). This ambivalence has been noted (Heath, 2017), with siblings engaging in fierce conflict whilst maintaining the potential for a close bond (Punch, 2008). For some people, the negative aspects of the relationship outweigh the positive ones and siblings can become estranged from one another. Yet even in these circumstances, siblings report feeling a strong moral imperative to repair the relationship (Eckel, 2015), as there is a presumed permanence to the connection irrespective of closeness (Halliwell and Franken, 2016). Overall therefore, the ‘stickiness’ of the sibling relationship (Davies, 2019) means that it has the potential to be the longest and most intimate tie held over the life course (Fletcher et al., 2013).

Whilst sociological interest in siblings is growing, there remains a noticeable lack of focus in comparison to other familial relations (Davies, 2015). This is somewhat surprising considering the unique place that siblings hold within people’s relational networks. Due to their generational proximity (Milardo, 2010), siblings struggle to exert power over one another (Punch, 2005), thereby relying on bartering and bribery to negotiate wanted or unwanted behaviours (McIntosh and Punch, 2009). However, this means that siblings may be privileged to an element of closeness unachievable by parents as they can share information with one another without fear of punishment. This generational closeness also means that as other family members age and die, siblings may be left as the only people with access to certain knowledge and memories (Milardo, 2010). Brothers and sisters may therefore turn to one another in later life to reminisce about childhood stories, for example, that no one else will have experienced first-hand (Eaves, McQuiston and Miles, 2005). Due to these unique qualities, siblings have the potential to maintain an inimitable role within the self-identification process (Jenkins, 2014). As Edwards et al. (2006) and Davies (2015) highlight, individuals establish who they are and who they are not in comparison to their siblings, whilst others similarly come to understand them in these ways. Sibling birth order also plays a vital role in identity construction (Gillies and Lucey, 2006), as it can create a feeling of familiarity and belonging (DeVita-Raeburn, 2004). Moreover, popular media, news, educational policy and family/school practices reinforce a set of normative roles according to birth order, which can influence the way that people perceive themselves and their position within the family (Davies, 2019).

Clearly then, the sibling relationship has the potential to be one of the most significant held over the life course. The death of a brother or sister can therefore have a profound and long-lasting impact on any surviving siblings. Indeed, ‘the loss of a sibling can be a crippling blow to our understanding of who we are, and how we function and relate to others’ (DeVita-Raeburn, 2004, p.4). Yet there is a distinct lack of focus across disciplines on sibling bereavement (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017), particularly those which recognise the value of complex experiential knowledge gathered using qualitative methods (Neimeyer and Hogan, 2001, p. 113). Research that is currently available is overwhelmed with medical and psychological conceptualisations of grief, which emphasise individual pathology and thereby largely fail to acknowledge the social aspects of bereavement (Valentine, 2008). They also neglect the lifelong nature of bereavement by focusing on grief in the short term, often prioritising ways to facilitate ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ grief (Rostila et al., 2012; Sveen et al., 2013). Consequently, there is a ‘relative absence of sociological and cultural studies of bereavement in the contemporary West’ (Walter, 1999, p.xv), leading to several gaps in knowledge which this research aims to address.

## The Study

This thesis documents the experiences of 36 siblings, and their adjustment to life following the untimely death of their brother and/or sister. In-depth interviews, lasting approximately 2-3 hours each, were conducted in various locations across England with participants who were aged between 19 and 66 years at the time of meeting. Responding to the academic failure to acknowledge sibling bereavement and recognise the significance of this for the individual, the primary aim of this research is to learn more about people’s everyday lived experiences of sibling bereavement, whilstdrawing out the temporal aspects of this as it is managed over the life course. In order to meet this overarching objective, a set of research questions has been devised, although these will be clarified at the end of the literature review once the context for their development has been established. The dominance of the medical model of grief within academia is also reflected within current bereavement and counselling support services. Therefore, a secondary aim of this research is to encourage and develop a more holistic understanding of grief and bereavement, one which recognises the social aspects of this experience, by sharing the findings with relevant charities and practitioners.

Whilst applying the lens of sibling bereavement, it is evident from the research questions that this project is mostly concerned with the living, specifically how people adapt to life following the death of a brother or sister. As a result, literature drawn upon throughout the thesis is from a broad range of sociological fields, including identity, family, personal life, death and time. Bringing it together in this way demonstrates the nuanced approach this thesis is adopting and highlights the positioning of the research at the intersection between these different areas of study. Overall, therefore, this thesis uniquely locates itself at a cross-section between a range of sociological sub-disciplines in order to extend current understandings of each. Core theoretical influences include Jenkins’ concept of social identity, Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphors, Davies’ view of sibling identity formation, Smart’s emphasis on embedded relationality, May’s outline of normative temporal scripts and Klass, Silverman and Nickman’s ‘continuing bonds’ understanding of bereavement.

Drawing upon these, as well as other theorists and original data, this thesis demonstrates that sibling bereavement is an inherently social experience, heavily embedded in time and relationships. In particular, it highlights the complexities of the relationship between siblings and their parents following the death of a brother or sister. It also emphasises the potentially significant consequences of this experience for the way that people perceive their own sense of identity and subsequently make decisions about how to present this to others. This innovative and original insight into people’s experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course advances the social model of grief, where currently the medical model dominates, with the intention to enhance the provision of bereavement support services currently available to surviving siblings. The sheer dearth of sociological literature on sibling bereavement means that it is not possible for this thesis to fill all of the identified gaps. It does, however, make a number of significant contributions, which are identified across the following 7 chapters.

## Structure of the Thesis

Following on from this introductory opening, Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to this thesis. As indicated previously, it draws together research from a range of disciplines and sociological sub-fields to offer a thorough outline of the work which informs and shapes the analytical lens of this project. For ease of understanding, Chapter 2 is divided into 3 sections. Part A, titled ‘Grief and Bereavement’, outlines and critically evaluates the prominent models of grief and bereavement before considering these in the context of the family. Part B, titled Relational Selves in Time, acknowledges that individuals are embedded in wider social networks, as well as in time, and explores how this impacts upon a sense of self. Finally, Part C, titled Siblings, locates the sibling relationship within the context of the family and explores the value of being and having a brother or sister, before concluding with a summary of currently available sibling bereavement studies. Whilst detailing what is currently known, the literature review also highlights where there are gaps in knowledge, clarifying how this research fits into those gaps and the original contributions that are made as a result. Finally, it concludes by introducing the research questions that are to be addressed throughout this thesis.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methods and methodology employed in this research. It outlines in detail how the study was designed and implemented in order to meet the aforementioned research aims in the most appropriate and effective way. The chapter begins with an exploration of theoretical considerations, making clear why a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews was the most suitable for this project. Discussion then turns to the more pragmatic aspects of the research design, such as information about how participants were recruited, as well as an overview of the 36 individuals who were eventually spoken with. Information is also given about how the interviews were conducted and then analysed. In addition, consideration is given to the role of the researcher, including the researcher’s positionality as a bereaved sister, as well as participant welfare and reflections on the process of conducting interviews with bereaved siblings.

Chapter 4 presents the first of the four original findings chapters that are included within this thesis. It builds upon existing knowledge of the sibling relationship by offering several detailed accounts of what it means to be and have a brother or sister, whilst also exploring people’s expectations regarding the normative sibling relationship over the life course. In line with the research aims, these ideas are considered through the lens of sibling bereavement, recognising a series of additional future losses that are linked to the death of a brother or sister, such as the opportunity to become an aunt or uncle. Consideration is also given to the impact that the death of a sibling has upon people’s sense of self, particularly in relation to potential adjustments within the sibling birth order and how that is negotiated by the individual. Throughout this discussion, it is made clear that bereavement is a social experience and so this idea is considered further in the following chapter.

Chapter 5 highlights the social nature of grief as it is embedded in a series of wider relational networks. As such, the sibling bereavement experience is shaped and influenced by a number of people over the life course, including but not limited to parents, partners, friends and colleagues. These relationships can be experienced as both help and hindrance, providing comfort and support or inducing a sense of burden and obligation of care. Although, adherence to such binaries is unrealistic as kinship ties are often much more complicated than a positive or negative divide implies. Discussion in this chapter focuses on relationships with the sibling’s friends, nieces and nephews, and with parents. Whilst a range of additional connections were raised during the interviews, these relational ties featured more often than most and also each bring to the fore a different theoretically substantial aspect of sibling bereavement. Significantly, discussion in this chapter challenges the previously held assumption that expectations of care towards parents are imposed upon surviving sons and daughters, instead highlighting that the relationship between children and parents following the death of a sibling is complex, requiring ongoing negotiation and management.

Chapter 6 continues to emphasise the social nature of bereavement by considering the social norms associated with hierarchies of grief as a contextual factor which may further influence the sibling bereavement experience. Throughout the interviews, participant comments regularly reflected an implicit set of assumptions regarding their claim to grief, particularly in relation to their parents. In line with current research, siblings often felt that their bereavement was overlooked and undermined and so this study builds upon these ideas by questioning how and why siblings experienced their grief in this way. The role of kin and clinicians in enforcing social hierarchies of grief are therefore explored in his chapter. Consideration is also given, however, to the ways that individuals negotiate their own understanding of these hierarchies, including their positioning within them. Overall, siblings were keen to emphasise the importance of recognising difference and individual experience, which prompts discussion regarding the necessity of grief hierarchies considering the effect they have on those upon whom they are imposed.

Chapter 7 offers the final of the four original findings chapters that are presented by this thesis. It draws heavily upon Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphors to explore the decision-making processes behind when and how individuals disclose their status as a bereaved sibling, as well as when they discuss their sibling with others. Due to the Western taboo associated with death, a mismanaged performance can lead to stigma and a spoiled identity and so this must be carefully navigated by those bereaved. As such, this chapter outlines the strategies employed by those interviewed in order to control their impression management, as well as considerations that were made before choosing to discuss their sibling, such as perception of the audience and perceived longevity of the relationship. It is highlighted how direct questions, such as the number of siblings that someone has, can cause great difficulty for those bereaved as it forces a performance they are unprepared for. This chapter finishes by exploring the role of time in the performance, noting that the passing of time can make it easier for siblings to express their bereavement, whilst also limiting the opportunity they have to speak about their sibling with others.

Chapter 8 concludes by summarising the main findings of this research. Rather than providing individual chapter summaries, the central themes of relationships, identity and time are outlined in turn. By structuring the conclusion in this way, ideas from across the 4 findings chapters are brought together under each analytical theme in order to present a more coherent narrative of ideas. As part of each theme, a number of key findings are presented and it is made clear how these offer an original contribution to knowledge. Following this, discussion presents a number of suggestions for possible future studies, as well as a brief overview of potential applications for practice. Finally, the thesis acknowledges the limitations of the project and concludes with some personal reflections on the ‘doing’ of the research.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

## Introduction

The academic area of Death Studies is still in its infancy, only initiating development as a field in its own right towards the end of the twentieth century. In this time however, it has expanded quickly and the range of scholarly contributions have significantly grown in both number and reach (Woodthorpe, 2009). Yet its relative newness means that there are still several gaps in the knowledge base and an imbalance in disciplinary contributions. Moreover, whilst Death Studies encapsulates death, dying and bereavement, there is a lack of focus on the latter of these elements as priority is often given to issues such as palliative care, bodily disposal and funerary practices (Walter, 1999). Although Death Studies is not a discipline in its own right, it is often disconnected from other sociological fields and perceived as a niche category of study (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016) As such, core sociological theories are often not applied across boundaries to the extent that they could be. This thesis will address this by drawing on a wealth of literature from a range of disciplines and sociological fields, applying them in new and novel ways to make an original contribution to understandings of siblings, family, identity and bereavement.

This literature review is split into three sections for ease of understanding. Drawn together in the conclusion, each of these largely separate knowledge bases will be interlinked in order to address the overall research aim. Part A will begin by outlining the changing paradigms within understandings of grief and bereavement, offering a brief overview of the transition from broken bonds to continuing bonds, as well as a critical discussion considering the value of such models. It will then proceed to discuss death in the family, exploring how families greatly shape and influence the bereavement experience. This social nature of bereavement will be drawn out further in Part B, recognising that the individual is embedded within a network of wider kinship ties, as well as in time, as beings whose identity is constantly changing over the life course. The final section, Part C, will begin by conceptualising the family and locating the sibling relationship within this context. It will then explore the available sibling literature and suggest how being and having a sibling, as well as sibling birth order, may contribute towards constructions of self-identity, before ending with a summary of previously conducted sibling bereavement studies.

## Part A: Grief and Bereavement

### Models of Grief

According to Dennis (2012, p.394), ‘tales of intolerable anguish and lifelong mourning with respect to the loss of loved ones are common if not prevalent’ within cultures dating back to ancient eras. As mentioned in the introduction, these attitudes towards grief and bereavement remained throughout the Romantic period (Stroebe et al., 1996), as well as the Victorian era (Neimeyer, 2001). However, these views began to shift, predominantly within the Western world, at the start of the twentieth century. The prompt for this change is generally perceived to be the publication of Freud’s (1917/1961) article ‘Mourning and melancholia’, in which he presents mourning as work that must be completed if the mind is to become uninhibited and free. He conceptualises love as the attachment of libidinal energy but argues that there is a limit to this energy reserve and thus, after the death of a loved one, ties must be withdrawn so that future attachments can be formed. Grief therefore is the ‘emotional and solitary process in which mourners had to withdraw from the world in order to detach’ (Payne, Horn and Relf, 1999, p.59). Since Freud’s (1917/1961) highly influential paper, there have been numerous additional theories that build upon his ideas, such as Lindemann’s (1944) argument that grief typically adheres to a recognisable pattern or Bowlby’s (1961) view that detachment from the deceased must be established as part of adaptive mourning behaviour. Several other works have contributed to the bereavement literature (such as Pollock, 1975; Peppers and Knapp, 1980; Parkes, 1986), including Kübler-Ross’ (1969) Stages of Grief[[2]](#footnote-2), leading to the dominant view ‘that for successful mourning to take place the mourner must disengage from the deceased, and let go of the past’ (Silverman and Klass, 1996, p.4).

This ‘broken bonds’ model of grief, characterised by the view that ‘[r]educing attention to the loss is critical, and good adjustment is often viewed as a breaking of ties between the bereaved and the dead’ (Stroebe et al., 1996, p.32), remained dominant in the West throughout most of the twentieth century[[3]](#footnote-3). However, it was questioned increasingly towards the end of the twentieth century and the release of Klass, Silverman and Nickman’s (1996) *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* is considered to have ‘caused something of a pendulum swing, whereby the focus in the scientific literature came to be placed more on the benefits of continuing a connection with a deceased person’ (Stroebe, Schut and Boerner, 2010, p.259). This influential publication ‘formally coalesced the notion of a “continuing bonds” model’ (Dennis, 2012, p.396), as it brings together contributions from several key theorists who support the view of bereavement as an adjustment rather than a detachment. Developed out of the editors’ combined research experience, the central premise behind the continuing bonds model is that bereaved individuals do not sever ties to the deceased but instead employ a variety of methods to maintain an inner relationship, such as talking to them, keeping their possessions, visiting the gravesite and acting on their behalf (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996).

Although the continuing bond is described as an inner interaction, it is recognised that ‘immediate family, cultural group, or larger society, can influence the individual’s desire and ability to remain involved with the deceased’ (Silverman and Nickman, 1996b, p.349), whilst the continued relationship with the deceased can also impact upon the survivor’s behaviour within the wider community. This therefore contextualises the relationship within a broader social network and recognises the reciprocal impact that this communal positioning can have on both the individual and their social existence. Moreover, it is acknowledged that these relationships are not static but evolve over time as the bereaved gain a greater level of awareness and understanding through maturity, whilst resolution is achieved once this bond is successfully adapted and integrated into everyday life (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996). Yet Silverman and Nickman (1996b, p.349) clarify that they ‘do not have a common definition of what is meant by an inner representation or an interactive relationship’, due to the variety of ways in which individuals report maintaining the bond. For example, some assign the deceased an active role, such as referring to their principles or wishes as guidance of how to act, whereas others perceive the deceased as passive. It is therefore suggested that to ‘understand the nature of the bond with an absent person, we also need to understand the relationship that existed prior to the loss’ (Silverman and Nickman, 1996b, p.350). This recognises that the uniqueness of the grief experience is intrinsically tied to the uniqueness of our social relationships and thus to gain understanding of the former requires exploration of the latter. Moreover, it acknowledges that relationships with an individual exist within a wider community or network of relationships and so these too must be recognised if a greater understanding of the bereavement experience is to be achieved.

In the same year that *Continuing Bonds* (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996) was published, Walter (1996) also sought to challenge the longstanding clinical conceptualisation of grief by proposing his biographical model. He outlines what he considers a ‘revolutionary’ movement, which seeks to revert away from modernist grand theories of grief towards a post-modern understanding that prioritises individual choice and experience. Using an autobiographical approach to present his own losses as case studies, he argues that resolution focuses not on withdrawing ties from the dead but instead attempts to locate an appropriate place for the deceased in the bereaved’s life. According to Walter (1996), this is achieved by speaking with others who knew the deceased as a way to construct an accurate biography and clarify the role they played in each person’s life. He emphasises the social nature of grief by contending that these are external dialogues and therefore ‘not social support for an intrinsically personal grief process, but an intrinsically social process’ (Walter, 1996, p.13). This is essential as others must be allowed to contribute to, challenge and update our understanding of the deceased if it is to remain accurate and stable in resolution. Walter (1996) refers to the work of Giddens (1991) to suggest why this process is so important, highlighting that as roles are no longer dictated by tradition, it is no longer certain who individuals are and how they fit into our lives, and so ‘[w]orking out who the deceased really was, what she was like, how I related to her, how she died, and checking this against others’ accounts is surely how the late-modern individual emerges from the other side of loss’ (Walter, 1996, p.15).

Yet Walter’s (1996) theory is not without criticism. Footman (1998, p.292) asserts that there is insufficient substance to Walter’s argument for it to be considered a ‘model’, commenting that it is ‘woefully short of research’. She also challenges the notion of establishing a ‘true’ and ‘accurate’ biography, questioning whether it is possible to ever really know the ‘truth’ of who someone is. While Stroebe (1997) commends him for removing grief from a medical context and relocating it in a societal context, she argues that the ongoing relationship with the deceased is fundamental to the grieving process, rather than any need to ascertain a common narrative of who the deceased was. In addition, Stroebe (1997) states that individuals can create a stable biography for the dead by themselves and highlights that this may be the only option for those who find communication with others an impossible feat, due to age or location for example. In his response article, Walter (1997) agrees that some individuals may be able to establish a biography by themselves but argues that it is essential to remain aware that some may wish to speak with others. In addition, he concedes that the narrative need not be true or agreed, but must simply be practical; for example, knowing enough about a father to predict how he would have wanted his children to be raised. He also acknowledges that this biography may not be stable and instead suggests that it will develop over time, particularly if the bereavement occurs in childhood, as the individual will come to understand the loss differently as they mature. Grief narratives are therefore fluid and may alter as the individual ages, gains new experiences and develops a new awareness or perspective of their grief. Overall, Walter’s (1996) proposed model retains value, despite these criticisms, as it acknowledges the temporality of bereavement and contributes towards a social understanding of grief by recognising the potential role of others in shaping the bereavement experience.

### Models of Grief?

Small (2001, p.34) argues that the risk of these models becoming a new orthodoxy is that ‘those people who present evidence of the benefits of disengagement could find themselves at risk of exclusion’. Creating a new paradigm therefore has the potential to harm individuals as it establishes a new binary of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. A similar concern is raised by Valentine (2008, p.174), who highlights the dangers of ‘imposing a model of how things ought to be’ due to the ‘messiness and unpredictability of living with dying and bereavement’. It is therefore vital that individuals do not have prescribed models of grief imposed upon them for fear of causing harm through isolation or segregation, whilst the unique experiences of grief recalled by participants should be recognised and valued in equal measure throughout the research process. Indeed, Dennis (2012, p.414) echoes this point: ‘Though this researcher and many contemporaries believe that subscription to the newer visions of grief is most likely beneficial, this is not necessarily the case, and certainly would not be for every individual mourner.’ Yet this belief that ‘subscription to the newer visions of grief is most likely beneficial’ reflects a wider misapplication of the continuing bonds discussion that has occurred frequently since its initial publication. Klass (2006, p.844) refers to ‘The Causality Thesis’ to describe some theorists’ and clinicians’ preoccupation with the notion of whether continuing bonds can help individuals to cope with bereavement in a healthier manner. For example, Stroebe and Schut (2005, p.486) argue that Klass, Silverman and Nickman’s (1996) book ‘fails to demonstrate that continuing bonds are actually associated with a healthy ongoing life’, whilst Field, Gal-Oz and Bonanno (2003) report that continuing bonds are not considered to support long-term adaptation. Yet these studies are missing the point, as Klass (2006) is keen to establish that these views are a misinterpretation of his work and at no time was it claimed that continuing bonds would lead to better adjustment.

Despite this, however, some theorists still misunderstand the purpose of the continuing bonds model, reflecting what Granek (2013) describes as a ‘disciplinary wound’ felt by those working in what Rose (1990) identified as the psy-disciplines (psychiatry, psychology etc.). Granek (2013, p.277) argues that these disciplines frame grief in ‘a medical, scholarly, scientific model’ and consequently ‘what has become “normal” in the research domain… is a dissociated mode of procuring knowledge about grief that has led us to focus entirely on symptoms, dysfunctions and treatments’. Indeed, non-sociological studies remain highly medicalised overall and often adopt a positivist approach, using questionnaires, surveys and grief scales to conceptualise death and bereavement in clinical terms (see Hogan and DeSantis, 1992, 1996; Howard-Sharp et al., 2018), with a focus on how to facilitate ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ grief (see Rostila et al., 2012; Sveen et al., 2013). Yet such an approach fails to recognise the ‘experience of death and bereavement as integral to life rather than a condition to be treated’ (Valentine, 2008: p.3). According to Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996, p.xix), an implication of their ideas is that researchers should re-evaluate the way that relationships are viewed in society and it should be brought into ‘professional dialogue the reality of how people experience and live their lives, rather than finding ways of verifying preconceived theories of how people should live’. As such, research should explore and reflect how individuals maintain relationships with the deceased, interpret their grief narratives and construct their own lives in bereavement without limiting these understandings to a pre-determined position. For example, the prevailing assumption that grief is a negative emotion and that recurring grief indicates maladaptive behaviour has been challenged by Rosenblatt (1996, p.55), who suggests that it ‘would be a mistake to think of grief as necessarily a bad thing’. This is because it may affirm how significant the relationship with the deceased was, whilst memories may elicit sad yet cherished thoughts of times experienced together. It is therefore imperative to discover further the meaning that individuals attribute to their grief narratives by facilitating the opportunity for participants to consider this openly, whilst ‘really listening and respecting the ideas, experiences and language of the bereaved’ (Rosenblatt, 2018, p8).

This discussion links to an argument made by Woodthorpe and Rumble (2016), who recognise that there is a disconnect between the Sociology of Death and mainstream sociological study of family, relationships and personal life, which means that a relational perspective is largely absent from the death, dying and bereavement literature (Broom and Kirby, 2013). Instead of questioning how people maintain and negotiate kinship ties following a death, the introduction of *Continuing Bonds* (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996) initiated a focus on how the living maintain ongoing relationships with the dead (Valentine, 2008). Due to this separation between the Sociology of Death and Sociology of Family, Woodthorpe and Rumble (2016, p.243) argue that ‘barely any mention has been made of the way in which relationships are both shaped by, and shape experiences of, death, dying and bereavement’. Although, there are a small number of studies which have begun to explore the way that death impacts upon families and the way they ‘do’ relationships following a bereavement; specifically, in relation to inheritance (see Finch and Mason, 2000; Gilding, 2010) and funeral planning (see Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016; Woodthorpe, 2017). Clearly though, more is required and so ‘sociologists working within the Sociology of Death need to embrace and explore the relational aspects of death more explicitly’ (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016, p.244). As a result, Woodthorpe and Rumble (2016, p.244) situate their paper at the ‘intersection of the Sociology of Death and the Family’. It is at this same intersection that this thesis is located. As such, it offers the first exploration of sibling bereavement using a relational perspective to acknowledge the wider influences on this experience.

The models of grief presented in this section offer an interesting array of ideas that can be adapted when theorising about bereavement experiences. However, as discussion demonstrates, adherence to these models can be problematic and potentially impose a set of normalised ideals upon those who are grieving. As such, this thesis will draw upon these ideas but resist any application of these models in order to move away from medical conceptualisations of grief and instead recognise the complexity of individual experience. A significant part of this experience is shaped by our relationships with others, particularly family members, as will now be discussed.

### Death in the Family

Originally proposed by psychiatrist Murray Bowen (1978), Family Systems Theory conceptualises the family as a complex emotional unit and has since been adapted for application in several areas of study. According to Gilbert and Gilbert (2017, p.159), a ‘family systems perspective considers the way relationships within the family and among family members, as well as the relationship between the family and other elements of the social environment, influence individual and family bereavement’. Within the family, members participate in multiple overlapping subsystems which can sometimes contrast with one another. For example, individuals maintain both sibling and parent/child relationships but the requirements of each connection may lead to conflict. It is suggested that these family systems are maintained by rules that are subject to constant renegotiation but that an event, such as the death of a family member, may challenge the existing rules, resulting in new ones being established and internal structures being re-negotiated (Rosenblatt 1993; 2018). Valentine (2008) similarly argues that, in response to death, family members each assume a different role and status with varying obligations and expectations but suggests that the adopted position of each family member is influenced by a combination of individual agency, rules within the family system and various cultural norms, including age, gender and relation to the deceased. Whilst Rosenblatt (1993; 2018) and Gilbert and Gilbert (2017) raise interesting points about the way that family can shape experiences of bereavement, their insistence on rules and systems implies rigid application and therefore lacks flexibility.

Valentine (2008) notes that a shared understanding of grieving rights and collective awareness of who was perceived as the family’s ‘primary griever’ heavily influenced how participants experienced their grief, as some reported feeling more distressed for the ‘primary griever’ than themselves, whilst others withheld their feelings to prevent causing further upset. However, not all of Valentine’s (2008) participants felt so obliging towards the notion of a ‘primary griever’, instead arguing that this diminished their own sense of grief and caused them to feel isolated. Yet Robson and Walter (2012, p.101) assert that ‘there are hierarchies of loss, and there have to be hierarchies of loss’, for practical reasons such as inheritance law, but also to develop social norms which guide people in knowing how to respond appropriately to the bereaved. For example, they claim that it would be inappropriate for someone to react similarly to a parent who has lost a child and an owner who has lost a pet. Thus they suggest that grief hierarchies are recognisable and legitimate theoretical structures, allowing for a more complex conceptual scale of loss to be established. Robson and Walter (2012) assume no consensus about grief norms and therefore talk of hierarchies as a plural, rather than singular, concept. Yet while grief hierarchies can be fluid, there are limitations to this and a recognisable pattern is still identifiable. For example, the location of a sibling within the hierarchy will vary according to whether the deceased was a minor, had a married spouse, or children, but they will always feature higher than grandparents and friends (Robson and Walter, 2012). Nevertheless, people’s relational positioning within these grief hierarchies has the potential to influence the sense of entitlement that those bereaved feel they have to grieve, as well as the extent to which others recognise that grief.

In her interviews with the bereaved, Valentine (2008, p.91) comments that she had ‘expected people to talk in terms of private and individual grief reactions and symptoms, yet their accounts conveyed the inherently social nature of grief’, due to the intrinsic link between their daily grief experiences and the wider social environment, including people, places, items and activities. This, in part, reflects Rosenblatt’s (1996, p.52) argument that ‘[i]ndividual grief does not occur in a relationship vacuum’. Indeed, Valentine (2008) points out that after the death of a close friend or family member, the bereaved’s network of relationships is comprised of people who may or may not also be grieving, which consequently impacts upon the individual’s existing social functioning patterns. For example, her participants expressed surprise regarding the extent to which other people’s grief affected their own, suggesting that it caused further distress or prompted them to withhold their feelings in order to support family members. As a result, Rosenblatt (1993) notes that when families are perceived to be collectively grieving, for example at a funeral or memorial service, there may be a greater diversity of needs and emotions than is publicly displayed. Valentine (2008) concurs, suggesting that private mourning could be a consequence of family dynamics rather than a need to demonstrate emotional restraint. Similarly, Mahon and Page (1995, p.19) found that the participants’ concept of emotions or behaviours suitable to the bereaved were heavily influenced by the reactions of others in the family, noting that ‘their responses were sometimes judged as right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate. These judgements in turn affected the children’s perceptions of their own bereavement’. As a result, the children in their study reported altering their external behaviours whilst also regulating their inner feelings according to what they perceived as acceptable, leading to feelings of loneliness and periods of self-initiated isolation for some participants. Consequently, Hockey (2001) is keen to highlight that what we think and feel can be as socially constructed as our actions and so it is important to recognise this interplay between self and society.

Not all family influence is problematic however, and it is important to consider the positive ways in which family can help when grieving. For example, Riches and Dawson (2000) claim that family and friends can provide valuable social support to those coping with grief by offering a safe environment in which to express difficult emotions, whilst Goldman (2017) highlights several ways that parents can support children when grieving the loss of a sibling. Rosenblatt (1993) argues that even social support considered burdensome may in fact be helpful if it distracts the bereaved or, in contrast, forces them to confront their grief. This point demonstrates that relationships are rarely experienced as a binary of positive or negative and instead occupy the complex space between the two ends of the spectrum. Consequently, a more nuanced approach which recognises the intricacies of family relationships must be adopted. For example, several of Valentine’s (2008) participants reported feeling a sense of duty towards bereaved family members, as well as the deceased, which some viewed as detrimental and inhibiting to themselves but maintained out of loyalty borne from invested kinship ties. Although not referring to bereavement specifically, Finch and Mason (1993) explore the notion of family obligation, agreeing that kin relationships respond at times of crises by offering practical and emotional support but state that this assistance is more fluid than Family Systems Theory suggests, operating via a pattern of guidelines rather than rules. Moreover, they claim that ‘a sense of responsibility for helping someone else *develops* over time, through interaction between the individuals… thus are *created*, rather than flowing automatically from specific relationships’ (Finch and Mason, 1993, p.167). To withdraw from these situations can be costly to the individual’s sense of identity, as well as their moral position in the family and wider community, hence why people feel obligated to fulfil a responsibility to their kin. Clearly then, the expectations of duty and care towards family members that are likely to arise following a death induce an array of mixed feelings which must be managed alongside emotions of loss and grief (Valentine, 2008).

### Part A Summarised

Overall, this section makes clear that family has the potential to exert great influence over the individual bereavement experience, be it positive, negative or, more likely, a mixture of the two. Moreover, family practices are diverse and do not adhere to a rigid set of rules, and so each individual experience of bereavement will be unique. Even members of the same family will be affected in different ways according to their roles and responsibilities. Clearly then, grief and bereavement are highly social experiences that adjust over time and should be conceptualised in this way, rather than as an intrinsic, psychological process. This section therefore highlights the original contribution of this thesis as it moves away from a medical model of grief towards a more nuanced approach which acknowledges the way that bereavement is embedded in time, as well as a range of relationships, particularly those with family. As Woodthorpe and Rumble (2016) highlight, this perspective is largely missing within the Death Studies literature and so it is necessary to now consider how the sociologies of personal life, time and identity can be drawn upon to enhance understanding.

## Part B: Relational Selves in Time

### Embeddedness and Relationality

Smart (2007, p.45) outlines the concept of embeddedness as a counterweight to the theory of individualism, claiming the ‘importance of always putting the individual in the context of their past, their webs of relationships, their possessions and their sense of location’. Whilst she acknowledges the heavy presence of individualisation theory, she also states that it has become ‘a conventional wisdom that familial roots which can locate a person emotionally, genetically and culturally are essential for ontological security and a sense of self’ (Smart, 2007, p.81). Yet she claims that there is often a common assumption of embeddedness within one’s family history so it is regularly taken for granted and thus not fully recognised. For example, she notes that the telling of family stories enables knowledge and traditions from the past to contribute towards the present or future self and has the potential to connect the living with the dead. Consequently, she argues that individuals should be located within historical webs of relationships that exist across time, including ancestors and the deceased, as these relatives continue to shape our current understanding of self through their presence in family stories, photographs (Finch, 2007) and heirlooms (Finch and Mason, 2000). Smart (2007, p.83) comments that this ‘builds a shared history and shared ancestry which makes the ‘new’ generation belong’, echoing Edwards’ (2000) suggestion that the past helps to form the present, as it frames our perceptions and provides a context for our understanding. However, whilst Smart (2007, p.83) suggests that family stories may ‘carry greater significance than community-based stories’ due to the value and social positioning of kinship ties, it is imperative to recognise the diversity of relationships within which people are embedded and regard the worth placed upon those bonds by the individual. This is important as Smart (2007) highlights how difficult it can be to remove oneself from these relationship webs, both physically and emotionally, as they can continue to impact on our thoughts and actions from a distance. Consequently, she stresses that ‘[e]mbeddedness and connectedness are therefore not to be taken as *a priori* good things’ (Smart, 2007, p.137), but reiterates that individuals should always be located within their wider webs of past as well as present relationships, regardless of their positive or negative impact.

Closely connected to this concept of embeddedness is the notion of relationality, also referred to as relatedness, which, according to May (2011, p.7), is an approach that sees a person’s ‘sense of self is founded on and shaped by the relationships they are embedded in from birth, and that they make important life choices with significant others in mind’. Smart (2007) argues that it is a term encompassing two primary themes. Firstly, it assumes that ‘individuals are constituted through their close kin ties’ (Smart, 2007, p.46), meaning that our sense of self is established through our relationships with others. Adopting this perspective conceptualises each person’s kinship bonds as personal to them and locates the individual at the centre of their own network, whilst acknowledging that different relationships within this network will interconnect and impact on one another (Mason, 2011). Secondly, it proposes that those we relate to in such a manner need not be blood relatives, recognising that non-blood kin can occupy the same position and be of equal importance as those traditionally perceived as kin. However, similar to the concept of embeddedness, Mason (2004) issues a warning that relationality does not guarantee equality, kindness or fairness and should not be assumed to inspire selflessness nor be experienced as a positive by all, as it has the potential to harbour unwanted expectations or influences. This is important to note, as much of the continuing bonds literature tends to ignore the negative aspects of relationships and demonstrate an assumption that kinship ties are inherently positive in nature. Once again, therefore, it is recognised that relationships are complex and their positivity should not be assumed a priori. These points also demonstrate why the Death Studies material is insufficient by itself to provide a well-rounded understanding, thereby justifying the complex theoretical framework adopted by this research.

### Relational Selves

Roseneil and Ketokivi (2016, p.145) argue that proponents of a ‘stronger formulation’ of relationality, including Smart (2007), Mason (2004) and May (2011), reject theories of individualisation presented by scholars such as Giddens (1991) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), instead presenting their work in opposition to such a specific focus on the individual. According to Burkitt (2008, p.171), Giddens’s (1991) assumption that biographical narratives are independently constructed by the individual, without consideration of others, ‘ignores how Mead and Bakhtin showed identity to be always primarily based in a relational life with others’. Jenkins (2014) similarly references Mead (1934) in support of his argument that perceptions of self-identity are inherently linked to the way that others see us, regardless of whether we agree or disagree with their assessment of who we are. Consequently, ‘all human identities are, by definition, *social* identities’ (Jenkins, 2014, p.18), as the process of self-identification cannot occur in isolation from others. This is because it ‘draws upon the environment of people and things for its content’ and ‘depends for its ongoing security upon the validation of others, in its initial emergence and in the continuing dialectic of identification’ (Ibid, p.73). Indeed, as Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge (1998, p.58) suggest, ‘it is through interaction with others that we come to know who we are and who we are not’. Yet Burkitt (2008) is keen to point out that recognising our position as social beings does not mean that we cannot simultaneously be a uniquely embodied person. He therefore uses the term ‘social individuals’ to acknowledge that each self is created and maintained in connection with others but proposes that ‘to become an individual self with its own unique identity, we must first participate in a world of others that is formed by history and culture’ (Burkitt, 2008, p.1). Both Jenkins and Burkitt are keen to emphasise that identity should be understood as ‘always multi-dimensional, singular *and* plural’ (Jenkins, 2014, p.18), allowing for factors such as context, audience and time (Burkitt, 2008). For example, whilst participants are each bereaved siblings, they are also the sons and daughters of bereaved parents, required to resume study or employment with non-bereaved others. It is thus essential to recognise that participants concurrently perform multiple identities, which singularly contribute towards an overall sense of self.

Recognising the multifaceted nature of social identity necessitates an acknowledgement that these variable roles may require or enable very different presentations of the bereaved self. It is therefore essential to draw upon the seminal works of Goffman (1959; 1963; 1974) in order to make sense of this. Using the dramaturgical metaphor of the stage and its regions, Goffman (1959) asserts that individuals make conscious decisions about what information to share with others as part of a carefully formed routine of ‘impression management’. Insights which contribute towards a desirable presentation of self are shared in the public ‘front region’, whilst behaviours (verbal or physical) that could be detrimental to their social standing are limited to the private ‘back region’. As such, the performer is tasked with controlling the audience’s access to, and perception of, information about themselves for fear of making a disagreeable impression of self. Linked with this is Goffman’s (1974) concept of frame analysis, which claims that individuals engage with an activity, and one another, differently according to the way in which an activity is framed. As such, frames help to guide the way that people interact with one another and the presentation of self that they choose to perform. For example, tearfully discussing the death of a loved one whilst at a counselling session or bereavement support group would be received very differently if carried out during the work Christmas party. According to Goffman (1963), management of this performance is crucial, as failure to achieve an acceptable presentation of self, one which conforms to society’s norms and values, can potentially lead to stigma, and thus a spoiled identity. Overall, therefore, Goffman’s (1959; 1963; 1974) work is integral to this research as it recognises the performativity and relationality of identity, noting the importance of context and audience receptivity to the ways that people make decisions regarding their presentation of self.

When analysing the interview transcripts from her study, Mason (2004) noted that relationality consistently featured within the participant narratives, including for those who perceived themselves as individualistic but demonstrated accidental or coincidental relationality in their narrative actions. She highlights that a personal narrative should not be misinterpreted as an individual narrative, arguing that people readily recount personal narratives but these contain much relational content. This is because people’s narratives were constructed ‘through relationships they had and connections they made with other people’ (Mason, 2004, p.177), often but not exclusively those deemed family and kin. Mason (2004, p.177) thus proposes that the process of relating must remain in focus, whilst ‘both agency and identity need to be understood relationally, and that the selves that emerge from our narratives are not simply ‘selves in relation’, but relational selves’. Roseneil and Ketokivi (2016) suggest that consideration of agency is essential, as it is this which allows the individual to reflexively engage with social phenomena and critically evaluate these interactions. Without this self-awareness, constructions of identity would be entirely socially determined. It is necessary to therefore clarify that a relational understanding of identity does not deny people a sense of agency but, as Smart (2007, p.187) argues, it should be recognised that agency is expressed ‘always within webs of connectedness’. In this regard, individual agency within the self-identification process is acknowledged but located within wider sets of relationships and kinship ties. Consequently, Mason (2004, p.163) claims that proponents of relationality must question ‘whether and how relational and individualistic discourses and practices are interwoven’ as a way to gain a greater understanding of if and how they interconnect.

### The Bereaved Self

Baddeley and Singer (2010) suggest that theorists who emphasise the social nature of grief premise their ideas on the understanding that death challenges the bereaved’s sense of identity. This is because the bereavement experience is closely linked to our position as socially interactive beings and thus ‘our sense of self is dependent on our relationship with others, so that when a loved one dies, our sense of who we are as a person is under threat’ (Valentine, 2008, p.93). Current literature indicates that aspects of identity can be maintained or redefined following the death of a significant other through the management of continuing bonds (see Bradbury, 2001; Gibson, 2008; Hockey, Kellaher and Prendergast, 2007). However, as stated previously, focus is given to the ways that the living maintain relationships with the dead (Valentine, 2008), with less attention given to the ways that relationships between the living are negotiated following a bereavement. Whilst there are studies which specifically explore the impact of child loss on parental identity (Toller, 2008; Hastings, 2000), there is a distinct lack of projects that have looked at this topic from the perspective of brothers and sisters.

Some research mentions the impact of sibling death on the identity of the living sibling (Forward and Garlie, 2003; Riches and Dawson, 2000; DeVita-Raeburn, 2004) but rarely is this one of the primary aims or objectives of the project. In contrast, this thesis is prioritising identity as an area of focus due to the significance of the sibling relationship in establishing a sense of self. As siblings are potentially an integral element of the self-identification process, the death of a sibling can have a profound impact upon constructions of identity. Forward and Garlie (2003, p.26) suggest that for surviving siblings ‘the task of defining and stabilizing personal identity and concept of self must now happen in the absence of a principal agent – the dead brother or sister’. Similarly, Riches and Dawson (2000, p.83) highlight that siblings are faced with the prospect of losing someone who may have been dearly loved as well as someone ‘whose presence played a key role in defining his or her sense of self’. According to Forward and Garlie (2003), the bereavement process requires searching for new meaning, reporting that participants felt they had permanently changed as a result of their sibling’s death and therefore had to re-establish their life narrative and re-define their sense of self. Balk (1983, p.152) also states that participants felt ‘an increasing sense of contrast with the selves they remembered prior to their sibling’s death. It may be for this reason why many bereaved siblings begin their narrative with the deceased’s death, as it represents a reference point upon which they began to establish their post-bereavement identity (DeVita-Raeburn, 2004). However, the ways in which siblings continue to establish the ‘self’ following the death of a sibling and/or in relation to a deceased sibling have yet to be fully explored and so this thesis will expand current understandings of self and sibling identity.

In more general terms, Bradbury (1999) proposes that the death of someone close signifies the loss of the part of ourselves that was constructed through our relationship with the deceased, in addition to the loss of that other person, hence why grief is such a profoundly painful and bewildering experience. Moreover, death can cause family roles to shift and be reassigned, which affects both family identity, as well as the identities of those members within the family (Shapiro, 1994). In response, Bradbury (1999) suggests that an understanding of this loss, as well as an adapted relationship with the deceased, must be integrated into the new, bereaved, self. Balk (2004) argues that redefining the bereaved self and reintegrating into life is the principle way to recover from bereavement. Although Bradbury (1999, p.176) disagrees that the concept of recovery is necessarily possible, she sees that the self can alter in response to bereavement and suggests that it is ‘the rebuilding of self that takes time, not the healing of an injury or wound’. Yet Silverman and Klass (1996, p.19) note that people are permanently changed by the bereavement experience, claiming that the ‘process does not end, but in different ways bereavement affects the mourner for the rest of his or her life’.

This idea of permanent change is echoed by Jakoby (2015), who summarises arguments that the death of a family member can destabilise our sense of self and rupture the assumed security of our biography. As such, Bury’s (1982, p.169) concept of ‘biographical disruption’ can be applied to bereavement, despite being originally proposed in relation to chronic illness, as it describes an event ‘where the structures of everyday life and the forms of knowledge which underpin them are disrupted’. Bury (1982, p.169) recognises the social aspect of such an occurrence, noting that the relational networks of the individual are brought into focus, thereby ‘disrupting normal rules of reciprocity and mutual support’, whilst ‘the expectations and plans that individuals hold for the future have to be re-examined’. Ellis (2013, p.254) considers the implications of this ruptural thinking, noting that ‘the prospect of ‘losing’ one’s identity is often thought to be a negative, deeply problematic experience, synonymous with a sense of unbecoming, losing direction and a distancing from who one once was and often from other people’. However, Ellis (2013) problematises this understanding by suggesting that the concept of rupture implies identity is a fixed entity prior to the event. Indeed, the ability to fracture identity suggests that it is both stable and reified prior to learning of a bereavement (Hockey, 2010). Yet, as Jenkins’ (2014, p.18) argues, ‘[i]dentity can only be understood as a process of ‘being’ or ‘becoming’’ and so one’s sense of self must constantly be re-negotiated over the life course through a process of self-identification that is both individual and interactional. Recognition that the process of self is an ongoing project thus challenges the rupture model, which conceptualises the self as something to be repaired, and instead proposes a more fluid and complex integration of relationality (Ellis, 2013). As such, it is not denied that individuals may experience a significant shift in their sense of self following the death of a family member (Hockey, 2010), as being human is ‘about learning to become someone who is different from the person we previously knew ourselves to be’ (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p.59). Consequently, the fluidity of identity before and after the bereavement must be acknowledged (Ellis, 2013).

### Life Course

Whilst the term ‘lifecycle’ is frequently used to delineate the different stages of development human beings must pass through in the period between birth and death, the term ‘life course’ recognises the ‘less rigid patterning of lives in contemporary Western societies’ (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p.59). Specifically, ‘cycle’ indicates a fixed set of transitions that define someone’s age-related status, whilst ‘course’ indicates that the individual is able to negotiate their passage through a range of possibilities. These can include gradual transformations, such as adolescence, or immediate transitions, such as the death of a loved one (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998). Yet the journey through the life course is not without influence, as May (2019) highlights the importance of recognising society’s temporal scripts, which are embedded within cultural narratives. These offer ‘prescribed timetables that provide a road map for what kinds of things should happen at what point in life’ (May, 2019, p.89), via a set of social norms about how people should grow up and grow old. As such, the stories that people tell about their experiences as a way to make sense of the world are influenced by their understanding of these temporal scripts. Deviating from these normative expectations can lead to criticism, attempts to intervene or stigma (Hazan, 1994; May, 2019). Encountering death at a young age, in this case the death of a sibling, and consequently not being able to interact with them for the remaining life course, challenges these temporal scripts and indicates a death that is ‘out of time’. As such, the individual’s personal narrative must be written without the aid of these scripts. It is therefore necessary to find out what happens when a person’s experience does not correlate with these normative temporal scripts in a circumstance not of their design.

As with each of the other concepts discussed in this literature review, this thesis retains an understanding of the life course which is viewed through a relational lens. As argued by Borgstrom, Ellis and Woodthorpe (2019, p.2), each phase over the life course is ‘not simply a series of individual experiences, choices and responses’, but rather ‘something that is creatively enacted between people’. Drawing on the work of Harris (1987), Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge (1998, p.64) similarly suggest that transitions through the life course are essentially relational, stating that ‘as individuals we do not move through a series of fixed points that are external to us… our movement is always in relation to others, who themselves are also in transition’. For example, the death of a brother or sister may mean a change from middle child to eldest (living) child or sibling to only (living) child. This transition must then be negotiated within a relationship with parents, who are at the same time adjusting to being the parent of one less living child.

However, not only are we embedded in relationships but Adam (2008) highlights that all aspects of life are embedded and extended in time. This thesis therefore employs an ‘understanding of people as temporal beings who orient themselves with the help of their past, present, and projected future experiences’ (May, 2019, p.88). Adam (1998; 2004) theorises what she terms a ‘timescapes’ perspective, which ‘acknowledges that at the structural level of understanding, time involves a number of irreducible elements’ (Adam, 2008, p.7). There are several aspects to this but the most pressing for this thesis is her discussion of the temporal element of time frame. Adam (2008, p.8) suggests that researchers must decide whether to locate their subjects ‘temporally in an externally located, socially constructed frame’, which is ‘stable and fixed’ i.e. clock time, or ‘in their personal frames of life time and family time’, which are ‘relative and mobile’, and ‘move with every new moment, situation and context’ i.e. life course time. In the latter construct, people’s implied past and future can be seen to expand and contract as they progress along the life course. Adam (2008) demands that researchers must remain aware of these alternative understandings of time, whilst acknowledging how they can impact upon the findings (Adam, 2008). For example, when applied to this thesis, the clock date of the sibling’s death will always remain the same but the positioning of that event in the participant’s life course will shift as time progresses and it resides further in the individual’s past. Alongside this, perspectives and emotions surrounding the event may change as time passes and the self-identification process continues (Jenkins, 2014). It is this personal experiential understanding of time that is to be prioritised within this thesis. However, doing so does not mean that clock time should be ignored as this reveals much about the cultural context in which the death occurred, which may in turn shape the bereavement experience.

### Part B Summarised

Overall, this section has clarified the way that self is conceptualised by this thesis. Whilst human beings are embodied individuals, it is argued that all identities are social identities, as people are embedded in wider networks of kinship ties that shape who we have been and who we will become. As such, identity is repeatedly negotiated over the life course, in relation to others, through an ongoing process of self-identification. Yet it should not be assumed that these influences are necessarily experienced in a positive way, as relationships are rarely regarded as entirely beneficial, but often a complex combination of positive and negative interactions. The literature discussed in this section has been drawn upon from a broad range of sociological fields, including identity, personal life, death and time. Bringing it together in this way demonstrates the nuanced approach this thesis is adopting and highlights the research’s positioning at the intersection between these different areas of the sociological discipline. However, the literature discussed so far lacks a targeted focus and awareness of the sibling relationship and so it is necessary to explore this more specifically in the final part of this literature review.

## Part C: Siblings

### Siblings within the Family

Earlier in this chapter it was recognised that individuals are embedded within wider networks of relationships, but the purpose of this section is to locate siblings more specifically within an increasingly diverse range of familial contexts. First, however, it must be clarified how the term ‘family’ should be understood in this thesis. The notion of ‘family’ can, and has been, considered ‘problematic’, largely due to the ideological stereotype of a dual-parented nuclear family, consisting of male breadwinner, female housewife and their biological children, that it has traditionally implied (Smart, 2007, p.26). As such, Edwards, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies (2012) note that there has been a recent shift away from the use of the term ‘family’ within sociology, with the intention to re-position it alongside understandings of personal life, intimacy and kinship. Moreover, the term ‘family’ arguably implies a series of rigid and fixed structures, which Morgan’s (1996) seminal work on family practices challenges by offering a more diverse conceptualisation. This view ‘radically shifts sociological analysis away from ‘family’ as a structure to which individuals in some sense belong, towards understanding families as sets of activities which take on a particular meaning, associated with family, at a given point in time’ (Finch, 2007, p.66). As such, Morgan (1996) recognises the variety of ways to ‘do’ family, rather than ‘be’ family, thereby indicating that families are fluid and subject to change. Yet Edwards, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies (2012, p.742) highlight that ‘where this conceptual shift is taken up without sufficient reflection, then, sociological research may risk analytic confusion’. As ‘sufficient reflection’ on the arguments is beyond the scope of this thesis, and for the purposes of analytic clarity, the term ‘family’ is used throughout this reseach. Whilst the criticisms of this are recognised and the debate regarding its application acknowledged, the concept of family clearly meant something to the participants in this study and so the term is used throughout this thesis in order to prioritise their understanding. As Morgan (2011) highlights, the idea of family retains value and significance as it remains a distinct sphere of people’s everyday practices and experiences, whilst people employ the language of family in their daily lives (Edwards, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2012).

Gillis (1997) similarly challenges the idealised notion of ‘the family’ and ‘family values’ but does so by arguing that these views are premised on myths and rituals. Younger generations, unsatisfied with the family they *live with*, romanticise that of previous generations and thus create a moralistic form of family that they aspire to *live by*. This is because ‘families past are presented to us not only as more stable but as more authentic than families present’ (Gillis, 1997, p.3). As the families we live with are ‘often fragmented and impermanent’ (Gillis, 1997, p.xv), the families we live by are increasingly idealised, implying the way that family life ought to be rather than how it is. Crucially, however, Gillis (1997, p.226) indicates that people are not deliberately misleading when they speak of the family they live by, but rather that they are ‘unable to distinguish between the two’. While the current position of families in general is not something to be discussed in this thesis, the suggestion that individuals retain normative understandings of the family that they aspire to in times of difficulty is something that can be applied following a bereavement and therefore holds value for this research.

Adopting the term ‘family’ does not, however, ignore ‘the complexity and diversity of relationships and experiences that is represented by arguments for sidestepping or subsuming families in a ‘new’ sociology’ (Edwards, Ribbens McCarthy and Gillies, 2012, p.746). Indeed, it is imperative to recognise the increasingly diverse range of family forms that are visible within society (Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies, 2003). Walsh and Mason (2018, p. 603) highlight the ‘diversiﬁcation of family forms and practices’, which includes ‘an increase in single parent families, cohabitating (unmarried) parents, same-sex parent families, transnational families and changes in gendered caring norms within families’[[4]](#footnote-4). Yet there is a lack of literature which explores the impact of these changes for siblings specifically. For example, Deater-Deckard and Dunn (2002) highlight that significant attention has been given to the effect that parental conflict, divorce and subsequent remarriage has on children’s relationships with their parents, but not with other siblings or stepsiblings. One of the few studies which recognises the impact of family diversification on siblings is offered by Song (2010, p. 265), who notes that Britain has recently seen a significant rise in mixed race marriages, describing the mixed race population as ‘one of the fastest growing populations in the country’. With this comes an increase in the number of mixed race siblings, who may contribute towards the way that individuals conceptualise and present their ethnic identities. Yet despite this potential significance, relatively little is known about the impact of this demographic change on siblings and their relationships.

An awareness of sibling diversity must extend beyond family composition, however, and so attention must also be given to a body of literature which focuses on the differential treatment of siblings by shared parents. Although these studies are once again based in psychology, they recognise that siblings within the same family can experience childhood and parenting in different ways. For example, McHale and Pawletko (1992) report finding increased levels of differential treatment experienced by young people who have a disabled brother or sister, whilst Siennick (2013) and Jensen and McHale (2017) explore the negative impact of differential treatment on the sibling relationship. Although such studies lack the in-depth insight offered by a qualitative approach, they are useful for highlighting how brothers’ and sisters’ can experience diversity of upbringing within the same family.

### The Sibling Relationship

Much of the discussion in this chapter thus far has been in reference to the wider range of kinship ties that feature within people’s relational networks but it will now concentrate specifically on the sibling relationship, in line with the research focus. Fletcher et al. (2013, p.804) explain that ‘the sibling relationship constitutes the longest-lasting family tie, beginning with the birth of the younger sibling and ending with the death of one member of the sibling pair’, whilst Riggio (2000) suggests that the value of the sibling relationship is not confined to childhood as it continues to be meaningful to the individual over the duration of the life span. This point is supported by Voorpostel et al. (2007), who claim that siblings are permanent members of each other’s relational webs, even though adult siblings may not feature strongly in each other’s daily interactions. As such, Davies (2019, p. 222) asserts that the sibling relationship is ‘sticky’ (Smart, 2007), as ‘the influence of siblings cannot easily be ‘shaken off’, remaining important regardless of the nature of the sibling relationship’.

Although Davies (2015, p.680) emphasises a ‘growing empirical interest in sibling relationships amongst some sociologists’, there is a notable lack of research regarding siblings within wider sociological study. Gillies and Lucey (2006, p.492) also comment on this lesser explored area with surprise, considering what they describe as a ‘UK policy preoccupation with children, families and social resources’. Instead, the majority of available literature on the sibling relationship is offered by psychologists, with a particular focus on child development (Punch, 2007; 2008) or sibling group composition (Edwards et al., 2006). Moreover, Edwards et al. (2006) claim that, particularly within psychology, the sibling relationship is problematised, as potential variables within the relationship, such as gender or birth order, are correlated with children’s outcomes, including educational achievement and intelligence. Within the sociological literature on siblings, focus is often limited to the connection between parent and child, rather than siblings, with particular attention paid to the impact of parenting and primary socialisation practices on children (Davies, 2015; Edwards et al. 2006). As a result of this prioritisation, sibling research mostly features children and adolescents, whilst the few adult studies to be conducted have focused on the role of the sibling relationship in later life, particularly in support giving or caretaking behaviours (Riggio, 2000; Voorpostel et al., 2007). There is therefore a lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the adult sibling relationship. Whilst this research can make a limited contribution about this experience for living siblings, it does offer significant insight into bereaved siblings’ expectations of the adult sibling relationship, including the role that they envisaged it would maintain over the life course.

As stated previously, underpinning this study is recognition that being or having a sibling is not automatically experienced in a positive manner and there is no guarantee of a close relationship with that person. Indeed, Gillies and Lucey (2006, p.491) note that growing up with siblings can be challenging and generate ‘feelings of anger, frustration and vulnerability’, whilst Punch (2008) suggests that siblings can regularly engage in fierce conflict and feel obligated towards one another. However, Gillies and Lucey (2006, p.491) also note that, although the strength and nature of sibling ties vary greatly, siblings can offer each other much support and guidance, contributing towards a sense of ‘love, loyalty and security’. Echoing this sentiment, Punch (2008, p.342) suggests that ‘as siblings share much time and space together, as well as knowledge of one another, this combination means that sibship is likely to be an intimate, close relationship, forming a bond between them’. Edwards et al. (2006, p.4) also suggest that young children spend a large proportion of their time with their siblings, suggesting that ‘the longevity of these sibling ties makes them distinctive’.

However, it can be argued that one of the most unique features of the sibling relationship, as compared to other familial ties, is the rare way that ‘siblings experience one another under relative egalitarian status’ (Robinson and Mahon, 1997, p.477). After conducting research into power relations within and between generations, Punch (2005, p.173) confirmed that, unsurprisingly, parents tend to exhibit more power than children but questioned how children understand the power differences between siblings, concluding that ‘in sibship, power is less linear and more contested’. As a result, siblings find it more difficult to withhold power over each other and struggle to discipline their unwanted behaviours. Thus, Punch (2005) notes that whilst siblings may find it more challenging to influence one another, often turning to bribery, threats and negotiation to do so (McIntosh and Punch, 2009), a positive of this is that siblings may feel more comfortable to interact in certain ways with each other due to the less formal nature of their relationship. Consequently, siblings may be privileged with knowledge of each other that parents are unable to access due to fear of parental, but not sibling, punishment. If, therefore, the sibling relationship is uniquely positioned in an individual’s relational network, it is likely that this will also occupy an inimitable role within the self-identification process.

According to Edwards et al. (2006, p.9), issues of identity and relationality reside at the core of sibling relationships, regardless of their quality, claiming that ‘identity is profoundly relational in that it is bound up with others’ identities and shaped by the meanings and ways of understanding them that are available to us’. Jenkins (2014, p.19) states that central to the self-identification process ‘is the systematic establishment and signification… of relationships of similarity and difference’, emphasising that ‘similarity and difference are the dynamic principles of identification’ which must always be taken together. Edwards et al. (2006, p.39) note that these comparisons are a key aspect of the sibling relationship, with people frequently commenting on the similarities and differences between brothers and sisters, due, in part, to the unique positioning of siblings as ‘simultaneously individual *and* one of a series’. Davies (2015) explores the significance of these comparisons in greater depth by questioning how intra-generational, lateral connections with siblings contribute towards the self-identification process. Her analysis of interview data revealed that ‘young people can make sense of who they are in relation to how they are similar or different to their siblings and that others often understand them in this way too’ (Davies, 2015, p.692). She notes how participants often commented on their appearance or personal characteristics to demonstrate how they were similar or different from their siblings, using labels that are often mutually exclusive and applied in opposition, for example, individuals claimed to be the ‘naughty’ or ‘good one’ in the family. Moreover, it was noticeable that people were able to offer these understandings after little or no consideration, suggesting that they were drawing upon existing narratives to make their responses. Davies (2015) highlights how family stories were used to perpetuate these narratives over time, whilst also commenting on the power interplay between family members that was visible during the telling of these stories. Potential conflict over the ‘accurate’ telling of family narratives and position of the story teller highlights in practice the constructed nature of memory and demonstrates that the value attributed to family stories, authentic or not, can have powerful consequences for an individual’s self-identification. Consequently, Davies (2015, p.680/681) concluded that ‘being and having brothers or sisters can have a profound impact upon young people’s sense of self and the formation of their social identities’.

Commonplace within wider, more routine, discussions of similarities and differences between siblings is the concept of birth order, including the ways that people perceive themselves in relation to their older or younger siblings. Indeed, McIntosh and Punch (2009) highlight that this receives much attention within the psychological literature, with a particular focus on the roles and expectations of siblings associated with their birth order position (See Wong et al., 2010). Adopting a more sociological approach, Gillies and Lucey (2006, p.485) found that ‘[a]ge and birth order were highly significant in shaping the content and nature of these relationships’. For example, during interviews, older siblings expressed an assumption that they should act as nurturer or protector over younger siblings, thereby suggesting that the responsibilities associated with birth order may have shaped their sense of self. Thus, an individual’s birth order position can contribute towards their identity construction. However, McIntosh and Punch (2009, p.63) emphasise that ‘birth order and age are not fixed hierarchies but can be subverted, contested, resisted and negotiated in children’s everyday lives’. Integral to this is the individual’s understanding of their own position within the sibling order, which can be adjusted and negotiated through daily interaction (McIntosh and Punch, 2009), or linked to issues of care, such as illness or vulnerability (Punch, 2005). Once again therefore, it is essential to prioritise the individual’s interpretation of experience within the research process as a way to gain further insight into these negotiable positions.

### Sibling Bereavement

Echoing the lack of sibling study within sociology, there is also a vast gap in knowledge regarding sibling bereavement experiences. Yet the ‘loss of a sibling represents the loss of a lifelong friend and advocate who shared and understood one’s life history like no other ever could’ (Wright, 2016, p.34) and so it deserves far more attention than it is currently receiving. Even if the sibling relationship is not as positive as Wright (2016) suggests, the literature presented in the previous section demonstrates the profound significance of siblings regardless. As Marshall and Winokuer (2017, p.11) note, ‘what does become apparent as one spans the literature about sibling bereavement is the relative dearth of studies exploring this field’. Silverman and Nickman (1996a) argue that siblings are often neglected, as parents are assumed to be the primary mourner, and so research on sibling bereavement is sparse compared with other familial losses, such as parents and spouses (Sveen et al., 2013). Similarly, Rostila et al. (2012) highlight that siblings are the least studied familial relationship. As a result, siblings have been referred to as ‘forgotten grievers’ (Rostila et al., 2012; Dyregrov and Dyregrov, 2005) and ‘forgotten mourners’ (Schreiber, 2017). Whilst academic bereavement literature begins to pay more attention to siblings, it is suggested that focus is limited to arguments which conceptualise sibling grief using the psychological concept of disenfranchisement (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). A term originally put forward by Doka (1989), that can be defined as ‘grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not, or cannot be, openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported’ (Doka, 1999, p. 37). As Wright (2016, p. 43) argues, ‘the adult sibling bond is not generally recognized as significant, which can leave the bereft sibling feeling isolated and misunderstood’. Thus, it is suggested that sibling grief is disenfranchised not because it is a stigmatised relationship, like an extramarital affair for example, but because the value of the sibling relationship is not recognised within normative understandings of family (Zampitella, 2011; Wright, 2016).

However, Robson and Walter (2012, p.97) problematize the concept of disenfranchised grief by challenging the ‘binary assumption that grief is either enfranchised or disenfranchised’, suggesting instead that grief is scalar or hierarchical. In addition, a number of research reports indicate the complexity of the sibling/parent relationship, which undermines the idea of disenfranchised grief by highlighting that it may not be as simple as siblings not having their grief recognised. For example, Mahon and Page (1995) agree that surviving siblings are often the least recognised grievers and comment that this can devalue the sibling’s grief, encouraging them to hide their own emotions for the sake of their parents. Yet Hogan and DeSantis (1994) argue that the surviving siblings in their study did not perceive parents as intentionally separating themselves but instead found parents unable to support them due to a preoccupation with their own grief. Furthermore, Forward and Garlie (2003) note that many adolescents felt that their parents were available for support but kept their feelings private as it was believed that the distress caused by sharing this information with their parents would in turn exacerbate their own pain. Indeed, siblings often report feeling a sense of duty and care towards their parents which causes them to hide their own grief in order to support them (Mahon and Page, 1995; DeVita-Raeburn, 2004; Funk et al., 2017; Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017). Yet Hogan and DeSantis (1994) found that, whilst parents could be a source of additional distress, the majority of participants reported that family members were helpful throughout the grieving process by sharing memories and discussing feelings. Moreover, siblings suggested that their family had grown closer due to this shared grieving experience and acted as a support network for one another.

In addition to feeling obliged to hide their grief, siblings have also reported keeping their feelings private as they considered their grief experience to be unique due to the nature of the sibling relationship, viewing their grief as different to that of their parents and underestimated by others (Forward and Garlie, 2003; Davies, 1999). This lack of understanding also caused their bereavement to be undermined at times and isolated them from others, leading to feelings of intense loneliness which compounded any existing loneliness felt at the loss of the sibling. Of the participants in Hogan and DeSantis’s (1994) study, 40% noted a persistent feeling of loneliness after their sibling’s death, whilst Forward and Garlie (2003) claim that the lost sibling relationship was more profoundly felt by those who were the only sibling survivor. This sense of isolation is reflected in one sibling’s statement declaring: ‘I can’t even express how much I hate being an only child… it was like my mom and dad had each other, and I had no one’ (Hogan and DeSantis, 1994, p.140). Clearly then, sibling bereavement experiences are highly relational and the complexities of its embeddedness must be more greatly recognised in academic literature. Adopting this approach once again diverts away from medicalised constructions of bereavement, which necessitates an avoidance of limiting psychological concepts such as disenfranchised grief.

Another common theme across the current sibling bereavement literature is the investigation of what impact sibling death has upon any surviving siblings, with a particular trend towards categorising outcomes as positive or negative. Emerging across the literature is a recurring theme that ‘the crisis of sibling death had been used as a means of growth’ (Balk, 1983, p.152). Several studies conclude that the experience of sibling bereavement led to an advance in personal strength and resilience (Hogan and DeSantis, 1994), maturity (Balk, 1983; 1990), compassion, sensitivity and a greater appreciation of life (Hogan and DeSantis, 1996). However, difficulties faced in school, such as an inability to concentrate, combined with disturbed sleep and altered eating habits, has been linked to a decline in grades (Balk, 1990), which consequently has a negative impact on socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood (Fletcher et al., 2013). There is also an identifiable gender difference, as daughters are more likely to assume the responsibility of caring for parents’ emotional needs, therefore causing a greater reduction in socioeconomic outcomes for women (Fletcher et al., 2013). Whilst these findings can have qualitative implications, the focus on categorising outcomes is once again reflective of the largely medicalised model that this thesis is avoiding.

Each of these studies also demonstrates a focus on the potential short-term effects of bereavement, despite several studies recommending that research into experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course should be carried out (Balk, 1990; Hogan and DeSantis, 1992). Marshall and Winokuer’s (2017) contribution is unique in that it presents a compilation of work exploring sibling bereavement across the life span, but these are snapshots of sibling bereavement at different stages in the life course, rather than consideration of sibling bereavement *over* the life course. Davies’ (1991, 1999) work begins to cast light on longer term experiences of sibling bereavement but these studies are still limited by their recurring focus on children and so little is known about how the death of a sibling in early adulthood impacts upon the surviving sibling over the life course. Davies (1991; 1999) offers a rare insight into the longer term effects of sibling bereavement, although once again focuses on those bereaved during childhood. She proposes that the personal growth outcome reported in other studies (see Hogan and DeSantis, 1994; 1996; Balk, 1983; 1990) continues in the long-term as encountering death at a young age requires children to accept their own mortality, thus providing them with a greater awareness and appreciation of life, as well as an improved ability to empathise with others (Davies, 1991). However, she also notes that bereaved siblings may feel different and therefore withdraw from their social peers at the time of death, making it difficult for them to develop sophisticated social skills. As a result, they may be more likely to experience loneliness, sadness and isolation in later life (Ibid). In a follow up study, Davies (1999) also notes that bereaved siblings can become highly reflective in adult life, considering what their sibling would be like if he or she were still alive, as well as how the experience altered their own outlook on life, others and themselves. Siblings also reported bouts of recurring sadness, often prompted by anniversaries, songs and photographs for example, whilst some reported living in fear of other loved ones dying in a manner similar to their deceased sibling (Davies, 1999). These findings once again emphasise that bereavement is embedded in time as well as relationships, thereby justifying the conceptual framework adopted by this research and highlighting the necessity of its focus.

Although a range of research has been presented in this section, it is important to note that the vast majority of available literature concerned with sibling bereavement, including the studies reviewed in this section, are largely based once again in the disciplines of psychology, nursing and health related studies. As a result, they often employ positivist research methods, such as questionnaires, and adopt a clinical approach when conducting the study which prioritise causality and health outcomes over individual experience (for examples see Hogan and DeSantis, 1992, 1996; Balk, 1990). Moreover, Sveen et al. (2013) argue that existing research prioritises children and adolescents, leaving a gap in knowledge regarding bereaved young adults. The inconsistencies across the research reviewed once again emphasises the importance of recognising people’s lived experiences of grief and bereavement, whilst the prevalence of family and kinship ties demonstrates the relational nature of grief as it exists within wider social networks.

### Siblings Continuing Bonds

Hogan and DeSantis (1992, p.164) challenge medical conceptualisations of bereavement which suggest grief is time-bound, proposing instead that siblings maintain a timeless social and emotional bond with their brother or sister after death. They found the theme of ‘ongoing attachment’ was pervasive throughout their interview data, a term they outline as ‘the emotional and social relationship or bond between the deceased and bereaved sibling… perceived by the bereaved sibling to be ongoing’. This was evidenced through participants speaking to their siblings in the present tense, reaffirming that the loving bond between them remains strong, asking for guidance and protection in their everyday lives, and reassuring the deceased that their memory will be kept alive and never forgotten. As a result, Hogan and DeSantis (1992, p.174) conclude that bereaved siblings ‘learn to live with the physical absence and the simultaneous emotional presence of their deceased brother or sister’, and thus ‘experience a sense of conceptual, emotional, and social eternity with their deceased siblings in the face of their physical absence’. In a later text, Hogan and DeSantis (1996, p.250) revisit the notion of ‘ongoing attachment’, reaffirming the idea that the ‘[d]eath of a sibling is permanent and irrevocable and shatters all expectations and anticipations of the surviving siblings for a shared future that is not to be’. As a result of this profound experience, Hogan and DeSantis (1996, p.250) claim that the way to deal with the ensuing feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and lack of meaning is to establish an ongoing attachment with the deceased, which ‘can be seen as a type of motivational energy that assists in transforming bereaved siblings into resilient survivors’.

In their interviews with adolescents who had experienced the sudden death of a sibling, Forward and Garlie (2003) similarly found that a core feature of the grieving process was the search for new meaning, claiming that continuing the bond with the deceased was integral to this endeavour. Participants felt strongly that the memory of their sibling should be kept alive and never forgotten, and so took steps to ensure that this occurred by discussing their memories and reflecting on the good times they shared. Moreover, it is highlighted that participants ‘went to great lengths to protect the memory of their sibling… when interviewed, rarely spoke of any negative memories of their sibling’ (Forward and Garlie, 2003, p.42), which contradicts Walter’s (1996) argument that the bereaved prioritise an honest, rather than idealised, biographical narrative of the deceased. In addition to more commonly reported methods for continuing bonds, such as speaking with the deceased and displaying photographs around the home, Davies (1999) outlines some of the more specific ways in which siblings purposefully integrate the deceased into their lives, particularly at special occasions, through the inclusion of subtle mementos. For example, one participant chose peach roses for her wedding as these were her sister’s favourite flower and the same type used at her funeral. Objects can therefore provide a meaningful way to maintain a relationship with the dead as they ‘offer a point of connection with the absent body of the deceased’ (Gibson, 2008, p.2).

According to Packman et al. (2006), people achieve a new or different understanding of the death as they mature and so ongoing opportunities to speak about the deceased can therefore be beneficial for many years. This is because ‘continuing bonds develop over time, that is, they are not something that are suddenly created at the time of death’ (Packman et al., 2006). Consequently, they argue that continuing bonds are not made but developed over time according to what is considered meaningful to the siblings. It is evident, therefore, that further investigation into the ways that siblings attempt to continue bonds over the life course is necessary as there is a lack of awareness regarding how this develops over time. Moreover, it is essential to do this whilst also locating ‘sibling grief in its family context to increase understanding of how the nature of the family system may affect the course of grieving in siblings and the nature of siblings’ continuing bonds expressions’ (Packman et al., 2006, p.836).

### Part C Summarised

The sibling relationship can be the longest and most intimate relationship held over the life course, despite the potential for conflict and disagreement. Birth order positioning, as well as understandings of similarity and difference between siblings, can contribute significantly towards sense of self and identity. As such, the death of a sibling can have profound ramifications for those siblings still living. Current knowledge of these consequences is largely medicalised, with a focus on short term outcomes and the argument that sibling grief is disenfranchised. Some sociological studies have begun to consider how an adapted relationship may be maintained with the deceased through the negotiation of continuing bonds but once again this is limited to the period of time shortly following the death. In contrast, this thesis will contribute to a sociological understanding of sibling grief which prioritises individual experience over the life course, with emphasis on the long term nature of bereavement. Doing so will greatly expand understanding of the sibling relationship and sibling bereavement as current awareness in both of these areas is limited due to lack of study.

## Conclusion

This literature review has drawn together work from a range of disciplines and sociological sub-fields to present an overview of the research that informs and shapes the analytical lens of this thesis. It has been highlighted that there is a plethora of knowledge gaps in current sociological understandings of siblings and bereavement. Whilst it is impossible to fill these gaps entirely, as too much is unknown, this thesis will contribute by developing understanding in these areas and highlighting directions for further study. As such, the overall aim of this research is necessarily broad and explorative. It is clear throughout this chapter that this thesis prioritises lived experiences of sibling bereavement, as articulated by those interviewed. These rich narratives will complement the, currently dominant, medicalised understandings of bereavement by recognising the long-term, relational complexities of life following a death. By acknowledging that people are embedded in time and networks of relationships, bereavement is conceptualised as a highly relational experience, rather than a purely individual, psychological process. As such, this thesis is adopting a conceptual framework which has rarely been applied within Death Studies, in order to connect literature from a range of sociological fields and thereby broaden the scope of understanding. The research questions are thus presented here, at the end of the literature review, as they have been formulated with this conceptual framework in mind. These research questions are:

* How does conceptualising sibling relationships as embedded help to understand experiences of sibling bereavement?
* How does recognising the relational and performative aspects of self help to understand bereaved identities?
* How does an awareness of temporalities help to understand experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course?

It is clear then that this thesis positions itself at the intersection of death, identity, family and personal life literature, in order to enhance current understandings in each field by merging together these, usually separate, bodies of work, thus offering new insight and ideas. Doing so will appeal to the ‘deep yearning in academia and in our culture for a more integrated, more whole, more compassionate, more complex approach to grief and loss research’ (Granek, 2013, p.286).

# Chapter Three: Methodology

## Introduction

As outlined in the first two chapters of this thesis, the aims of this research are to offer an in-depth, qualitative insight into experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course, whilst highlighting the social nature of grief as it is embedded within wider relational networks. The focus of this chapter is how the research was designed and implemented in order to meet these research aims in the most appropriate and effective way possible. It will begin by outlining the central questions that this study intends to address in order to begin filling the knowledge gaps identified in the literature review. It will then proceed to detail the overall research approach and outline the methodological positioning of this study. Justification for prioritising a qualitative approach will be given before explaining the qualitative methods employed; semi-structured interviews that draw upon narrative and object elicitation strategies. Consideration will be given to the role of the researcher in this approach. Information regarding the process of analysis will be provided, before outlining plans for dissemination. As such, the first half of this chapter prioritises the methods employed in the study. The second part retains a methodological focus but turns its attention more specifically towards the participants. This begins with an outline of how participants were recruited, followed by an overview of the eventual 36 individuals who were interviewed. Specific consideration is then given to participant welfare and potential issues that may arise due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. Finally, the chapter ends with a reflection on the researcher’s own positioning. Notably, there is no specific ‘ethics’ section, as a series of ethical decisions were made at several points throughout the research process and so these are articulated throughout the chapter.

## Research Aim and Questions

Informed by the key literature, the core aim of this research is to illuminate the, currently shadowed, sibling bereavement experience, whilst drawing out the temporal aspects of this as it transpires over the life course. In order to meet this aim, the central research questions are:

* How does conceptualising sibling relationships as embedded help to understand experiences of sibling bereavement?
* How does recognising the relational and performative aspects of self help to understand bereaved identities?
* How does an awareness of temporalities help to understand experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course?

Alongside this, a secondary aim is to share the findings with a number of bereavement support charities in order to inform and enhance service provision.

## Suitability of Qualitative Research Methods

As mentioned previously, the core disciplines researching bereavement and grief are psychology, medicine and nursing (Granek, 2013). Reflecting each discipline’s fundamental aims, often the primary purpose of these studies is to measure people’s grief responses and track grief intensity over time; the intention being to establish what is effective in reducing grief symptomatology and ways to recognise those potentially at risk of developing ‘complicated grief’ (Neimeyer and Hogan, 2001; Rostila et al., 2012; Sveen et al., 2013). Consequently, these studies mostly rely on a range of scales and surveys to quantitatively assess grief and measure its persistence (Hogan and DeSantis, 1992, 1996[[5]](#footnote-5); Howard-Sharp et al., 2018). However, Stroebe, Stroebe and Schut (2003, p. 237) note that, due to its complexity, it is ‘difficult either to conceptualize or to measure even the most fundamental aspects surrounding grief’. Indeed, even those who advocate the merits of such methods recognise that it is necessary to ‘paint a picture of bereavement that is far more complex and less tidy than that suggested by the artificially simplified and controlled canvasses of quantitative questionnaires’ (Neimeyer and Hogan, 2001, p. 113).

In contrast, qualitative methods are able to offer ‘a useful counterbalance to the often atheoretical, objectivistic, superficial, and decontextualized study of grieving that typifies conventional studies of bereavement’ (Neimeyer and Hogan, 2001, p. 106). In response, Valentine (2008) highlights that there is a growing trend within the wider bereavement literature towards the use of qualitative studies, seeking to explore participant experience through the use of increasingly interactive methods. According to Buckle, Dwyer and Jackson (2010, p. 111), facilitating this interaction allows for a meaningful dialogue between researcher and researched, making it possible to ‘explore questions regarding meaning, experience and understanding after the death of a loved one’. This ability to ask follow up questions and explore unexpected lines of enquiry is a vital benefit of qualitative research, as, with quantitative surveys, Stroebe, Stroebe and Schut (2003, p. 238) note that ‘important dimensions of grief and grieving may be missed simply because the researchers did not include certain topics in a questionnaire’. Moreover, they claim that qualitative methods have the capacity to offer a broader and deeper understanding of bereavement, as such ‘approaches are suited to revealing the unique meanings that underlie the reactions of bereaved individuals or cultural groups’ (Stroebe, Stroebe and Schut, 2003, p. 238). Adopting a qualitative approach is thus methodologically appropriate for meeting this study’s aims, as it facilitates the generation of rich data regarding ongoing processes of meaning making and personal experience over time, thereby offering a contrasting insight into sibling bereavement than is currently available.

Underpinning this qualitative study is a broadly constructionist philosophy, which conceptualises knowledge as ‘socially and personally constructed, with no single view laying claim to universal validity or absolute truth’ (Neimeyer and Hogan, 2001, p. 105). This perspective ‘denies the essentiality and universality of thoughts, feelings, and words said in or about bereavement’ (Rosenblatt, 2001, p. 286), and thus, the intention is to ‘discover unique and common perspectives of the persons being studied, rather than to generate incontestable “facts”’ (Stroebe, Stroebe and Schut, 2003, p. 238). Although this approach has been criticised for lacking reliability and validity (Stroebe, Stroebe and Schut, 2003), and for failing to offer causal explanations of grieving behaviours due to the descriptive intent (Neimeyer and Hogan, 2001), these concerns are irrelevant to this research project. The methods used by this study have been chosen precisely because they prioritise in-depth individual insight over broad generalisations and offer a way of hearing detailed perceptions of grief experiences, rather than grief responses. Moreover, the in-depth and interactive nature of qualitative research enables the researcher ‘to enter the social world of participants’ (Valentine, 2008, p. 3), which is vital when conceptualising grief as an embodied experience inseparable from other aspects of social life. Indeed, Silverman and Klass (1996) note the challenge of adopting a positivist methodology when questioning how people attempt to understand the social context of their lives. Instead, they argue that a constructionist approach is able to prioritise individual experience and the ways in which people make meaning of their experiences, whilst making it ‘possible to hear and legitimate the web of relationships in which the bereaved are involved, including that with the deceased’ (Silverman and Klass, 1996, p. 22). Adopting a constructionist perspective therefore allows for the opportunity to recognise that people are ‘active in a network of interacting individuals, families, groups, institutions, and ways of thinking’ (Rosenblatt, 2001, p. 287). As a result, a ‘comprehensive constructionist analysis would illuminate this network of mutual interactions in all their systemic complexity and subtlety’ (ibid), making it possible to explore the social and relational nature of grief that is a central aspect of this research. Clearly then, adopting this approach is ideal for seeking to address the research questions as it acknowledges the complex interaction between the individual and the relationships in which they are embedded.

The final justification for using qualitative methods within this study links to its ethical, rather than theoretical, positioning. Employing qualitative methods offers bereaved individuals the opportunity to speak exclusively about their dead loved one in a detailed manner; a situation that very rarely arises in everyday life (Buckle, Dwyer and Jackson, 2010). Moss and Moss (2012) comment that people are often required to grieve privately whilst demonstrating control of their emotions in public; failure to comply leaves them open to assumptions of weakness, which thereby devalues their grief. In contrast, Buckle, Dwyer and Jackson (2010, p. 121) argue that researchers willing to spend time conducting in-depth interviews ‘communicate to participants that their personal, subjective perspective is valuable and important’ as they are ‘viewed as experts on their own experience’. Offering participants an open and attentive arena in which to discuss their brother or sister is therefore an ethical, as well as practical, decision, as it is considered a priority of this research to allow individuals the opportunity to speak about their sibling in a less restricted manner. Buckle, Dwyer and Jackson (2010) also highlight that a researcher who interacts with their participant is better placed to observe their emotional responses and attend to any upset or distress they display. As this research is strongly underpinned by an ethos of respect, care and compassion for those taking part, it is felt only a qualitative approach allows for the development of a necessarily personal and supporting relationship with the participant. This then offers participants the ‘opportunity to be openly introspective in an environment that is perceived to be relatively secure’ (Clark, 2010, p. 407), thereby offering a safe environment in which to reflect on potentially distressing matters. The creation of such a ‘safe space’ is vital, but only achievable by building relationships and establishing rapport via the use of a qualitative approach. The finer details and practical considerations of how to facilitate this ‘safe space’ are reflected upon throughout this chapter.

## Interviewing

All participants engaged in a semi-structured interview, which drew upon narrative and object elicitation methods. Liamputtong (2007, p. 96) notes that in-depth interviews are a traditional method appropriate for researching vulnerable people as they necessitate ‘active asking and listening’, which elicits ‘rich information from the perspective of a particular person and on a selected topic under investigation’. Moreover, it is preferred by researchers of sensitive material as it allows the participant to speak about their lived experience in greater depth (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005; Johnson, 2002). Whilst alternative methods are more frequently being used by social researchers, May and Lewis (2019, p. 13) highlight that ‘it is important not to over-emphasise claims of methodological innovation’ as traditional, static interviews still have much to offer. Indeed, they found that ‘the stationary nature of sit-down interviews slowed down the pace of the interview such that our participants were able to reflect on how they made sense of their embodied experiences’ (ibid). This opportunity to reflect and make-meaning is essential to this study as participants were asked to articulate complex feelings, emotions and memories related to their bereavement experience.

A broad schedule was devised to use as a guide during the interviews (see appendix 2), which served as a reminder of the topics to be covered and provided potential prompt questions in each area, although the sequence and wording of questions was adapted to each interview (Patton, 2002). This allowed for a more tailored and personalised approach to the conversation, allowing me to ‘adapt to the scenario and personality at hand, rather than… stick robotlike to an established script’ (Odendahl and Shaw, 2002, p. 311). The use of object elicitation also encouraged interviewees to take an ‘active role in setting the agenda’ (Willig, 2017, p.212), whilst expressing greater agency and control over the topics covered (Silver, 2012). As such, interactions were more relaxed and personable, which helped to facilitate the building of rapport and improve the level of detail offered in participant responses.

Although not rigidly structured in this way, it is useful to conceptualise the interviews in 2 parts. Conversation opened with a focus on the period of time when the sibling was alive, including childhood and early adulthood, encouraging participants to discuss their brother or sister and share details of the sibling relationship, including memories and stories. The aim being to establish rapport whilst improving my understanding of the deceased and participant, as well as their relationship together. This would continue until the stage at which participants would either voluntarily share information about how their sibling died or I felt it was appropriate to ask. Although this moment would often elicit an emotional response, people living with bereavement are repeatedly required to share their story and so the recounting of events was often an articulate narrative that had been visibly rehearsed over the years (Willig, 2017). This is in contrast to other points in the interview, when it was clear that the participant had been asked to reflect on an aspect of their bereavement experience for the first time. It was at these moments that the slower pace of a static interview offered participants the time to consider their answers before responding (May and Lewis, 2019). After recounting how their sibling had died and the initial aftermath of this moment, focus would turn more generally to the study’s main themes, including relationship maintenance, identity construction, continuing bonds and everyday lived experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course. Interviews lasted on average 2-3 hours and took place in a variety of locations, a consideration which is discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

## Artefact Elicitation

Dyregrov (2004) comments that, prior to interview, all of the parents in her study were keen to share photographs, objects and other items associated with the deceased, highlighting their concern for the deceased’s identity to be recognised and valued by the researcher. Consequently, participants were invited to bring to the interview any artefacts of their choosing, including objects and photographs, which linked to their sibling in some way. Finch and Mason (2000) argue that inherited objects are endowed with symbolic rather than material value as they retain memories of the deceased and act as a visual reminder of the recipient’s relationship with the dead. According to Smart (2007, p.167), keepsakes and heirlooms are heavily invested with feelings and memories of the deceased which ‘invoke that person or some event involving that person, thus conjuring up feelings and reminiscences which keep the memory of that person alive’. As a result, they present a paradox of absence and presence, simultaneously acting as a reminder of the deceased whilst highlighting their inability to be there in person (Gibson, 2008). As such, ‘bereaved people recruit objects to the task of sustaining their relationship with someone who has died, and in the process, enabling that person’s continuing social life’ (Hockey, 2014, p. 108). The keepsake therefore ‘acts as the *embodiment* of a person who no longer has a physical body’ (Finch and Mason, 2000, p.142). As a result, possessions can take on new meanings for the bereaved as they seek to retain a connection with the deceased and encapsulate memories of the relationship within material objects (Hallam and Hockey, 2001).

Artefact elicitation offers a way to sensitively and collaboratively draw out these personal thoughts and feelings that usually remain private (Mannay, 2010), encouraging people to speak about ‘aspects of their experience that may be difficult to tap into through conversation alone’ (Willig, 2017, p. 211). As stated previously, people are likely to deliver a bereavement narrative which is rehearsed and somewhat scripted (discussed further in chapter 7). Object elicitation is thus a useful method for use in bereavement research as it facilitates the disclosure of ‘unrehearsed, in-the-moment reflections’ and ‘encourages fresh engagement with lived experience’ (Willig, 2017, p. 215/215). In addition, Kehily (1995, p. 23) argues that the inclusion of photographs in her interviews ensured that ‘past and current version(s) of self were juxtaposed in ways that produced different layers of meaning, understandings and reconstructions of identity’. Artefact elicitation can also, therefore, be a helpful way of encouraging participants to reflect on their sense of self over time. As such, its inclusion within the research methods is justified on the grounds that these themes are central to the research questions.

Unlike Dyregrov (2004) but noted by Willig (2012), not all participants were enthused about the prospect of presenting an object to discuss in the interview. Overall, only 14 of the 36 participants chose to bring an object or photograph with them (see appendix 3). Those who didn’t were not forthcoming with the reason why and it was deemed inappropriate to ask for fear of projecting disappointment or disapproval. However, those who did so seemed to enjoy sharing their chosen possessions and it afforded a greater sense of who their sibling was through the conversations that it prompted. The lack of an object did not hinder the ‘standard’ interviews, but there were clear benefits to having the objects present and the use of object elicitation proved to be a useful addition worthy of inclusion. For example, interviews with those who shared items immediately felt more personable, as sharing their intimate possessions indicated a level of trust (Torre and Murphy, 2015), and I was prompted to ask questions about their sibling that encouraged the recollection of precious memories. Participants were also visibly more confident at this stage in the interview as it was familiar ground that they were discussing (ibid). In addition, the focus of my gaze on the object, rather than the participant, helped to create a more relaxed environment and deviate from the interview schedule towards a topic of their choosing, thereby encouraging participants to feel more comfortable and in control (Shohel and Mahruf, 2012).

Objects were primarily regarded as ‘elicitation tools during interviews’ (Werts, Brewer and Mathews, 2012, p. 826) and so were not directly included within the analysis process, although their presence is noted in the interview transcripts (Torre and Murphy, 2015). Some participants had made copies of their objects (poetry, letters, newspaper clippings and photographs), which they gave me after the interview and of which I am still in possession. Hockey (2014, p.94) labels these items as ‘material outcomes of the interview’, along with digital recordings and transcriptions, noting that they have social lives of their own. However, White (2019) problematises this and questions what researchers are ethically obliged to do with items that are bestowed upon them by participants. Currently, all material relating to this thesis is held in locked storage, where it shall remain until a solution is found regarding the ethical dilemma they pose.

## Narrative Methods

According to Gilbert (2002, p. 237), there is ‘great diversity in the process of conducting a narrative study’, whilst Polkinghorne (1995, p. 5) comments that within ‘qualitative research literature, the term *narrative* is employed to signify a variety of meaning’. Indeed Riessman (2008, p. 11) describes narrative research as ‘a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form’, but states that ‘as in all families, there is conflict and disagreement among those holding different perspectives’. It is clear therefore that there are multiple ways of conceptualising the term ‘narrative’ and integrating this within a research project, so it is necessary to clarify the understanding adopted by this thesis.

Muller (1999, p. 221) proposes that, most simply put, narratives are ‘stories that relate the unfolding of events, human action, or human suffering from the perspective on an individual’s lived experience’. They allow people to reflect on their own experiences, as well as the meaning that they attribute to these experiences (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010), and thus can be conceptualised as a device through which people make sense of their lives (Birch and Miller, 2000). As such, they are ‘rich sources of data that can be used to explore social life’ (Willis, 2010, p. 424). Smythe and Murray (2000, p. 326) highlight that individuals ‘enjoy a certain epistemic privilege by virtue of the fact that the story is about their own experience and no one can know an experience as intimately as the one who has lived it’. As there is no way to directly access someone else’s memories (Riessman, 1993), consideration of the stories co-produced through narrative interviewing therefore offers a ‘useful way of gaining access to feelings, thoughts and experience’ (Holloway and Wheeler, 2010, p. 193). Indeed, May (2002, p.243) suggests that the research setting offers an ‘arena in which narratives can be elicited and explored’, whilst Willis (2010, p.424) proposes that narratives are ‘usually solicited through in-depth, open-ended interviews’. Integration of narrative methods into the research design therefore fits with the overarching aims of this study, enabling the researcher to hear the participants’ individual, embodied narratives of bereavement according to their understanding.

Crucially, however, Muller (1999) stresses the importance of prioritising lived experience, whilst recognising the socially constructed and contextual nature of ‘reality’. For example, May (2002) highlights that narratives are social products, dependent on the social, historical and cultural context in which they are located, whilst Giddens (1991) cautions against the individual’s reflexive reworking of events in which memories are subject to an ongoing process of interpretive reconstruction. Valentine (2008) agrees that a single interview is limited in conveying this but an in-depth conversational approach allows this to be captured to some extent. Thus, in line with the overall research aim, drawing upon narrative methods prioritises the complexities of life as reconstructed and interpreted by the individual. The intention is therefore not to interrogate the ‘truth’ of a situation but to understand the author’s perspective within the broader social context of their life (Riessman, 1993). As a result, it is necessary to accept that there are multiple interpretations of ‘reality’ rather than a singular ‘truthful’ account (Smythe and Murray, 2000). Indeed, ‘narrative is not an objective reconstruction of life’ (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p. 3), as ‘the story that is told may attempt to cover the full sweep of a person’s experiences, or it may be partial, topical, or edited’ (Denzin, 1989, p. 29). Consequently, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the subjectivity contained within participant narratives during analysis.

It is argued that individuals use narrative as a way to make sense of challenging life events and enable them to understand the past, thereby creating order from disorder (Riessman, 2008). Some accounts of life course transitions are told retrospectively, in reminiscence, memoir or therapy; a process that can involve creating a shape and pattern among events which, at the time, were experienced as random and chaotic (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998).Thus ‘narratives are strategic, functional, and purposeful’ (Riessman, 2008, p. 8) as they allow the narrator to make sense of their life and establish their identity through the construction and presentation of who they are through the telling of stories. As Muller (1999, p. 223) notes, the ‘telling of stories is a way, perhaps the most basic way, for humans to make meaning of events in their lives. Stories are used to define who we are, to claim an identity’. Consequently, Riessman (1993) advises that narrative interviews are highly suited to projects investigating issues of subjectivity and identity, such as this one, as they prioritise the individual meanings and values that people attribute to various moments in their life. However, it must also be recognised that aspects of a narrative may be ‘omitted, embellished, reframed and adapted for different audiences’ (Kehily, 1995, p. 24). As discussed in the literature review, people maintain and perform a multiplicity of social identities, and so it must be remembered that the ‘self’ narrated in the interview holds no claim to a ‘true’ or ‘real’ self. Nevertheless, priority is given to the understanding of self and experience as presented by the individual, rather than making any claims to ‘reality’; drawing upon narrative methods can be useful in achieving this aim.

Overall, therefore, integrated into this research approach is a relational framework, which acknowledges the embodied individual, but recognises that people are embedded within wider social networks that become apparent through storied narratives. These narratives are able to offer insight into the way that individuals remember and make sense of their lives, whilst also reflecting the broader contextual environment in which they are situated. As such, an awareness of narrative was maintained throughout the interviews and drawn out during the process of analysis. The way in which this was achieved is outlined in the analysis section of this chapter.

## Role of the Interviewer

The discussion thus far has referred to the narrative author as an individual, but it has been suggested that narratives are inherently social in the way that they are constructed, re-constructed and articulated (Griffin and May, 2012). According to Gilbert (2002, p. 224), this is because ‘we make meaning by creating and exploring our stories in concert with other interested parties’, but a result of this is that individuals within a social network are able to exert influence over the narrative content. Gilbert (2002, p. 225) discusses this evolutionary nature of narratives in greater detail, highlighting that they are ‘always representations of a lived experience and are subject to change and reinterpretation’. These ideas are explored in further depth throughout the thesis but of relevance for this section is the argument that the acquisition of new information and development of a deeper understanding through conversation allows for a more complex interpretation of the same events over time. More specifically, it is argued that engaging in the interview process can have a potentially transformative effect on the narrative, as the revealing of personal and private details may prompt the participant to develop a new understanding of the past (Birch and Miller, 2000).

Understood in this way, the role of the interviewer becomes ‘that of a facilitator who enables the interviewee to reexperience and to reflect on the events’ (Enosh and Buchbinder, 2005, p. 610). However, the interviewer cannot be removed from this process, as they are part of the social world under investigation and so it is impossible not to influence the narrative shared through the questions asked and responses given (Valentine, 2007). Indeed, just by hearing the participant and being present in the interview, the researcher has an impact (Riessman, 1993). As such, they ‘must be aware that they influence the story simply by their physical presence and by their listening to that unfolding story’ and so ‘the investigator’s role is to listen, report, interpret, and to recognize their own participation in the process’ (Gilbert, 2002). Consequently, this thesis recognises that the interview itself is a highly relational and interactional act (Enosh and Buchbinder, 2005). As a result, it is important for the researcher to be reflective and make some considerations. For example, Gilbert (2002, p.229) claims that someone able to elicit in-depth narratives should be ‘open to listening to the stories of others, with a willingness to consider ways of viewing the world that are different from their own’, whilst Ezzy (2010) suggests that researchers must remain aware of the interview as an embodied emotional performance and respond accordingly. Indeed, Komaromy (2019, p. 12) applies the work of Goffman to the role of interviewing, suggesting that researchers must assume a ‘performance which needs to be balanced between the requirement to present the correct demeanour and the separate need of the inquiry itself’. Finally, it should always be remembered that decisions regarding the final content of the report rests with the researcher and so the ‘only way to prevent misuse of the researcher’s power is to use a wealth of descriptions and citations’ (Enosh and Buchbinder, 2005, p. 613). This approached has therefore been applied throughout the thesis. Further consideration of researcher positionality and reflexivity is given later in this chapter.

## Analysis

As noted by Clark, Foster and Bryman (2019, p. 270), ‘the process of choosing your analytical approach should not coincide with the start of analysis’ but be decided upon before entering the field, to ensure that methods and strategies for data collection are devised appropriately in order to meet the needs of the research. As such, it was decided prior to commencing interviews that data collected would primarily be analysed using thematic analysis to identify themes across the interview transcripts, although an awareness of narrative would also be maintained for the reasons outlined earlier in this chapter. Overall, therefore, interview transcripts were coded and analysed using a narrative approach to thematic analysis (Ellis, 2010; Riessman, 2008). In line with the research aims, this enabled the analysis to recognise both what and how meaning is constructed through the use of storied narratives, whilst also maintaining an awareness of the temporal elements inherent to bereavement experiences. Esin, Fathi and Squire (2014, p. 204) outline a constructionist approach to narrative analysis as that which ‘takes into account the broader social construction of that story within interpersonal, social and cultural relations’. Applying narrative analysis in this way allows a researcher to access and acknowledge the diverse and multi-layered nature of stories, rather than conceptualise them as a singular, coherent account (Andrews et al., 2004).

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78) suggest that ‘thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis… compatible with both essentialist and constructionist paradigms’. At its most basic application, thematic analysis is ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79) and yet there is little agreement about its conduct, with several conflicting explanations available (Roulston, 2001). To avoid this confusion, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) method for carrying out thematic analysis was adopted by this research, as it is widely cited across a range of disciplines and offers clear stages for the researcher to follow. Indeed, Clark, Foster and Bryman (2019, p.279) commend this approach for being ‘particularly noteworthy in terms of its theoretical and methodological transparency’.

According to this technique, phase 1 requires ‘familiarising yourself with your data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.87), in order to provide a strong foundation upon which to build analysis. Whilst time-consuming and potentially frustrating, Riessman (1993) suggests that transcription is an excellent way for the researcher to become fully immersed in the data. Alongside transcription, Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87) recommend that ‘it is a good idea to start taking notes or marking ideas for coding’, particularly if the data was gathered through interactive methods, such as interview. As evidenced in appendix 4, this strategy was applied throughout the entire transcription process as I sought to make links between participants and draw out commonalities as they became apparent across transcripts. This proved extremely useful and helped me to begin thinking about potential themes as I was able to refer back and forth, updating my suggestions as they developed or diminished over time. In addition to this, Braun and Clarke (2006, p.86) strongly recommend that writing be seen as ‘an integral part of the analysis’, which continues throughout the whole process rather than something that simply takes place at the end. With this mind, I sought to familiarise myself with the data and continue engaging with it by producing a number of mini case study reports (see appendix 5) once the first few interviews had been transcribed. These summarised the interview content, as well as my personal reflections on the interview itself, and began to draw out potential themes within and across the individual narratives.

In addition to these first steps, it was necessary to include an additional element which does not feature as part of Braun and Clarke’s model. It is agreed with Taylor and Ussher (2001, p. 310) that themes in the dataset ‘do not simply emerge, but must be actively sought out’. Moreover, the process of collecting and analysing data ‘is unavoidably informed by the researchers’ disclosures, comments and choice of questions and by their preconceptions and their personal, theoretical and political orientations’ (ibid). Recognition and acknowledgement of these decisions must once again be considered by the researcher and used to reflexively inform an understanding of the findings. Indeed, 36 in-depth interviews, lasting on average 2-3 hours each, generated a wealth of rich data that would be impossible to present in one thesis and so unavoidably decisions were made regarding what to include and exclude. As such, Mauthner and Doucet (2003) highlight the, often neglected, need to remain reflexive in analysis as well as data collection phase. In response to this, reflexive memos were made alongside the transcription (see appendix 6), aiming to bring to the fore any emotive responses or researcher biases in order to reflect on these, thereby seeking to make strange the familiar and prioritise the participant’s narrative. Particular focus was given to instances where specific aspects of the participant’s experience were highly similar or dissimilar to my own, but notations also documented instances where, upon reflection, it was clear that I had responded or asked a question based upon personal interest or empathetic understanding. Recognising these moments allowed me to reflect upon the ways that I had shaped the interview content and ensure that I was consistently aware of my positionality as researcher.

These reflexive memos also helped with phase 2, ‘generating initial codes’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.88) as they allowed me to see, in conjunction with the literature review, which themes were arrived at deductively, including what I had expected to find based on the literature and my own intuitions, and which were arrive at inductively by following the data. Maintaining a reflexive position ensured that this ‘hybrid’ approach to coding was possible (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), as I could justify the decisions that were made in this regard. For example, whereas the decision to apply a relational approach and therefore draw out the relational aspects of sibling bereavement was decided upon prior to data collection based upon the literature review, the findings generated by this lens, such as the hierarchies of grief, were arrived at inductively through close reading of the transcripts.

Seale (2000) highlights the potential benefits of using a computer software programme to assist with this initial coding and so transcripts were uploaded and coded using NVivo. This once again required me to actively re-read each transcript, thereby increasing my familiarity with their content even further. Each code was then printed and annotated (see appendix 7). Returning to the data in this alternative format allowed me draw out narratives within particular topics, in addition to those that were present within individual participant interviews. For example, it was clear within the ‘sibling’ code that there were was a shared understanding of what it means to be a brother or sister in society, as well as the expectations for this relationship over the life course, thereby generating a public narrative of brotherhood or sisterhood.

Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87) identify phases 3, 4 and 5 as ‘searching for themes’, ‘reviewing themes’ and ‘defining and naming themes’ but clarify that qualitative analysis is a recursive, rather than linear, process. As such, it ‘involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that you are analysing, and the analysis of the data that you are producing’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.86). Consequently, a long time was spent reviewing the identified codes and trying to draw these together into themes that could be explored within the analysis chapters. The strategy of consistently writing with the data was applied until eventually, through an iterative process of reading, writing and editing, the data was brought together into coherent arguments.

Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight the flexibility of thematic analysis, suggesting that researchers must decide for themselves what constitutes as a ‘theme’ and claiming that volume of references to a certain issue do not necessarily mean that the issue is most important. Instead, what is important is whether the concept reflects something integral to the overall research aims and questions. For example, chapter 5 explores the concept of aunt/unclehood, as articulated by the participants. While not mentioned by many, those who did speak of it raised many important issues that relate to the aims of this thesis and require further attention in future study. It was therefore deemed worthy of inclusion in the final edit. A similar approach was also adopted when deciding on the other themes for discussion in this work. The aforementioned reflexive memos aided this process as they encouraged me to consider my experiences alongside those of the participants. Whilst several elements of my narrative were similar, other aspects which have proved central to this thesis were not. Yet by working with the data so closely it was clear that they were central concepts that could not be excluded. As such, the overall thesis presents ‘a narrative created by the writer/researcher, that has come from the narratives of others’ (Gilbert, 2002, p.228).

## Dissemination

All participants will be contacted at the end of the project to offer them an overview of the findings, in order to recognise their contribution and ensure a continued dialogue (Dyregrov, 2004). This will be written in a non-academic tone to ensure accessibility, although participants will also be made aware that the full thesis is available, should they wish to read it (Smythe and Murray, 2000). At the beginning of the project, contact was made with Cruse Bereavement Care, Compassionate Friends and Child Bereavement UK for referral purposes and also to aid with recruitment. In return for their assistance and with the secondary aim of this research in mind, a summary of findings will be shared with these charities, as well as The Good Grief Trust[[6]](#footnote-6). Other counselling services in the local area will also be offered access to the same information, deliverable via verbal presentation or written report. Alternatively, a summary of findings will be shared via Twitter, as Verhagen, Bower and Khan (2014) cite the benefits of using social media to disseminate research to a wider audience.

Guidance regarding useful ‘takeaway’ points are made in the final chapter of this thesis that will be shared with professional services, although specific suggestions for policy and practice are not at this stage, as this researcher is not a qualified therapist and so it would be irresponsible and inappropriate to present such ideas. Instead, a planned extension of this research intends to work with practitioners to co-produce a policy briefing note, in which key research findings are effectively translated into practice and policy issues. It may also be possible to co-create a set of resources which can be disseminated to charities and practitioners using this briefing note for guidance.

## Participant Recruitment

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, a ‘self-defining’ approach to recruitment was applied, as recommended by Valentine (2007), employing opportunistic and snowball sampling methods; the intention being to empower participants with the agency to choose whether or not to take part and minimise any sense of pressure or obligation to participate in the research. Use of a self-defining approach also allows individuals to interpret their own sibling relationship, allowing for the inclusion of a diverse range of sibling relationships seen in contemporary families, such as step, half and adopted brothers or sisters. However, Stroebe, Stroebe and Schut (2003) raise the issue of potential bias associated with the use of this recruitment method, commenting that individuals may volunteer due to a particular motivation to take part, such as a desire to assist others by sharing their grief or a hope that participation may help them come to terms with their own grief. However, there are many different reasons why people choose to take part in research (Clark, 2010), and having a self-motivated reason for doing so doesn’t necessarily skew or bias the study. As with many aspects of research, the compromise is to reflect on these potential biases and as much as is possible be aware of their potential to influence the research (Stroebe, Stroebe, and Schut, 2003). Discussed in greater detail in chapter 6, participants often voluntarily commented that they wanted to take part in the research because they felt sibling bereavement received very little attention in comparison to other familial bereavements. They therefore opted to speak with me in an attempt to address this imbalance and help others learn more about sibling bereavement experiences.

As ‘the bereaved’ are a non-visible ‘group’, there are no straightforward or pre-defined methods for recruiting participants. Bereaved individuals who have participated in other research projects have recommended the use of indirect recruitment methods in order to minimise the potential pressure to participate (Buckle, Dwyer, and Jackson, 2010; Dyregrov, 2004). In response, a variety of indirect recruitment methods were employed by this research project with the aim to recruit participants of varied age, gender and ethnicity. Specific measures to enhance representativeness were not taken further as it is beyond the scope of this project to draw out experiential differences based on these factors, although an awareness of sample make-up was maintained during the recruitment and analysis phase. As such, recommendations for further research in these areas are highlighted throughout the analysis chapters.

To begin with, friends, colleagues and relatives acted as mediators by presenting the research to eligible contacts who were then able to volunteer should they feel comfortable to do so. After this initial recruitment, advertisements were then shared by three main National bereavement charities; Cruse Bereavement Care, Compassionate Friends and Child Bereavement UK. A personal contact in Rotary International also shared the call for participants across their South Yorkshire branches, with the aim of targeting older males. Finally, an email was sent via the University’s distribution list to Postgraduates and staff. With each of these avenues, the onus was on the participant to make first contact so that if they chose not to participate, it was an anonymous decision and they felt no repercussions for not taking part (Valentine, 2007).

## Participant Overview

Initially, the intended sample was to be 20-25 individuals who were aged between 14 and 30 when they experienced the death of a sibling. It was decided to focus on those bereaved in early adulthood as this is an understudied age group in the sibling literature (Riggio, 2000; Voorpostel et al., 2007). This also allows for the recruitment of people bereaved a long time ago, thus enabling a focus on the long term aspects of sibling bereavement in line with the research aims. However, the total interview count was 36 as the final wave of recruitment elicited an unexpectedly high number of responses and an ethical decision was made to not refuse anyone the opportunity to speak about their experience having expressed the desire to do so. It is for this reason also that the age parameters were stretched, with the youngest bereavement age being 8 and the oldest age being 34. Overall, participant age at the time of death was spread across the 26 year gap, whilst participants were aged between 19 and 66 years at the time of interview (see appendix 3). Due to the exploratory nature of the research and once again for similar ethical reasons, there was no restriction regarding cause of death. For reasons of sensitivity, details about each sibling’s cause of death is not included in the participant overview (see appendix 3) but this information will be provided, when appropriate, during the analysis chapters. A minimum of 5 years had to have elapsed since the death to reduce the potential risk of harm to participants and also to reflect this project’s focus on long term sibling bereavement experiences. Despite the research’s self-defining approach to recruitment, only 4 non full blood siblings were interviewed (3 half/step siblings and 1 adopted sibling). Out of respect for the way that participants conceptualised their relationships, the term ‘sibling’ is used throughout this thesis to encompass these individuals. Their non full blood position is only disclosed when necessary.

As only 9 of the 36 participants interviewed were male, it is not possible to make generalisable claims regarding gender. However, potentially gendered elements were identified in the analysis and discussed in the findings chapters, along with suggestions for future research that applies gender as its focus. Although all participants are currently residing in the UK, 1 was raised in Mexico, 1 in the USA, 2 grew up in Northern Ireland and was 1 born in Kuwait but moved around the Middle East as a child. All bar the latter experienced the death of their sibling in their home country. Much like gender, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to draw out in-depth cultural differences in sibling experience but these will be highlighted, where appropriate, in the analysis. The vast majority of participants were university educated and employed in professional jobs. This will have been influenced by the avenues used to recruit participants and so further exploration of class differences would be beneficial, using alternative methods of recruitment to garner a more varied class sample.

Opportunity arose to interview two surviving siblings from the same family and so the option to be interviewed individually or as a pair was made available. As participant welfare is paramount, it was important that this alternative format was possible, as Liamputtong (2007) highlights that vulnerable participants who share the interview experience can feel more supported and therefore more willing to engage in open dialogue. In addition, Heaphy and Einarsdottir (2012) argue that observing the interactions between participants in joint interviews offers the unique opportunity to further develop an understanding of the dynamics within their relationship. Yet it may also be that one sibling’s narrative dominates and the level of disclosure can be inhibited by the other person’s presence (Allan, 1980). Nevertheless, these issues were avoided as both siblings opted to be interviewed separately. Although, Moss and Moss (2012, p. 460) highlight that when a participant is aware of other family members taking part, it is ‘likely that each may imagine possible responses and attitudes of the others’, which has the potential to alter what is said in the interview. Having conducted the interviews, however, it is strongly believed that this was not the case. The 2 siblings articulated discrepancies in their accounts of particular people or events, and seemed to speak frankly about their family members without concern for what the other might say. As such, both appeared assured in the knowledge that the interview was confidential and discretion would be applied when writing about identifying details.

## Participant Welfare

Underpinning every aspect of this research was a fundamental concern for participant welfare. Those taking part were therefore afforded the highest level of respect, empathy and care at all times, ensuring that every effort was made to support participants through each stage of the research process. Essential to this is the idea that ‘it is important to treat them not just as data sources but as human beings with their own distinctive individuality and autonomy’ (Smythe and Murray, 2000, p. 317). Moss and Moss (2012) comment that participants reported feeling vulnerable if they did not feel secure in the interview, once again highlighting the importance of establishing a ‘safe space’ in which to speak. One way to achieve this was to display an ‘understanding and supportive, rather than judgemental’ demeanour (Moss and Moss, 2012, p. 464). Indeed, Dyregrov (2004, p.399) reflects that participants were willing and able to narrate their story, despite it being painful to do so, as long as the listener was a ‘respectful, empathic, and informed researcher, seemingly without time limits’. In addition to ensuring participants did not feel rushed, another way of encouraging those taking part to feel more relaxed required reassuring participants that there were ‘no correct ways of feeling, thinking and behaving, no clear guidelines, and no right or wrong answers to our questions’ (Moss and Moss, 2012, p. 463). Overall, therefore, the attitude and approach adopted was vital in establishing a positive relationship with participants and assuring their comfort throughout the research process.

To minimise the potential for participant harm, those taking part were reassured that they did not have to answer any questions that they found too distressing (King and Horrocks, 2010). The needs of a distressed interviewee always took priority over the needs of the research, thus all interviewees were reminded of their right to withdraw should the experience prove emotionally stressful (Parkes, 1995). Protocol was also in place to support any individuals who were negatively affected by their participation (Hadjistavropoulos and Smythe, 2001), with professional help available on standby if necessary (Stroebe, Stroebe and Schut, 2003). Contact was therefore maintained throughout the study with bereavement support services, Cruse Bereavement Care and Compassionate Friends, for both referral and consultation purposes.

Integral to safeguarding participants is the need to ensure full and informed consent. Yet it is documented how challenging this can be when conducting in-depth interviews as, mentioned previously, the direction of the conversation can be undetermined and less predictable (Hadjistavropoulos and Smythe, 2001). Moreover, as Valentine (2008, p.8) notes, obtaining informed consent can be more complex in bereavement research as unexpected responses are more likely and so these ‘situations call for a process of negotiation, compromise and adjustment on the basis of experience’. However, measures to maximise informed consent must be implemented and so a full outline of the research was provided in the information booklet (see appendix 8) made available to participants prior to them volunteering to take part. This information was then reiterated prior to signing the consent forms and conducting the interviews. At this point, two separate consent forms were issued, one clarifying the research’s participation requirements (see appendix 9) and one outlining data usage (see appendix 10), as it is important that participants are aware of what will be done with the findings, such as publication and dissemination intentions (Munhall, 1988). The ongoing opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification wherever necessary was also made clear and reiterated throughout (Dyregrov, 2004). Interestingly, Munhall (1988, p. 151) challenges the notion of informed consent by claiming that it is a ‘static, past tense concept’, whereas qualitative research is ‘an ongoing, dynamic, changing process’. Consequently, she proposes the use of ‘process consenting’ as a flexible approach that requires the researcher to ‘assess the effects of involvement in the field and continually acquire new permissions’ (Munhall, 1988, p. 157). Smythe and Murray (2000) suggest that this can be achieved by using multiple consent forms, verbal agreement to continue or informally revisiting the topic of consent, but stress that it must be initiated by the researcher on a regular basis. Whilst it is felt that asking participants to sign multiple consent forms is arduous and unnecessary, it is agreed that consent can be informally re-established throughout the interview process, particularly if participants appear upset or uncomfortable, and so this technique was applied during fieldwork.

To further enhance participant welfare, individuals were offered a multitude of interview locations and comfort breaks were made available upon request (Dyregrov, 2004). Participants were given a choice of venues to enhance comfort and encourage open dialogue, with interviews eventually taking place in a range of locations, including: their home, University, a café, a pub, via phone and Skype. It was made clear that information given will remain confidential and steps to ensure anonymity, such as pseudonyms for names and changing identifiable details, were used when transcribing and writing the thesis (Parkes, 1995). However, participants were also made aware that ‘the right to privacy is not absolute’ (Smythe and Murray, 2000, p. 314), and informed that the researcher is obligated to disclose any concerns regarding the safety of those taking part. Participants were also made aware that, whilst steps have been taken to anonymise their transcript, those familiar with their history may still be able to identify them from specific information given (Rosenblatt, 1995). Moreover, third parties may also be identifiable as a result of the level of detail offered in the narratives, which raises an additional ethical consideration as these third party individuals have not given consent to feature in the research (Hadjistavropoulos and Smythe, 2001). Consequently, full interview transcripts have not been published as part of this thesis in an effort to minimise the risk of identification occurring. It was anticipated that some participants may ask not to have a pseudonym or, more likely, that their sibling’s name not be altered in the transcripts (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). However, no one requested this and so it was not an issue that had to be dealt with.

Participants agreed that interviews could be audio recorded to ensure accuracy during the transcription phase (Tessier, 2012). In line with the University of Sheffield’s Research Ethics Policy Notes (2018), data protection measures were adopted to ensure the safe collection and storage of personal information. These were outlined in full in the project’s ethics application, which was submitted to and approved by the University of Sheffield in September 2016. In brief, audio recordings were erased once they had been transcribed. Any identifying documents, including digital transcripts, were password protected on a personal memory stick which remains in a locked cabinet accessible only by myself.

## Researching the *Bereaved*

According to Hockey (2014, p. 98), ‘individuals who are bereaved… rank highly among the categories of research-vulnerable people’. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the detailed, interactive nature of qualitative explorations of bereavement experiences, several researchers have expressed concern about the potential for causing harm when studying people who are bereaved (Dyregrov, 2004). However, in recent times, an increasing number of researchers and clinicians have noted a series of positive outcomes for participants who have featured in such studies. Moss and Moss (2012, p. 464) describe the interview as ‘an empowering experience’, with the potential for ‘enhancing one’s sense of personal efficacy’. Participants have reported finding the interviews tiring and emotionally draining but, overall, a positive experience and worth the effort (Buckle, Dwyer and Jackson, 2010). As Rosenblatt (1995, p. 144) suggests, ‘bereaved people may gain enormously from talking with someone who takes their stories seriously and witnesses and acknowledges their pain’. Crucially, participants highlighted that ‘being’ bereaved is part of their everyday life and so were able to anticipate that the interview would be emotional and potentially painful but were not deterred by this, instead claiming that ‘the interview did not cause pain, it allowed for its expression’ (Buckle, Dwyer and Jackson, 2010, p. 114). Despite this, however, Dwyer, Buckle and Jackson (2010, p.112) argue that research ethics boards (REBs) can be hesitant to approve research into grief and bereavement due to the seemingly intrusive nature of in-depth interviewing, and therefore state that there is an ‘apparent gap between the experience of participants in qualitative research on bereavement and the concerns of REBs’, as the potential benefits of participation are frequently overlooked and downplayed.

Despite this, Dyregrov (2004) states that vulnerability is too often presumed and so an increasing number of researchers are instead advocating that bereaved individuals should be allowed the opportunity to choose for themselves whether or not to participate, highlighting that they are the most able to decide whether taking part would be harmful to them. Furthermore, Valentine (2007) suggests that using an open-ended interviewing technique allows participants to only disclose as much as they feel able to discuss, whilst Rowling (2010) also claims to seek reassurance from the voluntary nature of the interviews, reflecting that participants can reveal as much or as little as they feel comfortable sharing. Overall, it is the belief of this research that individuals should be given the agency to choose for themselves whether to take part in the project, recognising that they are the experts in their own grief and therefore the most capable of determining their suitability to participate. However, this view was challenged during one particular interview in which it was clear that the participant was still very much struggling with her grief and the knock-on effects of her loss. The offer to stop the interview or take a break was declined repeatedly, which raised an in-the-moment ethical dilemma.

This reflects Rosenblatt’s (1995) argument that there is more to a project ‘being ethical’ than successfully passing a review panel. Indeed, Guillemin and Gillam (2004, p. 262) highlight the difference between what they term ‘procedural ethics’ and ‘ethics in practice’; the former involving seeking approval from REBs and the latter being the ‘difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research’. Whilst every effort should be made to account for the vast array of ethical considerations associated with researching people who have been bereaved, not all eventualities can be prepared for (Woodthorpe, 2009). In these ‘unpredictable’ situations, an appropriate response must be momentarily negotiated but crucially, the ultimate responsibility for ensuring ethical conduct lies with the researcher and this must be remembered at all times (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Yet the ability to instantly adapt is not something that can be taught and so researchers must rely on intuition, informed by knowledge of ethical guidelines, when deciding how to respond on such occasions (Woodthorpe, 2009). Returning to my own in-the-moment dilemma, as the participant was keen to continue, it was decided to ask the central questions but end the interview earlier than normal as a form of compromise. At which point, I began to offer my own experiences as she had repeatedly expressed a sense of loneliness at not having anyone to speak with who could understand. We spoke at length as a conversation, rather than a research encounter, and I informed her some of the support services that were available. Despite concerns that the interview had caused distress, her follow up emails expressed gratitude for the rare opportunity to share her grief and speak with another bereaved sibling about their experience. This reflects Reed’s (2019) argument that sociologists should not shy away from conducting sensitive research but simply engage with it in a sensitive way.

## *Researching* the Bereaved

It is increasingly acknowledged that conducting bereavement research can be emotionally challenging for the researcher as well as the researched (Sikes and Hall, 2019). Indeed, Valentine (2007, p. 160) reflects that ‘the emotional impact of an interactive approach would prove at least as challenging as the intellectual task’. According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 61), one of the reasons for this is because researchers of grief and bereavement do not retreat to an emotionally neutral role when listening to and transcribing interviews but instead ‘carry the individuals with us’ and their ‘words, representing experiences, are clear and lasting’. Gilbert (2002, p. 233) highlights that the process of transcribing and analysing narratives can be labour intensive, as it ‘requires listening and relistening, reading and rereading’. Moreover, she also warns that repeatedly engaging with emotive bereavement interviews can be emotionally costly too. Smart (2014) discusses this further, highlighting that interviews are fleeting but meaningful encounters that bring two lives into contact. As such, researchers can be ‘haunted’ by the stories of past participants, often because of how they reflect wider issues. Consequently, she proposes that ‘the trick is to value the person while addressing the social’ (Smart, 2014, p. 147).

A few implementable suggestions are available to researchers in order to help minimise potential distress and assist with the research process, which were integrated into the research design. Although, Woodthorpe (2009, p. 74) notes that there is a ‘gap between training and the actual undertaking of empirical research’, meaning that novice researchers are potentially unprepared for the ‘emotional and interactive nature of undertaking empirical research’. Current recommendations include maintaining a research journal in addition to fieldwork notes, in order to help document researcher reflexivity (Valentine, 2007; Rager, 2005). Punch (2012, p. 87) highlights that the researcher will never be ‘able to fully understand the impacts of their emotional and personal struggles of conducting fieldwork’ but suggests that a field journal ‘may encourage a more systematic and critical engagement with such issues’. This journal is also beneficial to the actual conduct of the interviews as Ezzy (2010) notes that introspective emotional self-awareness can lead to more attentive and open interviewing. In addition, it is advised that time be scheduled between interviews, where possible, to allow for a period of recuperation as emotional interviewing can be mentally exhausting (Rowling, 1999), although this was difficult to implement in practice. Interviews were scheduled at the participant’s convenience and so there were occasions when multiple interviews were conducted within a short space of time. Finally, a bereavement counsellor, familiar with the researcher’s position as bereaved sibling, was contacted prior to beginning the PhD. Though not required, this trained professional was available to provide formal support if necessary (Rager, 2005), whilst friends, family and supervisors were fully aware of the study in order to offer informal assistance (Rowling, 1999).

## Positioning of the Researcher

It is vital to recognise that the researcher impacts upon all stages of the research process, from choosing the initial study aims to interpreting and presenting the findings. Indeed, Buckle, Dwyer and Jackson (2010) state that there is ‘no neutrality in any research endeavour, there is only variation in the extent to which researchers recognize and document their subjectivity and bias’. Consequently, Watt (2007, p. 1) argues it is imperative that those conducting research must carefully focus on the topic of study, whilst always considering ‘the ways a researcher’s own assumptions and behavior may be impacting the inquiry’. Whilst there are limits to the extent to which the researcher can be aware of their own impact on the study and its participants, it is essential to consistently reflect on this throughout the research process and be mindful of its influence (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Researchers must therefore seek to be as ‘honest, clear and self-reflective as possible’ when considering their impact on the project (Buckle, Dwyer, and Jackson, 2010). This is particularly pertinent due to the researcher’s position as bereaved sibling and so my role within the research process has to be carefully considered. It is perhaps unsurprising to read that the initial idea for the thesis stemmed from my own experiences and a personal interest in learning more about sibling bereavement from a sociological perspective. Indeed Hockey (2007) notes that it is common for personal bereavement to trigger the generation of research questions. Beyond this initial point, however, great care has been taken to prioritise the experience of my participants above my own. As such, there are aspects of the overall findings that strongly resonate with my own feelings but a number of other elements that do not.

It may be assumed that my position as a bereaved sibling defines me as an insider researcher, due to my affiliation with the community that I am seeking to investigate (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). Yet it is agreed with Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 62) that adhering to a binary of insider or outsider is overly simplistic, proposing instead that it is necessary to ‘embrace and explore the complexity and richness of the space between’. For example, my own experience is the death of an older brother due to long term illness, which affords me with a variable level of understanding depending on the participant. There were elements of shared experience with some, such as losing an only sibling, but a significant number of differences meant that I was never fully inside nor outside of the research. Rowling (1999) suggests that bereavement researchers should be neither in nor out but alongside participants, whilst maintaining a reflexive ‘empathic distance’. It is necessary to recognise that my own grief will always be present within the research environment but question how this frames the research lens (Pearce, 2010). To achieve this reflexivity, I sought to always prioritise the participants’ perspectives by making no assumptions of experience and clarifying any ambiguous points made during the interviews. The aforementioned research journal and reflexive memos also helped with the process of self-reflection.

A significant decision for this research was whether or not to disclose my position as bereaved sibling. Rowling (1999) reflects on this dilemma, suggesting that likening your experience to the participant’s is not helpful and instead decided to keep her views private but opted to use affirming verbal and non-verbal cues to demonstrate understanding. Pearce (2010) warns of potentially overshadowing the participant’s narrative with your own but also notes that some participants responded more positively when they knew the researcher had shared a similar experience and therefore had a greater understanding. Indeed some of the participants in this study did comment that they would not have taken part in the interview had they not known that the researcher was also a bereaved sibling. Whilst Valentine (2007) states that she intended where possible to maintain a stance similar to that adopted by Rowling (1999), she also highlights that it is not desirable to establish rigid rules regarding disclosure as participants may ask direct questions regarding researcher experience and so, she instead advocates finding a compromise which acknowledges and respects the needs of both parties. It was therefore decided to disclose my position as bereaved sibling in the information pack sent to potential participants but refrain from sharing my personal experiences unless specifically asked. When necessary in the interviews, it was affirmed that the participant’s narrative took precedence and any questions regarding my own experience were to be answered after the interview had ended; the intention being to avoid influencing participant responses and to respectfully recognise the sensitive personal experiences shared by participants through the offer of mutual disclosure. Rubin and Rubin (2012) argue that deceiving participants is not only ethically wrong but also disrespectful and implies they are incapable of seeing through your dishonesty. The intention was therefore to maintain an honest and respecting relationship with the participant whilst prioritising their narrative.

## Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has outlined the specific methodological and ethical decisions taken throughout the entire research process, which led to the final production of this thesis. Marvasti (2004, p. 9) claims that qualitative research is ‘less about technical requirements and more about theoretical considerations’ and so emphasises the importance of making decisions that are most appropriate to the study being carried out. The aim of a qualitative researcher therefore should be to develop a research design that meets the theoretical needs of the project and so the methodology chapter provided has outlined how this has been achieved. In summary, a series of in-depth interviews, which drew upon narrative and artefact elicitation strategies, were conducted with the overall aim of answering the research questions outlined. Great care was taken to prioritise participant welfare at all stages in this process and maintain a reflexive position as researcher, as detailed throughout this chapter as a whole. The following four chapters will now provide a detailed discussion of the findings that were generated through analysis of the interview transcripts.

# Chapter Four: Being a (Bereaved) Sibling

## Introduction

This chapter offers the first of four analytical themes that are to be presented within this thesis. Whilst the other analysis chapters will discuss aspects of bereavement as experienced within the context of the sibling relationship, these ideas can only be fully understood by first exploring the value and meaning of the sibling relationship itself, as conceptualised by those interviewed. During her research, Valentine (2008, p.91) found that ‘participants constructed narratives of loss that revealed a preoccupation with defining just what it was they felt they had lost’. According to Silverman and Klass (1996) this is because individuals must establish what has been lost in order to be able to deal with that loss, taking into account possible changes in role and status as well as the death of the deceased. This chapter will therefore seek to draw upon and expand existing thought regarding what it means to be, and have, a brother or sister, whilst also extending these ideas by questioning what impact the loss of this relationship has on the individual and their sense of self over the life course. By exploring if and how people expect the sibling relationship to develop over time, a far greater understanding of wider cultural expectations regarding the normative sibling relationship can be established. Cicirelli (1994) offers a comprehensive overview of how the sibling relationship is conceptualised in varying cultures around the world, highlighting the importance of recognising these differences in an increasingly global society. However, as this study was conducted in England and the majority of participants were raised in the West, the literature presented in this thesis largely focuses on Western understandings of the sibling relationship. Any significant variations will be drawn out on an individual basis.

The opening section will begin with consideration of the sibling relationship, as discussed by those interviewed, seeking to draw out what makes this familial relationship different from others and clarify the uniquely important role that it may play in people’s lives. The second section recognises that relationships are not static but instead continue to develop over time. It will explore how participants expected this relationship to change over the life course, reflecting on how they anticipate the sibling relationship would have been experienced in later life and how the loss of this relationship will impact upon them and their lives as they age. Following on from this, the third and fourth section in this chapter will discuss in greater depth the crucial role that this relationship can play in people’s ongoing self-identification process. Feeling like, and being recognised as, a brother or sister, as well as positioning within the sibling birth order, can be vital in shaping one’s sense of self and so it will be questioned whether and how this continues after the death of a sibling. Finally, this chapter will conclude by embedding the individual within their wider relational webs and consider how the shockwaves of a sibling’s death may ripple out across these (actual as well as potential) relationships.

## Sibling Relationship

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, it is imperative to understand what has been lost if the meaning and consequence of that loss is to be grasped. This section will therefore consider the ‘sibling relationship’ through the lens of bereavement, as conceptualised by the participants in this project, as well as wider academic study. As discussed in the literature review, it is recognised that family practices vary *between* families (Morgan, 1996), shaped by a range of factors, including, but not limited to, class[[7]](#footnote-7). For example, unlike most other participants, Theresa and her brother grew up in a particularly affluent family, which lead to their relationship being characterised by distance:

I think we got on really well even though we didn’t see each other an awful lot. I wish I could have spent more time with him actually but I think boarding school and being at university at different ends of the country and then him doing a PhD that involved him being abroad most of the time wasn’t terribly conducive to spending a lot of time together. (Theresa)

Yet, as discussed in the literature review, this variation can also be found *within* families, as siblings can each experience different relationships to shared parents and other siblings (Horsley, 2017). For example, Viv is the eldest of five (step) siblings, with 18 months between her and her deceased brother, followed by another brother 6 years younger and sisters who are 9 years and 11 years younger:

I could notice how I felt more grown up and more responsible in comparison to each of them [younger sisters] whereas my brother was closer to me in age so we’d be more rough and tumble… you have different relationships because the age gaps are different. (Viv)

There is clear variation then between siblings and their relationship but it was noticeable overall that people spoke with implicit, normative ideals of the ‘typical’ sibling relationship: ‘we’d argue but then we’d have brotherly-sisterly conversations’ (Beth), as well as the value of this:

I think about the most trivial things that happened growing up, yeah they might be typical brother and sister things but actually they’re so much more than that now, you realise that they’re so much more than that and so much of what you take for granted is you realise how special and significant it actually is. (Jane)

An example of this ‘triviality’ can be found in Beth’s comment: ‘normally I used to buy my mum’s birthday presents and he used to buy my dad’s or tell me what to buy, so that’s quite hard now because we don’t have that’ (Beth). This seemingly mundane memory highlights that aspects of the sibling role can be routine and everyday yet leave a void once unfulfilled. Moreover, it recognises that ‘being’ a sibling is a diverse practice, with unique nuances and variations that will undoubtedly lead to a distinctive bereavement experience (Kissane and Kasparian, 2017). This section therefore recognises that the sibling relationship is not a homogenous bond but argues that there are conceptual commonalities that can, and will, be drawn out (Marshall, 2017). Consequently, ‘bereaved siblings experience unique challenges not typically experienced by individuals going through other types of bereavement’ (Halliwell and Franken, 2016, p. 338). Thus it is essential to explore what these differences are as awareness and understanding is currently lacking within academic and professional literature, which this thesis aims to address.

Within the family, siblings occupy a unique position as they maintain a generational proximity (Milardo, 2010), and shared familial experience with one another that is unshared by any other relation (Robinson and Mahon, 1997). Although cousins and friends may be described as ‘like’ brothers and sisters, they are highly unlikely to possess a mutual experience of (potentially) shared parenting (biological or otherwise), or typical expectations of the relationship as those held by siblings (Wright, 2016). This is due to the ‘temporal and domestic proximities experienced by many siblings who grow up together in the same household’ (Davies, 2019, p. 221). As Samantha articulates: ‘there is no one else who understands what it was like growing up in our family, and those frustrations and difficulties… like the past is a foreign land, no one else knows it except your siblings’. Edwards et al. (2006) suggest that young children spend a large proportion of their time with their siblings; the value of which is raised by Frances:

My sister’s friend is devastated (by the death of France’s sister) but she lost her mum a few years ago and she said losing my sister helped her prepare for losing her mum. I think that one thing she said makes me realise her mum still comes first. My sister was like her adopted sister if you like but her mum hurts more because it’s blood and you’ve been with them all your life and I grew up with my sister whereas I didn’t grow up all the time with my friends and I think there is a difference. (Frances)

Yet even when they did not live together, siblings are able to share a sense of understanding and unspoken insight. For example, Claire moved out of the family home when she married at the age of 19 and her brother was 12 but for years afterwards she explains that ‘he’d come to our house and he’d say, o mum is doing my head in, and I used to know what he meant’ (Claire). This exemplifies Rosenblatt’s (2018, p. 6) point that, ‘a death that ends a long-term relationship ends the efficiency and enjoyment of short-hand communication that is only possible because of shared memories’. Having experienced the death of their mother in early childhood and subsequent remarriage of their father, Jane highlights that there is value in siblings having primary experience of childhood, rather than a recounted version of events:

There’s so much affirmation, confirmation, whatever the word is, in mutual understanding. With my brothers, they saw the same shit I saw growing up that’s informed things that have happened in my life now or relationships that I have. Nobody gets it like they get it because you can tell somebody ‘til you’re blue in the face but actually they had a very similar lived experience. (Jane)

Having lived through the death of her sister when she was 14 and brother when she was 30, Phoebe outlines the significance of this shared familial understanding in relation to sibling bereavement and being the only surviving child:

I think that’s a lot of what was so devastating when my brother died. Now there was no one else who understood what we went through whereas he understood it instinctively and in a way that’s why you don’t have those conversations because it was in our blood and air and being and that’s why it hurts when you lose both your siblings because suddenly I was on my own with all of this and just having him out there, there was someone else in the world, my comrade. (Phoebe)

Clearly then, there is something unique and substantial about being and having a brother or sister, meaning that there will be huge ramifications if this relationship is lost (Halliwell and Franken, 2016). Thus ‘we grieve the deaths of siblings – no matter what the relationship… even when relationships may be strained or absent’ (Doka, 2017, p. vxii).

Due to the lateral connection, siblings retain relatively egalitarian power over one another, which is juxtaposed with the hierarchical power maintained by parents over their children (Punch, 2005). As Valentine (1999, p. 150) highlights, ‘parents’ superior age, size and life experiences means that their power over their children is literally embodied’, whereas these differences are largely negated between siblings. Whilst this may lead to conflict and negotiation of authority, it also means that siblings may be privileged to information about one another that their parents are unaware of for fear of repercussion (McIntosh and Punch, 2009). For example, Adam reflects on his and his parents’ relationship with his older brother:

Their relationship with him and my relationship with him was completely different, like they were parents and I was more of a friend, so we would talk about all sorts, from football to girls, that they wouldn’t with him. (Adam)

This power dynamic, combined with the amount of time and space spent together in childhood, means that the sibling relationship has the potential to be one of the closest held over the life course, irreplaceable by any other (Punch, 2008). This sense of intimacy is indicated in Ashley’s recollection of when her twin sister received a terminal cancer diagnosis: ‘my sister left everyone a letter but she didn’t leave me one and everybody was like, why didn’t she leave one? I said it’s because we’ve talked about everything’. As such, it is suggested that the sibling relationship is ‘expected to be one of the longest and sometimes most intimate relationships of a lifetime’ (Robinson and Mahon, 1997, p.477). This is reflected in Adam’s observation, which once again compares his own experience with that of his parents: ‘they had a big chunk of their life where he wasn’t, whereas for me, my first memories he was there and he was always the bigger brother through every step of my life until that point’. Until his brother’s death, Adam had never known a day of his life without his brother as part of it and didn’t expect to be faced with this situation for decades to come. Unlike parent and child, it is assumed that brothers and sisters will age together and live beyond their parents together (Halliwell and Franken, 2016), as Becky details:

It was completely a relationship that we both took for granted I think… you expect your parents to die at some point but you expect your siblings to be there for most of your life really. It’s one of those relationships, certainly how I felt about it and still do, that it’s just a given and they’re the person who knows what went on in your childhood, has the same experience of your parents and losing that feels like losing both a past and a future. I find it quite hard to reflect on my childhood cause I’ve got no one to reflect on it with… I’ve got no one who grew up in the same family as me and certainly now having different adult relationships with my parents… it would be so nice to pick up the phone to my brother and have the conversation with him. (Becky)

Each of these statements implies that there is an inherent difference between the relationships held by siblings and those of children with their parents. Even Becky, who described her cousins elsewhere in the interview as ‘like siblings’, acknowledges that there are certain privileges afforded to the sibling relationship that cannot be replicated by others. This is further indicated by Poppy’s discussion of how she sought to behave differently towards her brother than her parents did at times when he was struggling with his mental health: ‘I know he’ll be receptive if I am like this. I don’t want to pressurise him, I don’t want to be mum and dad, I want to be sister, someone he can call on’ (Poppy). Samantha had a similarly comfortable relationship with her brother and sought to uniquely position herself in his life as he struggled with alcohol addiction: ‘I kind of felt like our time together was his easy time, and the kind of relaxing time, and we’d kind of look after each other and just be in each other’s company’. Participants’ reflections regarding the uniqueness of the sibling relationship were not reserved for comparisons with parents, however, as some also commented on other kinship ties:

Technically I have a brother-in-law but there’s no way that I could ever view him in the same way, ever. Same goes with my sister-in-law. I have no siblings in the same way. I can’t take on, it’s a different role. It just doesn’t feel the same as it would do if it was coming from my brother. (Poppy)

As well as her in-laws, Poppy also raised this in relation to her husband and close friends:

It’s quite lonely because I don’t have a best friend as it were. My closest friend is my husband and that’s not the same is it? I have lots of close friends but nobody I would come anywhere near to calling as close as my brother would have been. (Poppy)

After disclosing that one of her friends had died at sixth-form, Melissa was asked to conceptualise the difference between losing a friend and a sibling:

The gap. The space. My little sister had a little room upstairs in our house and now she’s in my brother’s room but for a while his room was just empty and it was a void. To even go near the room was ghostly and it does leave a gap, like a hole, an unfillable hole. (Melissa)

This sense of permanence is reflected in Connidis’ (1989, p.82) suggestion that ‘the tie to a sibling is ascribed whereas that between friends is achieved’, indicating that sibling status is irrevocable, regardless of how close the relationship is, whilst friendship can be established and lost over time. Whilst participants did not specifically articulate this idea in the same way, it was apparent that everyone, including Becky, conceptualised their relationship with their sibling as different to relationships held with friends and other family members.

As specified in the introduction to this section, there are significant variations between people’s sibling relationships and part of this is the recognition that not everyone experiences a positive relationship with their brother or sister (Varjakoski, 2019). Britney openly reported having a somewhat negative relationship with her brother: ‘We weren’t close… He was two years older, and we were very different. So, like, the best way I’ve described it is, I was my father’s child, and my brother was my mother’s child’. Yet she still noted:

There were a couple of times, when we were teenagers, and we’d have to come together because we’d messed up somehow. We did something wrong and we’d have to be like, well you say this. So there were those couple of times, like teamwork as teenagers, to both benefit each other, to selfishly benefit our own selves, we had to team up with each other. (Britney)

This links to Gillies and Lucey’s (2006, p.491) suggestion that growing up with siblings can be challenging and generate ‘feelings of anger, frustration and vulnerability’, whilst Punch (2008) suggests that siblings can regularly engage in fierce conflict. However, Gillies and Lucey (2006, p.491) also note that, although the strength and nature of sibling ties vary greatly, siblings can offer each other much support and guidance, contributing towards a sense of ‘love, loyalty and security’. Indeed, rarely are relationships experienced as a binary of ‘good’ or ‘bad’; siblings may be allies and rivals who love and hate each other simultaneously (Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017). As Poppy explains: ‘it’s one of those things that even though I can say he infuriated me, he was annoying, this that and the other, no one else can ever say that so any criticism of my brother has to come from me’. Therefore, it can be argued that any sense of comradery and shared experience may not be valued in younger years and siblings may drift apart but there remains value in this initial intimacy (Robinson and Mahon, 1997), due to the memories that they share (Eaves, McQuiston and Miles, 2005).

It is clear then that participants were able to reflect on the sibling relationship as it had been, as well as the aspects of that bond which were irreplaceable. In addition to looking back at the relationship they had lost, however, participants were also able to look forward towards the aspects of the relationship that had yet to come.

## Loss of Anticipated Sibling relationship

Having outlined in the previous section the potential uniqueness of the sibling relationship, as well as its value to those interviewed, this part will explore in greater depth what siblings anticipated the relationship would have been like had their sibling survived. This therefore necessitates a shift in focus from the lived sibling relationship to the future sibling relationship imagined by the bereaved, as the ‘[d]eath of a sibling is permanent and irrevocable and shatters all expectations and anticipations of the surviving siblings for a shared future that is not to be’ (Hogan and DeSantis, 1996, p.250). Indeed, Marshall and Winokuer (2017, p.197) report finding a consistent ‘sadness over the loss of a future with their sibling’ and suggest that ‘the recognition of a future life lived without a beloved brother or sister is another common element across all age groups’. Regardless of how close siblings were in life, each participant spoke of the relationship as one of presumed permanence, indicating once again that, unlike other relationships, the sibling relationship is one expected to last a lifetime irrespective of intimacy (Halliwell and Franken, 2016). Those interviewed often demonstrated pre-conceived notions of how they expected the nature of the sibling relationship to change over time (Cicirelli, 1991), lamenting on the stages of this process that they had yet to reach and would miss out on experiencing, such as caring for one another in later life (Wright, 2016). This ties to Gillis’ (1997) work regarding families we *live with* and those we *live by*. According to Gillis, families we *live by* are an idealised version of the moral attributes associated with the ‘traditional family’, which reflect the hopes we have for our own relationships and how we’d like family life to be. Thus, it can be suggested that participants spoke of the sibling relationship that they had hoped to ‘live by’, had their brother or sister not died. Exploring people’s anticipated losses in this way can reveal more about their experience of being bereaved, but also about their expectations of the sibling relationship itself. This then contributes to a wider understanding of normative ideals regarding the sibling relationship over the life course.

One aspect of this presumed permanence is the idea that ageing siblings may look to one another to reminisce about childhood memories of which no one else would have knowledge (Eaves, McQuiston and Miles, 2005). As older family members die, siblings remain as potentially the only available gatekeepers to particular shared memories (Bank and Kahn, 1982; Moss and Moss, 1989, Milardo, 2010). A point that Samantha was aware of: ‘when that sibling, in my case the only sibling, has gone, there’s no one else who understands that place, or that you can talk to or relate to about that experience’. As suggested, this sense of loss was particularly felt by those who have no other living siblings, making their loss of a ‘comrade’ so much more apparent (Forward and Garlie, 2003). Mary has another living sibling but reflects on her friend’s situation:

My friend whose brother died, that’s it, she’s lost her only sibling and as her whole family gets older, she’ll be the only one who has any recollection, you know she’s lost that shared past, that shared history, and she’s lost the only other person who knows what it’s like to grow up in her family and she’ll be the only one around to care for her parents. (Mary)

Whilst this is an important point, it can be argued that people with other living siblings may not have access to the same memories as one another, as they may not have been raised in the same household, for example. Consequently, the death of one sibling may have similar implications for a person with other living siblings as someone who has no other living brothers or sisters with regards to memory recollection or familiarity of experience. Nevertheless, the idea of siblings as ‘memory gatekeepers’ can be integral to the bereavement experience and will be revisited in the next chapter.

Returning to the work of Gillis (1997), his ideas are particularly pertinent for those whose sibling died prior to what participants perceived as the phase beyond the younger, argumentative years. This period of ‘emerging adulthood’ is characterised by greater freedom and independence, allowing the sibling relationship to become more voluntary than before (Laverty, 2017). Participant comments reflect an assumption that it is typical to disagree and fall out with siblings when younger, as there will come a time of life that the relationship will stabilise in adulthood (Conger and Little, 2010):

You grieve for a past that you miss and you’re witness to as such, that one person that you’ve shared the same experiences of growing up in the same family with, but also grieve for a future in which we would have had a much better relationship or certainly a different relationship and we would have been quite close and I feel like I’ve been a bit robbed of that so that’s one of those things that I certainly think about now, especially getting older and doing the whole 20s thing and being surrounded by friends and seeing their relationships change with their siblings… I certainly miss having a grown-up relationship with him. (Becky)

Consequently, having experienced the death of her brother when she was 17, Britney laments: ‘I didn’t really lose a relationship, I lost what could have been a great relationship’. Although her relationship with her brother was challenging, she still hoped for a time that their connection would be closer and was open to the possibility that the situation could change. This once again ties in with the argument that the sibling relationship is one of longevity and even those who do not see each other for years still remain as siblings throughout this time (Connidis, 1992, Robinson and Mahon, 1997). In contrast to those who regretted not yet reaching the ‘friend’ phase of sibling relationship, Frances, who was 34 when her sister died, reflects on what is lost by those who did achieve this but had it taken away from them:

Even though we fought like cat and dog when we were younger, we turned into friends as we got older and she would have always been there, even if she was going away a lot. I’d have been there talking to her and making decisions with her. (Frances)

The assumption that siblings would be connected for life was also reflected in participants’ comments regarding the anticipated shared experience of parental death, as well as the expectation that siblings would have helped to care for parents in later life (Cicirelli, 1995, Marshall, 2017). Further discussion of surviving siblings’ obligations towards parents is explored in far greater depth in the following chapter, but raised here to demonstrate that it featured as part of what people expected from the sibling relationship over time. Speaking about arranging her mum’s funeral, Abi, now aged 61 but whose brothers died when she was 12 and 20, compares her experience with that of her friend, who has three siblings:

There are times I think I’d really just like to be able to share this a little bit more. It doesn’t happen often, but that was certainly one of the points where I thought, oh it would be really good to have somebody else to just say, why don’t we… and mum really liked… (Abi)

However, as Becky’s comments reveal, these reflections on later life aren’t always immediately apparent and instead, become more relevant as time goes on:

Thinking into the future, it’s like oh God mum and dad are gonna get really old and frail and crotchety… the kinds of things that you never think about as a child but as I get older and watch my friends go through that with their parents you know, I think about that stuff and certainly miss having someone to help out or talk to about that sort of thing. (Becky)

Indeed, not all participants had considered how their sibling’s death may affect decisions made in the future if the issue of caring for elderly parents arose. When asked, Tony’s response was disjointed and indicated that he had not fully thought about this potential issue: ‘in terms of being around to look after them, oh, God, I don’t…see that’s where I’m going to miss Karen because we could have shouldered the burden a little bit’. Despite the lack of details, however, his response demonstrates that he anticipated it would have been a joint responsibility shared between him and his sister. Whilst Connidis (2001) suggests the death of parents often brings siblings (back) into contact with one another in order to discuss sharing the estate, Winokuer (2017, p. 172) found that parental death ‘can cause a fracture in the relationship between siblings that can’t be healed’. Yet none of the participants imagined the future in this way and even Britney hoped for a more collegiate relationship as her and her brother aged. This once again suggests that participants shared a set of idealised norms regarding the development of the sibling relationship over the life course, each lamenting the loss of this potential support.

## Sibling relationship and Sense of Self

In the literature review, arguments were presented outlining the idea that other people play a crucial role in the self-identification process, helping to establish who we are and the way we see ourselves (Jenkins, 2014). As the first two sections of this chapter have demonstrated, the sibling relationship is uniquely vital and thus plays a significant role in this self-identification process (Edwards et al., 2006; Davies, 2015; 2019). For example, as one of seven children, Charlotte indicates how her individual identity was tied up with that of her siblings: ‘you were just used to being a bunch, so nobody actually took notice of you individually… we all found it quite hard to establish ourselves as adults’. Whilst Kate notes that she was recognised in relation to her older brother, rather than as an individual: ‘I didn’t have an identity, I was just his little sis, that was my name’. For bereaved siblings, however, this becomes problematic as they are still required to continually establish who they are but must learn to do so without a key agent in the process (Riches and Dawson, 2000; Forward and Garlie, 2003).

It is clear therefore, that the death of a sibling can potentially have a profound impact upon someone’s sense of self (Bussolari and Horsley, 2017), as Dan, aged 46, demonstrates: ‘it’s the gravest single thing that has gone on and I’ve had all sorts of shit go on in my life… but I’d still say that this is the single most significant thing that’s happened… it feels like the better bit of me died’. Rather than speaking of his sister as a separate person, Dan has assimilated her into his own identity and speaks of the death as his own. As such, this comment reflects the idea that grief can be an embodied experience and reveals how a person’s sense of self can be physically connected to an intimate other (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012). This can also be seen in Beth’s reflections:

I feel like he was the other half of me… when we were younger, you can see from some of the photos, we were joined at the hip, and we didn’t go anywhere without each other so yeah, we had that extra connection between us… he is definitely part of me. (Beth)

Moreover, her words serve as a reminder that the death of a sibling can continue to be an influence over the life course: ‘my brother’s death *does* define me on the inside and always will’ (Beth).

For some participants, the impact of their sibling’s death was so significant that it caused a permanent and irrevocable change in their perception of self. This feeling of separation in their identities was experienced as a sense of self ‘before’ and ‘after’ (Balk 1983; Franklin, 2017). On these occasions, the death of a sibling was considered to be so biographically rupturing that people felt immediately disconnected from their ‘old’ selves and thus could not resume the identity they had held prior to the death (Bury, 1982). Such an experience was most clearly articulated by Frances: ‘I’ve got 2 periods in my life, there’s the before she died and the after, it’s like there’s an invisible line and it’s like I’ve got 2 lives, the before and the after, there was a different me before and after’. Yet few participants spoke of any shifts in their identity in such defined terms and most comments instead indicated an active process of transition. For example Brooke notes that, following the deaths of both of her brothers, she: *‘*definitely had to establish this new identity of just me, not my brothers’ sister. I don’t quite know who that is, you know? I think I had to learn how to be a little bit different and do things on my own’. This was something that many participants reflected on during the interviews, as they were forced to draw out who they were as an individual, rather than in relation to their sibling. As a result, siblings talked about having to forge an identity that was different from the one they’d had previously. This was particularly pressing for identical twin, Ashley: ‘I think you have to reshape yourself to a person that is just a person and not a twin so I think that took quite a few years… it’s a real challenge but I have, I think, just tried to carve out my own name’[[8]](#footnote-8). Whether experienced as instant or gradual, however, it is still clear that the death of their sibling was a pivotal moment in their perception of self.

Throughout the interviews, participants often spoke of their identity as being connected to that of their sibling. In particular, they reported a focus on how they had tried to establish themselves in separation from their brother or sister when they were alive: ‘my parents would go to parents evening and go well, she’s not like Gayle and I’d think no, she’s not, she’s a very different person’ (Gayle). Tony’s recollection was also a seemingly common one:

I was very much in her shadow all the way through school because we went to the same school and yes, constantly having comments like, you’re nothing like your sister and your sister’s so much, sort of, better than you at this. (Tony)

This reflects the work of Davies (2019), as she explores the ‘stickiness’ of the sibling relationship in educational settings. Davies (2019) found that teachers would make comparisons between siblings, often making assumptions based on their reputation and physical resemblance. In earlier works, Edwards et al. (2006) and Davies (2015) explore the role of siblings in identity construction, with a focus on how people draw on the similarities and differences between themselves and their siblings as a way to understand their own personal identity. The following discussion builds on this work by questioning whether and how siblings continue to construct their identity in relation to their brother or sister once that person is no longer living.

After the death of their sibling, participants often expressed a newfound comfort in the similarities they shared with the deceased sibling and sought to emphasise these links instead: ‘He was always very academic, the smart one. As I’ve got older, obviously I don’t know this, but I feel like if he was still alive now we’d be a lot more similar because I feel like I’ve grown up a lot’ (Amber). Whereas Amber, aged 20, reflected that she and her brother would be more similar now had he lived, Martin was keen to assert that he and his older brother were already similar to one another, but that he wasn’t aware at the time:

Me and my brother are similar, very similar… I’m so like him but never really knew… even now to this day, it’s 17 years after, if I’m in the pub and his friends are in they’ll just say to me ‘you’re just like your brother. (Martin)

Thus, rather than trying to assert their differences, individuals often took great joy from people saying they were alike: ‘some of his friends would be like, o you’re so like him in this way’, and that means a lot to me, whatever those traits are that people are commenting on, I try and hold onto them’ (Jane). As Jane’s comment suggests, some participants tried to incorporate aspects of their sibling’s identity into their own: ‘it sounds like something basic but it literally is doing well academically because he was so good at it. I feel like I want to try harder at doing that for his sake’ (Amber). This reflects the work of Foster et al. (2012, p.7), who found that bereaved siblings were motivated by ‘an internal desire to be more like their deceased brothers or sisters’. It has also been suggested that individuals take on their sibling’s characteristics after death as a way to comfort parents and attempt to relieve their grief (McGoldrick and Walsh, 2004), although participants in this study did not speak in this way. As the following chapter details, some surviving siblings adapted their behaviour and emotional responses to try and meet the needs of their parents but not their personality traits.

Returning to the example of Britney, her change in attitude regarding the differences and similarities between her and her brother demonstrate the most significant adjustment. She recalls:

When I was younger, I had such a negative thought of him, so I just assumed everyone didn’t like him. And so, she [brother’s friend] was like, you have his smile and I was like, that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me about him. Because we do, we looked a lot alike. (Britney)

When pressed further on why this comment was so meaningful, she commented:

I hated it when people would compare us and I hated it when people would say, oh you look just like him. I hated that. So I think when she said that, it was 2 years later and I was like, oh I did look like him, so just accepting it’s okay to be happy that you looked like him. (Britney)

For Britney, their physical resemblance was a burden whilst her brother was alive, but after his death, she began to conceptualise it in a much more positive way. As Mason (2008) found, physical resemblances can be a way for people to feel that they have an ongoing connection with a family member who has died. Adam recalls his time at school following the death of his brother, implying that their physical resemblance, as well as the confusion this caused teachers, was experienced in a positive way, even though friends interpreted it differently:

After he died, in school, we’d have the same teachers. I’d often get teachers call me his name. I wasn’t really too bothered and in a way it was nice but my friends would immediately jump on it and correct the teacher… it never fussed me that much. I always liked the fact that we look quite similar. (Adam)

Embracing these similarities can be interpreted as a way to continue bonds with the deceased (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996), and remain linked with one another (Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017). As such, the death of a brother or sister may prompt people to alter their perception of, and feelings towards, any perceived similarities and differences between themselves and their sibling. This therefore extends the ideas of Edwards et al. (2006) and Davies (2015) and expands current knowledge regarding how being and having a sibling can contribute towards the self-identification process.

## Sibling Order and Age

Another significant contributing factor to people’s sense of self, in relation to their brother or sister, is the role of sibling birth order (Gillies and Lucey, 2006). Wu et al. (2018) outline that attitudes and beliefs regarding sibling birth order vary across societies, highlighting, for example, that South and Southeast Asian cultures encourage a notably high level of respect for the eldest sibling. In their British-based study of brothers and sisters, Gillies and Lucey (2006) found that older siblings expressed an affiliation with the role of nurturer or protector over younger siblings, thereby suggesting that the responsibilities associated with birth order may have influenced their broader sense of self. Davies (2019) similarly found that young people assume the position of elder sibling to be one of support and responsibility, conceived of as a ‘taken-for-granted by-product of birth order position’. Once again, however, this must be considered with reference to how birth order and its affiliated expectations are altered by the death of a brother or sister. This was something that participants reflected on regularly throughout the interviews and many expressed discomfort at the way that their birth order had been disrupted: ‘I remember being upset a lot yeah, so that was weird because I was never meant to be older than my brother’ (Ruth). As a result of their sibling’s death, people were forced to reconsider their positioning in the birth order, and the impact of this on the way they saw themselves, as well as their relationship with their sibling (DeVita-Raeburn, 2004). This section will explore the varying ways that people responded to and managed this adjustment, with consideration of how this contributes to their ongoing negotiation of self over the life course.

Davies (2019, p. 214) highlights that popular media, news, family/school practices and educational policy reinforce a set of ‘normative expectations surrounding sibling birth order positions’, which assert birth order roles. Yet McIntosh and Punch (2009, p.63) emphasise that ‘birth order and age are not fixed hierarchies but can be subverted, contested, resisted and negotiated’, highlighting that the individual’s understanding of their own position within the sibling order is integral to this process. As Punch (2005) notes, this can be particularly complex when one sibling is ill or vulnerable in some way. For example, Samantha’s brother lived with an alcohol addiction and so she says: ‘I was always his little sister, although as we got older, I felt like the grown up. But he’d always sign birthday cards ‘big bro’ and stuff like that. Yes he saw himself as my big brother’. As Samantha highlights, her brother readily identified himself as the ‘big brother’, though her positioning as ‘little sister’ became less clearly defined as they aged, and his vulnerability became more pronounced. Melissa made a similar observation about her brother, who had cerebral palsy and autism:

I do think of him as my older brother but also he was never my older brother when he was alive because he wasn’t, he was vulnerable, like I said we’d push my little sister in her buggy and we’d push him too like he was as much of a child as she was so I didn’t see him as that older brother that looks after you sort of thing… no not an older brother. That’s really weird though isn’t it because he was an older brother and he was significantly older than me so, he’s 5 years older than me so yeah, he should have been but he wasn’t. I didn’t see it that way any way. (Melissa)

Clearly then, living sibling birth order can be experienced in a non-linear fashion according to individual circumstance (McIntosh and Punch, 2009). Yet precisely because of the normative expectations regarding birth order which are emphasised in policy, practice and popular media (Davies, 2019), the death of a sibling causes a significant and unavoidable disruption, which must be negotiated by surviving siblings. As such, it can be conceptualised as a death which is ‘out of time’, as it defies understandings of linear temporality (May, 2016) that are ascribed via birth order positioning.

Although there were commonalities in thought between groups of participants, it was evident that there were also distinct differences in understanding too. Thus, it was apparent that adjustment to the disrupted birth order is negotiable according to the individual. For example, Amber saw herself as shifting from middle to eldest child after the death of her older brother:

I feel like the oldest, yeah, definitely… in the 2 years after his accident, whenever we had family occasions I felt like in that situation I had to take on his role in terms of being the one who would talk to everyone and be more mature… I think because we don’t speak about him a lot then I sort of forget that he was the oldest child. (Amber)

It can be inferred that Amber’s approach reflects her understanding of normative sibling roles; the death of her brother required her to move into his place and take on these ‘elder’ responsibilities. Abi also perceived her place in the birth order as different following the death of her two brothers: ‘I think I see myself as the only child but with these sort of ghostly forms that had some influence on me’ (Abi). Rather than assuming her brother’s position in the birth order, as Amber did, instead Abi removed her brothers from theirs, albeit not entirely.

However, such distinct adjustments to the sibling order were not common. Instead, the majority of participants expressed unease at the situation and found it difficult to realign their positioning. Andy summarises the problem: ‘the only thing I remember out of it was something to do with that strange situation of now being older than your older sister and it was a weird thing’ (Andy). Those who were already the eldest rarely discussed experiencing a change after their sibling’s death but people whose older brother or sister died were faced with complexities. One of the biggest moments was when they lived to and beyond the age at which their sibling died:

My little brother is like 3 years older than my brother was now and actually my brother talked to me about that just the other day, how he found turning 22 really difficult, much more than any other age because that’s the age that my brother was when he died. I talked about how I had felt the same and even when he turned 22 I found it really difficult because it’s that thing of, he’s our big brother but yet you’ve now got past the age that he got to. (Jane)

Other participants also expressed similar sentiments, including Adele:

I was very sad and nobody else thought of that… but I told a friend of mine at the time and I was like, I’m 27 now and so many months and my sister didn’t make it past this age. Yeah that was tough, not hugely tough but it was definitely a milestone. (Adele)

As Adele highlights, this ageing aspect of bereavement may go unrecognised by other members of a person’s kinship network, highlighting the relational nature of grief as well as the need to raise awareness regarding siblings’ experiences. Adam, now 32 but bereaved aged 14, also reflects: ‘I remember it being really odd the first time I was older than him. That was long ago but yeah I remember thinking that was really weird’. Phoebe similarly found it difficult to reach an age beyond her brother, but is keen to assert that it feels less relevant 12 years later (she was 42 at interview) as she remains his little sister:

My brother died just before his 33rd birthday so I cried a lot when I made it to 33, yeah I cried a lot, but, in a way, you cry because it represents their loss of their life. Now it doesn’t mean much because I still feel like their younger sister so the numbers don’t count in the end. They signify a marker of their passing because they signify your loss and your sense that it’s so wrong that they’re not there but from this distance, it doesn’t mean much now. (Phoebe)

Like Phoebe, the majority of participants who raised this issue indicated that they had retained the original birth order, as the middle or youngest child: ‘I still think of him as being my older brother’ (Bella); ‘I’m still the middle one. It’s weird, maybe that’s weird, I don’t know, but that will never change, she’s always the older sister and she’s still there’ (Frances). Despite it commonly feeling ‘weird’, most people found it too problematic to re-conceptualise their birth order in a way that differed from the original chronological order: ‘I struggle with being older than him. I find it really odd. He’s still my big brother. He will always be my big brother.’ (Samantha). This complexity can be seen in Andy’s musings:

She died aged nearly 13, few days before her 13th birthday, and so she’s always a little girl right and yet she’s always the eldest too right and so she’s not a little girl. I never see her as a little girl cause she was my older sister… I don’t think that will ever change. I can’t really conceptualise her as a young girl. (Andy)

Indeed, people’s sense of discomfort often appeared heightened by their inability to articulate why the situation was so ‘weird’ or how to align the contradiction between how they felt and what they thought of as ‘reality’. This inability to rectify the disparity between ‘head’ and ‘heart’ occurred to the extent that some people’s understanding appeared to defy the material reality visible in photographs:

I was quite obsessed with the closer I got to 23, I think I almost breathed a sigh of relief once I got to 23 and now I’m 34, I’m older than she ever was although I still look at photos of her and think she looks older than I do. (Mary)

Similarly, Charlotte says: ‘I look at those photos, she still seems older than me. It’s really weird. It’s like, she’s a teenager and I’m 60, and I look at them and I’m looking up to her or something’. As such, the experience of a death ‘out of time’, one which defies normative temporal scripts regarding the age death should occur and the linear temporality expected with sibling birth order, is clearly bewildering. It challenges normative assumptions regarding life and death, thereby making it difficult to comprehend and articulate in a way that feels comfortable to those who have experienced it.

Yet all of these comments reveal that, whilst the point of ageing beyond that of the deceased sibling was monumental, the need to establish what this means and how to understand it continues well beyond the significant birthday. As will be demonstrated across each of these analysis chapters, the lifelong status of bereavement requires people to continually re-address elements of their experience as they re-surface over the life course. Temporal markers, such as birthdays, act as prompts for those who are bereaved to reflect on age and the passing of time (Franklin, 2017), at which point grief can be revisited (Rosenblatt, 1993) and emotional responses elicited (Valentine, 2008). As a result, some people tried to age their siblings alongside them: ‘occasionally I will think about what age he’d be and then I always think of him as being a couple of years older’ (Adam). Frances recalls a conversation with her husband: ‘I said to my partner, “she would be 53” and he’s very down to earth and he’ll say, “yes but she isn’t is she” because she’s not here and I’ll say “yes but if she was here, she’d be 54” and I carry it on’ (Frances). Unable to perceive herself as older than her sister, Frances manages her experience by continuing to age her sister over the years. Yet this can also prove problematic for people’s perception of self, as Abi’s comment demonstrates: ‘my big brother would be 73 this year… I’m not old enough to have a brother who’d be 73’. Such reflections indicate the ‘ghostly’ presence of her brothers that she previously alluded to and also highlight that she is still able to consider her own identity in relation to that of her brother, despite feeling like an only child.

However, it was suggested by some participants that the significance of this ageing was linked to the acquisition of life experience, rather than years:

When I turned 19 and became the same age, and then when I turned 20, I was like, weird. I still feel younger, even though I’ve lived. I got a college education that he never got and I did things he never did. But I definitely do in my head, I still feel younger. (Britney)

Like many of the other participants, Britney still identified herself as the youngest sibling, despite reaching these milestones ahead of her elder brother. Both of Brooke’s older brothers died when they were 18 (first when she was 11 and then 17) but makes a similar point:

When I got to my 20s, it was like, o right yes I’m the first one who’s not a teenager, so that was strange. I think it was not just age things but the different experiences, getting to uni, getting married… I think it’s been the experiences that have been ones where I’ve thought and wondered about them. (Brooke)

Due to the generational proximity of brothers and sisters (Milardo, 2010), it is often expected that siblings will experience core life course milestones, such as leaving school and having children, at similar times, regardless of how close that relationship is (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). Consequently, not having the other person there to experience those together is destabilising for siblings as it challenges the normative temporal script, whilst adding to the feelings of confusion concerning age and birth order. DeVita-Raeburn (2017, p.70) suggests that this can be particularly bewildering for younger siblings due to ‘the disorientation of losing a leader, the person who showed [me] the way’. Indeed, Davies (2019, p.222) notes that ‘older siblings can provide a ‘route map’ to adulthood, acting as a guide for younger siblings’. Even though these shared life transitions may not have occurred had the sibling lived, it once again ties in with the notion of families we live by (Gillis, 1997), and normative life course assumptions regarding traditional sibling relationships.

Overall then, it is clear from this discussion that the impact of death on the sibling birth order is significant. Although participants such as Amber and Abi had readily adjusted to the change and those who had lost younger siblings rarely felt any different in this regard, most participants simply described it as ‘weird’ and something extremely difficult to reconcile. Of all the aspects of bereavement that younger siblings talked about having to negotiate, this appeared to be the one that they had the most trouble resolving and many of the siblings spoken to still hadn’t found a way to explain it. It may be that, typically, people’s positioning within the sibling birth order, whilst negotiable and contested, creates a sense of familiarity and belonging (DeVita-Raeburn, 2004), which offers a stabilising marker that individuals can integrate into the self-identification process and use to maintain an ongoing sense of self (May, 2016). However, the death of a sibling ruptures these orderings and challenges their pre-established positioning amongst the sibling series, thereby defying linear temporal expectations of birth order. This may consequently contribute towards the feelings of biographical disruption or transition that siblings can experience (Bury, 1982), leading them to re-establish and re-assert their understanding of the adjusted sibling birth order.

## Loss Beyond the Sibling Relationship

Earlier in the chapter, the anticipated losses associated with sibling bereavement were explored in relation to the sibling relationship itself. This section will now build upon these ideas further and extend the contribution of this chapter beyond the Sociology of Siblings to the wider scope of the Sociology of Family and Relationships. It was clear across the interviews that for many people, a series of additional consequences rippled out from the epicentre of the sibling’s death that often compounded their grief further. As Rosenblatt (1996, p.50) points out, ‘all that is lost is not realised at one point in time. There is, instead, a sequence, perhaps extending over one’s lifetime, of new losses or new realisations of losses’. Connected to the future sibling relationship is a number of additional potential relationships that would have stemmed from this. Siblings present the opportunity to extend kinship ties both laterally, via siblings’ partners e.g. brother/sister in law, as well as horizontally via siblings’ children e.g. nieces and nephews. This can enlarge familial ties and broaden an individual’s sense of self by stretching their identity roles. For example, it is via siblings that we can become aunties, uncles, brothers and sisters in law, which adds to the roles that we can perform over the life course.

Whilst relationships with aunts/uncles can be ‘casual, involving little contact or intimacy’, they can also be ‘diverse, intimate, complex relationships’ with parental-like qualities of care and support (Milardo, 2005, p. 1234). It is this missed opportunity which participants commented on:

The chances that would have been if she’d survived, that she’d now be married, divorced, who knows, but quite possibly she have had kids and the loss of opportunity not only for her but of the family that I’m never gonna have as a result of that. (Dan, aged 46)

Although such roles may in part be fulfilled via partner’s siblings, Adam highlights that there is a perceived unique value inherent to one’s own sibling relationship:

I am really disappointed that I won’t be a *proper* uncle, although I’ll be an uncle through my girlfriend’s side if her brothers ever have children, but I am really disappointed that I’ll never be that sort of immediate uncle. (Adam, aged 32)

These comments once again reflect Gillis (1997) work regarding idealised family relationships, whilst Adam’s use of the word ‘proper’ indicates the perceived value of blood ties in these imagined futures (Nordqvist, 2017).

However, it is important to recognise that siblings experience not just the loss of anticipated relationships but potentially the loss of existing ones also. Most commonly raised in the sibling bereavement literature is the idea that after the death of a brother or sister, children (of any age) may also lose their parent/s, due to them being consumed by grief (Hogan and DeSantis, 1994; Hindmarch, 1995; Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). As Lamers (2003, p. 275) argues: ‘the death of a sibling may be a double loss to the surviving siblings… Their parents may become so involved in their own grief that they withdraw from the surviving children’. Consequently, Hindmarch (1995) refers to these as secondary losses. Such an experience can be seen in Bella’s account of the time following her brother’s death, which signifies a typically muted grief response more commonly experienced in the 1970s (Limb, 2015):

When my brother died I think things were handled really bad. Mum used to go on walks and smoke all the time and dad used to drink. That was their way of coping. They didn’t get any counselling, they didn’t get any support, nothing and then I think they just got on with life but it’s always there. (Bella)

Other participants commented on this more explicitly and the complex relationship between parents with their surviving children will be explored in far greater depth in the following two chapters. However, it is raised here to serve as a springboard into a discussion of how the death of a brother or sister can have profound and far reaching consequences for living kin.

Participants were often reluctant or hesitant to attribute direct causality to events as a result of their sibling’s death but would readily identify a series of actions that they felt would not have happened otherwise. Allegorically, the sibling’s death initiated a domino effect but the direction in which the dominos fell could not for certain be attributed to the initial push. For many of those interviewed, this series of events was experienced within the family as each member attempted to manage and adjust to the death. Phoebe illustrates this speaking about her parents’ reaction to her sister’s death by suicide at the age of 19:

I find my relationship with my mum much more difficult because, what happened after my sister died is, about a year later my dad left and my mum had a break down and went into a psychiatric unit. She tried to take her own life as well and so it was just me and my brother and we were both very keen not to be taken into care so we kept it quiet and so we just bumbled along… I was always afraid that mum would take another overdose so I was sort of on suicide watch all the time with her and my brother left to go to university so it was just me and her so we went from being a family of 5 to being just me and mum so when you talk about did it change your life much? Yeah! (Phoebe)

Like Phoebe, several participants spoke about a significant chain of events that occurred following the death of their sibling, but it was Kate who raised the idea that: ‘that’s the thing with death, or at least with my brother’s death, I feel like it was the impact that it had on my family, that was almost a bigger deal than him dying in a way’. This links with Hogan’s (2014) argument that a significant part of the sibling bereavement experience is the realisation that the family is different than it was before, as well as Pretorius et al.’s (2010, p. 10) claim that sibling grief is compounded by the ‘fragmentation of their family as they knew it’. Following her eldest brother’s accidental death, Kate states that her other elder brother ‘went off the rails’, to the point that the family moved to Europe in an attempt to improve the situation. However, ‘that’s when a rift started to grow between me and my brother’ and now Kate says: ‘I feel like both my brothers are dead’. However, she clarifies:

I don’t think one thing happens and the years down the line you make a decision based on that event. I think it’s like one thing happens, lots of other things happen after that and then as a result of an amalgamation of these occurrences you might make a decision. (Kate)

Indeed, she articulates what several other participants felt; that their own lives had drastically altered direction as a result of their sibling’s death, but it was impossible to specifically attribute causality. Instead, it was as though shockwaves rippled out from the death that were still to this day affecting the life course trajectory. As Pat articulates: ‘my whole life has been shaped by the death of my brother, my whole life’. Multiple siblings talked about how the death of their sibling had caused such ripples in time that they grieved both the sibling’s death, as well as the consequences of this for their family.

However, not all participants spoke of these long term consequences with such significance. For example, Amber changed school approximately 6 weeks after her brother drowned as she no longer wanted to be at the same school as when it happened. When asked if she had made decisions in response to her brother’s death, she replied ‘I wouldn’t have moved colleges but then I wouldn’t have got into uni here if I hadn’t moved colleges either so that’s a difference’. Whilst this could be considered a significant ‘ripple’, affecting Amber’s lifelong relational web and career opportunities, she did not discuss it as such and her sentence tailed off with ‘so that’s a difference’, implying that she had only thought of it in order to provide an answer to the question. Yet it may be that time is required for the gravity of these decisions to become apparent, as Amber was aged 20 when interviewed and 5 years bereaved, whereas Gayle was 66 and 39 years bereaved. Gayle’s comments reveal the temporal nature of bereavement as she reflects on the significance of her brother’s death:

The whole of life changed, everything changed. The whole background, the whole history. I mean, I didn't do very much looking back in time but I do more *now*, but I didn't *then*. I've always been very pragmatic, so it was just got to get on, got to get back to work and keep going on. (Gayle)

In the initial period following her brother’s death, Gayle was living miles away from her family and focused on her medical training so tried to not give much thought to her grief. Yet, as she explained in the interview, retirement has allowed her the opportunity to be more reflective and look back on decisions that were made in the past, thereby learning more about her bereavement (Packman et al., 2006). However, Theresa is similarly aged (56 and 32 years bereaved) but attributes comparable amounts of significance as Amber when posed with the same query: ‘I always tried to be a parent that is there for my kids, always, I mean you wouldn’t believe the things I’ve done for them and the miles I’ve driven quite frankly and I personally think that is a result of that’. Her comments imply that her life has been significantly shaped by this desire to be a ‘good’ parent, affecting her actions on multiple occasions, and yet she did not elaborate further and had no more to say on the topic. Clearly then, the meaning and value attributed to these ‘ripples’ varied significantly between participants, further demonstrating why it is important to prioritise experience as understood by the individual. These rich, complex and varied narratives make a significant contribution to the existing bereavement literature as they offer a far deeper insight than is currently available due to the dominance of positivistic methods.

## Conclusion

It was highlighted in justification of this research project that the sibling relationship, as well as sibling bereavement, is largely overlooked within sociological literature. This chapter has not only drawn upon but expanded this work by offering detailed accounts of multiple sibling relationships, as conceptualised by those who were interviewed. It began with an exploration of what is unique about being and having a brother or sister, outlining the ways that it differs from other relationships due to shared experience, presumed permanence and potential volatility. After emphasising the importance of this inimitable relationship, it was then necessary to consider what the associated consequences of losing this key relationship could have for the individual throughout their lifetime. By recognising the temporality of bereavement and reflecting on people’s hopes and expectations for the future, this discussion contributes towards an improved understanding of wider cultural expectations regarding the normative sibling relationship over the life course.

Discussion then turned to the siblings’ sense of self and perception of positioning in the family. The death of a brother or sister is a pivotal moment for surviving siblings, as they must continue with the ongoing identification process with a key figure no longer present. Often a focus on difference in life turned to a search for similarity in death and the need to re-establish a sense of identity that incorporates the bereaved aspects of self. The seemingly greatest challenge, however, is to renegotiate birth order positioning as it alters with the passing of time. This element of bereavement proved difficult to negotiate, with siblings often struggling to articulate their feelings or perceptions of self in this regard. Overall, therefore, it became clear that whilst some aspects of bereavement are negotiable and manageable, others are far harder to comprehend and resolve.

Finally, the chapter concluded by considering further potential losses beyond the death of a sibling, such as the lost opportunity to become an aunt/uncle, or to have a niece/nephew, as well as the significant impact death can have on relationships between the living. The final section sought to once again highlight that the death of a sibling has implications for the surviving sibling/s that reach far past the initial grieving, both in time and in relationships. By doing so, it recognises that sibling grief and bereavement is an experience that extends beyond the embodied individual and their internal psychological processes. Consequently, this discussion expands the, currently limited, sociological contribution within the sibling bereavement literature and offers a more complex account of experience than is presently available.

It has been alluded to several times throughout this chapter that death is not experienced in a relationship vacuum but in a web of interconnected relationships. Therefore, the following analysis chapter will explore in far greater detail this notion of relationality, making clear how siblings are embedded in a much broader web of relationships and how this can impact upon the sibling bereavement experience.

# Chapter Five: Bereavement as a Relational Experience

## Introduction

The previous chapter ended by drawing out the relational aspects of bereavement and highlighting that sibling death is embedded within wider familial relationships. Whereas this was framed with regards to loss, commenting on how people grieved for losses beyond the death of their sibling, this chapter will instead focus on the living, exploring how interactions and relationships with others can shape the bereavement experience. As Gilbert and Gilbert (2017, p. 163) recognise, those who are ‘bereaved must also contend with changes in their relationships with others, both within and outside the family’. To ignore the influence of others would be to offer an extremely limited account of the sibling bereavement experience as people do not live in social isolation (Rosenblatt, 1996; Valentine, 2008). This influence may be experienced in the short term following on from the sibling’s death as the deceased’s relational web temporarily overlaps with that of the bereaved, such as with colleagues, or it may assume a long-term connection, such as with family. Moreover, these ties can be experienced in both positive and negative ways, either as a sense of comfort and support or as a burden and obligation of care, although adherence to such binaries is often unrealistic and unhelpful.

It is apparent throughout the analysis chapters that grief and bereavement is embedded in all relationships, with participants talking about work colleagues, extended family, and partners. However, this chapter will focus on relationships with parents, nieces and nephews, and the sibling’s friends. This is because, firstly, comments about these relationships featured most frequently within the interviews, indicating that they are therefore of value, but also, secondly, they each highlight different theoretically interesting elements, which will be outlined further in each section. It is essential to locate ‘sibling grief in its family context to increase understanding of how the nature of the family system may affect the course of grieving in siblings and the nature of siblings’ continuing bonds expressions’ (Packman et al., 2006, p.836). As clarified in the literature review, the view of the family as a ‘system’ is not one adopted by this research, but the idea that an individual’s grief must be located within the family context is integral, as family members maintain ‘multiple, interactive, sometimes conflicting’ roles (Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017, p. 160), which must remain in consideration.

In its exploration of the social nature of grief and bereavement, the first section of this chapter seeks to outline the role that siblings’ friends may occupy in the bereavement experience. It will be suggested that siblings’ friends become knowledge stakeholders, able to unveil new information about the sibling to the family due to their position within the deceased’s relational web. The second section will continue this idea, proposing that surviving siblings can assume a similar role for nieces and nephews, as well as their (future) children, sharing vital information about the parent or grandparent they will never know. Moreover, the concept of generational proximity, introduced in the previous chapter, will be revisited in this second section, as it will be suggested that generational proximity may be central to the sense of responsibility developed in relationship to nieces and nephews following a sibling’s death. The third and final section of this chapter will continue to build upon this discussion of familial obligation and responsibility but linked to parents. It was briefly noted, in the previous chapter, how the relationship between parents and surviving children can be affected by the death of a sibling, and so this section will explore how siblings negotiate the complexities of this changing relationship over the life course. Overall, therefore, this chapter aims to make clear the highly relational nature of bereavement, once again emphasising the temporality of this experience. As such, it will continue to respond to the research questions that were posed in the literature review chapter.

## Siblings’ Friends

The first relationship to be explored within this chapter is that between the participants and their deceased sibling’s friends. Whilst a significant enough number raised the value of speaking with their siblings’ friends to warrant discussion in this chapter, it is important to note that multiple participants stated that they did notdeem it necessary. For example, when asked if he learnt anything new about his sister from her friends and whether he valued this, Ray replied:

Nothing major but just the odd thing you know when you talk to people who came to the funeral they’d tell you stuff, like, after a funeral when people are sat round reminiscing… they might be things that I didn’t know of but they were just things that happened you know. (Ray)

According to Ray, there’s a clear distinction between what his sister did and who she was, with the latter being the most important and the aspect of her identity that he was most assured of. When asked the same question, Frances stated: ‘I pretty much knew what she was… I don’t think it’s a vast difference. I think they knew her the way I knew her really’. Like Ray, Frances did not gain anything from speaking with her sister’s friends as she felt they had nothing new to offer.

However, several participants did value speaking with their sibling’s friends in the time following their death. The aim of these conversations was to discover otherwise unknown and inaccessible information about their sibling, thus gaining a ‘better’ understanding of who their sibling was in the time leading up to their death. Comments reflected an implicit awareness of the plurality of individual identities (Jenkins, 2014), as participants were mindful that friends relate to one another differently than siblings do and thus would be privileged to information about the sibling that the family was unfamiliar with. Mary was 12 when her 23 year old sister died and so she related to her sister in a very different way than her friends did: ‘she was my older sister so my knowledge of her is that she was someone who looked after me and was fun, whereas their relationship with her was someone they got pissed with’ (Mary). As a result, a number of participants commented that they had sought out their sibling’s friends in order to glean this alternative perspective:

I remember I started wanting to find out more about his life and I started asking his friends a lot of things, going for nights out with his friends, spending time with his friends. It was almost as if I was kind of doing that to get to know him in the way that I probably should have done when he was alive. (Martin)

This opportunity can be particularly important as, talking about the fact that her partner never met her brother, Ruth says: ‘It is a bit weird because it’s like I’ve got no one to share it with on that level if you know what I mean… it’s literally like I’ve only got my mum and dad to talk to’. Thus it is not an option available to everyone but for those who do have a choice, it can offer additional insight and also provide opportunity to speak about the deceased.

Friends and family often occupied two separate spheres of the dead sibling’s relational network, with the deceased acting as the connection between the two. According to Tanner (2005), this reflects a broader trend during early adulthood, which sees individuals reducing their focus on family relationships in favour of newly developing social relationships. As a result of this shift in attention, those from outside of the family are in a position to offer an insight different to that of the family. Becky’s brother died at the age of 17, when she was 19, and so she states:

She [mum] felt his friends and girlfriend were kind of the most important people to my brother at that time or certainly the people he spent most time with and who sort of knew him that wasn’t him within his family. I dunno, they kind of knew him the best so everyone got quite a lot from that. (Becky)

There were varying degrees of overlap between these two groups; some were aware of others by name only and some were familiar with one another in person. However, the opportunity to share information, as well as the appropriateness of this interaction, was limited whilst the deceased was alive due to the differing nature of the shared relationship: ‘we’ve heard things about him, his friends told us stories about things they probably wouldn’t have mentioned’ (Jackie). It may seem likely for the two groups to lose contact when the tie connecting them was removed and yet the shared experience of loss was often able to unite them both, if only temporarily. For some, this occurred organically through the organisation or delivery of the funeral, whilst others purposefully sought out and contacted their sibling’s friends. Regardless of how communication was established, the opportunity to share stories about the deceased became available through these connections: ‘I’m able to meet more people. I met a ton of people that went to his school but I’m able to talk to them about him and they can be like, o he did this this one time, and so I’ve learned a lot more’ (Britney).

As a result, siblings’ friends became located as knowledge stakeholders in the bereavement experience, able to offer further insight into the sibling’s identity, as well as their perceptions of the siblings’ relationship. Multiple siblings indicated that it was important to hear this information and appreciated the opportunity to discover more about what their sibling thought about them:

I do remember immediately after his death getting in touch with 2 of his closest friends asking if we could meet up and we did and I remember asking, what did he think of me? It was about me, which was weird, because I wanted to, I didn’t know what he would talk about with them. (Poppy)

Discovering what their siblings thought and felt about them can be particularly pertinent to those bereaved in adolescence and early adulthood, as such expressions of care are not typical between younger brothers and sisters (Gillies and Lucey, 2006). Jewsbury-Conger and Little (2010) suggest that, as individuals acquire independence from their families during this transitionary period, the typical sibling relationship undergoes great change in this time, reducing in conflict and increasing in warmth. Thus, for those who have yet to reach this potential point with their siblings, finding out from others that their sibling cared can be a valuable asset.

Leading on from this point, it is somewhat unsurprising that people sought out their sibling’s friends, considering the valuable role of younger people’s friendships during emerging adulthood, as their social life broadens out and engagement with familial relations becomes more voluntary (Laverty, 2017). During this time, friends can offer ‘a confidant with whom one can share very private information’ (Richey and Richey, 1980, p.537), as well as copious amounts of support when dealing with developmental tasks (McNamara-Barry, Madsen and DeGrace, 2015). Indeed, Brooks (2005, p.50) reflects that ‘within the literature on adolescent friendships, the importance of disclosure and openness, particularly about current plans and hopes for the future, are recurrent themes’. Thus, she claims that it is widely recognised how young people’s friendships change as they enter adolescence and develop new intimacies with friends, whilst Pahl (2000) notes that this can also continue into early adulthood. Although siblings’ friends may become increasingly familiar with the siblings’ everyday lives, rising levels of personal independence, alongside the passing of time and associated life transitions, such as marriage or university, can lead to physical and/or emotional distance between siblings not present in younger years (Jewsbury-Conger and Little, 2010). Yet Edwards et al. (2006) suggest that siblings feel secure enough in the permanence and connectedness of the sibling relationship to allow for this distance, as they draw comfort from the background assumption that being a brother or sister is a fixed relational status. Moreover, Laverty (2017) suggests that this distance can actually allow for siblings to establish a more egalitarian relationship, which can then help create closer bonds in later life. Nevertheless, this increased closeness to friends makes them a potential asset to the bereaved as sources of information following the death of a sibling.

Some found it beneficial and interesting to acquire additional information about their sibling but stated that it hadn’t changed their overall opinion of who they were. For example, Becky explains ‘I feel like I always knew who he was’. However, there were a number who expressed that these insights did impact upon their perception of their sibling’s identity: ‘he’d [brother] given him [friend] some really good advice, I can’t remember what it was and it made me look at my brother in a different light and see him completely differently’ (Ruth). For Ruth, these stories helped her to realise a personality trait and characteristic that she hadn’t previously associated with her brother, whilst Mary came to see that her sister performed different identity roles with different groups:

I suppose there was the dawning of the fact that she wasn’t just my big sister, she was also an adult in her own right and wondering what she might have been like as that adult but to me she’s always just been my big sister. (Mary)

Whereas for Martin, the newly acquired knowledge about his brother’s identity had consequences for his own, as he realised that they shared several resemblances between them: ‘me and my brother are similar, very similar, it’s quite scary actually in what I’ve learnt about him since he’s died, that I’m so like him but never really knew’ (Martin). It is clear, therefore, that friends can help to provide a deeper understanding of a range of factors, including the deceased’s identity and the sibling relationship, by offering new insights to the bereaved.

Siblings seeking to find out more information about their brother or sister could be seen to fit with Walter’s (1996) Biographical Model, which suggests that speaking with people who knew the deceased in order to construct an accurate biography is a necessary part of grieving. Walter’s (1997) later recognition that the narrative need not be agreed is an important concession, as participants did not express a desire to find out the ‘truth’ of their sibling’s identity, simply to hear more information about them from people who would have a unique insight. Walter (1996) also acknowledges that the deceased’s biography may not be stable, suggesting instead that it will continue to develop over time, particularly if the bereavement occurs in childhood, as the individual will come to understand the loss differently as they age:

I think it sounds so weird but in some ways I’ve become closer to him because I understand him more or I understand what he meant to me more because I think in that moment, unfortunately, you don’t always think about that. (Jane)

This links with Packman et al.’s (2006) suggestion that people achieve a new or different understanding of the death as they mature and so ongoing opportunities to speak about the deceased can be beneficial for many years: ‘we’ll message each other [sibling’s friend] when it’s her birthday and that’s been really nice and I’m hoping that will continue because they’ll have memories of my sister that I’ve not got’ (Mary). According to Packman et al. (2006, p.836), this is because ‘continuing bonds develop over time, that is, they are not something that are suddenly created at the time of death’. Consequently, speaking with sibling’s friends can be beneficial at the time of death but also continue to be worthwhile as time progresses, in order to assist with this adjusting continuing bond as it develops over the life course.

## Nieces and Nephews

As previously alluded to, it became clear in the interviews that surviving siblings with nieces and nephews felt a dual sense of duty towards their siblings’ children. Firstly, participants often perceived it as their responsibility to inform this younger generation about the deceased. This was heightened by the recognition that once the siblings’ parents are no longer alive, siblings are likely to be one of, if not the only, remaining family member capable of passing on this information. Secondly, the notion of familial obligation towards nieces and nephews was felt more greatly by those left in a potential position of care. Drawing heavily on the work of Milardo (2005; 2010), as well as Finch and Mason (1993), the examples of surviving siblings caring for the deceased sibling’s child(ren) will be discussed in this section. May and Lahad (2018, p.2) note that the role of aunts and uncles is ‘an under-theorised and under-researched category’ and so literature in this field is extremely limited. However, they highlight the work of Milardo (2005; 2010) as an example which offers a rare insight into this relationship. Although none of these authors acknowledge specifically how this is impacted by the death of a sibling, Milardo (2010) does recognise that aunts and uncles can adopt significant parenting roles in circumstances where parents are absent. As found by May and Lahad (2018, p.11), aunting is an ongoing process of negotiation requiring members to ‘reconfigure, challenge and adapt to dynamic forms of family life’. Thus, this section will explore the ways in which some participants’ relationship practices responded to these altered family dynamics following the death of a sibling.

To begin with, it will be explored how, much like siblings’ friends, aunts and uncles can be knowledge stakeholders, uniquely placed to share information with the children of their deceased sibling/s. Smart (2007) cites the work of Misztal (2003) to explain how something so seemingly individual as memories can be understood as socially embedded. Misztal (2003) highlights that no one is able to remember everything and so argues that people’s socially acquired value systems guide the memory selection process. For example, she claims that family helps to shape our awareness of what is worth remembering by choosing particular stories to rehearse and retell over time. This thereby influences our knowledge of the past, helps determine our memory selection process and creates a feeling of shared familial history and identity through collective memories, including those passed down from unknown ancestors. Milardo (2005; 2010) comments that aunts and uncles are able to share stories of their siblings from across the life course, which allows nieces and nephews to gain a broader perspective of their parents, as well as themselves and their origins. This can transform the way that children view their mum or dad and foster a greater understanding of who their parents are as individuals. Moreover, this storytelling offers nieces and nephews details about their parents and family history that would be otherwise unavailable. Milardo (2010) suggests that this is particularly crucial when children are estranged from a parent; an argument which is transferable to this research in that the parent is unavailable to share such stories directly with their children and so must rely on others to do so for them. Peter indicates that this can be vital in passing on information to the deceased siblings’ children. Speaking about his sister’s two daughters, he says: ‘be there for them. Let them know and understand what their mother was about, ‘cause they did, they questioned me, cause they knew that I was the closest one in our family to my sister’.

As Milardo (2010, p.19) highlights, aunts and uncles are likely to be in possession of distinct memories and stories relating to their siblings ‘because they are often of the same generation as the parents of nieces and nephews and know and understand parents as siblings or peers’. Moreover, they share a ‘unique relationship’ and ‘distinct developmental history’ as they are likely to have been witness to a number of developmental milestones e.g. leaving school or getting married (Milardo, 2010, p. 99). Consequently, this imbues in siblings the responsibility of being knowledge stakeholders and a generational linchpin, able to pass on stories of the past to generations of the future. As a result, siblings may retain this role over the life course, as they are positioned to share first-hand information with great nieces and nephews about the grandparent they never met:

We are the only two really that can give them [nieces] any sort of insight into what they were like as a kid, as a teenager growing up, getting married you know, that sort of thing… I’ve been able to share all that with her daughters and grandkids as well, cause they’ve children now so obviously it’s their grandmother and eventually they’re going to be wanting to ask questions about their grandma who they’ve never met. (Peter)

Indeed, Ashley makes a similar point, whilst also highlighting that other family members may not be willing to share their own memories:

What I do is try and almost create memories so when I’m with them, because they’ve got 2 little children themselves, now I can say, o that’s just like your grandma, she would have done this with your mummy and try and help build those memories for them. I know their dad won’t sit and talk to them about what she was like as a mum so I chat to my niece. (Ashley)

As Mary points out, siblings are potentially going to be one of the last people to keep their memory going so need to learn what they can before elder relatives die and those memories are lost:

There’s loads that I don’t know so whilst I still can I need to ask about her childhood and ask people who knew a different side of her to tell me what she was like, because of the fact that I am one of the youngest people who knew her. All being well I’m gonna be the one who’s left last I suppose. (Mary)

Milardo (2010, p.25) indicates that people felt varying levels of obligation towards their sibling’s children, and that positivity of relationship should not be assumed, but reinforces the relationality of this, suggesting that ‘significant transitions such as marriage and divorce are experienced across households, and they may intensify relationships with siblings and their children or distance them’. Participants with nieces and nephews, who took part in this research project, consistently expressed increased levels of intimacy with them after taking on large caring roles following the death of their brother or sister. As Zampitella (2011, p. 340) highlights, ‘expectations of care for the surviving parent and even for the deceased’s children will need to be addressed… Therefore the surviving sibling will not only grieve but may also need to make significant shifts in his or her responsibilities’**.**

For Peter and Ashley, they became invested in helping to raise their adult sibling’s young children when the surviving spouse struggled to maintain a positive relationship: ‘I think she knew that her husband would be the sort of man who would have another girlfriend really quickly and she said, I want my children to be looked after and I said I would always look out for them’ (Ashley). Similarly, when asked what his motivations were for making the decision to become more involved with his nieces, Peter said:

Because I’m their uncle. They didn’t have the support of their father when they most needed it, when they were leaving school, the teenage years, they became estranged through another marriage and the girls were not a priority for him… that was my aim in life. What I could do for them is what my sister couldn’t do because she wasn’t there… it was more, from my part, being there for the kids for my sister than anything that I wanted from it. (Peter)

In contrast to Peter and Ashley, Gayle’s niece and nephew were much older when her second sibling, their mother, died at the age of 49, one studying at University and one at boarding school, and so it was unnecessary to get involved at that time. However, she now considers herself ‘surrogate grandma to her [niece’s] children, because she hasn't got a mum to do it’ (Gayle). As she explains:

I mean obviously I can't replace her mum, but I try because her husband's parents both…they're divorced, they both live most of the time abroad and aren't really interested in bringing up children… And as I say, she doesn't get on that well with her father… So actually, she hasn't got anyone apart from me and my husband. (Gayle)

The most extreme case of care was presented by Asim (the youngest of 6 siblings), who, with the support of his other sister, adopted his sister’s two sons and one daughter, following her murder, when he was 18 years old. As both of Asim’s parents were no longer alive, and the children’s father was in prison for killing his wife (their mother), options were limited and the three children were living in foster care. Asim states:

I had to do it. I couldn’t abandon her kids. She wouldn’t abandon us. She gave up on her education to raise us. She stopped going to school because of us. She could have had much better life opportunities than looking after us. I couldn’t abandon them. (Asim)

Asim’s mum died when he was only 5 years old and so he explained that his eldest two sisters, one of whom being the sister who later died, raised him and his other sisters. For varying lengths of time, they lived in Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia, often without their father as he was exiled and absent for political reasons. Although raised in the Middle East, Asim moved to London when he was 16 to be nearer his (half) sister. At the same time, his elder sisters moved to Canada and it was here that she was murdered. As a result, Asim had to fight for custody whilst living in a different country, making the process even more complicated. When the decision was made to adopt his sister’s children, Asim indicated that he readily assumed this role of responsibility as he felt it was owed to his sister for the sacrifices she had made in raising him. This raises two interesting points. Firstly, it aligns with Davies’ (2019, p.215) suggestion that gendered narratives of brothering present the idea of ‘brothers as ‘protectors’ of sisters’. Despite growing up in a different culture, the gendered notion of masculine authority transgresses these cultural boundaries and can be extended to the Middle East (Suad, 1994). Secondly, it reflects Finch and Mason’s (1993) argument that feelings of familial obligation develop over time as a result of interaction between individuals. In this sense, the significantly elevated level of obligation that he felt towards his sister and her children reflects the high level of duty that he felt she demonstrated towards him in earlier life.

Noticeable amongst all of these quotes is that the motivational drive for siblings wanting to care for nieces and nephews stems from a sense of duty towards the deceased sibling, rather than their offspring directly. This is not to say that participants didn’t feel compassion for their nieces and nephews or indicate a desire to maintain their wellbeing, but rather, participants indicated that their primary source of obligation was to their sister. As Finch and Mason (1993) suggest that familial obligation is established over time, the increased opportunity for interaction between siblings, rather than nieces and nephews, may account for this sense of duty. It may also explain why Milardo (2010, p.6) found that people are ‘more inclined to provide support to their siblings than they are to the children of their siblings’. Rather than duty towards siblings, participants’ feelings may also reflect a sense of increased obligation to the dead. Indeed, fulfilling the deceased’s wishes has been identified as an example of continuing bonds (Ho et al., 2013), and so this may also help to explain why participants articulated a sense of obligation towards their siblings, rather than nieces or nephews.

In addition to notions of familial obligation (Finch and Mason, 1993), siblings were also more likely to take on this role due to their aforementioned generational closeness (Milardo, 2010). Although Gayle and Asim’s parents were no longer alive, Peter and Ashley’s were, yet participants perceived it as their role to support nieces and nephews, rather than the duty of grandparents. This is because, unlike grandparents, siblings were more likely to have children of the same age, be of a similar parenting generation and be in a more suitable position to take on a long-term commitment. Parents may also have been assumed to be emotionally unavailable due to their own grief (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). As such, grandparents were able to resume the normative role of ‘being there’ but ‘not interfering’ (Mason, May and Clarke, 2007). This reflects Finch and Mason’s (1993) point that situations are relevant when determining which relative should assume duties of care within families. Thus, whilst it is the common public consensus that parents are primarily responsible for helping their children (Finch and Mason, 1990), care should not be assumed a priori, and individual circumstance often has an impact on how families negotiate such occasions.

Although there were only four examples available for discussion, it is noticeable that each occasion involved a sibling caring for his or her sister’s children, which supports Milardo’s (2010, p.10) theory that ‘aunts and uncles are more likely to develop relationships with the offspring of sisters’. Although, these examples also challenge Milardo’s (2010) claim that women feel a greater sense of responsibility to provide for nieces and nephews than men, as two of the four are brothers caring for their sisters’ children. There is not enough evidence in this thesis to make solid claims, but it could be that the death of a sibling nullifies the gendered assumptions of care that are reported in living relationships. Finch and Mason (1993, p.79) suggest that it is usually women who are assumed to be the ‘obvious choice’ of carer, unless circumstances are ‘unusual’, which death could be construed as, and recognise that there is variation between families. Yet, it was not the gender of the deceased sibling that was influential in these examples but the gender of the living partner. Men are more likely to re-partner following the death of a spouse than a woman (Koren, 2016; de Jong Gierveld, 2004), which in the case of Peter and Ashley, was cited as the reason for the need to take care of their nieces and nephews. As well as gender, it may also be that class can be a determining factor in issues of care, as only those with the financial means are able to assist. Although Asim defies this:

We eventually brought them here and that meant a lot of legal cost and that meant poverty for us, counting pennies, working in things that I would never have worked but if there was will, there was a way. (Asim)

In this example, Asim demonstrates that his determination to uphold his duty of care to his niece and nephews was a powerful incentive, one that overruled concerns over money.

Whilst there isn’t scope within this thesis to explore the topic fully, the four examples discussed indicate that it is something that needs significant further study. Due to the limited sample size, more questions have been raised than answered, with the most obvious one asking what are the determining factors in who cares for nieces and nephews after the death of a sibling? Crucial to this study, however, is the fact that siblings spoke of this decision as one borne from a feeling of duty and obligation to their sibling. This reflects a form of continuing bonds unique to sibling bereavement that has yet to be explored in any of the literature. It also highlights the deeply relational nature of sibling bereavement and a potentially profound implication for life course trajectory following the death of a sibling, which again is significantly under-discussed in the literature.

## Parents

Given the immediacy of their kinship tie, it is unsurprising that parents (including step parents) were the kin most heavily mentioned in the interviews. As found by Funk et al. (2017), all participants with living parents commented on this relationship and it was clear that, in varying ways, the sibling experience of grief is highly influenced by parents (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). Indeed, the immediate family is irreparably changed (Funk et al., 2017), and living siblings must learn to adjust to these new forms of family practice (Morgan, 2011). For many of the siblings interviewed, the death of their brother or sister prompted a new sense of care and responsibility towards their parents, experienced in both positive and negative ways, which had to be navigated and negotiated over the life course. However, it is important to note that not everyone felt this same level of pressure. For example, Andy says ‘you try and understand what your parents went through but at the same time you’ve got to get on with your own life’. Gayle reflects that she was aware that the death of her younger brother when he was 22 would have a significant impact on her parents and yet, due to her living far away, the responsibility fell to her sister, the middle sibling:

You knew it had changed everything for mum and dad. You knew it made a physical difference to dad because he didn’t have anyone to help him on the farm. So the whole structure, infrastructure of life had changed. But I was up here and they were down there. So it would’ve been worse for my sister, definitely. (Gayle)

It is important to also acknowledge that such feelings are not unique to the sibling experience, as bereaved parents may also feel increased responsibilities towards living children:

Sometimes it’s awkward because they’re really sad and I want to support them but they don’t want to let me support them because they want to be parents… when it comes to this shared grief she doesn’t want us to look after her and my stepdad doesn’t want us to look after him, because they want to be parents. (Viv)

The discussion presented in this chapter does not deny this alternative perspective or preclude such arguments from taking place elsewhere[[9]](#footnote-9). However, the persistent prevalence of this issue throughout the interviews and the lack of recognition in the available literature means that it is important to consider it here from the perspective of siblings, in line with this research’s primary aims.

Once again building on Finch and Mason’s (1993) ideas, this section will explore the diverse ways that feelings of obligation were felt by many of the bereaved siblings interviewed. Viv’s brother was the son of her stepfather from a previous relationship and so, in consideration of her mum and stepdad, she reflects: ‘I do feel a very strong sense of duty towards them. Sometimes I think that it’s good because it’s tricky being a stepfamily, it’s complicated and I might have been less patient without this’. According to Abi, the death of her two brothers signalled a shift in the way that she conceptualised her family role: ‘I think I see myself as this label we’ve given our second son, child on duty. I think I see myself as that really… being the only one’ (Abi). Thus, Abi saw it as her place to assume full responsibility for her parents as her siblings were no longer alive to do so. Similarly, Ray shared that his family had moved home so that they could take care of his mum (Ray’s dad died when Ray was 16) following his sister’s death 22 years ago:

That was the driver for us moving back to the village so we could be close to my mum and sister, because we knew they would need support… all the way through it and afterwards, taking my mum on holiday with us and things like that, I don’t know if compensate is the right word but you know, trying to make the best of a bad job rather than leaving her on her own and having to cope with it on her own. (Ray)

Ray’s words demonstrate an awareness of time, as he sought to take actions which would care for his mum in the long term, rather than the shorter, more immediate period following his sister’s death. His willingness to relocate and integrate his mum into activities typically reserved for the immediate family, such as holidays, demonstrates a temporal awareness of his newfound obligations with the expectation that it would continue long into the future.

Others also spoke of situations where they had factored parents into decisions that they would ordinarily feature in far less, if at all. For example, as Abi’s brothers died of a hereditary genetic condition, she initially refrained from having children until a time that her and her partner could be tested as DNA carriers but comments: ‘particularly for my mother I thought I can’t do this again ever to her… because it’s a genetic thing, that responsibility about not having children’ (Abi). In contrast, Samantha talks of her desire to have children, partly for her parents’ sake: ‘I want to make sure that there is a family there and that my parents have something to be happy about again, something to look forward to’ (Samantha). This links to Funk et al. (2017, p.10), who also found that participants ‘expressed feeling a sense of pressure to have children… out of a sense that parents needed a grandchild’. Not only does this highlight the magnitude of the decisions that parents are factored into, but it also reinforces the relationality of bereavement as sibling’s partners and children are affected by these also (Valentine, 2008).

Other examples offered in the interviews may appear mundane by comparison, such as Melissa’s recollection of visiting her dad:

He asked, do you want a beer? And I was like, no I’d rather die but I was like, I will have a beer because I just thought at the time, I feel like he wants me to have a beer, this is more than a beer, read between the lines. There are times where I do feel like I’ve got to step up. (Melissa)

Melissa felt that this seemingly minor gesture was laden with hidden depth, as she felt obliged to ‘step up’ and engage in activities with her dad that would typically be fulfilled by his only son. This attempt to mitigate the loss of a male companion indicates that gender may be a contributing factor in the way that surviving siblings interact with parents, although this did not feature explicitly enough within interviews for it to be explored in greater depth here. In contrast to Ray’s example, Melissa’s story reflects the everyday nature of bereavement (Ellis, 2010), and highlights the subtle decisions that people who are bereaved make daily in relation to their loss. For example, Brooke commented:

I ring my mum and dad every day. I do want to speak to them and that’s partly for me as well but I think also I am always making sure that I ring and that they’re not on their own… those sorts of decisions that I make are maybe quite small ones but I’ve just put them in my routine. (Brooke)

Here Brooke highlights a common consideration, which was the need to maintain regular communication with parents. Due to the lack of support from an extended kinship network, Kate felt a heightened sense of responsibility towards her mum: ‘I feel very, very conscious to maintain regular communication with my mum and just have a really good relationship with her’. These comments once again reflect some of the everyday, mundane adjustments that participants made in response to their sibling’s death, with communication being a recurring example of this across the interviews.

As outlined, the majority of decisions and strategies that participants spoke of required siblings to carry out actions or behaviours towards their parents, which is well documented within the sibling bereavement literature (Hogan and DeSantis, 1994; Lamers, 2003; Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). However, what is lacking and what this thesis contributes is an awareness of the sense of responsibility that siblings may feel about their embodied self. Multiple participants commented that they had internalised a perceived duty to stay healthy and alive following the death of their brother or sister, not for their own sake but for the benefit of their parents:

My mum was terrified of me travelling and I didn’t want to upset her. She was having a physical reaction to the idea of my going anywhere and I didn’t want to stress her out so that was another reason why I didn’t go. (Viv)

Having seen the anguish felt by parents following the death of a child, siblings did not want parents to experience the fear of that happening again and so sought to look after themselves: ‘I do things to try to keep myself safe as much as I can, but that’s for them, I think… I still feel like how do I keep them from going through any more trauma? (Brooke). At times, this caused siblings to modify personal plans at the expense of their own interests:

Although I always thought I wanted to go off and travel the world, I was always conscious of, I can’t upset my mum and dad, I can’t upset mum and dad, I can’t cause them any upset. I think that partly held me back, you know not wanting to risk, it’s not like I thought if I go abroad I’ll die but I knew mum and dad would worry. (Mary)

Seeing or knowing that parents are visibly upset is challenging for children, as it signifies a disruption of the traditional parent/child relationship (Ward and Spitze, 1998), which typically sees parents as pillars of strength and support:

It’s very upsetting when you see your parents crying and stuff which you’re just not used to seeing at all. It’s not something that you, a young kid, wants to see really and it’s quite hard to deal with so I do remember specific instances of that. (Andy).

This dismay at seeing parents upset was not limited to childhood, which Martin highlights following the death of his brother in a car accident:

I wasn’t there thank God. I know that sounds selfish but my sister’s told me since that mum was trying to get to him, running to the car and there were people pushing her away and that, it must have been awful. I would have hated to have seen my mum like that. It was bad enough seeing her when I did. (Martin)

Whilst these comments could be seen to reflect a reluctance to see any loved ones in pain, it was noticeable that participants did not express discomfort at seeing other family members grieving, aside from their parents. Indeed, Asim stated that a mercy of his parents having already died when his sister was murdered was that they were spared the pain of losing her. It is therefore argued that part of sibling’s obligation towards mothers and fathers stems from the disruption of traditional family roles caused by the sibling’s death. Parents previously perceived as strong, nurturing and in-charge are rendered vulnerable in bereavement, whilst their fallibility as human beings is revealed to potentially previously unaware children. This can therefore lead to a renegotiation of the parent/child relationship, which sees children assuming greater responsibility towards their parents than previously demonstrated, in the form of a ‘caretaker role’ (Goldman, 2017, p. 33). As Finch and Mason (1993, p.166) highlight, ‘responsibilities do not operate on the basis of fixed rules’ and are instead much more fluid, developing over time as a result of interaction between individuals. Consequently, even though the social norm is for parents to adopt responsibility for children, it should not be assumed that such commitments must be transferred in a unilateral direction (Finch and Mason, 1993).

Part of this renegotiation was the way that participants tried to support their parents emotionally by concealing the extent of their grief, despite the challenges of doing so:

I think I was pretending that it wasn’t happening because I think I was just trying to act normal for my mum and dad... It was hard though… right from the beginning I was trying to be strong for my parents, just act normal, just so there was a bit of normality. (Ruth)*.*

Funk et al. (2017, p. 9) note that whilst mutual mourning can facilitate a ‘strengthening of the relationship with parents’, it can also create distance if siblings feel that they must hide their feelings. This reflects a common argument amongst the sibling bereavement literature, that surviving children often believe their emotions cannot be revealed for fear of causing their parents greater upset(Lamers, 2003)**.** As a result, they may ‘hide their grief or pretend they are doing well when they are not in an effort to protect their parents from further pain’ (Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017, p. 164). As Peter explains:

I was trying to be supportive of both my mum and dad too ‘cause I was at home… you put a brave face on don’t you? I think that’s what I had to do because I could see my dad was struggling, and my mother was certainly getting angry and anxious. (Peter)

Whereas for others, it was considered more appropriate to physically conceal themselves: ‘what you do is you make yourself unobtrusive. You don’t want to cause a problem… I can distinctly remember just thinking just need to be unobtrusive here’ (Abi). This can lead to periods of isolation:

I remember in that period afterwards spending quite a lot of time just in my room away from everything and away from everyone, so as to not show them that I was as upset as I was… I was just trying to be as supportive as I could to them. (Brooke)

For Beth, this was made easier by her lack of proximity:

When I went to uni for my first year, I really struggled with it there. I used to cry a lot, I was always really down and I hid that from my mum as well. I think that was quite easy to hide from my mum because I was away. (Beth)

A similar notion of restriction was reported with regards to what topics were appropriate to discuss with parents: ‘it was a long time afterwards that I felt that I could talk to my mum about things… she had her own stuff to deal with. I couldn’t put that on her’ (Holly). Although Melissa demonstrates that she developed her own strategy for managing this: ‘I didn’t want to probe, like I didn’t want to ask my mum in case it made her cry… so there was a while where I was just investigating, like listening to conversations with my mum’ (Melissa). Whilst all of these comments seem to reflect the literature in that siblings talk about suppressing themselves or their feelings for the sake of their parents, they also indicate that the participant felt they had an element of choice in the matter. Within the interviews, siblings spoke of their actions as ones they took willingly to support their parents, including Brooke wanting to be ‘supportive’ and Abi not wanting to ‘cause a problem’. That’s not to say that they didn’t begrudge having to make those decisions, but that they weren’t completely passive in the situation, instead acting out of a sense of familial duty (Finch and Mason, 1993). Indeed, Phoebe’s statement acts as a reminder that such support is neither automatic, nor guaranteed:

I feel guilty because I’m the only one left, she [mother] doesn’t have anyone else to lean on but I can’t do it, I can’t do it for my own survival so that’s complicated but we have enough good stuff in the relationship for us to manage. (Phoebe)

Although Phoebe feels that she ought to take on additional care of her mum, because of their blood tie, the interactions between the two of them over the years have been insufficient to enact a feeling of responsibility towards her.

However, there were occasions where participants felt that their perceived duty of care did at times take priority over their own wishes. This is reflected in Mary’s suggestion that, because of her sister’s death, she: ‘felt like I had to have a bigger wedding than I would have done so that mum and dad had that opportunity’. Similarly, Poppy lived in Mexico at the time of her brother’s death and says: ‘it made life very difficult because I felt I had to call them every day… if I didn’t call at a certain time then it was like, are you okay? The amount of worry on their part was pretty stifling in many respects’. It was clear that this pressure was felt more acutely by participants who did not have any other living siblings (Forward and Garlie, 2003). Whereas Melissa says: ‘No I don’t think I have a duty of care. There’s less of us but there’s still 4 of us.’ (Melissa), Kate argues: ‘it certainly makes a difference if you feel like you’re all they’ve got in terms of kids. Yeah of course I feel more responsibility towards them’ and Ruth explains ‘I feel quite on my own with everything’.

Having experienced the death of two siblings, Phoebe’s concerns very much focused on being the ‘last one’, and she stressed the importance of there being someone remaining:

I remember when I went back to Beirut after my brother died, I got stuck in a lift with my boss and another colleague and we had to climb out, it was quite dangerous, especially in a country where nothing works, and there was this little question about who would go first and I remember thinking, I can’t go first because I’m not allowed to die and I felt really strongly that I’m not allowed to die. I can’t and I felt almost doomed by this, by these successive losses… I couldn’t bear the pressure of being the last one left. (Phoebe)

As Phoebe’s final statement reveals, such responsibility can be experienced in a negative way and place great demand on those involved. Becky reports similar challenges:

When I was at uni I kind of felt like I wanted to be at home or certainly that I should be at home. There was a lot of guilt there… she [mum] used to ring me twice a day, there was a lot of pressure to be at home… so I was really torn as to where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. (Becky)

This can be exacerbated by an awareness that such situations are forced by a death, making them unexpected and unfair:

It’s that sudden pressure of being an only child… I don’t think mum necessarily means to do it. I don’t think it’s a conscious thing but there’s a certain level of emotional blackmail about you know, if I don’t go home once a month I kind of get that ‘I haven’t seen you in ages and I really miss you’ and it’s that kind of emotional pressure and guilt. (Becky)

However, Claire indicates how this can all change with the passing of time. She talks about how her bereavement experience has changed since the death of her parents:

Until my mum and dad died I went to his grave every fortnight because my mum and dad did… they died 6 years ago this year and I don’t go as much because I hate it. It goes through me to think they’re in the ground… there’s artificial flowers on at the moment, I put them on. (Claire)

This example reiterates that bereavement is a lifelong experience; one that must continually be negotiated as situations change in time and relational influences alter over the life course.

More than anyone, the issues of obligation and responsibility were raised most commonly throughout her interview by Claire. During our time together, it was clear that her life had been greatly shaped by a commitment to care for her parents after the death of her only sibling in a motorcycle accident. She reflects in detail on this experience:

I look back and I don’t know how I coped for them years because every day I used to have to go and see my mum and then when my dad was ill it was even worse and it was awful… I had to see them regularly, they depended on me… We’d got chance to go and live in America years ago and we didn’t go. We couldn’t leave my mum and dad you know because they’d have been on their own and they just depended on us such a lot… She [mum] used to get upset so easily and it was anything for a quiet life. She used to tell everybody that if it hadn’t of been for me and the kids she thinks her and my dad would have ended their lives and she always said that it was us that kept her going so then you felt guilty and so you did anything for a quiet life. (Claire)

It is evident from this extract alone that Claire experienced significant distress over many years due to her increased duty to care for her parents, which begs the question of why she continued to take on this responsibility despite the pressure it induced. As discussed in this section thus far, part of this stems from social norms of care, as well as a sense of responsibility developed over time. Gender must not be overlooked either, as women are more likely to adopt family responsibilities than men (Finch and Mason, 1993). However, Finch and Mason (1993) offer a further suggestion in this regard, noting the importance of moral as well as material dimensions in transactions of service. They suggest that ‘people’s identities as moral beings are bound up in these exchanges of support, and the processes through which they get negotiated’ (Finch and Mason, 1993, p.170). They argue that the way people perceive and present themselves is being continually constructed and reconstructed, for example, as a reliable daughter. To withdraw the care through which individuals establish this identity would be too costly for that person and so they uphold these duties as a way to maintain their own sense of self. Consequently, negotiated responsibility within the family may work on a material level but not on a moral level if one person feels beholden to another (Finch and Mason, 1993). This amalgamation of factors influencing Claire indicates the complexity of family responsibilities and challenges the often cited trope that siblings are simply repressed by their parents’ grief.

As raised thus far, the relationship with parents can be highly influential in shaping siblings’ bereavement experiences, with a range of factors impacting upon the interactions and responsibilities between those involved. Whilst many of the issues discussed could be conceptualised as ‘internal’ to the relationship, it is important to recognise that influences ‘external’ to the parent/child relationship can also have an impact. For example, participants reported that an additional source of pressure came from other people who tried to enforce the ‘prioritise your parents’ narrative (Goldman, 2017), even if their parents were not complicit in this:

I think a lot of people said to me ‘you’ve got to look after your parents’… if I’m really busy, you know people think I should be seeing more of my parents and my parents think I should put myself first but obviously not neglect them, but other people think I should be seeing them more often than I do. (Jackie)

Poppy makes a similar point: ‘from day one it was people knocking on the door, like the neighbour came in saying look after your mum she’s the only one you’ve got and it’s like, yeah, my brother was the only one I had of him’. Bella acknowledges that these voices might be well-intentioned but makes clear that they are unwanted:

I also remember my uncles telling me to be brave for my mum and dad and all that crap. I just got on with it really but when I look back on it, I think they shouldn’t have told me that, but that’s what they believed, that you had to be strong for your parents and look after your parents. (Bella)

It will be argued in detail in the next chapter that the reasoning behind these suggestions is partly due to siblings being positioned lower down social hierarchies of grief than parents. However, it is raised here to highlight that the relationship between parents and children is also shaped by the wider relational networks in which the individuals are situated, and that such influence must be recognised when seeking to explain the dynamics of that relationship.

The final section to be explored in this chapter relates to the parent/child relationship as it alters over the life course. Siblings talked about the future and how they expected their responsibilities towards parents to change as their ageing would potentially lead to increased care needs: ‘in terms of being around to look after them [parents], that’s where I’m going to miss my sister because we could have shouldered the burden a bit’ (Tony). Similar to the respondents in Funk et al.’s (2017) study, siblings anticipated caring for parents in later life, but, unlike those participants, did not share the same feelings of frustration at having to tend to this duty by themselves, despite the prevalence of concern being demonstrated by those without any other living siblings: ‘when they become elderly and they need care and support I think that’s something that could be quite difficult to deal with on my own but I will just have to find a way’ (Jackie). As Tony and Jackie’s comments demonstrate, siblings were aware of the ‘unspoken expectation’ that they would care for parents in later life (Bussolari and Horsley, 2017, p. 114), even if they were yet to decide on the finer details of how this would be done. In contrast, Brooke had some clear ideas of how she would potentially support her parents in later life:

I think when they get older, we need to buy a big enough house where my mum and dad can move into in the future… I feel they would never ever put that on me in any way and never have made me feel responsible for any of it. There were 3 of us with that responsibility before and it’s all me now. (Brooke)

Once again, this extract highlights the importance of recognising personal choice and prioritising meaning according to the individual, as she asserts that her feelings of responsibility stem from her own decision making, rather than parental influence.

According to Morgan (1975), whilst relationships are generally permissive, rather than obligatory, parent-child relationships are most likely to have fixed responsibilities associated with them. Indeed, when participants in Finch and Mason’s (1990) study were asked which relative should provide care in later life, children were often most likely to be named.Although care for elderly parents is often unequally distributed (Leinonen, 2011; Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2003), the absence of a living sibling denies the opportunity to establish these family practices in reality, so siblings are once again left to imagine the family we live by (Gillis, 1997). Although it may have fallen on them regardless had their sibling lived, the chance to find this out is denied and their sense of duty is no longer questionable. Consequently, those with no other living siblings are more mindful that it is entirely their responsibility and realise this at a younger age after being prompted by their sibling’s death.

## Conclusion

Overall, this chapter extended the ideas presented at the end of the last chapter as it continued to challenge the long-held idea that bereavement is an individual experience. It did this by exploring the most prominent relational influences on the siblings interviewed and recognising that the ‘family environment is a critical contextual variable in sibling bereavement’ (Davies, 2017) The first section outlined the potential value of speaking with the dead sibling’s network, in this example friends, as a way to find out more about the deceased, as well as the nature of the relationship shared between the dead and those grieving. It proposed that the deceased sibling’s friends could act as knowledge stakeholders, capable of unveiling previously unknown information about the deceased to those still living. Whilst this communication could be confined to the time immediately following the death, for some it has sporadically continued and still serves to inform their continuing bond with their sibling. This therefore emphasises the relationality of bereavement, whilst also recognising that influences on the bereavement experience can re-appear over time and must be re-negotiated on these occasions.

The second section aimed to contribute to the literature on sibling bereavement, as well as uncle/aunthood, as both are limited in their scope. Discussion in this section highlighted the valuable role that aunts and uncles can play in the lives of their deceased sibling’s children as carers, memory holders and living connections to the family’s past. Consideration was given to the context in which siblings adopt significant care roles for nieces and nephews, as well as their children, questioning how the relevant decisions are made following the death of a sibling and highlighting that additional research in this area would be highly beneficial.

Finally, the last section in this chapter spoke in depth about the parent/child relationship, as one of great importance and influence in the lives of bereaved siblings. Arguments largely focused on the increased sense of duty and care that children feel towards their parents following the death of a sibling. This feeling of responsibility manifests itself in behaviours such as increased communication and maintaining personal safety, as well concealing grief, both physically and emotionally. It is well documented within current sibling bereavement literature that surviving children feel a greater need to care for parents, even sometimes at the expense of their own wellbeing. However, this section sought to problematise the idea that such expectations are put upon them, instead highlighting that it is possible for siblings to engage in care willingly, despite any reluctance or issues that may arise. Moreover, discussion demonstrated the complexity of family obligation as something that must be continually and actively navigated over time as situations change, for example as parents age and require increased levels of support. Recognising these anticipated expectations of care contributes further to an understanding of culturally normative assumptions regarding the sibling relationship over the life course.

The following chapter will continue the discussion of negotiation started in this chapter as it will draw out some of the social narratives affecting the sibling bereavement experience and the ways that individuals deal with these issues. It will also continue to highlight the relational aspects of bereavement as it considers who enforces these narratives and how they are maintained.

# Chapter Six: Social Hierarchies of Grief

## Introduction

Whilst it has been established that sibling grief and bereavement are embedded in relationships, it is also important to consider additional factors which may influence and shape the bereavement experience. Hence, this chapter will explore social norms regarding hierarchies of grief as one of the contextual dynamics which may impact upon this. Walter (1999, p. 120) suggests that ‘mourners are rarely left alone in their grief’ and the criticisms they face ‘indicate that people consider there to be norms for bereaved people to follow’. Similarly, Harris (2009) suggests that there are clear social norms regarding who is eligible to speak about the deceased, as well as how long their grief is permitted to last and what the appropriate modes of mourning are. Indeed, participant comments frequently revealed an implicit set of assumptions regarding their claim to grief. These were often expressed in the initial expression of interest, as well as the interview setting and follow-up communication, making it clear from an early stage that it would be a central theme in the research. This chapter will therefore explore how participants perceived and experienced their bereavement in the context of social grief hierarchies, as well as the impact of this on their overall bereavement experience. Discussion throughout this chapter primarily builds upon the work of Robson and Walter (2012) as key proponents of the existence and necessity of social hierarchies of grief. Although ‘each culture creates its own grieving rules, defining the ways an individual is expected to grieve’ (Doka and Martin, 2002, p. 338), there is not room to explore such variation within this thesis and so discussion in this chapter remains within a Western framework, in line with participant experience.

Walter (1999, p.125) asserts that the ‘policing of grief’ is carried out by ‘primarily families, but also employers, friends, themselves and only finally professional bereavement workers all police the bereaved’. Aside from employers (who were mentioned too disparately to make any significant contribution to the discussion), each of these influences will be discussed in this chapter, questioning how they contribute towards the establishment and maintenance of a social grief hierarchy. Unlike Walter (1999), however, this work does not seek to ascertain who the ‘primary’ enforcers are, as it is believed that this varies by individual, their relationships and a multitude of interactions. The opening section of this chapter will outline how participants considered sibling bereavement to be conceptualised in general terms, situated within the context of wider kinship ties. Discussion will then focus on what influences shape this narrative, specifically the role of kin and clinicians. The final section will then seek to outline the role of the ‘self’, questioning how people negotiate their own positioning within grief hierarchies. It will be concluded that siblings largely reject the notion of hierarchies, instead emphasising the importance of difference and recognising the value of individual experience.

## Conceptualising Sibling Bereavement

As discussed in the methodology, multiple participants expressed that their motivation for wanting to take part was because they were surprised that a researcher was interested in the sibling experience, noting the rarity of this attention. They were often surprised but pleased that someone was doing a study about sibling bereavement and wanted to share their story with an engaged third party. Reflections included: ‘I was interested in your study because I don’t think sibling bereavement is something that’s necessarily given any attention’ (Kate); ‘I think sibling bereavement is a relationship that is often unseen socially and unheard about when we talk about loss’ (Phoebe); ‘I think we are a forgotten race aren’t we?’ (Melissa). As found by Rostila et al. (2012), the notion of sibling grief being secondary or less recognised was something that many of the siblings raised in communication both prior to and during the interviews, highlighting what they saw as the importance of giving sibling bereavement greater recognition:

It’s been 37 years and no one’s ever asked me or there’s never been any research on this. I was quite shocked when I saw the study and I just sort of thought, no one talks to us, the siblings… it’s a voice that’s missing. (Pat)

The prevalence of such comments amongst the spread of participants indicates that it is pertinent to the sibling bereavement experience and therefore necessitates attention within this thesis.

Participants frequently spoke of their grief being overlooked, leading them to feel that sibling bereavement is currently undermined and undervalued (Rostila et al., 2012; Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). In Ruth’s words: ‘it’s like you’re *just* the sister’. Yet participant comments reflect the relational element of this experience, indicating that it is not just that they don’t feel able to mention their grief but that other people don’t ask them about it:

My experience of sibling bereavement has never really come up really. It was a long time ago and even though it has shaped me as a person and I probably use my past experience a lot in my job, no one has ever asked me about how it affected me. (Holly)

This reflects the social nature of grief as to be ignored implies that attention is directed elsewhere, given by an observing other:

The way I felt for years after my brother died, I think I kind of fell into the background a little bit so I wouldn’t be surprised if my needs or the way I felt about it just wasn’t taken into consideration ‘cause I feel like that’s what happened for years after that. I just don’t think anyone asked me how I was at the time or in the years following. I don’t feel like my grief was important as other people’s. (Kate)

Kate’s comment reflects the idea that the level of importance or value that is attributed to an experience is often socially measured in the weighting given to it by others, even just in everyday conversation. Thus, by others not asking about the sibling’s bereavement, it is assumed that it is of lesser social value.

It may appear from these initial comments that Doka’s (1989) idea of disenfranchised grief may apply to siblings as the value of the relationship is under-recognised. However, reflecting the theory of Robson and Walter (2012), siblings in this study rarely spoke in oppositional terms i.e. franchised or disenfranchised, instead indicating that their positioning could, to an extent, be negotiated and flexible. Although none of the participants spoke in specific terms about hierarchies, it was clear from their comments that they had internalised a sense of order and priority regarding different family member’s claims to grief. Unlike Robson and Walter’s (2012) work, it is neither possible, nor desirable, to present a fully developed hierarchy of grief, as it was not the intention of the interviews to create one and so insufficient information on the topic was gathered. What emerged instead, however, was a complex narrative regarding the surviving siblings’ relationships with parents. This is unsurprising as Robson and Walter (2012) found that members of the nuclear family are typically privileged when establishing hierarchies of grief and, as mentioned previously, parents often feature heavily during interviews with bereaved siblings (Funk et al., 2017; Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). It was noticeable that fathers were mentioned less often than mothers (Funk et al., 2017), indicating that there may be a gendered element to positioning due to differing expectations of grief management (Walter, 1999; Creighton et al., 2013), but further consideration of this is beyond the scope of the thesis[[10]](#footnote-10).

It could also be that the type of sibling relationship affects their positioning in any grief hierarchies, due to the socially ascribed value given to blood relations (Nordqvist, 2019). For example, Robson and Walter’s (2012) suggested hierarchical framework does not include non-full blood sibling relationships, such as half, step or adopted. In contrast, this thesis included participants of multiple sibling relationship variations in recognition of the increasingly varied range of kinship ties found in contemporary families (Smart, 2007; Walsh and Mason, 2018). Of the four non-full blood siblings interviewed, only one participant talked about feeling their grief diminished due to being a step-sibling:

There is a sort of difference in people’s response when it becomes apparent that he was my stepbrother, like you kind of see, I guess almost relief because it’s a horrible thing to tell someone that you have a sibling that passed away, it’s really sad and an awkward conversation and then something akin to like, o it’s not so bad then, not that anyone would say that out loud but do you know what I mean? (Viv)

None of the other step/half/adopted siblings expressed such feelings and yet Viv’s account is so detailed with potentially significant implications that it warrants further investigation. Whilst limited sampling means that further conclusions cannot be drawn on this topic, further research in this area would be beneficial to consider the additional factors which shape the positioning of siblings within grief hierarchies. Additional study would also be useful to establish whether there is a social grief hierarchy for variations within the sibling relationship alone. For example, does the type of sibling relationship denote a different entitlement to grief amongst other siblings?

What follows in the rest of this chapter further contributes to answering the research questions by considering how the siblings interviewed felt that their grief related to that of their parents and a review of the impact this perceived positioning had upon the bereavement experience. This chapter will contribute further to arguments which recognise the social nature of grief and bereavement by considering how siblings’ interactions with kin and clinicians served to reinforce norms regarding the positioning of sibling bereavement. As this chapter will proceed to discuss, participants were able to demonstrate varying levels of resistance within and towards any perceived normative hierarchies of grief. It will reflect on the ways that siblings negotiated this understanding for themselves, noting the difficulties many of them faced when trying to articulate their perceived positioning in these social standings. As such, this chapter expands Robson and Walter’s (2012) work by highlighting that those subject to the enforcement of grief hierarchies may challenge their necessity and resist their application. It therefore extends discussion in this area by problematising the authority of social grief hierarchies and offering a more nuanced perspective than is currently available, using the lens of sibling bereavement to do so.

## Influence of Kin

Participant comments presented thus far in this chapter indicate that sibling bereavement is often overlooked, under-recognised and even, at times, ignored (Rostila et al., 2012; Schreiber, 2017). However, as will now be argued, sibling grief is largely devalued not necessarily because of its inherent socially ascribed worth or status but because it is relationally embedded within a wider familial bereavement (Valentine, 2008; Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017). Similar to Funk et al.’s (2017) participants, siblings indicated that their grief had been disregarded due to the intensity of their parent’s grief:

I think there’s much more emphasis on my mum as the mother, and yeah I can’t recall any circumstances where people wanted to know how you were as the sibling and went out of their way to look after you as the sibling… as the sibling you can be in danger of being sort of on one side a bit whereas it’s all about the parents. (Ray)

Within the family, your voice, you have to be silent because your mum is obviously and your father is suffering and a lot of it is about them and yeah of course they’ve lost a child but it doesn’t go away for us, for the kids, it didn’t. (Pat)

Thus, comments such as these reflect siblings’ positioning within family grieving hierarchies as featuring lower than parents (Robson and Walter, 2012). Indeed, Goldman (2017, p. 33) suggests that: ‘many bereaved siblings feel diminished or ignored because a seemingly strong grief hierarchy places parents first as grievers’. Not asking siblings about their experiences invalidates their grief but not asking them in lieu of asking about their parents indicates that their bereavement experience is of lesser importance:

Sometimes when I tell people about him, their first question is ‘how’s your parents?’ and that’s fair enough if it’s someone that knows my parents better than they know me but when it’s someone like a work colleague I think, actually you should be more interested in me cause you know me. (Jackie)

Jackie later commented that she thought it was important to raise awareness of this, as ‘people don’t realise how much of an impact it has’. Aside from verbal cues, Claire demonstrates that it can also be physical actions that indicate positioning within the grief hierarchy: ‘my mother-in-law came [to visit] but no, everybody went to visit my mum, my mum and dad, you know, his friends and what have you’. She also highlights the rarity of someone focusing their attention on her:

It was about 2 months after we lost him and I can remember somebody asking me how I was and it was just a neighbour or somebody I knew, and I can remember thinking you’re the only person that’s ever asked that and nobody had said anything. You know that still sticks in my mind. (Claire)

Misztal (2003) raises the important role of emotions in the memory making process, highlighting that the intensity of emotions felt at the time is likely to influence whether we remember an event. Thus, for this event to ‘stick’ in Claire’s mind demonstrates the emotional value that she attaches to it due to the context in which the event occurred (Smart, 2007). Being able to recall this memory four decades later indicates how meaningfully rare it was for someone to place value on her wellbeing and prioritise her experience for that moment in time (Misztal, 2003). Mary similarly recalls an occasion when a family member took the time to acknowledge her individual grief, emphasising the personal value of such an event. Speaking about a letter that she received from her uncle, she reflects:

We got so many letters and cards but they were all to mum and dad, well they must have said me and my brother too I suppose some of them, but this one [shows Laura] was written specifically to me from my uncle and looking back, some of it’s a bit like, did you really write that? But at the time this meant the world to me. I really treasured it that someone had bothered in the aftermath to write to just me. (Mary)

Just as Claire retained her memory, Mary retained her letter because of its significance. Although she speaks of its worth in the past tense, the fact that she still has it and chose to share it in the interview indicates that it remains a valuable ‘dormant’ possession, capable of bringing about emotional affect when retrieved (Woodward, 2015).

During the interviews, a smaller number of participants were keen to assert that their grief had been acknowledged and they did not feel that their loss had been overlooked. For example, Rosa says:

I feel like in my family, even though my brother doesn't say much, it is recognised and okay to be sad and to ask and to remember. I've never felt like they had it worse and then made me feel like I wasn't going through something. I felt really supported while knowing that we were all going through grief. (Rosa)

Others also reported that their grief had been equally acknowledged, although the following quotes indicate that this recognition is time sensitive. As a result, siblings still maintain a lower positioning within familial grief hierarchies, due to the duration of time for which the person's grief was recognised:

I think people were generally fairly good at recognising my grief as well as mum and dad’s… certainly at the beginning people were better about it. I think as time went on I got more of the ‘how are your mum and dad?’ and my grief was certainly recognised less in the longer term and still is, but I think initially it was a bit more balanced. (Becky)

Thus, some participants felt that their grief was recognised to a greater extent in the time soon after the death (Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015), at which point their grief was treated equally to that of their parents. Yet their comments reveal that such attention waned faster than that afforded to their parents in the following months and years:

No one ever really contacted me saying, oh how are you? I got that immediately, but then a couple of months down the line, no one ever, they still contacted, like people contact my mum on his anniversary. On February just gone, a lot of people contacted my mum to say, are you alright? Thinking of you. But no one ever really thinks, oh I wonder how Beth is doing. (Beth)

It is not uncommon for the level of attention and support offered to bereaved families to fade over time, as audiences become less willing to listen to people recounting their emotional experiences (Baddeley and Singer, 2009). However, as Beth and Brooke’s comments reflect, those who do maintain contact, usually around the anniversary of the person’s death, often prioritise communication with parents, rather than with siblings:

People used to contact you a lot around anniversaries and things like that and they still do that and a lot of people still do that with my mum and dad but quite a few people don’t do that anymore and don’t message me on anniversaries anymore. (Brooke)

Whilst the multitude of quotations presented thus far evidences that grief hierarchies exist, as well as the role of social actors in reinforcing these rankings (Robson and Walter, 2012), it must also be questioned how these operate as social narratives. It is accepted that parental grief is ‘unnatural and untimely’ (Wheeler, 2010, p. 53), as it is ‘counter to the expected order of life events, and defies basic assumptions about the world’ (Gilmer et al., 2011, p. 2). As Frances explains: ‘that’s not how it’s supposed to happen’. The death of a son or daughter most obviously defies normative temporal scripts as children are always younger than their parents. Yet this is less obvious for siblings due to their generational proximity (Milardo, 2010), and so there is no equivalent grief narrative for siblings:

People are concerned for you but the bit they understand is parental grief, they can sort of empathise with how terrible that is but because we’re siblings we’re more used to sibling rivalry and this concept of competition. (Phoebe)

As mentioned in the literature review and raised here by Phoebe, the popular narrative concerning siblings is that of rivalry and competition, whilst the ‘typical’ sibling relationship is constructed as love-hate (Gillies and Lucey, 2006; Punch, 2008). Consequently, the only existing social narrative available is one of conflict, and so siblings cannot rely on a stock narrative to regulate people’s social interaction norms towards them following a bereavement. The result is a lack of understanding regarding sibling bereavement experiences and the demotion of siblings down the grief hierarchy, due to this assumption of an ‘ambivalent’ relationship (Heath, 2017).

A potential narrative that was raised by some siblings was that of ‘being strong’ or ‘being good’ for their parents, which is frequently cited within sibling bereavement literature (Packman et al., 2006; Linn-Gust, 2010; Goldman, 2017). Yet this once again highlights a prioritisation of parents’ wellbeing:

Bella: I also remember my uncles telling me to be brave for my mum and dad and all that crap.

Laura: How did you find that?

Bella: I just got on with it really but when I think back on it, I think they shouldn’t have told me that, you know, but that’s just, that’s what they believed you know that you had to be strong for your parents and look after your parents really.

It is acknowledged that parents may have been told a similar sentiment by friends or family, regarding being strong for their surviving children (Riley et al., 2007). However, the difference in this context is that social norms regarding familial roles indicate that it is a parent’s responsibility to care for and protect their children (Cheal, 2002). Persisting with these duties following one child’s death is therefore a continuation of previously held values. In contrast, children are not typically expected to care for their parents until later life (Finch and Mason, 1990). Encouraging them to do so following a bereavement indicates a shift in values for the sake of the parents’ welfare, thus prioritising parental wellbeing ahead of the siblings’ and reasserting their position in the grief hierarchy.

These assumptions of parental care could also help to explain why siblings are located lower than parents in familial hierarchies of grief. Walter (1991, p. 301) suggests that ‘in a relatively isolated nuclear family in which outsiders have played little if any role in childcare, the death of a child may be a uniquely isolating experience’. This is because friends and neighbours (in typically White British families) no longer share childrearing responsibilities and so that charge lies solely with the parents (ibid). Parents choose to birth children, raise and protect them so their death can be experienced as a failure to meet these needs, which can induce additional feelings of guilt, shame and anger, alongside grief (Gilbert, 1997; Price et al., 2011). Siblings, in contrast, are mostly free from this assumed responsibility. Moreover, brothers and sisters are bestowed upon children at the whim of their parents (Connidis, 1989). As Marshall (2017, p. 103) notes, ‘a sibling simply arrives and there is no choice but to be in a relationship’. This lack of care responsibility, combined with the ascribed nature of the sibling relationship, may then also help to account for why siblings are perceived to grieve less than parents.

As demonstrated earlier with reference to Rosa, it is important to highlight that some people were keen to point out that their parents treated their grief as of equal importance, even on occasions where other family members didn’t. There is a common viewpoint within bereavement literature that parents become so consumed by their own grief that they don’t recognise that of their other surviving children (Gibbons, 1992; Lamers, 2003, Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017). Whilst this did happen on occasion, it was by no means a universal experience and as discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship between surviving children and their parents following a sibling death is far more complex and negotiated than is currently suggested. When asked if her grief was recognised in the same way as her parents, Brooke commented:

I don’t know, definitely people were there and people would talk to me about how I felt and would hug me and all that kind of stuff but no, I think the focus was on my parents. I don’t think people recognised what a big impact it could have on you as a sibling like they did the impact it could have on a parent… thinking about the people who came around and stuff, it was probably more focused on my mum and dad. (Brooke)

Yet Brooke was quick to follow up in saying that her parents did try to recognise her grief in an equal way: ‘they were there for me and they did try to support me the best way they could’ (Brooke). Clearly for Brooke, it was important for her to ‘defend’ her parents and emphasise that they tried their best in the situation. Jackie was also keen to assert that her parents tried hard to portray that their loss was experienced as a family and that Jackie’s bereavement was of equal importance:

They were actually really supportive of me and they involved me in everything… my parents have always signed off with both of their names and mine and I think they’ve recognised that this isn’t just their loss, they’ve treated me like an equal. (Jackie)

Despite their efforts, however, other people didn’t always pick up on this message of shared grief. Although their parents tried to prioritise their grief and made efforts to display this to others, Brooke and Jackie’s comments indicate that broader societal assumptions concerned with relational claims to grief can deter individual efforts to counter these ideas. This indicates that normative values regarding hierarchies of grief are ingrained in cultural narratives to such an extent that they cannot so easily be overruled. Further consideration of the ways that individuals negotiate this conflict will take place later in this chapter but discussion here begins to problematise the ideas proposed by Robson and Walter (2012).

## Influence of Clinicians

As mentioned in the introduction, informal kinship ties are not the only contacts whose understanding and application of grief hierarchies impact upon the sibling bereavement experience. The majority of academic literature about death and dying is produced by clinical disciplines (Granek, 2013), which are also the professionals most likely to discuss grief and bereavement on an individual level. It is pertinent to consider how these dominant professions influenced the way that participants spoke of grief hierarchies during interviews (Rose, 1990). For the most part, participant engagement with these disciplines was mediated through interaction with doctors, counsellors and therapists, although some had read books or searched for academic literature. Evidence of this broader influence was implicitly littered throughout the interviews, with one participant demonstrating knowledge of the related conceptual terminology: ‘what’s the word that they use about sibling bereavement? It’s like disenfranchised or something’ (Becky). This section will outline how grief and bereavement professionals contribute towards the establishment and maintenance of grief hierarchies, as well as siblings’ positioning within these.

Building on the previous section, the following quotes reflect how familial grief hierarchies are reinforced by clinical support systems. For example, Brooke reflects that ‘even at the hospital, them offering counselling or whatever afterwards, it wasn’t offered to me. It was definitely just offered to my mum and dad at the time’. Holly recalled a similar experience: ‘my mum was offered sleeping tablets at the time by the family doctor. I wasn’t offered anything, nobody spoke to me about it at all, no professional ever spoke to me about it’. As does Samantha, though she mentions the loneliness that results from such separation:

The support, the interest, the care, goes to parents sometimes… I remember kind of scrambling around for kind of, where’s the support for me? Where is the support for the bereaved siblings? I just felt quite isolated in that way (Samantha).

Dyregrov and Dyregrov (2005, p. 720/722) highlight the ‘insufficient professional assistance’ offered to siblings, arguing that they were ‘only partly looked after by the family’s network and professionals because most of the attention was directed towards their parents’. Although this may depend on the type of bereavement experienced as Worden et al. (1999) claim that outside agencies are more likely to offer support to young people following the death of a parent, than the death of a sibling. Once again showing an awareness of her positioning within some kind of grief entitlement structure, Kate makes a similar argument: ‘I reckon if my mum or dad had died at school I probably would have got some counselling, but your sibling can be just as profound’. Although there are multiple examples here, this is not an exhaustive account of siblings’ experiences. Others also shared similar stories and expressed familiar sentiments of separation and isolation. These memories portray that not only did siblings feel excluded, but demonstrate an awareness that their parents had been treated differently, thus reinforcing these hierarchical structures. Yet according to Dyregrov and Dyregrov (2005), due to reduced parental capacity following a death, it is the responsibility of professional support systems to better support siblings, and ensure that they are both seen and heard.

At this point, it is important to highlight that these weren’t the experiences of all participants and this research recognises that professional services can be of great benefit to those who access them (Wiles et al., 2002). Despite refusing counselling initially because ‘it was a macho thing. It was for women counselling, it wasn’t for blokes’, highlighting once again the gendered nature of grief experiences, Ray conceded that he would benefit from professional support after an incident of ‘road rage’, which he saw as demonstrating his underlying anger issues. At this point, Ray said ‘I started going to counselling with this lovely woman through the doctors… I think she did help, she did a lot and got some things out that were festering inside me’. Despite having a poor experience the first time that Pat spoke with a counsellor, he reported a more helpful second encounter:

Pat: He just said stop drinking so much, which was funny, it was the best advice actually.

Laura: Did you take his advice?

Pat: Yeah, felt a lot better too (laughs).

To present a fair account of clinical influence, it is also imperative to recognise how these hierarchies of grief are embedded in time. Academic and professional understandings have changed significantly over the past 30 years (Glasby, 2015), shifting from a model of broken to continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996), whilst broader societal values are placing increasing emphasis on mental health and emotional wellbeing (Limb, 2015). To demonstrate this, the example of Bella’s narrative is presented as one which may not have been uncommon in its time but is likely to draw professional rejection now:

Bella: I was fine for a couple of years and then I just stopped eating. I was anorexic, but I was told it was nothing to do with my brother. I was told I was just selfish… I was told because it was 2 years after the event it wasn’t anything to do with him… I was told it was nothing to do with that, you’re just, o you’re being selfish and I was being awful to my parents.

Laura: Where did that come from?

Bella: Well that was from some of the professionals actually, yeah, and there wasn’t any reason for me to be, anyway, and yet I now do think it was a lot to do with that you know.

This was the most extreme example amongst the participants of someone being treated dismissively and secondary to that of their parents by a medical professional. Although, its occurrence over 30 years ago could make grounds for an argument that it is outdated, as Walter (1994) highlights that there has been a generational shift in attitudes towards death and bereavement. Regardless of this, however, the overall prevalence of hierarchical examples amongst the range of siblings interviewed, both older and younger, indicates that it was and still is the case that sibling grief can be regarded as ‘neglected’ (Funk et al., 2017) or even ‘forgotten’ (Rostila et al., 2012; Schreiber, 2017), with professional influence contributing to the overall establishment of a grief hierarchy (Rose, 1990).

Walter (1999) suggests that ‘only finally’ do professional bereavement support workers police grief and thus it may be argued that the examples offered shouldn’t be given much value when considering the development of grief hierarchies. However, it was clear in the interviews that professional attitudes and responses did appear to carry weight of varying degrees with a multitude of participants:

I did see a bereavement counsellor because my doctor told me I needed to but when I spoke to the bereavement counsellor they said that everything I was feeling was normal and that I was looking forward and getting on with my life and they felt that I didn’t really need support, which was kind of what I’d felt. (Jackie)

In this example, Jackie felt reassured that her feelings were ‘normal’ after it being confirmed by a counsellor, even though that was what she’d felt in the first place and only doubted herself after speaking with her doctor. This exchange highlights the power and authority that medical/clinical professionals can possess, and how people can seek this out to reaffirm or challenge their previously held position (Pilnick and Dingwall, 2011). Indeed, ‘medical knowledge can be seen as one of the most powerful or persuasive accounts of change within the self currently available to us within Western society’ (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998, p. 62). Whilst not all participants sought out clinical support, it would be naïve to deny how such practices shape people’s expectations and seep into everyday understandings of grief (Rose, 1990). Although, once again, it is worth noting that people are not merely passive consumers and did express ideas counter to professional opinion:

Even my GP, I’d gone to him about something completely unrelated any way 5 weeks later and he thought I should be over it by now and I just thought ‘5 weeks?!’ you know, yeah I just thought really, a doctor of all people should know better. (Jackie)

Thus, Jackie was not entirely convinced by the professional opinion presented to her, demonstrating that people can pick and choose which elements they are willing to accept or reject.

Referring back to Walter (1999) then, families may police their members’ grief, but it is argued here that they can employ the ideologies and terminologies of the clinical professionals to do so. Thus, it should be considered how they operate in unison and what the relationship is between them. Moreover, the role of the individual within this and the extent to which they themselves accept or reject these hierarchies is important. Hence why it will be explored further in the following, final section.

## Self-Negotiation

The plethora of quotes offered thus far in this chapter demonstrate that siblings expressed feelings of hurt, sadness and disappointment at being demoted down the grief hierarchy. However, whilst participants often verbally rejected the idea of their grief being conceptualised as a lesser loss, some siblings also expressed agreement with these social norms and embraced them: ‘I used to say that even though it was sad for me because I’d lost my sister, it was worse for my parents because they’d lost a child and I think that there can’t be a worse grief than that’ (Frances). A possible explanation for this could be that people have unknowingly assumed these norms and embraced them due to repeat reinforcement. Indeed, Kate independently proposed this idea herself, suggesting that she had internalised social narratives about sibling bereavement and therefore perceives her own grief as secondary:

Even to this day, I kind of delegitimise my grief and I think that’s a reflection of how people have made me feel so I kind of have convinced myself that I have to be over it by now, do you know what I mean? Oh well I was fairly young so it can’t have impacted me that much or like, obviously it’s much worse for my mum, you know… when constantly people act in that way then maybe at some point you’ll stop recognising it as well. (Kate)

Kauffman (2002) presents the argument that individuals can internalise these processes of disenfranchisement, indicating that the impact can be both psychological and sociological. Thus, participants’ comments may reflect an internalisation of social norms or merely a sense of social desirability in wanting to appear in agreement during the interviews. However, it would be impossible to establish this with any certainty. According to Bradbury (1996), though professionals may try to impose a dominant narrative on patients and their families, this has been found to be only temporary and bereaved individuals still manage to come to their own conclusions. Finch and Mason (1993) highlight that such deterministic explanations that rely on the notion of following rules, or structure rigidly determining action, reduces the individual’s capacity for manoeuvrability. Indeed, it is overly simplistic to ignore participants’ agency when making decisions to care for other family members, and present them as merely passive victims of inequality, as Ashley demonstrates:

He [doctor] discovered in the case notes that her case was mishandled and that she probably didn’t get cared for appropriately and none of my family know that. I’ve not shared that with any of them, so I suppose that’s a burden that I hold on to but I made that conscious decision that I wouldn’t tell my parents that because I didn’t want their grief to be even more painful. (Ashley)

When speaking with Ashley, it was clear that she felt confident and committed to her decision; to reduce what she holds as an act of compassion and sacrifice to an act of internalised norms would be deterministic and diminish the value of her perspective. Like Ashley, many siblings consider themselves to have chosen to prioritise other family members and take an active role in the decision-making process. It was stated in the methodology that this thesis would prioritise lived experience and the interpretations given to these moments by the participants and so, this perspective will be maintained.

Adopting Finch and Mason’s (1993) concept of negotiation recognises that individuals are able to express agency in their decision making, whilst acknowledging that such choices are never entirely free from influence and can, at times, be tightly constrained. According to Valentine (2008), a discursive perspective has revealed the limitations of a positivist paradigm in reflecting the complex and reflexive relationship between subjective experience and social practice, and the diversity of bereavement experience within contemporary British society. Therefore, it has to be accepted that some siblings, like Frances, do indeed feel that their grief is secondary to their parents. However, it was noticeable across a broad spectrum of interviews that siblings rarely expressed an outright acceptance or rejection of such ideas. Instead, the opinions articulated indicate that individuals establish a compromise in how they understand, and engage with, dominant narratives of grief hierarchies. Moreover, the range of quotes to be presented in the following discussion highlight the uniquely personal way that each sibling balanced this contradiction, as each demonstrates a slight variation from the last. Yet these were also often complex and unresolved, as participants proposed inconsistent views with contradictions that went largely unrecognised.

Valentine (2008) argues that people may modify or reject predominant narratives, such as those offered by medicine, psychotherapy and religion, which position the individual in a subordinate relationship to the expert, in order to produce alternative narratives. In bereavement, people have been shown to demonstrate a flexible realism in taking account of the limitations and contingencies of real life (Masson, 2002). Their narratives reveal how they attempt to negotiate the ideal within the context of their lived situation. For example, Adam hints at this contradictory aspect, as he begins by saying he ‘won’t argue’ with people giving all of their attention to his parents but then proceeds to highlight how challenging this time was for him and how he was lonely as a consequence:

I very much felt that all of the attention was on my parents, which you know is not something that I’m going to argue with because it must have been really hard but yeah I feel that all the attention was on them and yeah, I think I was forgotten a lot. I could easily disappear into a room and no one would know and my mum would be the first to realise, that happened a lot. (Adam)

Adam’s experience reflects that found by Dyregrov and Dyregrov (2005, p. 719), who reported that the siblings they spoke to often felt alone in their grief and that this was exacerbated when living with parents, as they had ‘feelings of being lost in the chaos’. Other siblings expressed similar contradictions, demonstrating an understanding of the situation but then proceeding to criticise it: ‘It’s always like that though isn’t it with sibling bereavement. It’s obviously mainly the parents… I understand it as well but it’s a bit annoying sometimes because I get it but sometimes I think, we were all a family’ (Amber). Once again, these sentiments are similar to those expressed by the participants in Dyregrov and Dyregrov’s (2005) study, who believed that their sibling’s death impacted upon their parents more than themselves, but still found it painful for their grief to be treated as secondary. Poppy acknowledges that such hierarchies are ‘weird’ but conforms regardless:

I asked if I could have some ashes to scatter in a place that was important for me, which they agreed to so I did, which was brilliant… I was quite scared to say can I have some ashes. He’s my brother but actually, they have more claim, which is weird, but they gave me some ashes. (Poppy)

Becky also states that her parents were prioritised but shapes her experiences using her knowledge of others, considering herself to be well treated in comparison to other siblings she knows who have been largely disregarded:

I look back on it now and I think, actually, I probably did alright. I don’t feel particularly I was ignored, I don’t know, it was obviously mum and dad were by far the primary focus of things I think. A lot of people would say ‘how are your mum and dad?’, it’s far more of that and far less of ‘how are you?’ but I don’t, I think I could have been worse. (Becky)

As can be seen in each of these quotes, siblings verbalised an understanding of, and often agreement with, the principle that their parents’ grief should be given greater recognition than their own but follow this with a contradictory statement or position. This suggests a sense of conflict between social grief hierarchies and personal experience, with siblings unable to address or articulate this juxtaposition. Crossley (2000) argues that popular narratives represent a valuable resource for adjusting to the social world and making sense of experience, particularly at vulnerable times, such as bereavement. Thus, in attempting to deconstruct cultural assumptions, it is important to take into account the way that such scripts may offer people a life-line when their taken for granted reality, including their sense of self-identity, feels under threat (Walter, 1991). Where there is a mismatch between conventional wisdom and individual experience, this may produce guilt at ‘not doing it right’ and may also give rise to questioning and negotiating the conventional line to produce alternative narratives (Crossley, 2000). However, whilst there are public narratives surrounding child loss, such as the idea that ‘shouldn’t bury your child’, which many of the participants commented on, particularly the value of the ‘first born’ or ‘first child’, a narrative of grief for siblings has yet to be established and so they are required to forge their own narratives: ‘what I didn’t have, that my mum and dad have, is the whole notion of it being a wrong that the generation below you has been taken out, and that whole parental thing about the pain of losing your child’ (Dan).

This idea is something that Martin elaborates on. Perhaps the greatest contrast can be seen in Martin’s account, who is openly aware of these socially prescribed norms and reinforces them, before dismissing them and suggesting an alternative perspective:

I suppose people did go to my mum first on more because she’d lost a child and in the eyes of society, losing a child is the ultimate thing to go through so there will have obviously been that kind of, my mum’s more important obviously, and I totally agree, but it’s totally a social thing isn’t it? In the eyes of society the mother’s lost a child, ‘there’s nothing worse than losing a child’. Well who’s to say there’s nothing worse than losing a brother? Everyone’s different. (Martin)

This notion of ‘difference’ was raised by several of the siblings, challenging the necessity of social grief hierarchies and indicating how unhelpful they may be according to those located within them: ‘I hate comparing better or worse types of loss but it is different’ (Becky). Rosa also states: ‘Is it recognised by everyone? No, not as much as losing a child but I also think that losing a child is different. It doesn’t make my loss any better or worse’. These ideas are contrary to Robson and Walter’s (2012, p. 101) view that ‘there have to be hierarchies of loss’, for purposes of funeral arrangements and inheritance. Yet the findings presented in this chapter relate to those of Valentine (2008, pp. 17-19), who noted that her participants shifted between narratives, and negotiated paradox and ambiguity to produce highly individual accounts that are characterised by ambivalence and contingency. Interviews revealed the complexity, diversity, uncertainty and unpredictability of the bereavement experience in a way which defied any attempt to present it in terms of an overarching model. As with all other aspects of sibling bereavement, this continued over the life course and so the ways that participants managed this negotiation over time will be explored further in the final section of this chapter.

## Self-Negotiation Over Time

This negotiation of understanding must be re-established over the life course as critical events, such as the birth of children, lead to an adjustment in positioning and perspective (Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015). To establish whether siblings’ perceptions of difference were linked to age and lack of parental experience, participants who had become parents following their siblings’ death were asked if their ideas had altered after the birth of their child/ren. It was clear for Poppy that becoming a parent had not changed her mind about the positioning of siblings within normative grief hierarchies, as she maintained that the two experiences were different:

I know that losing a child to suicide as a mother is just horrendous but I draw the line at saying it’s more important than my loss. It’s different cause it’s a different relationship but I wouldn’t say it’s worse if you’re a mother. It’s different. My mum doesn’t have to deal with a 3 year old and a whole family. She doesn’t have to deal with work in the same way. She’s got other things that she has to deal with but I’ve got to live the rest of my life with this so it’s different. (Poppy)

Her explanation explores in greater depth the notion that the loss is neither easier nor harder but different, highlighting the significance of generational proximity and life transitions in this experience. Andy similarly reflects:

As I’ve got older, as I’ve become a parent I’ve been able to reflect on it, how different it was for them, you know you’re supposed to be responsible, you’re supposed to be in charge, you’re supposed to, you know this isn’t supposed to happen to you, all that stuff, so I can only imagine what it was like for them and it is different for everybody, it’s important that everyone respects that and understands that. (Andy)

Whilst Andy’s understanding has shifted over the life course, due to becoming a parent and thus garnering an alternative sense of perspective, he still emphasises the importance of recognising difference and individuality in bereavement. Similarly, Jane maintains that ‘quantifying grief’ is unhelpful, making clear the role of other people in recognising sibling bereavement:

I can’t imagine what it’s like to lose a child and now that I’m a mother, I get why there’s a bit of focus on that but having lost a parent and then a sibling, I think it’s people don’t give siblings the dues I guess in relation to how hard that actually is. It’s not that you quantify how much people are grieving and so parents grieve more or less or siblings more or less but I think certainly the way people around you act, they don’t fully understand the gravity of losing a sibling I don’t think, certainly not in my experience. (Jane)

Here Jane recognises that becoming a parent has influenced her perspective slightly but she maintains that sibling bereavement is not given the full recognition that it deserves due to lack of understanding.

Of all the participants interviewed, Mary spoke the most about how becoming a mother had given her a new sense of perspective with regards to her own parents:

Once you have kids yourself and become a parent, it does cast another light on what it was my parents lost, you know having had a baby and cared for that baby and watched that child grow up and had all those hopes and dreams for that child, so yeah I suppose I’m a bit more sympathetic to mum and dad. (Mary)

Like Jane and Andy, Mary developed a greater understanding of her parents’ grief after having a child. However, Mary’s account is vague and contradictory, suggesting that these are ideas that she has yet to fully consider. At first she says: ‘I always enjoy discovering that someone else has lost a sibling because I remember at the time, there’s so much focus on parents’ but when asked to elaborate, comments: ‘I realised as I said that that in a way that’s a bit unfair because looking back, mum and dad arranged for me to have counselling through the doctors’. She then says: ‘I suppose it is worse for parents isn’t it? But it doesn’t change that it’s weird for siblings too’. Interestingly, the eventual consideration that it is worse for parents wasn’t proposed after reflecting on her experience as a parent or remembering the grieving behaviours of her parents but came instead after a lengthy account of the support she received through a local charity: ‘it did help a lot of families but I think it’s folded now because it ran out of funding but yeah and I suppose it is worse for parents isn’t it? But it doesn’t change that’s weird for siblings too’. Her answer then tailed off and she was unable to put forward further explanation, implying that she wasn’t entirely convinced of her own argument. Further indication of this conflict comes when Mary comments:

In some ways looking back you almost feel like, I don’t know, obviously it was 12 years of my life but I don’t remember so much of it. You almost feel like, do I have a ri... (cuts off) I don’t know, you feel partly robbed and you feel partly, do I have a right to view it as significant but obviously it was significant because it was all I knew growing up. (Mary)

Thus, it could be suggested that Mary’s understanding of her own positioning in the grief hierarchy is affected by her perception of time, and how the length of a relationship can influence a person’s claim to grief (Doka, 1999). Adam made a similar comment: ‘in some respects it must be harder for them because he was their first child but in other respects I think it was harder for me because he was always there for me’ (Adam). As such, Franklin (2017) notes that there exists a ‘myth’ that the death of a loved one isn’t as painful for a young person, arguing that not understanding death doesn’t protect a person from feeling the pain that comes with it. The age at which the sibling was bereaved, and length of time they spent together, could therefore be seen as an additional complicating factor, which further diminishes their sense of entitlement to grieve.

## Conclusion

While the previous chapter highlights the importance of embedding the individual within a wider relational web, this chapter recognises that there are additional contextual factors that influence those relationships and shape the way that they are experienced. Across the interviews, it was clear that participants possessed an implicit set of assumptions regarding their own claim to grief. Even those who felt their grief had been recognised equally demonstrated an awareness that this was often not the case. This chapter therefore questions the origins of these beliefs by providing an overview of the influences that were visible in the siblings’ interactions with kin and clinicians, who were identified as significant figures in the enforcement of sibling positioning within social grief hierarchies. Overall, siblings often spoke of their grief as being ‘different’ to other familial losses, rather than trying to make comparisons or achieve a higher position within social hierarchies of grief. This was also consistent amongst participants who had become parents since the death of their sibling and thus experienced a shift in perspective. As a result, this chapter challenges Robson and Walter’s (2012) assertion that grief hierarchies are recognisable and legitimate theoretical structures, necessary for regulating social grieving behaviours, thereby opening up discussion in this area.

The initial section of this chapter began by outlining how participants considered sibling bereavement to be conceptualised in general terms. It was noted that multiple participants expressed surprise at discovering a research project that focused on the sibling experience as they felt it is largely overlooked and undermined in comparison to other kin. In particular, they spoke about their parents and made it clear that any claim to grief, or lack thereof, is interlinked with this relationship. Consequently, discussion within the chapter largely focused upon how the siblings interviewed felt that their grief related to that of their parents and considered what impact this perceived positioning had upon the overall bereavement experience. The second and third section demonstrated that siblings largely felt that their status as grievers is typically considered subordinate to their parents, meaning that their grief was often demoted and diminished. Such ideas are frequently perpetuated by kin and clinicians, who encouraged siblings to recognise their parents’ pain and take steps to help minimise it, even if this came at a personal cost.

Yet it would be deterministic to assume that siblings internalise such ideas without challenging them or attempting to establish their own understanding. Consequently, the fourth section questioned how people negotiate their own positioning within grief hierarchies, noting the difficulties many individuals faced when trying to articulate their perceived positioning in these social standings. Participant responses often demonstrated inconsistencies and conflict, once again indicating that some aspects of the bereavement experience are difficult to resolve and rectify, requiring ongoing negotiation and management. The final section in this chapter therefore explored this in relation to time, questioning the impact that a life transition, such as parenthood, may have upon the experience and understanding of bereaved siblings. It is noticeable that, despite the final section, temporality and life course has featured less within this chapter than it has in others. However, this omission is an important point in itself. Although clinical and academic understanding has shifted somewhat significantly over the past thirty years, attitudes to sibling bereavement and sibling positioning within hierarchies of grief have not changed in that time; siblings were and still are less entitled to grieve than their parents.

The fourth and final analysis chapter most directly links with the second research questions, as it considers a further way that bereavement and identity should be considered a relational experience, by exploring how people manage their personal experience in a social world by performing their grief over the life course.

# Chapter Seven: Performing Sibling Bereavement over the Life Course

## Introduction

It was established in the literature review that bereavement is a life-long status and that a person does not cease to be bereaved at any point (Wright, 2016), even though expressions of grief may ebb and flow over the life course (Rosenblatt, 1993). Throughout this time, those who are bereaved are repeatedly required to make decisions about whether to disclose their experience, as well as what to say and how to deliver it. Some recognise and express their status more than others, doing so in different ways to a variety of audiences. Myers (2004) likens the experience of ‘coming out’ as non-heterosexual to that faced by people with a chronic illness, but elements of this argument can also be extended to people following a bereavement. For example, there are potential personal, social and professional risks associated with disclosing one’s status (Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015), linked to the non-normative position of being a bereaved sibling. Consequently, individuals must make decisions about how to manage the disclosure in various social contexts. This performative aspect of bereavement was evident throughout most of the interviews, with participants negotiating for themselves over time how, when and why they decided to talk to people and tell variations of their story. Establishing this performed narrative is important as ‘bereavement is the state of being caught between the present, a past and a lost future. Rewriting the past to make sense of the new present is crucial if sense is to be made of change and the future faced’(Walter, 1999, p. 70)**.** Yet there are a number of potential challenges associated with this, which will be explored throughout the chapter.

In addition to the considerations outlined in this chapter, it is likely that gender impacts upon the performance of bereavement[[11]](#footnote-11). Men have been found to have ‘an uncomfortable relationship with grief’, as ‘socially constructed masculine ideals dictate that men be stoic in the aftermath of loss’ (Creighton et al., 2013, p. 35). This reluctance to display emotion and discuss their grief could account for why only nine of the thirty-six participants interviewed were men. Yet precisely because of this limited sample size, it is impossible to make any conclusive arguments. Moreover, it is overly simplistic to ignore the impact of class and culture on masculinities of emotion and so a research project that adopts a more intersectional approach would be better suited to this cause (Davis, 2008). Indeed, the supposed ‘taboo’ of death is a largely Western phenomenon (Walter, 1999), particularly in the UK (Walter, 1991), and so performances of bereavement differ greatly between locations. The findings in this chapter then are likely to be specific to the West and so further research into these cultural variations would be beneficial.

As Plummer (1995, p.22) argues: ‘all the time we are telling stories about our pasts, our presents and our futures’, and what is interesting is not ‘analysing the formal structures of stories or narratives’, but ‘inspecting the social roles of stories’. It is precisely this social aspect that will assume the focus of this chapter, recognising that telling stories requires an audience and a ‘stream of interaction between producers and readers in shifting *contexts*’ (Ibid). Drawing on the dramaturgical metaphors used in the seminal works of Goffman (1959; 1963; 1974), this chapter recognises the storied aspect of performance but prioritises the performative impression management integral to the sibling bereavement experience. It will begin by outlining why this was deemed necessary by those who enact it, before exploring the importance of negotiating decisions regarding the initial disclosure, including when to tell people and what to share. Following this will be a consideration of how participants manage their performance to ensure a coherent and consistent presentation of self, whilst recognising that there are moments when this performance is forced and the capacity to control the situation is diminished. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a reflection of how decisions regarding the performance changes over the life course, as individuals continually renegotiate this impression management over time.

## Why Perform?

Decisions of whether to disclose a bereavement challenge notions of the self because in that moment, people must decide who they are and who they want to present themselves as being. As argued by Baddeley and Singer (2009, p.215), the ‘act of telling another person about a painful loss in one’s life is a complex social phenomenon that is likely to have a powerful impact for both discloser and listener’. Although discussing chronic illness diagnosis, Charmaz (1991) notes the challenge of these ‘protective disclosures’, as they require individuals to make strategic announcements involving a high level of organisation and control. As Kate suggested: ‘It’s almost easier not to [mention him] because it’s such a conscious activity. You have to reflect so much’. It was apparent across the interviews that this decision-making process was continually negotiated as people attempted to navigate social situations in which their bereavement may arise: ‘I found it difficult in a sense that you’d have to tell someone at some point’ (Andy), as when ‘no one knew, it became something I had to tell’ (Britney). Consequently, those already familiar to the individual and their personal circumstances were valuable, as they at least were already aware of the basic narrative (Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015).

Walter (1991) cites the work of Blauner (1966) to explore the argument that taboo surrounding the discussion of death is diminishing in modern society. According to Blauner (1966), this is because people are living longer and therefore not leaving behind economic, social and psychological dependents, which makes their deaths easier to come to terms with. As such, ‘bereavement is a rather rare experience for the modern individual, who… hopes to reach middle age with parents, children and siblings all intact’ (Walter, 1991, p. 300). Moreover, the rise in research on death and dying (Lee, 2008), increased number of TV documentaries about death related topics (Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015) and growing visibility of the death café movement (Crettaz, 2010) further indicate that what was taboo is now merely uncomfortable. Yet, ‘while death is becoming a less sequestered topic in society this change is less apparent among people who have been bereaved due to a traumatic event’ (Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015, p.623), such as suicide, accidental or sudden death, as well as those who die young (Walter, 1991). Experiencing bereavement at a young age is therefore significant, as Britney outlines: ‘I’m still young so even if someone now lost their sibling it would be like, that’s tragically sad’. In addition to this, Andy explains that the process of deciding when and how to disclose is made harder by the relative rarity of sibling bereavement: ‘It’s rarer right, so you feel different, you feel that something’s happened to you that hasn’t happened to almost everyone else’ (Andy). Overall then, deaths which occur at the ‘right time’ according to normative temporal scripts are significantly easier to consider and discuss than deaths which occur ‘out of time’ (Walter, 1991; Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015). As such, those who are bereaved in this way ‘*are* isolated, and may well report being treated as lepers’ (Walter, 1991, p.301).

Walter’s (1991) assertion helps to explain why siblings often expressed concern over the implications that disclosing their bereavement would have for the way that they were thought of by others. Many of the siblings interviewed raised this fear: ‘I don’t want people to judge me differently because my brother’s died’ (Beth); ‘Sometimes it’s not nice that cause then people tend to react to you differently don’t they?’ (Martin). Melissa, who I was familiar with prior to the interview but unaware of her situation, also stated: ‘don’t think of me differently now that you know’. It is clear that decisions of when to disclose must be highly strategic in order to manage the reaction of the audience (Goffman, 1959), but further consideration must be given to the consequences when those bereaved earlier in life introduce this information to the conversation in order to understand why the performance is deemed necessary.

Across the range of comments made, it was Philippa who directly mentioned the concept of stigma:

I never felt that I could talk to people… I was never asked. I was never really…no one really wanted to talk about it… there’s a lot of stigma about talking about how you feel. And I definitely felt that. So I just kept it in really and then hadn’t…I’ve dealt with it, but I haven’t grieved as much as I, kind of, deserved. (Philippa)

Pitman et al. (2018, p. 121) claim that ‘suicide has long been thought to be the most stigmatising of bereavements’, but recognise that sudden bereavement also bears this mark (Pitman et al., 2017), whilst Walter (1999) adds to this list those who are bereaved by murder. Yet it was clear across the interviews that a large number of participants felt at times that their identity had been ‘spoiled’ (Goffman, 1963) by the revelation of their bereavement. So far within academic study, Goffman’s (1959; 1963) work has been applied to type of death but not relation of death and so this chapter adds a new dimension to current discussion regarding bereavement and stigma. This is particularly necessary as Pitman et al. (2018, p.126) found that ‘taboo was perceived more often in relation to displays of grief than in relation to the cause of death’. Findings in this chapter are presented through the lens of sibling bereavement, although consideration of other familial bereavements, as well as the relational ties between these, would be highly beneficial.

As recognised earlier, murder, suicide and sudden death are all very different and yet they can be conceptualised together as deaths which transgress normative temporal scripts and thus occur ‘out of time’, allowing them each to be considered stigmatising. This is because those bereaved earlier than temporal scripts predict ‘experience an unwelcome *discrepancy* between virtual and actual social identity’, where ‘virtual social identity refers to normative expectations regarding what the person *ought* to be, while actual social identity refers to attributes the individual *actually* possesses’ (Monaghan, 2016, p. 184). Being a sibling is assumed to be a lifelong relational status (Robinson and Mahon, 1997) and so the death of a sibling earlier than late life contradicts this assumption and leads to a spoiled identity due to the associated stigma (Goffman, 1963). Consequently, a carefully managed performance of identity is required to manage this potential tension during interaction (Goffman, 1959; 1963). The ways that siblings negotiated this performance over the life course will be the focus of this chapter, thereby offering a new and novel application of Goffman’s (1959; 1963) work to understandings of sibling bereavement.

## Deciding *When* to Disclose

Despite the potential for a negative outcome, it was suggested that only by knowing about the person’s bereavement would it be possible to understand in greater depth the nature of the participant’s identity: ‘I still feel a bit weird with new people that don’t know and don’t know all that’s happened because it’s had such a huge impact on who I am’ (Brooke). A similar sentiment is reflected in Beth’s words, although she also talks of the difficulties inherent within this: ‘I do feel really conflicted. Sometimes I want recognition, this happened to me, it is a thing that’s happened in my life and I have to deal with it. But then, I don’t want it to define my life’. As Baddeley and Singer note (2009, p. 204), ‘the rehearsal and telling of narrative memories is a primary way of developing and revising one’s identity’. Whilst much time appears to be spent contemplating how to perform ‘normality’ and managing the possible outcomes associated with sharing the bereavement narrative, this is clearly unachievable at all times and there is the potential to reject the requirement. For example, Brooke explained why she delayed going to university: ‘I didn’t want to have to just go to uni and be this normal person when that wasn’t what my life actually was at the time’. In the initial aftermath of her brother’s death, what she perceived as the need to perform ‘normality’ was simply too much and so she was able to delay this until a time when she felt better able to manage the performance. This notion of having to act ‘normal’ at university also reflects Goffman’s (1974) argument that different stages, referred to as frames, are organised with their own formal or informal rules. Brooke clearly anticipated that her grieving behaviours would not align with those expected within the typical university frame and so resisted having to perform in that environment.

It was clear throughout the interviews that the immediacy of people’s performance angst varied in and over time (Pitman et al., 2018), but appeared amplified at certain key moments, particularly when participants were starting somewhere new, such as employment or university, and thus would be required to meet larger groups of people for the first time (Myers, 2004). As Adam noted, it was considered important not to be perceived as ‘the one that talks about death’, for fear of being negatively thought of by his peers (Pitman et al., 2018). This desire to fit in and not be defined by her brother’s death was apparent in Britney’s interview when she stated:

At the time I wanted to be normal, as normal as possible so at the time I would have said anything for people to be like, okay she’s moved on… I didn’t want to be treated any different for my last year of school. (Britney)

This idea of being ‘defined’ by the death was raised repeatedly across several interviews, as though it would overshadow other aspects of their identity and thereby assume their ‘master status’ (Goffman, 1963). Consequently, some people decide to tell no-one However, this has potentially longer-term ramifications as once the performance of non-bereaved has been delivered, it is then much harder to re-deliver an altered performance, which can therefore make social interactions more complicated. Nevertheless, the fact that participants are able to express a level of choice in making decisions about when to disclose their bereavement indicates that it is a ‘discreditable’ stigma as, beyond the funeral, it is ‘neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them’ (Goffman, 1963, p. 14). Unlike a ‘discredited’ sigma, one that is ‘known about already or is evident on the spot (Ibid), this means that the bereaved are presented with the chance to potentially hide their stigmatising quality. However, with this opportunity also comes the requirement to constantly manage and control the information that they ‘give-off’ during interaction (Goffman, 1959).

The discreditable nature of bereavement was evident in Beth’s interview as she avoided telling her employers (in the public health sector) about her brother’s death by suicide because ‘I don’t want them to shelter me from those sorts of aspects’, outlining that they were running a new project about suicide and didn’t want to be left out because of her previous experiences. This reluctance to share her position is understandable as Charles-Edwards (2005) notes that managers are ill-equipped to deal with death in the workplace and may therefore be unaware of the best way to handle the situation. However, Beth’s comments suggest that her plan backfired as the required upkeep of the story restrains her and limits the parts of herself that she can talk about at work:

I don’t think it really defined me at uni, whereas now I’m in a job I feel like it’s defined me a lot more now than it did then… it wasn’t a big issue. I think I’ve made it a big issue now that I’ve not told anyone at work. (Beth)

Thus her attempts to keep her story quiet to avoid the associated attention mean that it has become a bigger issue in its silence. In contrast, when Beth moved to uni, she:

Told them in the first week and that was fine… before they’d asked the question I’d told them. It was a lot easier to do it that way. I knew that, because I was spending a lot of time with those people, I knew that I would have to do that. (Beth)

This suggests that the level of intimacy she expected to develop in the relationship was central to her decision-making process; something discussed further in the next section.

Nevertheless, Beth wasn’t alone in wanting to separate her personal and professional performances. Hazen (2003) argues that the social norms associated with working relationships prohibit people from disclosing emotionally personal stories, once again indicating how the framing of a situation impacts upon the way that people behave in that context (Goffman, 1974). This idea is reflected in a number of participants’ interviews: ‘in my cohort, who I’ve been studying with for a year and half, I think 3 people know… I didn’t want to bring it up in public for everyone to analyse clinically. That’s a bit of a different hat’ (Rosa). In contrast to Beth however, Rosa appeared unconcerned and unfazed by this separation, instead valuing the privacy that it afforded her. Whilst she saw it as a positive that aspects of her identity remained ‘backstage’, Beth spoke of it in more negative terms and raised several concerns. Bereaved 5 years at the time of interview, she demonstrated the most conflict and insecurity with regards to her ‘story’ and how she managed its performance, revealing:

I struggle because people say to me, do you have a brother? And I find it quite difficult to have that conversation with someone… having to explain a story… I don’t want people’s sympathy. I don’t want them to feel sorry for me… I don’t want other people to feel uncomfortable… I don’t know how to tackle that conversation, and I still haven’t worked it out. (Beth)

It was evident throughout the conversation that Beth was unclear of her narrative and uncomfortable with the way that she was currently performing it, but also felt trapped in it for the time being. Yet part of her struggle was linked to the insufficiency of words to adequately articulate the sheer magnitude of what she had lost: ‘I don’t know how to explain it. I feel like half of me is gone but how do you say that to people?’. This final statement indicates that not only do people have to make strategic decisions regarding when to disclose their position as a bereaved sibling, but also about what to say and how much to share.

## Deciding *What* to Disclose

Alongside the decision of when to disclose comes the decision of what to disclose, requiring the individual to consider how much of the story they are willing to share, as well as how to deliver the performance. However, reflected across a number of the interviews was the idea that ‘I just make it up as I go. I don’t really have a hard and fast rule’ (Rosa). Sometimes performers were not aware of the rules of the performance, even though this was clearly something they managed and negotiated on a regular basis: ‘It’s a bit of a feeling, I don’t know… I don’t know how I make the decision to talk about stuff or not’ (Brooke). Similarly, this sense of being guided by emotions rather than logic was also outlined by Ashley, who described her ‘barometer’ as an internal tool she uses to reflect whether she feels strong enough to talk about her sister: ‘If I know I can just breeze through it then I’ll mention it but otherwise I would tend not to’. Similarly, Myers (2004, p. 260) suggests that ‘coming out is often easier when one is able to do so “in the abstract” – that is, when one’s disease is well-managed’, reflecting this idea that disclosure is more manageable when feeling better able to control the affiliated emotions. Whilst not all participants were able to articulate this decision-making process when asked in the interview setting, the majority were, and it soon became apparent that this script writing is a complex procedure affected by, and changeable according to, multiple factors. These include but are not limited to: perceptions of the audience, age, context, and anticipated longevity of relationship. Each of these aspects will now be discussed.

The most commonly cited reason for thinking about what to say and when, was that people often felt that they had to control the conversation after the story had been told and ‘work out what to do with this person’ (Abi). The response of the audience was frequently referred to when siblings were asked about their decision making process, reflecting Baddeley and Singer’s (2009, p. 203) argument that ‘listeners heavily affect the content and nature of the memory narrative being disclosed’. As Adam explains: ‘If I brought up death the person across might start crying or that person might not show any emotion, everyone is so different, it’s a really hard subject to deal with’. The unpredictability of the audience’s response was one reason for being wary, but other explanations included perceptions of what is appropriate conversation: ‘people don’t want this emotional splurge’ (Charlotte); a desire to emotionally defend the audience: ‘it’s too long a story to go into but we don’t do it out of taboo, we’re thinking about protecting other people’ (Ashley); or because the audience’s predictably poor response will be harmful to the narrator:

I know that no one has a good reaction to it and it makes people uncomfortable… it’s something people get really awkward about… I don’t feel the need to bring it up because you don’t get anything back from it that makes you feel any better. It generally just makes you feel worse. (Becky)

The range of reasons listed here complements those found by Pitman et al. (2018), whose participants cited social awkwardness, unwanted pity, topic avoidance and audience aversion to displays of grief as examples of the stigma associated with bereavement.

Another element of people’s decision making is the individual’s perception of the anticipated longevity of the relationship, as Beth notes: ‘If it’s the beautician or the hairdresser or something I just say no because I’m not gonna know them for long enough and they don’t need to know my life’ (Beth). Other participants made similar comments, indicating that they would be more willing to share their story with an audience if they were likely to remain part of their life in the longer term. However, this becomes more problematic if the anticipated longevity of the relationship is difficult to predict, such as in the example of dating:

Amber: I’ve dated a few people since then, and I’ve told both of them but not straight away. It’s been after a while and I feel like I’m not honest unless I tell them. I feel like it’s a massive thing. It’s like a really big thing that I think when I get to know someone I’ve got to tell them.

Laura: How do you make decisions about the point at which you tell them?

Amber: It’s always like a rush almost, as in I feel like it’s a really rushed thing. I think when something starts being, not a fling but it’s actually something quite serious, I feel like I’m being deceiving until I’ve told them because it’s such a big part of me but it really, in relationships I actually do want people to know, more so than just with casual friends or acquaintances, in which case I don’t really mind as much if they know but in relationships or if it’s someone that I’m dating I actually want them to know.

The complications of dating was something raised by many of the younger participants as an extra scenario that they were required to manage. In addition to the usual concerns regarding disclosure, there were also fears that sharing such information would limit the development of intimacy when forming new relationships (Baddeley and Singer, 2009): ‘One of my friends used to joke around, so when you go on a date with a girl, never tell her your story cause she’ll think you’re a miserable bastard and walk away’ (Asim). As Melissa highlights, decisions made in this regard are not without self-doubt: ‘If people asked I’d tell them. I’ve never not been honest about it, not like it’s something to be ashamed of, but it is one of those things like do I want to be sharing this on a first date?’ (Melissa). Whilst these responses appear well-formulated, Britney demonstrates the complexity and consideration that can be involved:

So if it’s a first date, I never say anything, about, like if he’s like, oh do you have any siblings, well first of all, I’ll never bring him up. Because if I bring him up, then it’s reciprocal. So I never, that’s not a question, I never bring him up. But if it comes up on first dates, I just say, oh I’m an only child, or whatever. And then, I’m normally good at deflecting into other subjects. But if it’s someone I’ve been seeing for a while, you know, and they look at my social media, like the two pictures on Instagram, I don’t know why anyone would notice that. Or if I catch myself saying something like, well we did this, then it’s something that I’ll explain. But for the most part, I don’t think people really know how to react to when you tell them that. (Britney)

Linked to the shared experience of poor audience reaction (Pitman et al., 2018), it was often much appreciated when siblings could interact with someone else who had been bereaved or undergone a similar life experience (Walter, 1991; 2000). Upon discovering such a person, often ties were tightened or even forged anew, with several participants outlining how their relational web had adjusted or expanded to accommodate these ‘insiders’. Indeed, Walter (1991, p. 301) reflects that ‘lacking others who share the loss of *this particular* individual, they may seek support from others who have experienced this particular *category* of loss’, which bereavement organisations are able to offer. As such, he outlines the potential value of talking with other bereaved people, rather than counsellors or therapists, claiming that ‘the communion experienced among those who have been through the same experience of loss can be powerful’ (Walter, 2000, p. 108).This extract from Mary’s interview highlights the valuable and rather unique role that such individuals can hold:

Laura: What is it then that you get from those friendships?

Mary: It’s someone being in a similar position really I suppose. Yeah and especially like it’s so long ago now, it’s over 20 years now since my sister died so it’s not something that often crops up in conversation much. You know I’ve been married nearly 5 years but I’ve hardly talked to my husband about it much, I think that’s partly because he doesn’t like to talk about deep and meaningful things any way, but it’s, I don’t know, it’s almost nice to have sort of permission to go over it and find common ground and have an excuse to talk about it again I suppose.

Laura: Would you like to be able to talk about it more with your husband?

Mary: Well he knows the basic story but once someone knows the basic story there’s almost not that much point in going over it again I suppose but yeah when you do come across, I don’t know it’s like you have a kind of bond almost when you do come across and not necessarily even siblings like, one of my best friends her dad died at a similar age, she was either 12 or 13 when her dad died so coming across anyone who’s experienced bereavement at a young age, like as a child as well, I think sort of has a similar effect, that sort of bonding almost.

For most participants, the level of performance varied according to their perception of the audience, but this was often reduced when they were assumed to have a shared or greater level of understanding:

When I talk to other bereaved siblings, not that I’ve done it very much, there’s this weird sense of familiarity with that person because invariably they talk about very similar experiences, thoughts and feelings, things that you carry alone most of the time. It’s like when you’re so close with someone that you can finish each other’s sentences but weirdly you don’t actually know them at all. (Becky)

Siblings talked about how they had formed relationships with unlikely people based on that ‘unspoken bond’ and sought comfort from other people who just ‘got it’. Referring to a minister who lost his wife to breast cancer also, Ashley stated ‘I felt okay sharing with him because I thought he would get it but I wouldn’t burden someone who didn’t know me well with that kind of story about myself’. This quote from Ashley indicates that she sees her story-telling as burdensome for those who don’t understand but of potentially mutual benefit for her and those who do, suggesting that her willingness to share is justified on grounds of benevolence, as well as shared understanding. As Goffman (1959, p.29) notes, not all performers ‘are interested in deluding their audiences for purposes of what is called ‘self-interest’ or private gain… may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community’. This reflects Baddeley and Singer’s (2009, p. 204) suggestion that ‘sharing may be motivated by a desire to feel better and a belief that sharing will help’. This sense of wanting to get something back from the conversation was also evident in Phoebe’s interview, as she outlined:

There’s people who just, it’s so far from their own experience I would have to hold their hand through the conversation, which I might do if it was important to what we were talking about or it seemed relevant and okay and that they didn’t get it but they were going to try but I’m not gonna do that just for the sake of it because it hurts so there’s got to be some feeling that it’s worth it with them. (Phoebe)

Clearly then, a number of participants indicated how they appreciated speaking with someone in the know and how this shared level of understanding can potentially reduce the need to perform. In his study of a parental bereavement support group, Klass (1996) also found that bereaved people found it easier to speak to others with whom they could share their experiences due to the difficulties of speaking about death in most other social contexts. The value of those in the know expressed across the interviews is best summed up by this passage by Jane:

When people ask you how many siblings you have and whether the answer is I still include them or I don’t still include them, talking to somebody who understands in that moment that you are asked that the gravity and the battle and the thought and the emotion that goes into such a simple question, you can’t explain that to someone and they either know it or they don’t know it. So I think finding someone who those types of unspoken things just understands it is like non-comparable, like in a situation of support and help, for me any way, it’s like, there’s no rival. (Jane)

It may be assumed therefore that increasing the provision of bereavement support groups and counselling services would be of greatest benefit to those bereaved, and yet ‘it is possible that this kind of first aid is actually isolating bereaved people still further from the wider community’ (Walter, 1994, p. 35). This is because they help to remove the presence of death from everyday interaction ‘so that life can go on as though death did not exist’ (ibid). Instead Walter (1994) suggests that mass educational campaigns teaching the general population how to listen to and speak with the bereaved may be of greater overall benefit; an argument echoed by Pitman et al. (2018). This would help to limit the discomfort and stigma tied to bereavement, thereby reducing the need to manage the associated performance.

Crucially however, shared experiential knowledge does not automatically equate to a sense of ease in the performance. Whilst some people saw family as being in on the story and thus didn’t have to perform in front of them: ‘I don’t have to watch what I say when it comes to my family’ (Britney), others expressed a feeling that they had to perform even more so with family to avoid upsetting or offending them (Funk et al., 2017). As Becky indicates: ‘I’m more afraid of being judged for what I say and how I feel by people that know me quite well or that I have better relationships with. No offence but I don’t know you and I find this far easier than having an honest conversation about it with someone I know’. However, Becky also noted in the interview (in reference to the bereavement support group she volunteers with): ‘it’s also kind of nice to be able to be in an environment where you can talk about it and people don’t judge you for it so, whereas pretty much everywhere, apart from with my family…’ Overall, her comments indicate that there were multiple layers to the performance; one aspect being whether or not to acknowledge and talk of the bereavement itself, which family are very much part of; the second one being how much personal feeling and opinion to share. This is where participants expressed the value of a knowledgeable other, such as a friend or colleague, as someone who could relate to and understand the story whilst being removed enough from the situation to not pass judgement or be offended by their views (Walter, 2000).

An additional benefit to speaking with those outside of the family is that siblings are able to retain ownership over the narrative that they perform, sharing a version of events they feel most comfortable with. This is important as Davies (2015, p. 689) highlights that stories are collectively produced and so they ‘are subject to the politics and power dynamics of the interpersonal relationships within which they are created’. Indeed, Baddeley and Singer (2009, p.205) propose that families speak extensively about the death with one another and therefore ‘different family members adopt a narrative of the loss that bears the stamp of the other family members’ interpretations’. This may lead to the development of rehearsed family narratives that can be shared in nostalgic reflection over the years (Smart, 2007), and passed on ‘as a form of social transmission’ which guides individual decision making in the future (Davies, 2015). Yet such familial influence isn’t always perceived as positive. Recalling writing her brother’s eulogy, Poppy says: ‘I put it in the story, in my thing, the way that I remembered it and mum said, you can’t have that because that’s not how it was and I was like, no it is how it was from where I was standing’. Thus, kinship ties can also effectively oppress the individual’s recollection of a memory (Smart, 2007), indicating that decisions about what to disclose can be limited or opened up depending on the context of the audience.

## Managing the Performance

Participants indicated that the story must be carefully narrated and shared several performance management strategies to ensure a smooth presentation. These are essential as ‘in their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged’ (Goffman, 1959, p.243). Techniques for ensuring a convincing performance include steering the conversation, avoiding particular topics and being specific with language use (DeVita-Raeburn, 2017). This is vital as one small inconsistency can reveal hidden truths: ‘If I’m talking to someone who doesn’t know I have a brother and I accidentally say ‘we’, like ‘we went to school here’ and then they’re like ‘what do you mean we? Aren’t you an only child?’ (Britney). Melissa also mentions how grammatical inconsistencies in tenses can be highly revealing: ‘my brother *was* or my brother *did*, and they’re like, what do you mean?’ (Melissa). Recalling a time at work, Jane (who has 2 living brothers) expands on one of these moments of exposure:

I said something like, O my brother used to do that as a kid, or something like that and it was, I used past tense because it was normal to use past tense because sometimes that’s like, if I have to use past tense that would elicit questions, what do you mean he used to? Or he looked like that? Or whatever, then I often don’t say it but it was normal to use past tense and I noticed that I vocalised it and I guess there’s always like a second afterwards you do something like that in the context of work that erm, I was like o I hope nobody asks me questions about ‘does he not still do that?’ or you know, something like that because it’s not always, people who you say it to don’t always realise that the person you’re talking about isn’t actually alive anymore and you certainly don’t want to explain. (Jane)

As a way to mitigate these scenarios, people with other living siblings mentioned the value of telling stories anonymously to disguise their sibling’s deceased status:

Sometimes I’ll say things in conversation and I’ll say my brother and won’t give a name… I’ve thought sometimes I’m being a bit disingenuous but yeah it means I can say it without getting into a difficult conversation. (Bella)

Here Bella reveals that it is possible to talk about her ‘brother’, rather than using a specific name, to facilitate discussing her deceased sibling in conversation. Although she expresses some discomfort with doing so, ultimately the reward of being able to mention him in conversation outweighs any concerns over honesty (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996).

Siblings also talked about the ability to sense when the conversation was steering towards discussions of families and siblings and outlined that they had developed strategies to manage or avoid this (Pitman et al., 2018). For example Britney notes that she is: ‘normally good at deflecting into other subjects’, whilst Brooke states:

I redirect quite a lot of conversations to somewhere where, if I’m sort of aware that it’s maybe going somewhere where I don’t want to go then yes, I’ll somehow ask something about them or change it. Yes I do that all the time. (Brooke)

At the more extreme end of the scale, some people talked about how they seek to avoid the scenario entirely by controlling the interactions before they occur: ‘I’m kind of aware that sometimes I’m a bit resistant to making new friends because I don’t want to have to get into conversations that I’m not comfortable with’ (Brooke). Poppy expressed a similar sentiment ‘I’m quite picky with who I make friends with now as well so I don’t tend to fake anything if I can help it’ (Poppy).

Whilst people often spoke of their performance management as an individualistic endeavour, Britney highlighted that it is possible to engage in ‘performances that are given by one or more than one performer’ (Goffman, 1959. P.86). These team members must ‘cooperate to maintain a given definition of the situation before their audience’ (Goffman, 1959, p.88) thereby helping to manage the performance:

We were with my roommate and her family who we’d never met. They asked my dad and me, do you have any siblings? I looked at my dad and I was like, nope just me. We’d be on the same page about it. My dad understood too that I’m not gonna talk about this with these parents I’ll never see again. (Britney)

Indeed, the audience’s lack of awareness that they are being duped can be a source of amusement for those in the know: ‘I used to just say I was an only child. I use to smile wryly when people used to say ‘oh you can tell you’re an only child’ and I’m like no, I’m not really’ (Abi). This example reflects Goffman’s (1959, p.28) argument that ‘when an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them… that, in general, matters are what they appear to be’. This may be an important social norm in situations where the narrative is rewritten, such as in the example of Beth’s contradictory work narratives.

When asked about ways that they had sought to memorialise their sibling, a number of people commented that they had thought about getting a tattoo (Buckle and Dwyer, 2019) but avoided it because it would limit their control of when to share their story: ‘when you have something like a tattoo everyone is like ‘what does that mean?’ and obviously sometimes you might just not want to talk about it’ (Amber). Kate also mentions that ‘for years and years I did think about getting a tattoo but then… one of the things that has put me off the most is that having to explain it to people’. However, Kate is keen to then point out that she is:

So happy to talk about him (her brother), I’d love to be able to mention him and talk about him, recognise that he was alive but I can’t because it makes people feel uncomfortable and I feel like death is such a taboo subject… which is a shame because that for me would honour his memory more than anything, just to be able to recognise and talk about him. (Kate)

Once again, Kate’s comments highlight that as much as she would like to talk about her brother, the audience’s lack of comfort with the topic and subsequent stigma dissuades her from doing so (Pitman, et al. 2018). In contrast, part of what Martin likes about his tattoo is that it prompts conversation (Davidson, 2017), even though 17 years later he wouldn’t feel the need to get one: ‘looking back now at 35 I don’t feel as compelled to stamp a guardian angel on me but it’s nice and I like to explain that’s what it’s for’. Unlike many of the other participants however, Martin was confident in sharing his story and performed his narrative with a greater sense of conviction.

In addition to embodied artwork, other ‘props’ can also be ‘employed by the individual during his performance’ (Goffman, 1959, p.32):

You’ll probably get the impression from me that I’ll often put it off unless I absolutely have to… it would normally be the photograph on top of the mantelpiece or whatever that would give the game away so to speak. (Andy)

Andy was very private and noted that he would often not talk about his sister or tell people of her death but would be ‘caught out’ when they eventually visited his house. As this ‘setting’ is usually only permitted with people of a certain intimacy level and a revelation that could have been avoided by hiding the image, it could be inferred that Andy used the photograph as a prop to initiate conversations about his sister to those allowed close enough to find out. Alternatively, it could be that allowing visitors to see the photograph provided Andy with the opportunity to ‘display’ his family (Finch, 2007), which took priority over his desire to keep his sister’s death hidden.

Although Goffman’s (1959) ideas relating to impression management are primarily focused on interpersonal interactions, these ideas are still relevant and applicable when considering recent technological advances (Jenkins, 2010). For example, social media was also mentioned as ‘a possible venue for grieving, support, and coping during bereavement’ (Rossetto, Lannutti and Strauman, 2015, p. 975), as it offered participants a way to manage their performance whilst avoiding face to face interaction: ‘it’s a way of letting people know, like if people don’t know I’m like ‘o yes this is an easy way for them to find out’ (Amber). Even this is a performance however as Jane comments, in reference to posting on social media at birthdays and anniversaries:

I don’t really like to talk about how much I miss him… so try to keep it quite short and not too revealing of how much I’m actually thinking about it… I don’t want it to be about me, it’s about him… it’s amazing how much thought I put into what actually does go up. (Jane)

Comments, such as Jane’s, that have been presented in this chapter so far make clear the complexity of conscious decision making that factors into people’s performances and highlights that it is far greater than currently discussed in academic literature on bereavement. Yet it is not always possible to exert full control over the disclosure, as will now be discussed.

## Managing the Forced Performance

Despite numerous strategies for managing the moment of disclosure, at times the situation is forced and decisions must be made immediately in response to an unplanned performance. Often these moments are unexpected and unavoidable, with the most commonly raised examples relating to work or when people had been asked the largely dreadedquestion regarding the number of siblings they have (DeVita-Raeburn, 2017). Franklin (2017) highlights that this is a problem for parents too, as they must struggle with the question of how many children they have, although there is no scope within this thesis to explore the way that parents negotiate this experience. As part of a course, Abi was asked to locate herself in the room depending on how many siblings she had:

I went and put myself in the only children and then found what we were required to do was explain something that sent me into a complete panic. At that point I was like ‘I can’t do this’ and went off to the loo. I realised after that I needed to acknowledge this… yeah I have changed, I do tell people. (Abi)

Consequently, Abi sought from that point to be in greater control of her performance and, like Beth at university, tell her story on her terms before anyone could force her to tell it on theirs. This sentiment was shared by Viv: ‘I used to feel more like I had to get it out the way because otherwise it would come up in a situation that I couldn’t control’. Although Viv states that since moving away from where she grew up and the people who knew her, it had become easier to manage the ‘discreditable’ nature of bereavement by, for the most part, keeping it private unless she was willing to share. Returning to Abi’s example, Poppy was put into a similar situation whilst on a course and expressed a similar reaction:

The fact that it was sprung on me and I wasn’t prepared for it made me kind of go, how am I gonna do this? And I suddenly realised what a decision-making process it actually was to answer that question and in the end I just didn’t do it. I just left the room. I just thought no I don’t want to do this. In this situation I don’t want to have to deal with my own biography so I left. (Poppy)

In these moments where people were stripped of a sense of control or anticipation, the inability to rehearse an appropriate script made them uncomfortable and so they left the situation to avoid having to perform unplanned.

One of the most obvious examples where people are forced into deciding what story to tell is when they are asked *the* sibling question (DeVita-Raeburn, 2017): ‘I think that’s one of the hardest things about losing brothers and sisters is when someone asks you how many brother and sisters you have’ (Melissa). As such, many participants expressed great disdain for this question as something they found extremely difficult to answer (Franklin, 2017). Brooke highlights the feelings of guilt associated with denying the deceased sibling, as well as the challenge posed by any follow-up questions that may arise:

People naturally ask questions about your life and brothers and sisters and stuff like that… I don’t know how to answer those questions. If I say no I haven’t got any siblings then a feel a bit guilty about that but if I say yes then what if they ask me any follow-up questions and I can’t answer them because then I’d have to make up a story. (Brooke)

Brooke wasn’t the only person to express lack of clarity and conviction over what to do when asked the question, as Jackie notes: ‘it depends on the situation… it’s always really uncomfortable… I haven’t actually found a solution’. Some people were very fixed in their answer: ‘if people ask me if I have any brothers or sisters I can’t say no because I do, he’s just not here. I literally, I feel like it almost causes me physical pain if I was to lie about it’ (Becky), or ‘I wouldn’t ever say I don’t have a brother cause that’s not true is it? You’ll never change the fact that you have a brother will you even if he’s not physically here?’ (Martin). As DeVita-Raeburn (2017, p.70) states ‘this also felt like a betrayal of my brother, denying his existence’. Peter also expressed determination in his answer:

I’ve always had 4 sisters and a brother, that’s never been disputed, I always say that and then I’ll say I lost my sister when I was 32… I don’t intend to shock people with it… but I think generally people tend to not say anything, they just shy away from the fact, try and not approach it or discuss it. (Peter)

In contrast, Britney adopted a different approach, stating: ‘I don’t like to tell people unless I know I’ll have more conversations with them so if people ask, do you have any siblings, a lot of times I’ll just say no I’m an only child’ (Britney), and some people, such as Kate, were still unsure: ‘whenever I have mentioned it, people have acted so uncomfortable that it’s put me off mentioning it to the point when people ask me how many siblings I have I never know whether to include him in that count’ (Kate). Mary suggests:

After all these years I still hate it because you just end up lying a lot of the time. You just end up lying. I’ll say I’ve got a brother who lives in Sheffield and stopping, or I say yeah I’ve got a brother and a sister and stopping, or I tell the truth, depends on who you’re talking to and how you feel on the day. (Mary)

Similarly, Poppy also varies her answer, sharing:

I kind of make a decision based on the situation I’m in, who I’m talking to… if I judge them able to be able to accept the real story then fine I’ll say yeah I have but he’s not here anymore, but if I judge them not to be then I’ll be like no I don’t and I don’t like saying that. It makes me feel very uncomfortable because it’s like denying his existence or something like that and I don’t want to do that. (Poppy)

Once again then, the siblings’ perception of the audience, as well as their own emotional stability, was integral to their decision-making process but unlike general conversation, the question is more difficult to manage because it is more specific and conclusive, requiring a definitive answer that participants felt uncomfortable giving. For some it is clear that they have established a way to manage the performance when forced, whilst others are still negotiating how they deal with the situation. Often the difference between these participants was the length of time that they had been bereaved and the opportunity that they have had as a result to decide how best to navigate these unplanned performances. This once again highlights the importance of considering changes over the life course, as will now be discussed in the following, final section.

## Performance In and Over Time

Most siblings commented that they had gradually decided for themselves how to manage their own performance and expressed greater confidence in doing so but this had required negotiation over time, self-learnt through interaction. As Myers (2004, p.260) notes, disclosure ‘is not a one-time confession but, rather, an on-going process’. For example, in answer to the sibling question, Kate says ‘I’ve tried it, I’ve tested out different responses’ (Kate). Britney comments: ‘it used to be something that I super over thought but now it’s more like, if it doesn’t come up it doesn’t come up and when it does come up it’s fine’ (Britney). Whereas Britney reports feeling more comfortable dealing with the conversation over time, Kate says: ‘in the past I used to bring it up more spontaneously but I’ve had so many negative reactions from people that it’s made me a lot more cautious about when I mention it and who I mention it to’. Kate’s comments highlight the relational way in which people’s bereavement narratives are shaped (Baddeley and Singer, 2009), as she adapts her response in accordance with positive or negative reinforcement (Pitman et al., 2018). However, according to Dan, time can also serve to fix the performance as it is rehearsed over the years and fits into familiar patterns:

What you say at the time then becomes your truth of it and so without ever realising you’ve created your truth because next time you’re asked about it you say what you said the previous time and then your mind starts to walk down a well-worn path and so you’ve inadvertently defined it without ever actually meaning to. Probably none of us were very good at stepping outside of that and actually thinking how we actually felt. (Dan)

Like Britney, Mary and Dan also talked about how their performance had changed over time and they had become more relaxed about it. However, what is particularly interesting is the similarities between their accounts. Mary and Dan are (younger) sister and (elder) brother, who experienced the death of their middle sister. The individuality of each person’s narrative has been prioritised throughout this thesis in order to distinguish their unique perspectives. However, their connection is raised here due to the parallels between their disclosure strategies over time:

In the immediate aftermath and probably for a few years afterwards I would have said I had a sister who got killed and then I would have mentioned Mary. I remember it being Lisa’s death one of the things I would want to get into. These days I certainly don’t do that, I don’t rush to it but I’ll cheerfully talk about it as and when it crops up. If I get asked now I would say, probably, I’ve got one sister, I used to have another. There’s been a gradual metamorphosis from focusing on Lisa exclusively. (Dan)

In the first few years after it happened I would tell people about it, new people I met like, ‘my name’s Mary, I’m 15, I’ve got a brother and a sister but my sister was killed in a car crash’, because I think I felt quite defiant, I don’t care if you feel awkward I’m gonna tell you, it’s my right to tell you, why should I feel awkward… I can’t remember when but there came a point where I didn’t want to be the girl who’s sister died anymore and I didn’t want it to define me anymore and I stopped telling people unnecessarily unless it cropped up in conversation but then I felt a bit bad that I was almost denying her so it’s not swung back fully the other way where I almost shove it in other people’s faces but, yeah I’m more open about it now but in a more relaxed way. (Mary)

After noting the influence that family can have on bereavement narrative disclosure (Baddeley and Singer, 2009), it is interesting that both siblings have taken on a similar trajectory in the way they have spoken about their sister over the years. Although, neither sibling commented on this, and may not even be consciously aware of it, therefore making it unreasonable to argue that one directly influenced the other.

As stated in the introduction to this section, most participants had become increasingly confident over time and gradually cared less about the audience’s reception. Adam reflects: ‘I could openly talk about it now if we’re in a group and if people don’t want to hear it they can leave whereas back then I would never bring it up, so I guess it’s changed over time but it has taken a long time’. Part of this confidence may develop as the performance is rehearsed, edited and amended over the years, as part of the self-identification process (Jenkins, 2014), but it may also be that part of this increased comfort is due to the audience being less awkward when hearing about a death that happened further in the past:

If you tell them that your sister died 20 years ago, that’s one thing cause they think you’re over it by now so it’s alright to carry on, whereas if I said that my sister died 20 days ago it would be o I’m so sorry. Do you know what I mean? It would be more awkward for them. 20 days ago is a lot more awkward for them than 20 years ago. Back to this thing of time, of time being a factor. (Ray)

As Ray suggests, the audience’s eased response is linked to normative assumptions of ‘healthy’ grief reducing over time (Sveen et al., 2013) and the expectation that sufficient time has elapsed so that the performer will not become upset when speaking of the deceased: ‘I think this is all proportional because back then it would have been a sob story whereas now it’s something I can look at in my past and be like, I did this and I did that and it’s all okay’ (Asim). Bereavement disclosures are therefore likely to become more socially acceptable with the passing of time as they are less likely to elicit an emotional performance and make the listener feel uncomfortable (Baddeley and Singer, 2009). This decline in stigma is also linked to the ageing of the surviving sibling. As time passes and the living get older, death becomes more familiar and encounters with the bereaved occur more regularly. This means that death disclosures are seen to transgress normative temporal scripts less defiantly and appear less ‘out of time’, even if the actual death occurred decades ago. Consequently, there is less of a perceived ‘*discrepancy* between virtual and actual social identity’ (Monaghan, 2016, p. 184) and so the stigma associated with discussions of bereavement can reduce over time as the individual ages.

Finally, Rosa highlights that over time, more people are familiar with the death and so the requirement to manage the performance is lessened:

I hated that question the first few years. I would avoid it. So sometimes I did say I had three brothers and sisters if I thought they wouldn’t ask more, but if they did and then how old are they, and then I got into the dilemma of do I tell them the age of death and how old she’d be now? And then it’s more questions so it was a really complex question. I think right now I don’t mention her. At the beginning I used to feel guilty of not including her but now I know she’s part of my life and I know the closest people to me would always be aware of it. (Rosa)

As time goes on, those familiar to the bereaved are likely to know of the situation and so the requirement to perform, or at least perform so consciously, is reduced. Yet an additional aspect is that as people age, their relational webs are likely to become more fixed. During a period of ‘emerging adulthood’, individuals are supported to ‘try on new relational patterns and life directions’, whilst ‘focusing on identity development and shifting worldviews’ (Laverty, 2017, p. 76). This process of ‘being and becoming’ is encouraged through acts such as dating, moving to University and starting a new career (Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998), whilst these significant life course transitions are more likely to take place during early adulthood according to society’s temporal scripts (May, 2019). Consequently, it is likely that people are more likely to experience a series of new encounters and introductory conversations during early adulthood than they are at any other period in their life. This means that the requirement to manage the performance of bereavement and negotiate the point of disclosure are more persistent at this time.

However, while the passing of time may make it less uncomfortable when talking about the dead, the potentially negative consequence of this is that the bereaved feel less entitled to speak about the deceased and share their memories together (Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015). Following a limited period in which grief is allowed, it then becomes ‘prohibited, restrained, unsanctioned, and unsupported by society’ (Corr, 2002, p. 57). Dan comments on this experience, arguing that ‘the effect of time is to feel like you have less entitlement to talk about how you’re feeling and therefore you edit out all the most important bits’. As such, he reflects that ‘the stories themselves that I do say are very much condensed’. Indeed, Baddeley and Singer (2009) note that the level of attention and support offered to bereaved families diminishes over time as audiences become less willing to listen. As such, the passing of time may allow individuals to feel more comfortable sharing their stories and performing their bereavement but it may also reduce the opportunity to do so. Either way indicates the significance of time in shaping the bereavement experience.

## Conclusion

This chapter has outlined yet another way that sibling bereavement should be considered a relational experience, one that is deeply embedded in social interaction. It has applied the dramaturgical metaphors proposed by Goffman (1959; 1963) to explore an aspect of grief which is barely discussed in the bereavement literature, which is the requirement of those bereaved to make decisions regarding how to manage the performance of their bereavement in order to reduce the level of stigma they experience. This includes the ways that siblings make choices about discussing their bereavement, as well as their sibling and the relationship they shared. The performativity of bereavement has been presented and it has been demonstrated how complex the decision-making process can be in these situations. Before proceeding to analyse the various components of the performance, this chapter opened with a discussion of why there is a need to impression manage at all. The suggested taboo of death was explored and considered in relation to deaths which occur ‘out of time’. As such, it was concluded that society may be becoming more comfortable with certain types of death but not all. The expectation of the sibling relationship as one to last a lifetime means that it defies temporal scripts when a sibling dies young and so stigma is associated with those who transgress these temporal norms and discuss their bereavement.

Following this opening section, the chapter continues with a discussion of how participants made decisions about when to tell people of their bereavement, noting that the challenge of doing so is that the audience may not respond favourably when told. Consequently, siblings often attempted to manipulate the situation so that they could disclose in a moment that best suited them and offered opportunity for the most hoped for outcome. Linked with this is the issue of what information to share in these moments, which was outlined in the third section. Variables in the decision-making process were explored, including who is in the audience, the participant’s age, the context of the interaction and the anticipated longevity of the relationship. Each of these factors can impact upon the version of the story that is performed and the level of information shared. The fourth section questioned the ways that people manage the narrative and utilise a range of tools to ensure that the performance runs smoothly. Often this involved developing a way to sense the direction in which a conversation is moving and steering it away from the topic of siblings if a discussion on the subject is unwanted. Other techniques included the use of generic words, such as brother, rather than names, to refer to the deceased surreptitiously, whilst also ensuring the use of past, rather than present, tense does not reveal inconsistency either. Limiting or making use of props, such as photographs or tattoos, is an additional way that participants were able to manage their performances and either prompt or prevent conversation.

Towards the end of the chapter, discussion turned to *the* question, meaning the often-dreaded request to know whether people had any brothers or sisters. Participants expressed a number of techniques for managing this situation and articulated a range of replies that varied according to the performer and audience, but also over time. Indeed, the final section of this chapter noted that the passing of time allows the individual to rehearse their narrative and revise decisions surrounding the impression management. Most participants had learnt to manage the performance and felt increasingly confident in doing so but this had required negotiation over time, developed through a process of interaction with others. Whilst the passing of time meant that the stigma of being bereaved was lessened, it also meant that participants felt less entitled to speak of their grief. Overall, therefore, the requirement to continually manage and negotiate the performance of bereavement over the life course indicates that it is a permanent feature of the self-identification process. As such, this chapter reinforces the argument that the death of a sibling, and subsequent bereavement experience, is integral to an individual’s sense of self. Consequently, this thesis highlights that far greater attention should be given to bereavement by death and identity scholars alike, if academia is to continue developing its ideas regarding the ‘self’.

# Chapter Eight: Conclusion

## Introduction

Brothers and sisters can play an integral role in shaping who we are and how we see ourselves (Fletcher at al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2006). Despite the potential significance and longevity of the sibling relationship however, there is a distinct lack of sociological focus on siblings (Davies, 2015). The loss of this relationship, as a result of death, can have profound consequences for any living siblings and yet there is a notable lack of knowledge regarding sibling bereavement (Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). Indeed, multiple participants commented prior to and during the interviews that they were surprised to see a research project focusing its attention on sibling loss and were therefore keen to participate as a result. Studies which have taken place are largely dominated by medical and psychological conceptualisations of grief that focus on individual pathology and often fail to recognise the social aspects of bereavement (Valentine, 2008). These studies usually employ positivistic methods, such as questionnaires and scales (see Hogan and DeSantis, 1992, 1996; Howard-Sharp et al., 2018), in an attempt to measure grief and track its progression. In contrast, as outlined in the introduction and methodology, the primary aim of this thesis was to sociologically explore sibling bereavement, using in-depth qualitative interviews to generate rich narratives of everyday lived experience.

Whilst there was some variety in the age, gender and ethnicity of participants, it is agreed that a more socially and ethnically diverse sample would have enabled a broader range of perspectives to be heard (Chapple et al., 2015). Analysis drew upon a broad range of literature from a variety of disciplines and sociological sub-fields in order to bridge the gap that currently exists between Death Studies and other areas of sociological enquiry (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016). The intention behind this was to apply existing theory, such as Goffman’s seminal texts (1959; 1963; 1974), in new and original ways, whilst creating links between previously separate fields of study, such as Death Studies and the Sociology of Family. As a result of the methods used and the literature drawn upon, this thesis makes several significant and original contributions to current understandings of sibling bereavement, as well as the sibling relationship more broadly. These have been outlined throughout the thesis but will be drawn together in this concluding chapter.

The overarching aim of this research was to prioritise and discover more about people’s lived experiences of sibling bereavement. Within this, however, it soon became clear that there were 3 core threads pulling through the analysis. Thus, rather than offering individual summaries of the analysis chapters (which can be found at the end of chapters 4-7), this conclusion will bring together the main themes from across the thesis and present them under the separate headings of relationships, identity and time. Framing the findings in this way creates a more coherent conclusion and also ties in closely with the research questions, thus presenting answers to the following:

* How does conceptualising sibling relationships as embedded help to understand experiences of sibling bereavement?
* How does recognising the relational and performative aspects of self help to understand bereaved identities?
* How does an awareness of temporalities help to understand experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course?

Included in this conclusion then is a summary of the key ideas raised throughout this thesis, drawn together for clarity. Following these 3 opening sections is a number of recommendations for future research. This is by no means an exhaustive list but offers a diverse range of suggestions. Next comes a series of applications for practice, which offer guidance on the key points that are relevant to professional services. Finally, this thesis will acknowledge the limitations of the research before closing with some personal reflections.

## Relationships

Grief and bereavement are highly relational, embedded in all relationships including those with the living and the dead (Valentine, 2008). While most of the findings in this thesis relate to surviving kin, participants did reflect on the nature of their sibling relationship. Comments throughout the interviews revealed a set of implicit assumptions regarding the future, making clear that participants held a number of normative ideals about how the sibling relationship would have unfolded over the life course. This reflects Gillis’ (1997) suggestion that people maintain an idealised version of the family they hope to ‘live by’, in contrast to the actual family they ‘live with’. As found by Rosenblatt (2018), siblings often possessed shared memories of childhood and a mutual understanding that goes beyond words. As such, even those who weren’t close to their sibling believed that this would prove invaluable over the life course as no one else would hold this information. The sibling relationship can therefore be understood as unique and inimitable, regardless of how close people are to their friends or cousins, for example (Wright, 2016). As such, most participants expected to grow up and grow old with their brother or sister, recognising the permanence of the tie between them regardless of their current closeness (Voorpostel et al., 2007). This meant that even those who weren’t amicable remained hopeful about the possibility for reconciliation in the future. The assumption was that any fights and fall-outs which seem common in younger years would fade over time, allowing the relationship to become closer and more friend-like (Conger and Little, 2010). As a result, it was believed that via siblings, people would become aunts/uncles and gain a brother or sister-in-law. It was also presumed that siblings would potentially support one another in the later stages of life (Wright, 2016) or assist in the care of elderly parents (Bussolari and Horsley, 2017). Consequently, siblings expressed great sadness not only for the brother or sister who had died but also for the aspects of their relationship that would never come to be. While a number of studies (including those cited) highlight the individual components, this thesis is the first to present an overall narrative articulating the normative assumptions associated with the sibling relationship over the life course. Although it is not a complete narrative, it does contribute a much fuller account of the sibling relationship that people expect to ‘live by’ (Gillis, 1997).

Moving away from the sibling relationship directly, this research highlighted the potential value of the deceased sibling’s friends as a source of support and information about the deceased; a relationship which has yet to be explored in the literature. By recognising the plurality of identities (Jenkins, 2014), it is acknowledged that a sibling’s friends may be able to offer an alternative insight into their character and personality (Walter, 1996). This included the deceased sibling’s perception of their brother or sister, as well as the relationship between them. While not all participants valued these conversations, a significant number expressed their appreciation of the insight gained via this channel. Another relationship discussed in this thesis that is unrecognised yet potentially significant for bereaved siblings was that with nieces and nephews. Participants often considered it to be their responsibility to inform this younger generation about their mum or dadand even assume a position of care over them. Applying the work of Finch and Mason (1993), this largely stemmed from a sense of obligation and duty towards the deceased, which had developed over time based on the ongoing interaction between siblings. Their willing to adopt semi-parenting roles may also be linked to the generational closeness of siblings (Milardo, 2010), as they were most likely to be of a similar age to the deceased, potentially with children of their own, and thus better positioned to undertake the role than grandparents, for example.

The relationship between surviving siblings and their parents has been explored in great detail throughout this thesis as, much like Funk et al. (2017) and Marshall and Winokuer (2017), it was frequently mentioned during interviews. For the majority of siblings spoken to, the death of their brother or sister prompted a new sense of care and responsibility towards their parents, which had to be navigated and negotiated over the life course. For example, this research is the first to highlight the responsibility that surviving siblings feel towards their embodied selves, ensuring that they remain healthy and alive in order to protect their parents from the anguish of losing another child. A more commonly cited reaction is that siblings may hide or diminish their grief and conceal the depths of their anguish in order to protect their parents (Funk et al., 2017; Gilbert and Gilbert, 2017). Although, not everyone felt the same level of pressure and often this sense of duty was experienced more acutely by those who had no other living siblings (Forward and Garlie, 2003). Participants expressed an awareness of need both now and in the future, demonstrating an understanding that parents may require more care in the later stages of life that would likely be their responsibility (Bussolari and Horsley, 2017). As such, some participants talked about plans they had for the future or even provisions they had made already in preparation, thereby demonstrating a temporal awareness of care duties. In the present, actions varied from the seemingly mundane, such as engaging in activities that would normally have been fulfilled by the deceased or maintaining regular communication, to the more radical, such as moving house to be closer to parents or making decisions about children in consideration of parents. Overall, it was clear that most participants felt an increased sense of care and duty towards their parents following their sibling’s death, which was expressed in a multitude of ways.

This heightened feeling of responsibility towards parents is well-documented in the available sibling bereavement literature (Hogan and DeSantis, 1994; Lamers, 2003, Marshall and Winokuer, 2017). However, likely because of the shallow data collection methods employed by the majority of these studies, this sense of duty is assumed to be experienced as an entirely negative, somewhat imposed responsibility. Yet the rich narratives produced in this thesis reveal that the relationship between surviving siblings and their parents is far more complex than this and attitudes towards parental care are multifaceted. Whilst stifling and restrictive at times, participants made clear that they wanted to care for their parents based on mutual feelings of love, loyalty and respect. This once again relates back to Finch and Mason’s (1993) suggestion that responsibility to others is not imposed but created over time and mutual patterns of care. Further analysis suggested that this feeling of duty stems from an amalgamation of reasons. For example, seeing parents upset disrupts the usual family roles of stoic adults caring for younger sons/daughters and so siblings may adopt a ‘caretaker role’ (Goldman, 2017, p.33) to mitigate this imbalance. Finch and Mason (1993) also highlight a moral dimension, as to withdraw the care through which individuals establish an identity, such as supportive son or daughter, would be detrimental to that person and so they uphold these duties as a way to maintain a personal sense of self. Once again, it is emphasised that siblings often expressed that they had choice in this and it should not be assumed a priori that it was forced upon them. It is acknowledged that not everyone would feel confident in resisting feelings of obligation and so, what this thesis highlights is the overall complexity of relationships. In doing so, it makes a strong case for a move away from the dominance of quantitative methods in bereavement research towards research methods which allow for such complexities and subtleties to be drawn out and made visible.

A final finding linked to relationships, which may also be seen to contribute towards surviving siblings’ feelings of care and responsibility towards parents, is the positioning of siblings within social hierarchies of grief. Within Robson and Walter’s (2012) proposed hierarchy, siblings are located lower than parents and it was clear across the interviews that siblings had internalised this sense of entitlement, or lack thereof, with regards to how much they were allowed to grieve. Participants indicated that kin and clinicians enforced this perception that parental grief deserves greater recognition by asking exclusively about parental welfare and encouraging a narrative of ‘being strong’ for parents (Packman et al., 2006; Linn-Gust, 2010). As a result, siblings were required to negotiate how they managed their positioning in these social grief hierarchies and the subtle methods used to reinforce their subordination. Although siblings made comparisons between their bereavement and parental bereavement, overall they were keen to stress that one is neither better nor worse but that the two experiences are very different. Even those who had become parents since the death of their sibling noted that they had gained greater insight and empathy but remained reluctant to state that one bereavement would be worse than another. This discussion therefore challenges Robson and Walter’s (2012) claim that grief hierarchies are necessary structures and contributes to a, currently limited, understanding of how imposing these, rather than questioning them, can influence and shape the bereavement experience.

## Identity

As noted throughout this thesis, siblings play a significant role in the self-identification process (Davies, 2015; 2019; Edwards et al., 2006). Their death and subsequent physical absence therefore has huge ramifications for the surviving sibling’s sense of self, regardless of how positive that relationship was, which requires ongoing management and negotiation over the life course. A small number of participants felt that the sibling’s death had caused a biographical rupture (Bury, 1982), which they experienced as a sense of self ‘before’ and ‘after’. Yet most participants outlined a gradual adjustment from being one of a pair or set, to one by themselves. This transition required them to assert and establish an adapted sense of identity in the wake of their bereavement. Whether this shift is experienced as gradual or instant, however, the death of a sibling is a pivotal moment in the self-identification process, with huge ramifications for the way that individuals see themselves and are perceived by others (Forward and Garlie, 2003). Davies (2015) notes that people make decisions about their sense of self in relation to the similarities or differences they share with their siblings. As such, siblings help us to determine who we are and assist others in understanding this too. Making an original contribution to knowledge in the process, Davies (2015) work was applied in this thesis to consider if and how people continue to establish their identity in relation to a sibling who is no longer living. Participants reported that, when their sibling was alive, they would often try to assert themselves as an individual and emphasise the differences between them. However, following the sibling’s death participants were more willing to acknowledge their similarities, both in appearance and personality, as a way to maintain a continuing bond (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996) and retain an element of their identity which resides in being a sibling.

Another core aspect of sibling identity is linked to birth order (Gillies and Lucey, 2006), even though birth order roles can be negotiated and subverted (McIntosh and Punch, 2009). For a small number of participants this was when they, as the younger sibling, identified as the older sibling due to their brother or sister being ill or vulnerable in some way (Punch, 2005). However, most participants readily identified with their sibling birth order and the socially ascribed roles which are associated with this. They therefore found it extremely disconcerting to reconsider their birth order identity if the death of their sibling challenged the original positions. May (2016) suggests that belonging is crucial to the construction of a self, and so it may be that interrupting the birth order challenged their familiar sense of belonging within a sibling pair/group, as well as the stabilising effect on identity that provides. Mostly affecting younger siblings, participants found that living beyond the age at which the sibling died was disrupting and raised questions over whether they could still identify as the ‘younger sibling’. Overall participants found it extremely difficult to articulate this experience and struggled to re-conceptualise their birth order in a way that differed from the original chronological order. As such, they commonly described the situation as feeling ‘weird’ and found it too problematic to explain. Ageing beyond an older sibling defies normative temporal scripts, which also contributes to the associated feeling of ‘weirdness’ that participants described. The lack of literature about sibling birth order following a bereavement means that these findings initiate discussion in this area and highlight several potential follow-up lines of enquiry.

Alongside the challenge of negotiating who they are and how they perceive their adapting sense of self, bereaved siblings must also repeatedly make decisions about when and how to inform people of their loss. Moreover, the relational nature of bereavement means that, following the initial disclosure, people must also learn to manage the ongoing performance of bereavement over the life course. This part of the analysis applied the seminal works of Goffman (1959; 1963; 1974) in a new and innovative way to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of Goffman’s work, make links between two areas of sociological study that were previously disconnected and thereby expand current thinking in both Death Studies, as well as the Sociology of Identity. As a significant aspect of someone’s identity, the performance and impression management of bereavement must be carefully considered due to the Western discomfort surrounding death, particularly those considered traumatic (Walter, 1991; Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015). General unease with the subject means that people who mention it risk being stigmatised (Pitman et al., 2018) and so the performance is necessary to avoid their identity being spoiled (Goffman, 1963). Yet this performance requires a significant level of thought and management, which participants reported learning to negotiate over time as a result of practice and rehearsing the narrative. Further discussion regarding the temporal elements of this are presented in the following section.

Siblings discussed a wide range of techniques for managing their performance, such as strategically deciding when and how to disclose their bereavement, while steering the conversation and avoiding the topic altogether were also options employed. A number of additional factors guided the decision making process, such as the receptiveness of the audience as well as the potential longevity of the relationship. Due to the difficulties faced when speaking with others, participants revealed feeling more comfortable with those who had experienced a similar bereavement as there was an assumed level of understanding and familiarity between them (Klass, 1996). For some participants, this connection was a deciding factor in why they chose to participate in the research as they knew that the researcher was also a bereaved sibling, which raises an interesting point for discussions of insider/outsider research. One of the most difficult aspects of the performance for the individual’s sense of self was the question of how many siblings people had, as it forced the disclosure and exposed their potentially stigmatising quality. Moreover, it also challenged the individual’s sense of self as they were required to decide if they still identified as a sibling, or indeed, considering the poem offered at the beginning of this thesis, whether society would accept their presentation of self as a sibling if the sibling was no longer alive. Participants once again expressed a range of techniques for managing this situation, ranging between complete honestly and full denial. Yet most participants had experimented over time with different responses, using a trial and error approach to find an answer which suited them best. Once again, further consideration of the temporal aspects of this are discussed in the next section.

## Time

Grief and bereavement are embedded in time, as well as relationships, meaning that a number of temporal factors are linked with the overall bereavement experience. As defined at the start of this thesis, bereavement is a permanent lifelong status, whilst grief ebbs and flows over the life course (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996), yet both must be continually managed. For example, annual temporal markers, such as birthdays, anniversaries and holidays, can cause ‘surges’ in grief as they act as reminders of loss (Rosenblatt, 1993, p.107). In addition, these moments also emphasise the passing of time, highlighting that one more year has been lived without the deceased, with a poignant moment being when more time has been lived without the sibling than with them. For some participants, however, it was not the progression of time specifically but the experiential symbols which emphasise this passing that were significant. For example, participants explained that attending university or getting married without the physical presence of their sibling was challenging as it was assumed that they would live these moments together (DeVita-Raeburn, 2017). Moreover, younger siblings explained that normally they would rely on their elder sibling to provide a ‘route map’ through these transitional life events (Davies, 2019, p.222). According to May (2019), normative temporal scripts, which are embedded within cultural narratives, outline a series of social norms regarding what should happen when. As such, these normative temporal scripts assume that siblings will experience significant occasions together and so it defies these scripts when they aren’t able to, even if this may not have been the case had the deceased sibling lived. As siblings are anticipated to age alongside one another, their death in earlier life is therefore unexpected (Fletcher et al., 2013), and so the loss of a sibling is experienced as a death ‘out of time’. There are several potential consequences of this which are outlined across this chapter but notably: it violates all of the assumptions associated with the sibling relationship as it is projected over the life course; it disrupts the sense of self associated with being and having a sibling; and it requires an effective performance management of self in order to minimise the risk of a spoiled identity. Yet this concept of ‘death out of time’ is greatly under-researched with relation to siblings despite its clear potential for having significant consequences. The discussion in this thesis therefore emphasises the need to explore this idea further, providing a springboard from which to commence study.

The notion of a death ‘out of time’ is partially recognised by public narratives surrounding parental bereavement following the death of a son or daughter. Whereas child loss is linked with phrases such as ‘not right to bury a child’ and ‘no parent should outlive their child’, there is a lack of a public narrative for a similarly ‘out of time’ sibling bereavement. As a result, individuals must largely negotiate for themselves how to understand and present their own narrative, albeit shaped by a multitude of factors, including their relational webs. The absence of a sibling bereavement narrative also has temporal implications, as siblings who felt that their grief was recognised as being equal to that of their parents indicated that this acknowledgement was time sensitive. Recognition of their grief faded as the years passed, which is common amongst all bereavements (Baddeley and Singer, 2009), but occurred at a rate far quicker than parental grief. Participants also reflected on how experiences associated with transitions through the life course, such as becoming a parent, affected their perception and understanding of positioning within social grief hierarchies. Across the interviews, siblings maintained the importance of valuing difference, rather than forcing comparisons, but did reflect that becoming parents had enabled them to see an alternative perspective and empathise with their own parents more. This once again highlights the lifelong nature of bereavement, accentuating that it is continually prompted for change and negotiation over the life course. Although these findings reinforce Robson and Walter’s (2012) proposed location of siblings within social hierarchies of grief, it once again emphasises that alternative conceptualisations must be considered which recognise the impact of these structures on those located within them.

As briefly mentioned earlier in this section, sibling bereavement which occurs ‘out of time’ often requires any surviving siblings to effectively present their performance of self and impression management in order to minimise the risk of a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1959; 1963). Yet many participants stated that rehearsal over time had enabled them to feel more relaxed when disclosing their bereavement, as they had learnt to manage the performance in a way with which they were comfortable. This may be due to practise affording the individual with increased confidence but it may also be the effect of time on the performance. The stigma associated with death fades over time due to normative assumptions that ‘healthy’ grief diminishes (Sveen et al., 2013), meaning that those bereaved will become less upset and unlikely to react in a socially awkward way (Baddeley and Singer, 2009). Moreover, death appears less ‘out of time’ when disclosed in later life, even if the death occurred young, as familiarity with death and bereavement become more common. This reduces the associated stigma as death disclosures are seen to juxtapose normative temporal scripts less obviously and thereby appear less ‘out of time’. In addition, as people age it is likely that their relational webs will become more fixed and less fluid (Laverty, 2017), meaning that there will be a reduced requirement to navigate moments of disclosure as there will be less conversations with those unfamiliar with the situation. However, the passing of time may adversely limit the sense of entitlement that people feel to speak about their grief, as the level of attention and willing to listen demonstrated by the audience declines (Corr, 2002; Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015). This discussion once again reinforces the need to further explore the notion of deaths that occur ‘out of time’ and links with the previous section as an avenue for study which could be pursued.

Overall, the passing of time acts as a consistent reminder of loss, including what was and what will never be. It also offers individuals the ability and opportunity to reflect on their life and realise the significance of their sibling’s death in a way that may not have been obvious at the time (Packman et al., 2006). Indeed, participants indicated that they experienced a series of ‘secondary’ losses beyond the death of the sibling that they must also come to terms with (Hindmarch, 1995), such as the potential inability to become an aunty/uncle, sister or brother in law. This once again links back to Gillis (1997) idea of the imaginary and assumptions regarding the family that people will ‘live by’ in the future. Moreover, several participants identified the death of their sibling as a moment in time which initiated a chain of events that would not otherwise have occurred. Whilst cause and effect could not be established, the sibling’s death was seen to have enacted a ripple effect through time, providing the undercurrent for much of their life after this point. For some participants, this was experienced as the breakdown of familial relationships and loss of family cohesion, as found by Marshall and Winokuer (2017), whereas for others it had informed a series of moments over the life course, bringing them to the point in life which they currently occupied. Although Marshall and Winokuer’s (2017) edited collection offers a number of snapshots of sibling bereavement at various points in the life course, this thesis is the first study of sibling bereavement to reflect on long-term experiences over the life course. As such, it is the only research to introduce this notion of bereavement causing ‘ripples in time’ that are subtle yet significant in the way that they have the potential to completely shape a person’s entire life course following the death of a sibling. Further exploration of this is important as it offers an alternative perspective to the currently dominant normative tropes surrounding bereavement, such as the idea that ‘grief gets better in time’ and that ‘time is a great healer’.

## Future Research

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a number of potential avenues for further study have been highlighted throughout the thesis. What follows is a selection of these possibilities:

* As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, a broader and increasingly diverse range of narratives could have featured in this research if specific efforts had been made to recruit a more socially and ethnically varied set of participants (Chapple, Ziebland and Hawton, 2015). Therefore, a similar project which seeks to draw out variations between class or gender, for example, or adopt an intersectional approach would be beneficial (Davis, 2008). It would be also useful to focus on the difference in bereavement experiences between alternative types of sibling relationships, such as in blended families, particularly in relation to hierarchies of grief (Robson and Walter, 2012). The aim of such a project would not be to compare or rank siblings but to explore the variation in sibling relations and dynamics in order to shed light on potential inequalities and inform practice of such findings.
* Discussion in this study has revealed a lot about people’s implicit assumptions regarding the sibling relationship over the life course. The narratives presented here originate from people who are required to imagine the future sibling relationship without the opportunity to live it. In contrast, it would be interesting to speak with those who have living siblings or are estranged from their siblings to discover whether and how these normative ideals differ. As part of this, it would also be enlightening to question from where these social narratives originate and if they can be adapted.
* The relationship between aunts/uncles with nieces/nephews is currently an understudied topic (Milardo, 2010; May and Lahad, 2018), so any sociological research in this area would be welcome. Yet this thesis raises the potential for exploring the roles of aunts and uncles following the death of a sibling. It was documented that some surviving siblings adopted care roles for their nieces/nephews and so further consideration of why and how this occurred would contribute to understandings of siblings, aunts/uncles and family more generally.
* This thesis has made apparent that negotiating and maintaining the relationship between parents and surviving siblings is multifaceted and deserves far more focus than current literature has to offer. Additional research into the complexities of this relationship is therefore necessary. An in-depth qualitative study, which elicits rich narratives to explore this idea further, would build upon the findings presented here and contribute significantly to literature on siblings, bereavement, and family practices.

## Applications for Practice

As stated in the methodology, it is beyond the remit of this researcher to make specific suggestions for policy and practice. However, this section offers a set of useful ‘takeaway’ points that may be adapted for application by those working in professional services. These will be shared with several bereavement charities, including those mentioned in the methodology, with the aim of informing practice with research-based knowledge. The intention is to develop these during the research extension by working with professionals to co-produce a policy briefing note and set of practitioner resources:

* **Sibling bereavement needs and deserves far greater focus and attention than it is currently receiving.** Public narratives emphasise that the loss of a child is a terrible tragedy that no one should have to face but no equivalent narrative exists for siblings, and so their grief is under-valued and overlooked. Higher priority must be given to siblings along with greater recognition of the significance of their loss.
* **Bereavement is still a difficult topic of conversation.** Charities which seek to challenge this, such as Dying Matters or the Good Grief Project, are essential for encouraging people to speak openly and comfortably about death, dying and bereavement. Additional educational events and workshops which build upon the growth of these awareness raising ventures could make a difference by helping to reduce the stigma associated with death.
* **Bereavement is a relational experience.** The way an individual grieves and mourns is hugely affected by those around them, including but not limited to, family, friends, colleagues and partners. For siblings, the biggest influence is often their parents. Feelings of responsibility and a duty of care often shape the way that siblings experience their bereavement but crucially, these emotions should not be assumed to be negative or limiting. It is important to hear individual voices and recognise the complexities of this relationship.
* **Bereavement is different for everyone.** There were lots of commonalities between participant experiences but also lots of differences, precisely because of these relational influences. Even two siblings from the same family had alternative perspectives and stories to share. Thus, general provision can be of benefit but scope to account for these individual variations is optimal.
* **Bereavement is a lifelong experience.** Feelings of grief may come and go over time but bereavement will always require management and negotiation over the life course. For siblings, this may arise at key moments that would ordinarily be shared with a brother or sister, such as getting married or having children, or typically much later in life when decisions around caring for elderly parents are being made. Recognising and preparing people for the longevity of their experience is essential.

## Limitations of the Research

It was specified in the introduction that this research was conducted within a Western framework of grief and bereavement, whilst the methodology acknowledged that specific measures to recruit people from a range of ethnic backgrounds were not employed. Efforts were made to recognise difference when possible during analysis, but it is a limitation of this study that it does not reflect the experiences of a more culturally and ethnically diverse range of people. For example, Song (2010) highlights that ‘information on siblings from minority communities or from non-Western cultures is particularly lacking’. This is therefore a clear area of study that would benefit from further attention and yet this thesis does little to contribute to its development. Similaly, Hockey (2001, p.199) outlines that Death Studies often ‘excludes the practices of Western ‘foreigners’, whether their differences be of ethnicity or social class’, instead prioritising the white middle class. Regretfully, it would be appropriate to target this criticism towards this thesis as the majority of participants were university educated and/or in professional employment, thereby indicated their middle class leanings.

However, the challenge of recruiting a non-visible group for a sensitive project alongside the exploratory nature of the research meant that it was necessary to produce a general overview of sibling bereavement experiences first, before more specific studies which prioritise difference could be considered. Although the thesis lacks demographic diversity, it does portray a rich array of lived experiences and demonstrates a level of complexity not visible within other studies that prioritise the medical model. Therefore, whilst this research does not represent diversity in the traditional sense, it is hugely varied in the depth of insight that it provides regarding sibling bereavement over time.

## Personal Reflection

From its conception, the primary aim of this thesis was to prioritise the thoughts, feelings and experiences of bereaved siblings for no initial reason other than a personal awareness that very rarely did this occur. However, it soon became apparent when planning the funding proposal that my suspicions were fair and a strong argument could be made for carrying out this research. The current dearth of Sociological literature focusing on sibling bereavement made it possible to adopt an exploratory approach and focus on sibling bereavement experiences more generally. While frustrated by the lack of attention given to siblings, this afforded the freedom to maintain an open mind and pursue a necessarily broad line of enquiry. From the initial discussion with my supervisor, to the fieldwork and eventual write up, the attention of this thesis has followed a consistent trajectory, which may be surprising given the often convoluted nature of the PhD process. Yet the targeted direction largely owes to the exploratory nature of the project; it is easier to stay on track when the margins are set so widely. Overall, it was always my intention to give siblings the opportunity to speak freely by holding a space in which their grief was prioritised above all others, whilst maintaining a core principle of compassion and care for the people who took part. Although physically and emotionally draining at times, I feel extremely privileged to have had the opportunity to conduct this research and genuinely honoured to have listened to the stories that my participants were willing to share with me. As such, it seems fitting that this thesis concludes with an expression of my sincere gratitude to each of the 36 siblings who volunteered to speak with me. I only hope that I have done justice to you, your siblings, and your experiences.

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# Appendices

## Appendix I – We Are Seven by William Wordsworth

———A simple Child,

That lightly draws its breath,

And feels its life in every limb,

What should it know of death?

I met a little cottage Girl:

She was eight years old, she said;

Her hair was thick with many a curl

That clustered round her head.

She had a rustic, woodland air,

And she was wildly clad:

Her eyes were fair, and very fair;

—Her beauty made me glad.

“Sisters and brothers, little Maid,

How many may you be?”

“How many? Seven in all,” she said,

And wondering looked at me.

“And where are they? I pray you tell.”

She answered, “Seven are we;

And two of us at Conway dwell,

And two are gone to sea.

“Two of us in the church-yard lie,

My sister and my brother;

And, in the church-yard cottage, I

Dwell near them with my mother.”

“You say that two at Conway dwell,

And two are gone to sea,

Yet ye are seven! I pray you tell,

Sweet Maid, how this may be.”

Then did the little Maid reply,

“Seven boys and girls are we;

Two of us in the church-yard lie,

Beneath the church-yard tree.”

“You run about, my little Maid,

Your limbs they are alive;

If two are in the church-yard laid,

Then ye are only five.”

“Their graves are green, they may be seen,”

The little Maid replied,

“Twelve steps or more from my mother’s door,

And they are side by side.

“My stockings there I often knit,

My kerchief there I hem;

And there upon the ground I sit,

And sing a song to them.

“And often after sun-set, Sir,

When it is light and fair,

I take my little porringer,

And eat my supper there.

“The first that died was sister Jane;

In bed she moaning lay,

Till God released her of her pain;

And then she went away.

“So in the church-yard she was laid;

And, when the grass was dry,

Together round her grave we played,

My brother John and I.

“And when the ground was white with snow,

And I could run and slide,

My brother John was forced to go,

And he lies by her side.”

“How many are you, then,” said I,

“If they two are in heaven?”

Quick was the little Maid’s reply,

“O Master! we are seven.”

“But they are dead; those two are dead!

Their spirits are in heaven!”

’Twas throwing words away; for still

The little Maid would have her will,

And said, “Nay, we are seven!”

## Appendix 2 – Interview Schedule

Pre-Interview

* Confirm time, date and location prior to interview.
* Thank participant and ask if they are still happy to be involved with the project.
* Ensure participant has my contact details and reassure them that they are welcome to contact me with any questions or concerns that they may think of.

Points to raise prior to signing of consent form:

* **Audio recording of the interview** – check this is okay, show participant the recorder and explain that it is beneficial for the purposes of accuracy. Reassure that no one else will hear the tape aside from me. If not comfortable being recorded, then I can take notes instead.
* **Confidentiality** – Confirm that anything said will remain private unless someone’s safety is at risk e.g. suicidal feelings. All data including personal contact information will be held securely by myself.
* **Anonymity** – All material will be anonymised e.g. pseudonyms given, locations/dates changed, although specific details may make the participant identifiable to familiar others.
* **Pseudonyms** – To protect their identity ask the participant for a false name and explain why/how it will be used.
* **Participant focus** – The topic of conversation to be guided by the participant. Reassure that we can stop, take a break or move on from anything that is too upsetting to talk about. Explain that we can return to the topic later if they feel comfortable/keen to do so.
* **Ability to stop** – Confirm that we can stop at any time, either for a break, for the day or their participation in the research entirely.

Signing of consent form:

* **Present consent form** – show form to participant and explain what it’s for.
* **Read through** – read each point and tick, checking for understanding and agreement.
* **Questions** – give participant chance to ask questions.
* **Repeat** – follow same process for data consent form.
* **Duplicate** – ask participant to complete two identical forms, one for me and one for them.

\*Give the participant an overview of topics to be covered and **WARNING** that at some point later on I will ask them about their sibling’s death but they can stop/take breaks etc\*

*NB: If at any point in the interview participants ask questions about my own sibling or bereavement experiences, reassure them that I’m happy to share my history at the end of the interviews but would like to prioritise them and their personal story throughout the process so will refrain until then.*

The Interview

Explain that, to begin with, I would like to learn more about them and their sibling but eventually I will ask more about the participant’s bereavement experiences since their sibling’s death. Each of the following topics is to be discussed at some point during the interview, but the order and manner in which they are raised will be flexible and led by the participant. I will ask questions to guide the interview that are linked to my key research questions although additional ideas raised by the participant will also be explored.

Ask participant to briefly introduce themselves e.g. ‘To start off can you tell me a bit about yourself?’ but draw on the following example prompts if necessary:

* What do you do for a living?
* Have you always lived in this area?
* Do you live with anyone else?
* Why did you decide to take part in this research?

*NB: Clearly state that this won’t be transcribed to reduce chance of participant being identified but helps me get to know them and gives a bit of context.*

**Family**

Ask participant to introduce their families e.g. ‘Can you tell me a bit about your family?’ but draw on the following example prompts if necessary:

* Who are the main people in your family? Are you close?
* How important is family to you in general? Has this always been the case?
* Do you have any friends who you would describe as family?

**Sibling**

Ask participants to tell me about their sibling using any material prompts that they may have as guides to the conversation. **Take a photograph to use as reminder later!**

As the quantity and format of the artefacts is for participants to decide, it is difficult to predict specific topics that may arise. However, key topics to discuss include (in most appropriate order):

* Childhood/growing up together (including wider family e.g. parents, grandparents etc.)
* Their relationship and how it may have changed over time
* What it meant to them (if anything) to be/have a sibling – did they like it growing up?
* The sibling’s personality/traits/hobbies
* Relationships with other siblings (if relevant)
* The narrative of the sibling’s death/family responses/how often they reflect on this
* How they remember their sibling/lasting memory of them
* How does it feel talking about this now?

Prompt questions may include:

* Can you give me with an example?
* Can you tell me a bit more about that?
* Has that always been the case or have things changed overtime?
* How have they changed?
* How did you feel/respond/act at that time?
* How did other people feel/respond/act at that time?

**The following question prompts have been split into topics for ease of referral in the interview but it is expected that they may be asked/answered in any order and are likely to ‘emerge’ in a less structured manner due to the conversational nature of the interview.**

**Identity**

Examples of broader, introductory questions include:

* How/in what ways do you feel that you have changed since the death of your sibling? E.g.?
* Has/how has your understanding of who your sibling was changed over time? Has this changed how you see yourself and your relationship?
* How/in what ways has your family changed since your sibling’s death? E.g.?

More specific follow up questions include:

* Did you/do you still feel like the eldest/youngest/middle child?
* Do you/other people still compare you to your sibling? In what way/s?
* Have family/friends/professionals/colleagues contributed to this change?
* Does ‘being’ a bereaved sibling influence how you form relationships with people?
* Have your religious/spiritual beliefs changed in any way since your sibling’s death?

**Continuing Bonds**

Broader, introductory questions include:

* Have you ever made a decision based on your sibling’s death/your bereavement? Future?
* How do you see your relationship with your sibling now? Has this changed over time?
* Do you do anything to memorialise your sibling? Examples? Alone or with people?

More specific follow up questions include:

* Do you talk about your sibling much? How does this vary by social audience?
* Do you talk to your sibling ever? What do you talk about? Do you tell people about this?
* Do people talk to you about your sibling? How do you feel about this?
* Have you ever felt their presence? What happened? Did you tell anyone?
* Have you/do you intend to tell future partners/children about your sibling? How?
* Do you try to imagine what your future relationship would have been like? If yes, explain.

**Everyday life/Life course**

Broader, introductory questions include:

* Can you tell me about what life was like following the death of your sibling?
* Can you describe how your grief and bereavement has changed over time? In what ways?
* How does your everyday experience vary between home/work/family/friends? E.g.?
* How often do you think/are prompted to think about your sibling? Examples? Do you tell people when this happens? Why/why not?

More specific follow up questions include:

* When do you feel like you started grieving for your sibling?
* How do you answer when people ask if you have any brothers or sisters?
* Did you seek professional support/guidance after your sibling’s death? How was this?
* Who do you see as your significant others who support you in your bereavement?
* How different is your bereavement experience at special occasions e.g. birthday and Christmas from your everyday experience? Does family influence this?
* Are there any other times that your grieving is made more difficult?

Post-Interview

Debrief:

* Anything else they would like to add?
* How did it feeling talking about those topics?
* Reaffirm that can contact me with any queries or concerns in the meantime.

*NB: If the participants expresses distress when reflecting on their participation I will remind them of their right to withdraw at any time and make them aware of the counselling services available should they feel it necessary to contact them.*

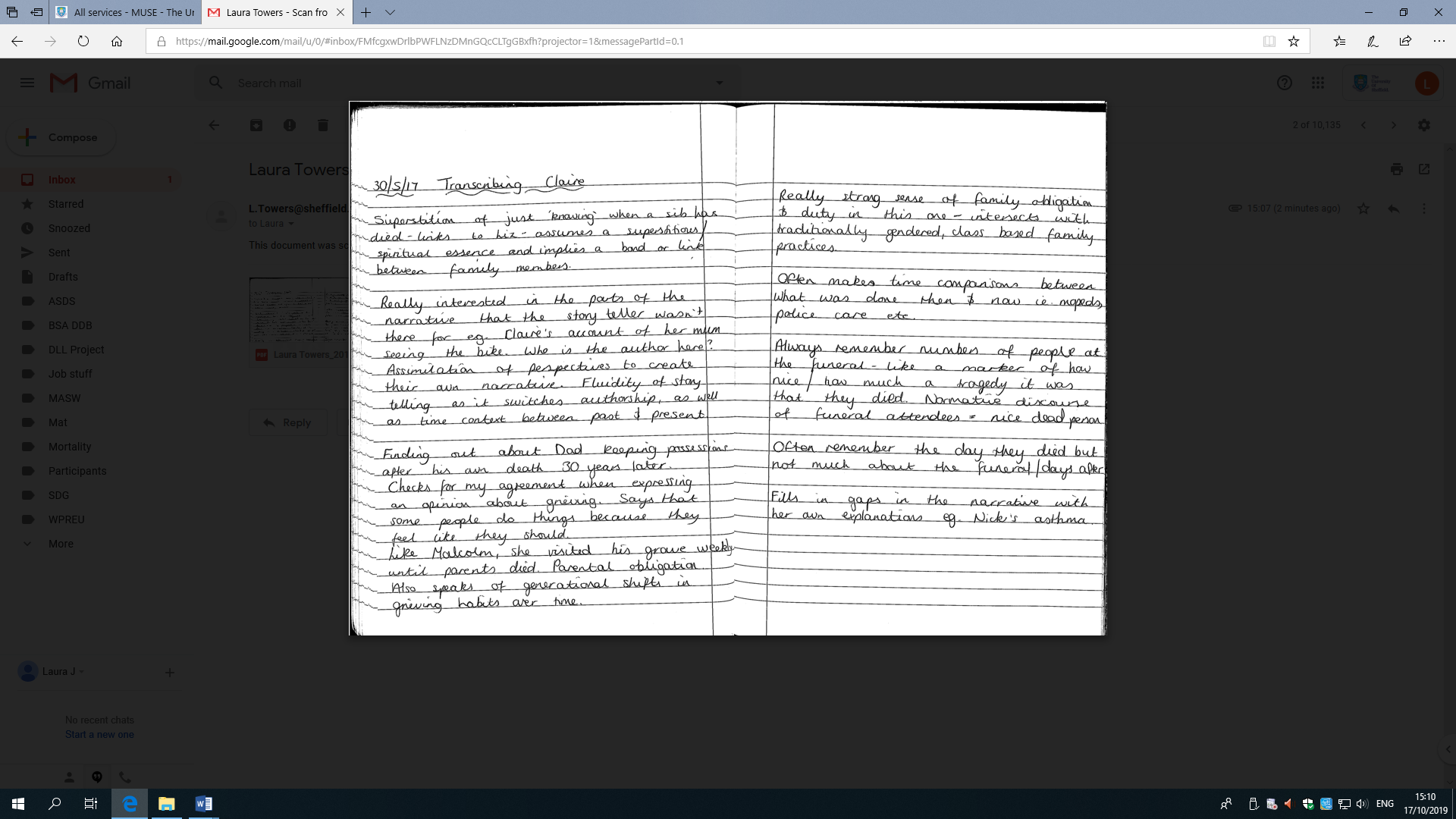
Next Steps:

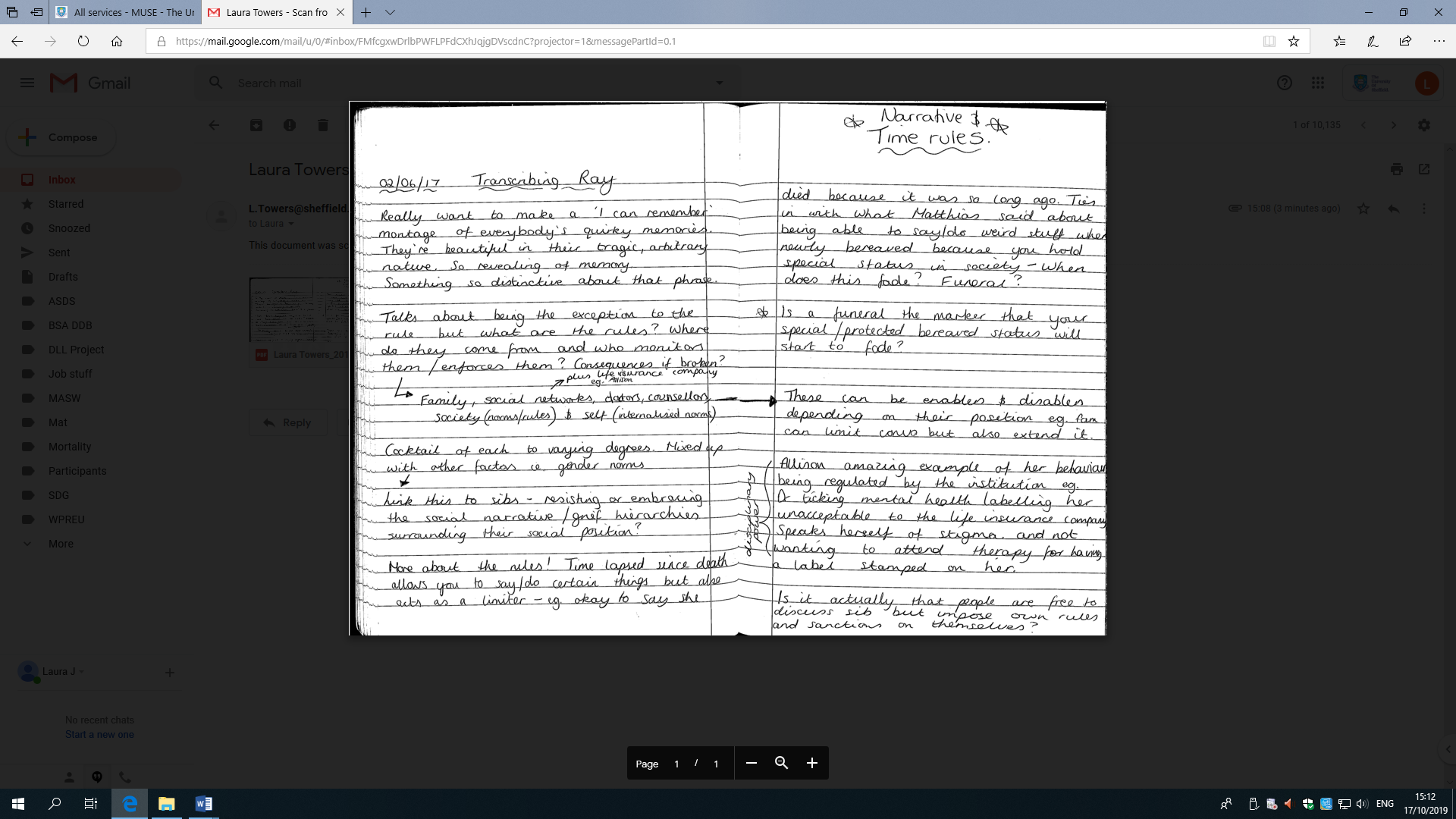
* Explain that I will now go away and transcribe today’s conversation. It will be added to the information I have gathered by speaking with other people and I will now begin to write my PhD report. Would they like a summarised copy of my findings once it is finished?

## Appendix 3 – Participant Overview

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant Pseudonym | Participant age then/now | Sibling gender/age | Object |
| Jane | 20 / 29 | Brother, 22 | Photo album |
| Andy | 8 / 40 | Sister, 13 | Poetry book |
| Peter | 30 / 60 | Sister, 32 |  |
| Jackie | 29 / 36 | Brother, 29 |  |
| Adam | 14 / 32 | Brother, 16 | Photo, news clipping |
| Kate | 12 / 30 | Brother, 21 |  |
| Amber | 15 / 20 | Brother, 18 | Photos |
| Becky | 19 / 30 | Brother, 17 | Photos |
| Martin | 20 / 37 | Brother, 27 |  |
| Claire | 23 / 64 | Brother, 16 | Photos, watch |
| Ray | 34 / 56 | Sister, 28 |  |
| Holly | 17 / 50 | Brother, 15 |  |
| Theresa | 24 / 56 | Brother, 21 |  |
| Pat | 11 / 48 | Brother, 4 | Heaney poem |
| Melissa | 12 / 19 | Brother, 18 | Photos |
| Ruth | 22 / 35 | Brother, 24 | Photos |
| Frances | 34 / 48 | Sister, 39 |  |
| Gayle | 27, 51 / 66 | Brother 22, Sister 49 | Photos |
| Samantha | 34 / 41 | Brother, 38 |  |
| Phoebe | 14, 30 / 44 | Sister 19, Brother, 32 |  |
| Charlotte | 30 / 60 | Sister, 33 |  |
| Asim | 16 / 32 | Sister, 28 |  |
| Britney | 17 / 25 | Brother, 19 |  |
| Tony | 30 / 41 | Sister, 33 |  |
| Poppy | 30 / 35 | Brother, 27 | Ring, photos |
| Bella | 16 / 55 | Brother, 21 |  |
| Beth | 16 / 22 | Brother, 18 |  |
| Brooke | 11, 17 / 33 | Brother 18, Brother 18 |  |
| Philippa | 14 / 19 | Sister, 0 |  |
| Viv | 18 / 30 | Brother, 17 |  |
| Abi | 12, 20 / 61 | Brother 23, Brother 16 |  |
| Dan | 25 / 46 | Sister, 23 | Eulogy, blog |
| Mary | 12 / 33 | Sister, 23 | Photos, letter |
| Rosa | 17 / 30 | Sister, 5 |  |
| Adele | 25 / 34 | Sister, 27 | Impact statement |
| Ashley | 31 / 61 | Sister, 31 |  |

## Appendix 4 – Transcription Notes





## Appendix 5 – Analysis Case Study

Participant Case Study - ‘Martin’

Context

Interview was conducted at 4pm on Friday 20th January at Martin’s place of work i.e. his classroom in the school he teaches at. There is no door to the room so, whilst it is after school hours, at times there are people passing by the doorway. Martin was recruited via the researcher’s relative, who also works at the school and informed the staff of the project. Nevertheless, full informed consent was provided and Martin volunteered to take part, rather than being approached.

Participant Biography

Martin was 35 at the time of the interview (36 in Feb) and single. His Mum is alive but Dad passed away Christmas 2015. He was 20 when his older (half)brother, Andrew, died in a car accident at the age of 27. He has a sister who is 13 months older than him so is now 37 but was 21 when Andrew died. Whilst Andrew is actually Martin’s half-brother, Andrew’s dad died before Martin was born so Martin, Andrew and their sister were raised as full siblings by Martin’s dad.

Reflections on the Interview

Martin clearly felt confident in his opinions and sharing his experiences/emotions. When speaking, he was decisive in his answers, thereby making it difficult to probe further. For example, I should have asked why he went to visit his brother’s grave when drunk but I felt as though I was asking an obvious question with an obvious answer. Also, when talking about his tattoo I didn’t feel able to ask about the reasoning behind his decisions like I did with Jane, as he seemed less open to reflecting on this in the way that she did. I am unable to say why this is but feel his gender may be indicative as Andy, Ray and Peter were very similar in their demeanour. It may also reflect the counselling that he attended, thereby offering a sense of assurance with his ideas. Having said all of this, I felt that Martin was performing a carefully rehearsed narrative and whilst I believe he was honest in his answers, I don’t think he was as open as some other participants have been. At times his answer didn’t directly correlate with the question but I don’t think this was an avoidance tactic, instead I got the impression he either understood the question in a different way than intended or had an idea of what he wanted to say and fit this around the questions I was asking. Although, when looking at the transcript, it is also clear that at times, increasingly as the interview progressed, Martin interrupts me and begins speaking before I have finished the question, which may also account for the disjointed answers. He seemed to use humour as a way to distance himself from the emotional nature of what he was talking about and would often finish sentences with a jovial ‘do you know what I mean?’ even though this was a rhetorical question. It should be noted that Martin works with my relative and there is no door to his classroom, so whilst he expressed several times that he ‘wasn’t bothered’ who heard us speaking, I still felt that he was conscious when speaking about particular subjects e.g. romantic relationships. My initial feeling after the interview was that it had gone really well but, on reflection, I think this was perhaps because I found it the least emotional, both for the participant and myself. On a personal level, I liked the participant but find myself less inclined to re-interview them due to the performative nature of the interaction and their potential reluctance to reflect on issues. In all honestly, I felt that they had more control in the interview situation and perhaps the power balance was tipped in their favour, despite my role as researcher. Whilst I’m not inherently against this, I found it slightly unnerving, both as a lesser experienced researcher and also as a person who generally likes to feel a sense of control.

Core Themes

Whilst it is becoming clear that there are definable themes emerging across the range of narratives, it is also evident that these themes are intrinsically linked to one another and therefore difficult to separate into identifiable sub-sections. The themes most central to this particular narrative are:

* Gender
* Identity
* ‘Healthy’ and ‘normal’ grief
* Time and memory

The following section therefore elaborates on these points and attempts to relate them to broader literature, as well as additional narratives. An attempt at integrating these ideas into narrower subheadings has been made for purposes of clarity but it is acknowledged that this separation at times is somewhat contrived. Moreover, the notions of relationality and continuing bonds act as a uniting undercurrent to each theme and it proved impossible to isolate them as individual themes.

Gender

Martin comments on the different reactions displayed by his parents when Andrew died. He talks of them having traditional gender roles and being ‘that kind of man and wife where my dad was old-fashioned’ (7), thus when Andrew died, Martin states that his ‘dad was one of them men, it was just like ‘you’re a man, get a grip’ whereas my mum was more understanding’ (17). This can be seen to reflect the expressive female roles and instrumental male roles within traditional nuclear families. Although his mum assumed a potentially unexpected authoritative role following Andrew’s death, taking charge whilst ‘dad was a bit to pot’ (7), this can be understood in the context that she is leading an emotionally charged situation; the skills for which clearly eluded Martin’s dad. Similarly gendered parenting following the death of a child has been raised in a few other interviews, particularly those of older participants but less with younger participants, perhaps indicating that increasingly egalitarian parenting roles extend towards emotional labour also.

Martin reflects that gender norms of masculinity prohibited him from talking with his friends at the time of his brother’s death but no longer do so now that he and his friends have matured. ‘As a young lad you don’t want to talk about stuff like that but when you get to your mid 30s a lot of my friends now, we actually realise that we’ve grown up and we can sit and have discussions whereas at 20 we probably wouldn’t have done… Now we’re older we can say like, you know, I’ll say, I can say ‘that upset me’ or, whereas at 20, as a young lad, this is a thing, like a gender thing, you wouldn’t have gone crying to your mate’ (p.16). For Martin, not having anybody to talk to was the catalyst for his panic attacks as he was ‘obviously holding it in and needed to speak to someone’ (8), thus why he eventually saw a counsellor. His ability to successfully perform ‘being’ a ‘university student, a lad at uni who’s having a good time’ (10) ensured that was able to go for months at first without speaking about his brother’s death in any detail. Although, in Martin’s words, this, in part gendered, performance was masking that ‘really inside I was dying wasn’t I?’ (10). Whilst the performance of bereavement is something that has been expressed across a range of interviews, Martin offers insight into the gendered nature of this. Moreover, it should be noted that only male participants have explicitly referred to gender in relation to their grief, thereby implying that female responses are considered acceptable or the norm, whilst typically male reactions are problematic or non-conventional.

Identity

Siblings’ friends are clearly a significant source of information after death. They allow the surviving sibling to glean new insight into the issue of ‘who their sibling was’ and ‘what they were like’, including their ‘other side’ or ‘true self’ that isn’t regulated for family approval. ‘I remember that I started wanting to find out more about his life, if you like, and I started asking his friends a lot of things, going out for nights out with his friends, spending time with his friends. It was almost as if I was kind of doing that to get to know him in the way that I probably should have done when he was alive’ (2). This may be significant in the sense that friends are more equally power balanced to siblings in the information they hold, thereby occupying a unique position with the bereaved siblings’ relational network. They are also able to offer new information about the nature of their sibling relationship as multiple participants have discussed how friends revealed that their sibling was proud of them ‘It’s a shame that he had that fondness of me that we never really showed it to each other’s faces’ (2). This then influences how the living sibling sees themselves, their sibling and the relationship between them. This is also linked to the idea that it’s possible to know more about the sibling by getting to know their friends, i.e. knowing who they liked and spent time with reveals something about who they were. Martin comments that he didn’t realise how similar he was to his brother until after he died; could this be because in life we establish sibling identities in relation to differences but in death we seek similarities to offer comfort and reassurance ‘Quite proud. I think ‘nice one’, yeah cause he lives on doesn’t he and he lives on through us if you like’ (4). The similarities between siblings may not actually be significant or unusual but because they are family we make more of this, which links to what Jane said about family resemblances meaning more than friends simply because it’s family. These similarities then allow for the deceased to ‘live on’ so siblings incorporate those traits that were previously different into their own identities as a way for the deceased to continue ‘living’.

Notions of resilience, endurance and growth as a result of the bereavement are persistent across the interviews. Most if not all have commented that they can’t change things, it is what it is, so might as well get on with it and deal with the aftermath.

‘I’d have it the other way in a heartbeat but I think after the initial grief and everything, I understood something quite profound that you can take, you can let this ruin your life or you can shape yourself by taking experiences from it by right well, what would I do now or what would he want me to do or in that sense so I think it’s life changing for a sibling isn’t it? I think it’s something that has shaped me for the rest of my life.’ (26)

Crucially, siblings perceive themselves as different, as changed, as stronger, as kinder, as more appreciative etc. Martin is the most obvious example of someone who has changed their life in response to their sibling’s death or is perhaps the most self-aware/reflexive sibling that I have spoken to in this sense. Not only in the actions he has taken but in the way he sees himself and the world around him. However, he does acknowledge later that it is difficult to tell because the younger him was carefree any way so can’t determine causality. A lot of other siblings have expressed a similar sentiment but still hypothesised nonetheless. He also talks about a shift in his sense of priorities and what he sees as a problem compared to other people, which is common across the narratives. Siblings discuss their identity in terms of before and after, past and present, but are mostly unable to articulate this transition. Case study interviews utilising timelines and relational mapping over time may be a way to explore this idea further?

Narratives of ‘normal’ grief

The interview contained a lot of talk of normal grief, getting over it, cracking up etc. Martin wasn’t aware of normal until he went for professional assistance but this really highlights the different theoretical approaches between disciplines i.e. what does it matter if he went to sit on the gravestone? My question is why did he do this, not is it normal to do this? Constructions of normal are very prevalent within this narrative but notions of normal/healthy grief are key across most narratives.

Martin didn’t feel like a secondary griever but does comment that people went to his mum first. Again, like Andy it’s possible that Martin appreciated the anonymity offered to him by being a secondary griever and therefore didn’t begrudge it. Highlights that I can’t assume this to be an out rightly negative experience but it is essential to act upon the sibling’s interests rather than according to societal norms.

Talks of grief like an external, influencing force to be endured/resisted rather than an emotion to be experienced. Is this similar in the other narratives? Very private experience of grief.

Often draw upon stock narratives e.g. ‘well what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger doesn’t it?’ (5). Do people draw upon these to shape their experience or do their experiences reaffirm these clichés? Most participants have referenced at least one at some point in their interviews and Andy commented on how he felt there was an element of ‘truth’ in such sayings.

Time and memory

Recurrence of grief over time ‘You get that grief again, you know that horrible feeling, you know the one don’t you’ (8)… ‘You’re always gonna miss them. You’re always gonna have that tear. You’re always gonna look at a photograph and have a cry. You’re always gonna cry on Christmas day. You’re always gonna feel upset on their birthday. That’s natural.’ (13)

Lots of issues around the performance of bereavement and ‘putting a front on’. Both a conscious and subconscious process? Do performers become more in tune/control of their performance as they rehearse it over the years? Martin explores the role of age and gender in this performance and understanding of self, again commenting on how this has changed over time.

Siblings’ death is untimely and so against the natural order that it is unbelievable and difficult to accept. Lots of siblings talk about finding it hard to understand and accept their siblings’ death as it is not ‘supposed’ to happen.

As young people want to continue with their lives they express feeling trapped or held back by the bereavement or by their parents’ grief. Parents can fix on their grief and live within it but siblings have to struggle with grief combined with wanting to live and progress the same as their peers. Timeline of the grief not as clear in this narrative as it has been in the others. Siblings’ lives are changing more than their parents so it is easier to locate within a timeline maybe? Martin talks of personal markers of his development over time e.g. not crying at a certain point in the graveyard.

Relational grieving practices

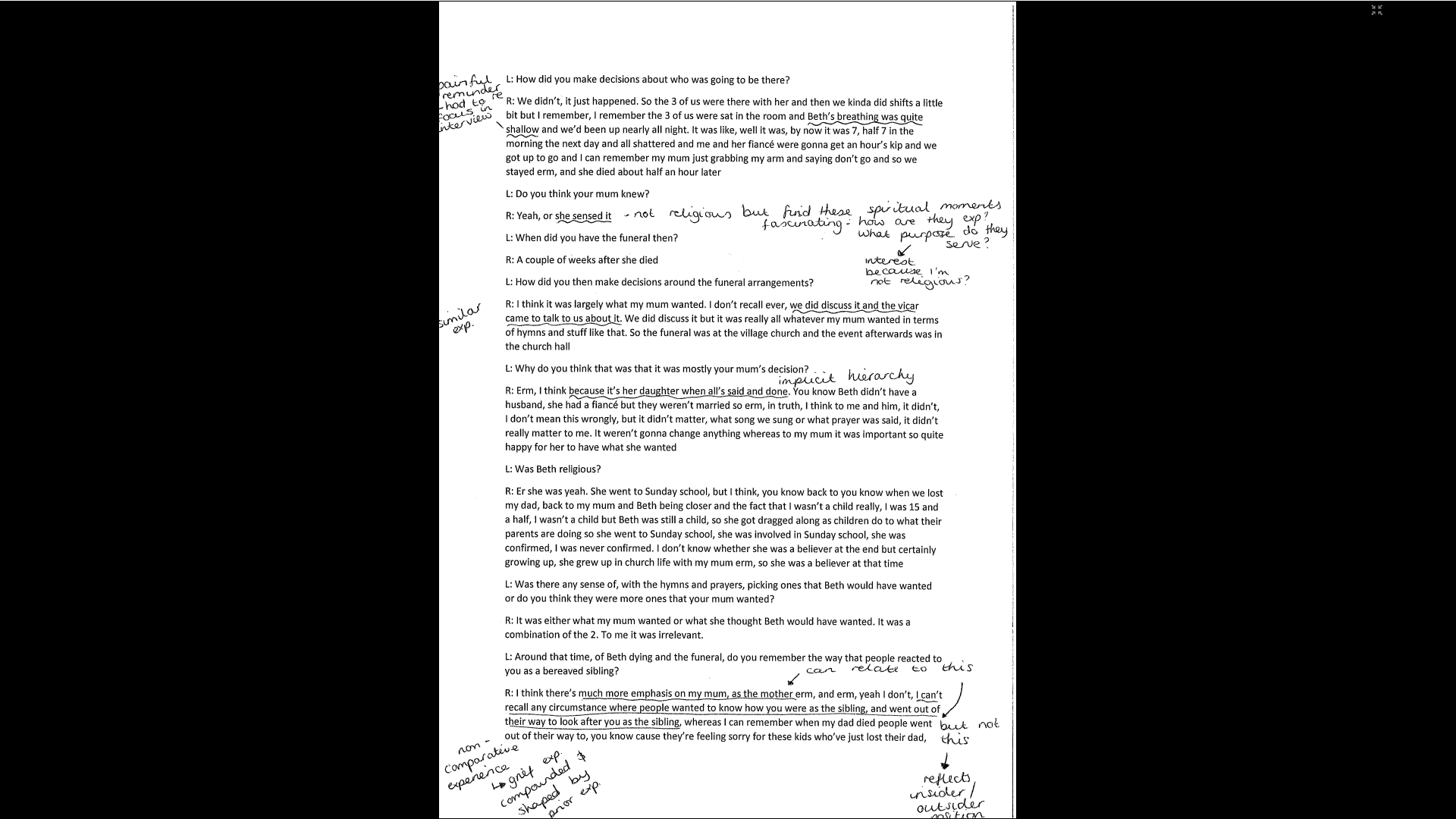
‘I didn’t want to talk to my mum because I thought ‘she’s gonna have enough on her plate’, didn’t want to talk to my dad because I thought ‘mum’s got dad’, didn’t really go to my sister cause she’d got boyfriend at the time, who she’s married now, er, so I kind of dealt with it a lot by myself’ (8).

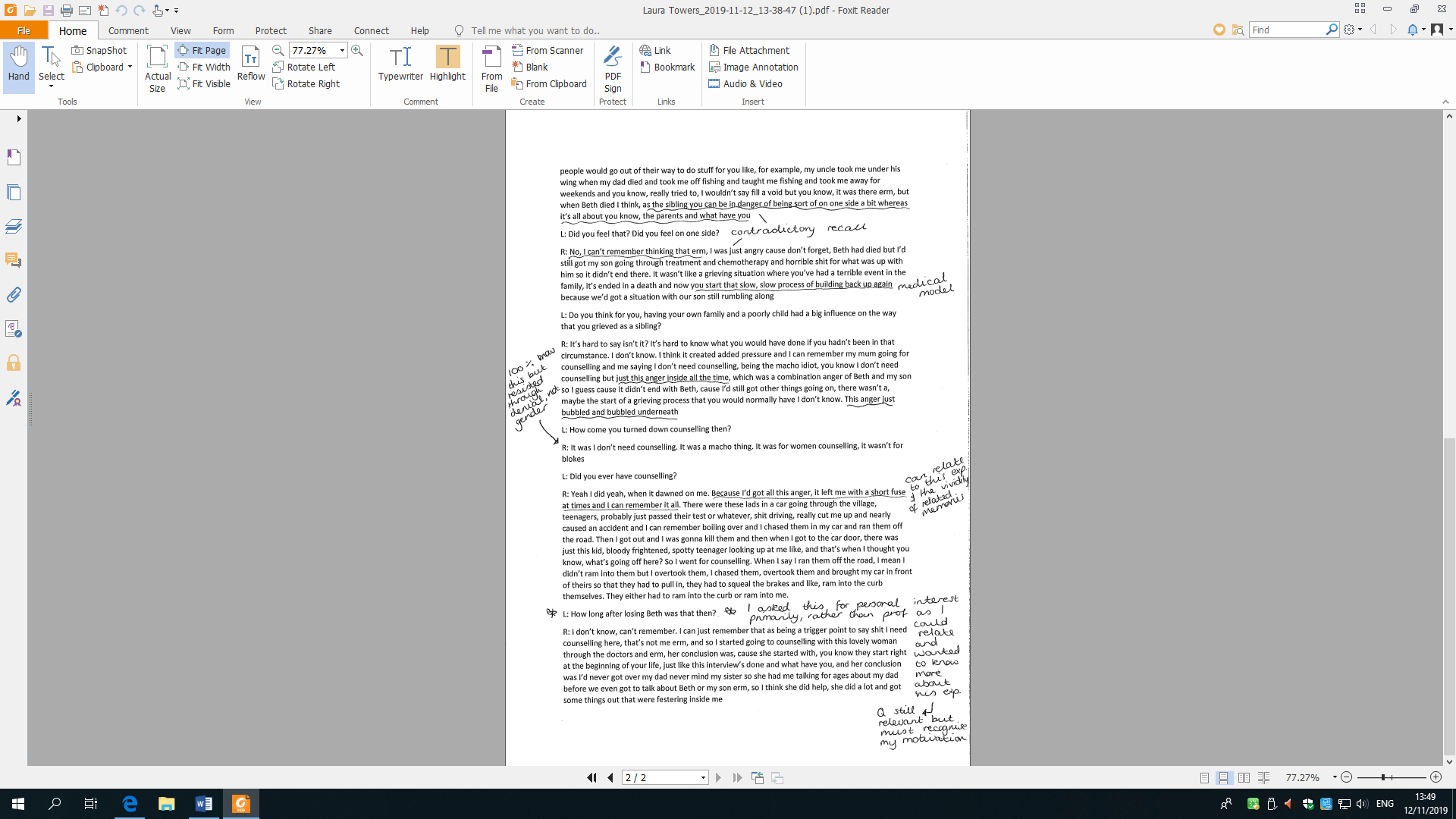
Siblings seeing parents upset has been commented upon multiple times by various participants. It defies traditional parenting roles e.g. strong, supportive ones, thus disrupting the normal order of things and challenging the status quo ‘my mum was trying to get to him, running to the car and there were people pushing her away and that, and she was just like, it must have been awful. I would have hated to have seen my mum like that, it was bad enough seeing her when I did’ (6). In this anomie, members must establish family practices and for many, this means establishing new practices rather than re-establishing old ones ‘but I mean, she’s got grandchildren, my sisters got 2 children and so she throws herself into that quite a lot’ (7).

Talk of visiting the chapel of rest for a ‘last goodbye’ but the only part they can say goodbye to is the body as the mind has already vacated. Moreover, a relationship is often maintained with the mind and so aren’t really saying goodbye to this part. Symbolic departure from the sibling. Parents seem to find this experience more comforting and ‘normal’ than siblings as siblings have talked of feeling scared to touch the body and fear of their feelings ‘I remember I was scared to touch him and stuff, I was really, I was like ‘o God’ and my mum was like ‘touch him’ and I thought ‘oooo’ (comedy scared noise) I dunno it was weird’ (7). Again, this is potentially related to parental roles of care and nurturing, which are different to traditional sibling roles, so parents want to touch, soothe, reassure the deceased child whereas siblings want to make the death ‘real’ and say goodbye.

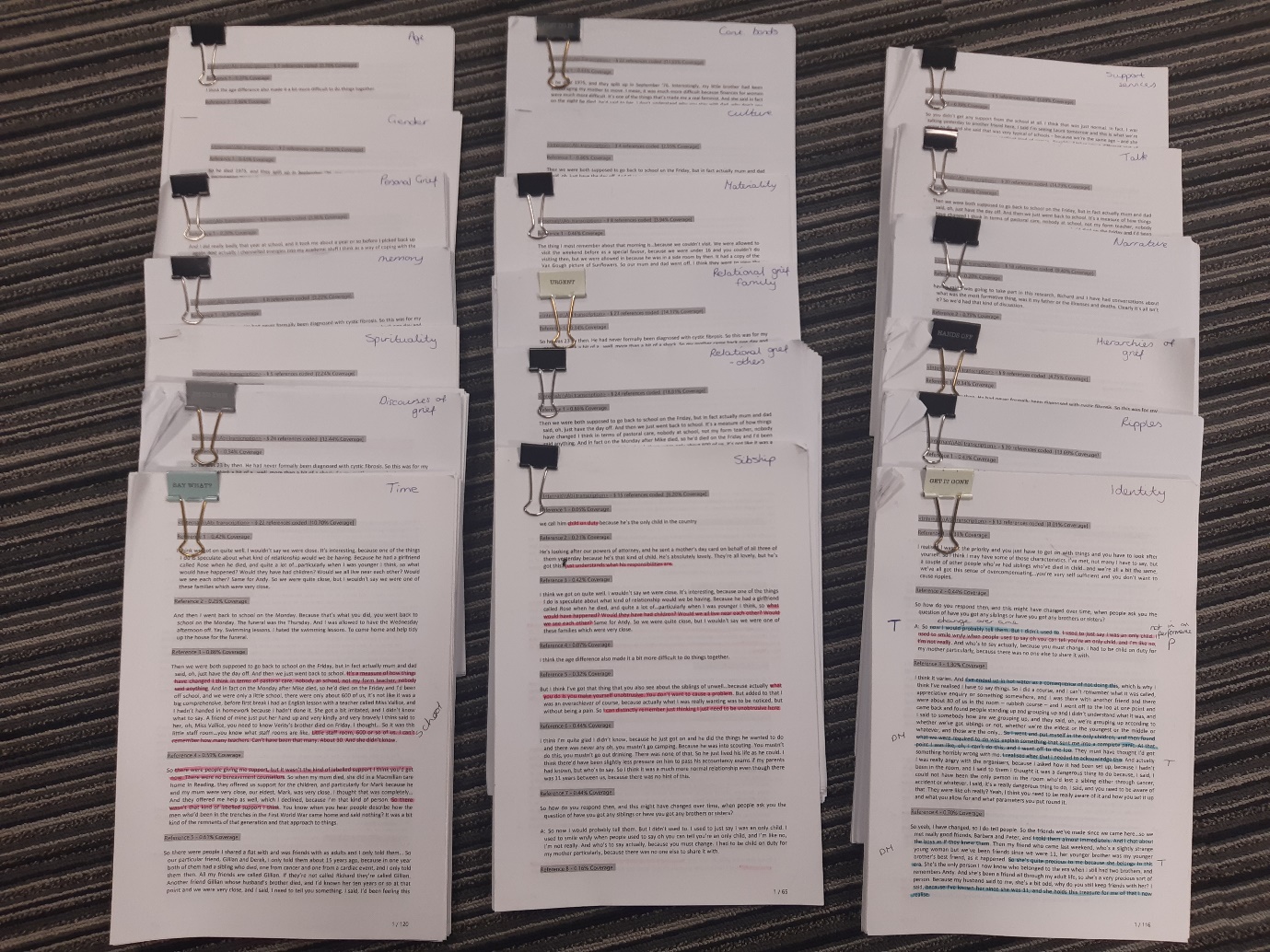
Relational decision making process in relation to the funeral arrangements etc but also the shaping of grief and bereavement ‘my mum guided us through it I suppose’ (7). Really core to this narrative but highly prevalent in others also. Counselling can offer an outlet to those who feel there are no others within the relational web that they can or want to talk to. Do I as researcher also fit this? Yes, if thinking about Adam’s interview. This changed with his Dad’s death and people’s positioning within the relational web had shifted i.e. mum no longer has dad for support so created an opening within this grieving web for Martin, although he attributes it to being ‘older and wiser’. Although, sister also had counselling thereby demonstrating relational grieving behaviours. This changes over time however e.g. visiting the grave was a ‘together thing’ but now it is an individual venture as time has passed and situations have changed. Talks about sister grieving differently from him e.g. not visiting the grave as ‘he’s not there’ for her. A lot of people have mentioned cousins as being important within their relational web. Is this because they’re a similar age to us and hold a similar position of power/responsibility within the family structure?

## Appendix 6 – Transcription Reflexive Notes





## Appendix 7 – Coded transcripts



## Appendix 8 – Information Letter for Participants



**Department of Sociological Studies.**

Laura Towers

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**Invitation to Participate: Research into Experiences of Sibling Bereavement**

Hello,

I’m writing to invite you to consider taking part in a research project which aims to explore people’s experiences of sibling bereavement over the life course.

Currently, there aren’t many studies that prioritise bereaved siblings’ thoughts, feelings and perspectives but I think it is vital that these views are heard. I’d like to share this information with bereavement support charities so that they can better understand how it effects a person’s life and hopefully improve their services.

I’ve included with this letter an information sheet about the study, outlining what the project is involves and what it would mean to take part. Hopefully it will answer any questions that you may have but if you do have any queries or concerns then please feel free to contact me using the details provided.

As a bereaved sibling myself, I appreciate that it can be difficult to discuss your experiences so if you would prefer to not take part, for whatever reason, that is entirely your choice. However, if you feel that you would like to be involved then it would be great to hear from you. Either way, I’d like to thank you for taking the time to read this letter and the enclosed information.

Many thanks and best wishes,

Laura

**Experiences of Sibling Bereavement over the Life Course**

**Participant Information Sheet**

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. It’s really important that you have a good understanding of what the research involves and what you will be asked to do before making any decisions about whether to participate or not. Feel free to discuss it with others, including myself and my supervisors, if you are unsure or have any concerns.

**What is the research about?**

The aim of the research is to learn more about people’s experiences of sibling bereavement, with a particular focus on how this might change throughout their lives. Possible questions might include ‘how do you express your grief and has this changed over time?’ or ‘have you ever made any decisions in response to the loss of your sibling?’

**Who is carrying out the research?**

Each aspect of the research will be done by myself. I am a PhD student at the University of Sheffield, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to carry out this project under the supervision of Dr Katherine Davies and Dr Harriet Churchill. It has been approved by the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield, as well as the University’s Ethics Committee.

**Why is it being done?**

Within bereavement studies, there is often a focus on how the death of a sibling may impact upon the living sibling/s in the short term and often in quite specific health orientated ways such as experiencing problems with loss of sleep, appetite or daily roles and responsibilities. I think it is really important to hear people’s stories and learn about their experiences in order to develop a better understanding of the longer term effects of sibling bereavement. These findings will be shared with bereavement charities to hopefully develop their awareness and understanding, potentially improving their support services.

**Who is taking part?**

I’d like to speak with people who were aged between 14 and 30 when they experienced the death of a sibling. There is no upper limit on the age you are now but a minimum of 5 years must have elapsed since the death so the minimum age of anyone taking part will be 19. This project is not focusing on a particular ‘type’ of death and so there is no restriction regarding the cause of death. If you have other living siblings who are also interested in the study, please feel to tell them about it and invite them to take part if you wish. Where there is more than one sibling from the same family wishing to take part in the study, the option to be spoken to individually or as a pair/group will be made available. If one sibling wants to participate but others don’t then that is not a problem, there is no pressure for anyone to take part if they don’t want to.

**Why have I been invited to take part in this project?**

It may be that you responded to one of the adverts that I placed online. Alternatively, it may be that someone you know has heard about the research and thought that you might be interested in taking part.

**Do I have to take part?**

Absolutely not, it is entirely your choice! If you read this information sheet and decide that it is not for you then you are under no obligation to take part. I will not contact you to ask for an answer or an explanation of your decision.

**What will I have to do if I decide to take part?**

I’d like to meet with you so we can chat informally about your experiences. I’d like to start by getting to know more about you and your sibling so that I might develop a better understanding of your relationship together. For example, I’d like to hear your memories of growing up together and any stories that you might want to share. I’d also be interested to see any photos that you’d like to show me, as well as any special objects that may have belonged to your sibling or perhaps reminds you of them. I’d then like to chat more about some of the ideas I mentioned earlier, such as how your experiences of being a bereaved sibling may have changed over time or prompted certain life choices, for example. Where we do this will be entirely your choice. It is difficult to suggest how long the interview will last as it mostly depends on what you would like to talk about and how much you want to share. I am flexible and can stay for as long or as short as you would like but I would generally expect interviews to last approximately 1-2 hours.

**Are there any potential downsides to me taking part?**

As a bereaved sibling myself, I fully appreciate the potentially distressing and unpredictable nature of grief. There are no right or wrong answers and I hope you will find the meeting to be more of a relaxed chat than a formal interview, but I do acknowledge that some aspects of our discussions may be upsetting for you to talk about. If you do get upset during our conversations then you would not be expected to carry on and we can change the subject, take a break or stop the interview. Of course, we can also continue if you feel able and willing to do so – it will be entirely your choice.

**What are the potential benefits to me taking part?**

Some participants in other bereavement studies have reported that taking part offered them a unique space to talk about the deceased and so they found it a positive experience overall. Others have stated that they felt they understood more about themselves afterwards and the majority are pleased that they took part. Although, not everyone feels this way and I cannot guarantee that you will gain anything from taking part. However, it is hoped that the findings of this research will be beneficial to sibling bereavement support services and potentially help others in the future.

**What will be done with the information that I provide?**

Please be assured that your participation in this research will remain confidential and I will not disclose to anyone any identifying details about who is taking part, including my supervisors. Anything that we discuss will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy when writing up my research but these will be encrypted straight after the interview so nobody can access them apart from myself. I will then write this up, word for word, but change any identifiable features, such as names, specific dates or locations to make recognition difficult, although specific details may make you identifiable by people familiar with your personal history. I will store this on my laptop under password protection that once again only I will be able to access. Once I have spoken with several participants, I will look at what everyone has said and try to find any key similarities or differences between them. Any personal contact details will be destroyed 5 years after the study is published but anonymous interview write ups will be retained by the researcher after this time period.

**What will happen when the research project is finished?**

When the study comes to an end, I will write up what I have found in an extended piece of academic work that will be submitted to the University for my PhD. I may also use some of this information to write articles in academic journals or give presentations to other researchers. In addition, I will be sharing my key findings with bereavement charities and, if you wish, I will send you a summary of what I found out too. With your permission, the organisation who fund the study (the ESRC) would also like the anonymous interview write ups to be made available to other researchers so that it may inform future studies.

**What can I do if I am unhappy about something?**

Hopefully this won’t be the case and is very unlikely! However, if you have any concerns or problems, then please do raise them with me so that I can try to address them. If you are not happy with my response, then you can contact my supervisors, Dr Katherine Davies and Dr Harriet Churchill. If at any stage you wish to withdraw from the study, then that is absolutely fine and you will not be asked to give a reason. If you decide that you would like some additional support, I am contact with some bereavement charities in the South Yorkshire area who are aware of my study and happy to help anyone in need of a confidential chat or advice. Anything you said to them would be confidential and not linked to me or this research project in any way.

**What are the next steps?**

If you have read this information and decided to not take part in the study, then there is nothing for you to do. If you are interested in any way, then please feel free to contact me using the following details:

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Postgraduate Research Student

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Sheffield, S10 2TU

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Email: [l.towers@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:l.towers@sheffield.ac.uk)

**For your information, here are my supervisor contact details:**

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Tel: 0114 222 6440

Email: [h.churchill@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:h.churchill@sheffield.ac.uk)

**Once again, many thanks for reading and please do not hesitate to ask questions.**

## Appendix 9 – Participant Consent Form

**Name of Participant.………………………………………………………………………………………**

**Participant Identification Number………………………………………………………………….**

***Please tick the boxes***

1. I confirm that I have read the information sheet for this project and have been able to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without having to state a reason.
3. I understand that if, during the interview, I feel upset or unable to answer a question, I can change the subject, take a break or stop the interview.
4. I agree that interviews can be audio recorded and I understand clearly the ways in which this material will be used.
5. I understand that that any information given will be used for research purposes only, including the PhD thesis, research publications, reports and presentations. I give permission for my contributions to be included within these works.
6. I understand and agree to the steps the researcher will take to protect my right to confidentiality and anonymity.
7. I understand that all of the above applies for the duration of my involvement with the project.
8. I give permission for to be contacted again within a 5 year period.
9. I agree to take part in the above research project.

Full Name of Participant ……………………………………………………………………….

Date……………………………………………

Signature…………………………………………………………........

Full Name of Researcher……………………………………………………………………….

Date……………………………………………

Signature…………………………………………………………........

## Appendix 10 – Data Consent Form

**Name of Participant.………………………………………………………………………………………**

**Participant Identification Number………………………………………………………………….**

***Please tick the boxes***

1. I understand that a transcript is a typed out version of what has been said during the interviews and confirm that I am happy for Laura to keep an anonymised copy of these after the project has ended.
2. I understand that Laura may use the anonymised transcript content for future academic papers and publications and agree to this being done.
3. I am happy for Laura to include anonymised data collected in both the interviews and diaries as part of her PhD thesis and future publications.
4. I understand that my personal contact information will be destroyed 5 years after the project has been published.
5. It has been explained to me that the organisation that funds her research (ESRC) ask for anonymised copies of the interview transcripts to be saved onto a digital archive run by the Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS).
6. I understand that other researchers can access this digital archive to look at these anonymised transcripts to help them with their own research projects.
7. I agree to Laura saving an anonymised version of my interview transcript in the digital archive but understand that this might not happen if the transcripts are unsuitable.

Full Name of Participant ……………………………………………………………………….

Date……………………………………………

Signature…………………………………………………………........

Full Name of Researcher……………………………………………………………………….

Date……………………………………………

Signature…………………………………………………………........

1. This is termed ‘anticipatory grief’. See Overton and Cottone (2016) for a brief overview of this concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although originally this was theorised in relation to receiving a terminal diagnosis and has been adapted. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996, p.35-36) note that the ‘breaking bonds’ model is typically Western and offer several examples of other cultures that value the maintenance of ties with the dead. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walsh and Mason (2018) also provide citations for a range of literature which explores this diversification of family in further detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example, the Hogan Sibling Inventory of Bereavement (Hogan and De Santis, 1996) is a 46-question survey designed to assess the thoughts and feelings of children after the death of a brother or sister. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Good Grief Trust is an umbrella organisation which aims to bring together all bereavement services. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Allan (1977) for an exploration of class in connection with the sibling relationship. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the twin experience in further detail as only one participant was an identical twin but it warrants further attention. See Magagna (2007) for discussion of how being a twin is integral to sense of self and identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Riley et al. (2007) for a discussion of parental responsibilities and feelings following the death of a child. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Schwab (2007) for a summary of gender differences in parental grief. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Doka and Martin (2010) for a full exploration of gendered grief and mourning behaviours [↑](#footnote-ref-11)