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Oral Histories with
Women who were Married to
Gay Men

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For the Women

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ABSTRACT

This project investigates marriages from the period 1978-2019. Oral histories were collected from women born between 1955 and 1978 who were married to closeted gay men. Scholarship on modern marriage has focused on standard marriages between a man and a woman. This study concludes that gender roles and perceptions of femininity held by the women in this cohort are more entrenched and resilient than the current historiography might suggest. These marriages gave rise to struggles with expectations of what it means to be a wife and a woman. I propose that parental influence, religious ideology, and patriarchy experienced in the private family home exert pressures against the publicly expressed perceptions of female liberation, cultural, and societal change. I argue that romantic ideology continues to affect women and their expectations of marriage.

Guided life stories were recorded with twenty-two women living in the UK from different class backgrounds, education, and religions. They were recruited from an internet group called Straight Partners Anonymous. The participants were in different stages of their process of divorce. Practising oral history as an insider gave rise to discoveries about effects on interviewees which contributes to scholarship of life-story work. I put into context the acts of remembering and creating meaning after discovering a new piece of information about the marriage, which further illustrates the complexities surrounding oral history testimony. The implication of this research is that marriage has changed less in recent decades than some accounts suggest. The project yielded a set of recordings covering women's lived experience of marriage and divorce which will be archived at the British Library.

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INTRODUCTION

*We have to return to the past, knowing that the past is what changes the most.*¹

This thesis examines marriage, sexuality, gender-roles, and ideas of femininity expressed by twenty-two women who were married to closeted gay men in the period 1978 – 2019. It explores the tensions and collisions between fluid ideas of sexuality, but also the entrenched and resilient ideas of gender in marriages where a husband is discovered to be exploring sex with men and goes on to have a long-term relationship with a man. The approach was to address an apparent historiographical blind spot in the current literature on late twentieth and early twenty-first century scholarship of marriage as it pertains to the understanding of sexuality and identity in women married to men. Works on marriage based on oral histories have concentrated on documenting the lived experience of men and women who are married at the time of the interview and where sexuality is talked about, it is done so in ways which would have made it impossible to discover whether any of the participants were closeted homosexuals. This means that up until now, historians have not been able to explore the effects of convergent historical events on some of the people who were most impacted.

The women in my research group were born between the years 1958 and 1988. In the UK, this was a period of dramatic change in how we experience gender, sexuality, marriage, and divorce. The participants' marriages discussed in this thesis provide us with a unique insight into what happens when ideas of gender and marriage collide with ideas of sexuality and marriage. They are at the leading edge of people affected by all these changes. All women have to come to terms with shifting notions of gender and sexuality, but coming into a relationship with a man who, at some

¹ *Society of the Snow*, Directed by J. A. Bayona (Netflix, 2023).

time after the marriage, comes out as gay, and who then seeks a relationship with a man, forces her to confront them in a very challenging way.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THIS STUDY

*It's as if women were never there and had never done anything.*²

A brief overview of the history of women's lives in the UK in modern times describes how women have fought and won the right to be seen, equally with men, as human beings, at least in the eyes of the law. How they lost this right in the first place is not addressed in this thesis.³ I will show that alongside changes to the laws governing equality in the workplace, equality in marriage, and equality in divorce, some women still experience inequalities based on their sex, gender, and sexuality, which are manifest in the domestic sphere, away from the reach of law.

The contraceptive pill was made available to (married) women in 1961, putting women in secure control of their fertility for the first time. At the same time, there began to be a rise in emphasis on sexuality in marriage and a sexualisation of culture. Women's magazines gave explicit advice about sex, sex guides became more widely available, and advice columns in newspapers regularly answered questions about sex from their readers.⁴ The representation of the female body in women's magazines also contributed to women's ideas of sexiness and beauty. As the twentieth century progressed, more and more explicit images of women abounded, on-line pornography proliferated, and the boundaries of what constituted lewd or improper imagery became more permeable. This loosening of censorship and the secularisation of society meant that men and women were exposed to idealised representations of bodies and pictures of nakedness.⁵

² Donald A. Ritchie, *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 169.

³ For a discussion on early humans' understanding of equality, egalitarianism and liberty, see David Graeber and D. Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything : A New History of Humanity* (UK: Penguin Books, 2021), pp. 75-76.

⁴ Tracey Loughran, 'Sex, Relationships and 'Everyday Psychology' on British Magazine Problem Pages, C. 1960–1990', *Medical humanities*, 49 (2023), pp. 2-3.

⁵ Anthony Aldgate and James C. Robertson, *Censorship in Theatre and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Adrian Bingham, 'Family Newspapers? : Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) contributed to the growing dissatisfaction that many women felt about their lives and helped to spawn the women's liberation movement. As a result of feminist activism in the late 1960s, women began to see opportunities to live fuller lives away from the home, where previously their roles had been confined to those of wife and mother. Women fought for, and won, the right to be treated as equals in the workplace with men, and acts of parliament were passed to that effect: The Equal Pay Act (1970), The Sex Discrimination Acts of 1975 and 1986, and the Equality Acts of 2006 and 2010. The gender pay gap has diminished as a result of these acts such that in 1970 the average hourly wage of women working full time was thirty-six percent less than that of men.⁶ In 1997 it was just over seventeen percent, in 2010 it was ten percent, and in 2018 it had dropped to eight- and-a-half.⁷

In spite of the 2010 Equalities Act enshrining feminist thinking in law, participants who decided to pursue their own full-time careers struggled to cope with raising a family without much support.⁸ During the duration of many marriages in this period, it was clear that childcare was still seen as being the responsibility of mothers.⁹ As half of the participants in this study had children with special needs, they were particularly exhausted by the combination of paid work, domestic labour, long car journeys to special schools, and being the first contact for liaising with schools and health services.¹⁰ However, life in the home was still largely unequal because, although fathers received paternity leave, they were not encouraged to participate in domestic unpaid work or even

1918-1978', (2009); Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Great Britain: Atlantic Books, 2003); Bob Guccione, 'Penthouse', (Penthouse World Media, 1965).

⁶ David Perfect, 'Gender Pay Gaps', 2011, <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/briefing-paper-2-gender-pay-gap_0.pdf> [accessed 2 April 2024]

⁷ Roger Smith, 'Gender Pay Gap in the UK: 2018', 2021, <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2018>> [accessed 2 April 2024]

⁸ Belinda, Eleanor, Patricia, Candy, Mandy, Pauline, and Alison

⁹ Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, C.1945-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Jane Lewis, *Work-Family Balance, Gender and Policy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010).

¹⁰ Jackie, Olivia, Belinda, Frankie, Ingrid, Cheryl, Mandy, Wendy, Pauline, and Alison

to view parenting and housework as an obligation if both spouses worked outside the home. Household chores and daily childcare duties have not had the equivalent overhaul presented to men as masculine virtues, whereas women's rights to work in any job and earn equal pay have been incorporated into cultural representations of femininity.¹¹

The marriages of all participants ended with divorce. The history of divorce follows a timeline of changing attitudes towards the dissolution of marriages based on a progression away from religious strictures and a recognition of the rights of women. In the early twentieth century, divorce was not only frowned upon for religious reasons - 'what God has joined together, let no man put asunder'¹² - but it was also constrained by a legal process that favoured husbands, and it was prohibitively expensive. The emergence of the companionate marriage model, which was first written about in the USA in 1927, and later adopted in the UK after the Second World War, began to offer an alternative to religious, permanent marriages. The idea behind companionate marriages was that couples could cohabit - and become sexually active - without starting a family and if they were to divorce, a less punitive burden was placed on the husband. However, couples wishing to divorce had to prove that one of the parties had committed adultery, and this often required expensive detective work or duplicity to provide the substantial proof required by the courts. John Haskely wrote about the absurd acts of couples who increasingly faked affairs to get divorced.¹³ In 1969 the Marriage Reform Bill meant that divorce became easier, but couples still had to provide a reason that the marriage had irretrievably broken down. These had to be one of the following: five years separation if one of the spouses did not consent to the divorce, two years' separation if both spouses agreed, adultery by one of the spouses which must be with a member of the opposite sex,

¹¹ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), pp. xxiv, 195,96; Dolly Smith Wilson, 'A New Look at the Affluent Worker: The Good Working Mother in Post-War Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006).

¹² Church of England, *The Solemnization of Matrimony* (London: Church of England, 1733), p. 190.

¹³ John Haskely, 'A History of Divorce Law Reform in England and Wales: Evolution, Revolution, or Repetition?', *Family law (Bristol)*, 48 (2018), p. 6.

or unreasonable behaviour.¹⁴ The legal definition of adultery - the penetration of the woman's vagina by the man's penis - has continued to prevail until the present day in spite of the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2013 and is enshrined in the Matrimonial Causes Act, causing outrage in many of the participants.^{15,16}

In addition to the laws on divorce being relaxed somewhat, the history of homosexuality affected the participants in my project. In particular, the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, the gay liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s, the impact of AIDS and HIV on the gay community in the 1990s and 2000s, and finally, the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2013 meant that homosexuality, and what it means to be a gay man, underwent a transition from being deemed perverse to being accepted as a normal member of society.¹⁷ The age of consent for homosexual men was twenty-one in 1957, but this then became eighteen in 1994, and finally sixteen in 2001.¹⁸ The gay liberation movement of the 1970s was attempting to upend ideas of marriage and family, but later on, many campaigners came to accept the bourgeois concept of marriage and they wanted admittance to it. So, marriage became a meeting of minds and a way of realising one's personality.

In the early part of the twentieth century, marriage was viewed as an arrangement which enabled young couples to live independently of their parents, facilitated the raising of a family, and was conducted largely in gender-defined spheres. Men were regarded as the patriarchal head of the home, working in the public sphere and earning money. Women were encouraged to be subservient and deferential. They would work at home and perform the domestic chores and parenting.

Although marriages were based on sexual attraction between partners, husbands and wives typically

¹⁴ Jennifer Levin, 'The Divorce Reform Act 1969', *Modern law review*, 33 (1970).

¹⁵ UK Government, 'Matrimonial Causes Act', *Part 1: Divorce, nullity, and other matrimonial Suits*, 1973, <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1973/18/part/1/2014-03-13>> [accessed 28 February 2024]

¹⁶ Olivia, Candy, Mandy, Wendy, Pauline

¹⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won : The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 167-70.

¹⁸ UK Parliament, 'Regulating Sex and Sexuality: The 20th Century', 2024, <<https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/sexuality20thcentury/>> [accessed 2 April 2024]

had limited leisure time to spend together.¹⁹ During the Second World War, women were required to work in jobs previously reserved for men. The resulting increase in income promised potential financial independence to women and meant that when the men returned home from the war, women began to challenge the traditional gender roles. Ideas of gender and sexuality continue to change towards the end of the twentieth century. Largely because of women's emancipation, the expectation was that couples would be companions and equals. A new, more individualistic, framework for marriage emerged, which was forced to consider women's increasing economic and reproductive control. As Marcus Collins writes, 'Intimacy was at once achieved and expressed through privacy, closeness, communication, sharing, understanding, and friendship.'²⁰ So marriage became a meeting of minds and a way of realising one's personality, although, as Anthony Giddens explains, men and women's ideas of intimacy are still very different. 'Love here only develops to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other. The masked emotional dependence of men has inhibited their willingness, and their capacity, to be made thus vulnerable.'²¹ It is no surprise that Giddens draws on women's - as opposed to men's - experiences in his definition of the 'pure relationship', where trust and intimacy emerge from within the relationship rather than as a result of external societal pressures.²² I suggest that when the societal and religious pressures to marry fall away, and when there is an imbalance of commitment to the domestic sphere from each partner, the intimacy which the pure relationship depends on, is vital to the wellbeing of the couple. In other words, a 'pure relationship' must be built on trust, authenticity, and intimacy. The lack of intimacy within the marriages narrated in this thesis became apparent in juxtaposition to the

¹⁹ Elizabeth Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995); Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²⁰ Collins, *Modern Love*, pp. 93-94.

²¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1992), p. 62.

²² *Ibid.* p. 138.

moment their husbands came out, when the participants reported an outpouring of confidences from their husbands.

In the decades following the Second World War, the idea that there is a life partner for everyone gained traction and nowadays even when couples get divorced, many people want to remarry. One might expect that a consequence of women's position as workers outside the home alongside men was that it would bring about more equitable sharing of domestic work inside the home with their husbands. In turn, there might be new ways for women and men to connect with each other because they would better understand each other's lives. The expectation that this would be the case, and the arising disappointment that it was not, was expressed by many of the participants in this project.²³ Some of the resistant pressures against the trend towards equality were also evidenced in the testimonies, which contained stories of parental expectations, religious constraints, and demonstrated the persistence of gendered ideology.

In addition to changes in the divorce rate, women have also been more likely to have paid jobs outside the home. In 1975 only 57% of women of prime working age (25-54) were in employment compared to 78% in 2017.²⁴ The composition of society changed from men being the breadwinner and women staying at home to both husbands and wives contributing financially to the household. This brought with it new markets and products aimed at the working woman and this then drove women's desire to earn money. Affluence brings independence, which makes some women more selective in the type of man they choose to marry. This then plays into gender role expectations.²⁵ It can have a dramatic effect on the way husbands and wives relate to each other, as can be seen by the testimonies in this research.

²³ Belinda, Shirley, Elaine, Mandy, Alison, and Nicole

²⁴ Barra Roantree and Kartik Vira, 'The Rise and Rise of Women's Employment in the UK', 2018, <https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/output_url_files/BN234.pdf> [accessed 4 April 2024]

²⁵ Avner Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence : Self-Control and Well-Being in the United States and Britain since 1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

PROJECT OVERVIEW AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The oral history recordings were made to answer some of the questions about modern marriage, and to shine a spotlight on marriages between a self-identified heterosexual woman with a closeted gay man. Women were invited to tell their stories about their marriages, divorce, and life afterwards, whilst reflecting on sexuality, religion, femininity, and identity. The existing literature on marriage does not take account of these complexities which, by definition, are not aspects of a standard marriage. However, the marriages of these participants can point to a variety of intersections with the historiography of courtship, marriage, and divorce because they represent expectations expressed by women who have entered marriages in the last four decades of the twentieth century and the first two of the twenty-first. As each marriage ends, the stories that are told encompass meanings that are linked to cultural expectations of married women in this period. The central theme that emerges is gender and sexuality, two concepts that are provoked by the discovery that one's husband is gay. The central finding is that there is a resilience of ideology associated with gender roles and sexuality. This is surprising, considering how the changes made to the law, in government policy, in the secularisation of marriage, and the legalisation of same-sex marriage would have been expected to be felt as real changes in the lived experience of women. This is a new story that has not been fully captured by the existing literature.

In reviewing the literature on marriage in the twentieth century, we can see a very large number of factors which have resulted in measurable consequences to the number of marriages, divorces, and remarriages taking place, as well as less measurable effects such as expectations and feelings of satisfaction about relationships. This work suggests that some women struggle to achieve the kind of marriage that contemporary historians have indicated is now the norm. A closer look at some of these works will provide the necessary background to this claim.

There is a relationship between the history of lived experience and, if they can be captured, the history of expectations. Official documents and statistics which report changes to laws or marriage and divorce rates give the impression that we live in a society which offers its citizens many

choices for adult life. People can choose to live in a heterosexual partnership without marrying, or a civil partnership, or they can co-habit without a legally binding contract. They may marry a person of the opposite sex or the same sex. People can choose to live alone; they can raise children alone or in any of the abovementioned families. The population which enjoys these legal freedoms is still in its infancy, and individual members of this population narrate stories of their lived experiences in contrast to these freedoms. People who choose to tell their stories do so for a reason, and those people who see themselves as having unremarkable stories, are often silent, and go about their lives without requiring attention. Since this project is concerned only with women who have been married to men and whose marriages have now ended, the stories that have been collected represent a very small slice of this larger population. Each historian chooses the period and the group of people that they include or exclude from their research. This results in an historiography of marriage which aims to give a typical view according to a period or a class of people. Now that we live in a society that recently legalised marriage between members of the same sex, and we are beginning to see divorces occurring amongst these couples, we may soon have new stories to tell. However, the participants populate a very singular island of the marital terrain, where their experiences shed light on areas that historians have been unable to see up until very recently. It is only since the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the legalisation of same-sex marriage, as well as the rise of the culture of individualism, and the ubiquity of dating apps on mobile phones, that we suddenly witness the events that are described in this thesis. Once we listen to these women's narratives, we also see that many expectations of marriage that were thought to be outdated, have persisted, and we then must engage with uncomfortable questions that arise. As historiography, this thesis bears witness to, and accounts for, the changes and persistence in married life as it is experienced by these women. The origins of the expectations that they had for their marriages, and the resulting narratives of their lived experience firmly situates them in this period of history.

Therefore, when Elizabeth Roberts chose to study three working class communities during the period 1940 to 1970, she discovered that women were still largely confined to the home, earned

lower wages than their husbands, and over the period under study, generally lost control of the family budget, and were really only able to enjoy a companionate marriage when their husbands retired.²⁶ Roberts writes about the pressures to become more and more affluent, which drove women into the workforce without a corresponding rise in their husbands taking over some of their domestic chores. This entailed having more work and less power – they did not exchange the autonomy they had in their homes for responsibility at work – instead having to balance running of the home and looking after children with their paid jobs. Betty Friedan's assertion that 'it was easier for me to start the women's movement which was needed to change society than to change my own personal life' sums up the turmoil of which women have felt themselves to be a part.²⁷ She wrote of the sheer drudgery of motherhood in the 1950s and 1960s and of the loneliness that stay-at-home mothers experienced along with the lack of understanding from their husbands. Although she was writing about the United States, her experiences clearly resonated with people in the United Kingdom. The book helped to spur a generation of women to act towards greater equality and liberation.²⁸ In juxtaposition to Roberts' work, women are seen juggling their families and work-life, but unlike Roberts' subjects, who were members of largely homogenous communities and therefore were bound together by social bonds, while also recognising that their marriages were normal for their period and therefore acceptable, these informants look back on their marriages as unacceptable or unfortunate. So, where Roberts finds her subjects' marriages influenced directly by historical and cultural forces of income, time, place, and community, the attitudes to marriage discussed in this thesis are arguably affected by politico-historical and cultural forces acting on husbands. Because the participants place sexuality at front and centre of their marriages, unlike Roberts' informants, they see the outcome (divorce) of their marriages as a consequence of their husband's duplicity.

²⁶ Roberts, *Women and Families*, p. 234.

²⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 2021 edn (London: Penguin Classics, 1963), p. 444.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 106.

Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher based their writing about sex (predominantly marital sex) on oral history interviews with couples who lived in the period 1918 - 1963.²⁹ They describe the overall sexual landscape of their interviewees; a total of fifty-seven married women and thirty-one married men born between 1901 and 1931. This thesis contains interviews from previously married women born between 1958 and 1988, which yields a group with which to begin making comparisons to their research. They concluded that their subjects lived in a period where the companionate marriage was emerging, as well as giving us descriptions of the beginning of a more reciprocal relationship in the bedroom.³⁰ It shows how some of the expectations that were placed on the people in this cohort cascaded down from grandparents and parents. However, Szreter and Fisher interviewed husbands and wives simultaneously and therefore would not have been able to uncover stories of closeted homosexual activity.³¹ Also, their work covers the period before the sexual revolution, whereas this project looks at the period after.

Claire Langhamer's book gives us a history of marriage in England from 1940 to 1970 and this is the period where the majority of the participants' parents would be starting married life.³² She has given a detailed account of the changes to attitudes about marriage that took place over the course of the last hundred years. By referencing women's magazines, the Mass Observation project, and oral history interviews, she describes how couples tended to be less accepting of marriages where obligation prevails rather than love.³³ She gives a thorough account of the interplay between the restrictions placed on older generations regarding sex and love, and the liberty felt by the young, who were emancipated by contraception, the move towards a secular society, and laws making divorce easier and less stigmatising. Her book informs this project by situating the expectations of

²⁹ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963*, loc. 139.

³⁰ Gillian Swanson, 'Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher. Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England, 1918-1963', *The American Historical Review*, 117 (2012), p. 1302.

³¹ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963*, loc. 407.

³² Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* First edition. edn (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 9.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 207.

the different age-groups of these participants about their marriages, chiefly by describing how the parents of this cohort would have been caught between the old and new ideas of marriage.

Langhamer's interviewees reflect on their positionality as participants in a period of immense social change and reconstruction as they were the first cohort to experience the contraceptive pill and the emergence of a more secular and liberal view towards marriage and divorce.³⁴ While she gives a comprehensive account of heterosexual love, the idea that husbands might be closeted homosexuals is not addressed and therefore, some observations about sexuality within heterosexual marriages might be incomplete.

The clash of ideas about intimacy and friendship between men and women is also apparent from the testimonies. Contemporary scholarship on masculinity delineates the persistence of gendered thinking. Michael Kimmel writes about how men feel that their spaces are being 'invaded by women'.³⁵ Men conduct friendships around shared activities and are not encouraged to show emotions, whereas women talk about relationships and emotions as a way of feeling connected. It follows that women might expect their husbands to embrace that kind of intimacy if they were also embracing the new equality of shared domestic chores and shared fiscal responsibilities. It also follows that men would feel encroached-upon and challenged in their masculinity. Naturally, some men who might already be questioning their sexuality, would find their ideas of masculinity - and their position as husbands- difficult to negotiate. As R.W. Connell writes, 'Gay men's collective knowledge, thus, includes gender ambiguity, tension between bodies and identities, and contradictions in and around masculinity.'³⁶ Even men who are comfortable with their sexuality might also resist what they would characterise as feminising pressure to express emotional intimacy within a marriage. As Jamieson writes, 'more [...] creative energy goes into sustaining a sense of

³⁴ Ibid. p. 209.

³⁵ Michael S. Kimmel, *Misframing Men: The Politics of Contemporary Masculinities* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010), Loc. 264.

³⁶ Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 40.

intimacy *despite* inequality than into a process of transformation.³⁷ It is the lack of this sense of intimacy that participants reported.

The scholarship on mixed orientation marriages has increased in recent years but has largely been based in the USA and has examined the sociological and psychotherapeutic implications for each partner.³⁸ The problems of being the straight spouse in the USA have been addressed by Amity Pierce Buxton, who focuses on support groups and counselling.³⁹ Thelma Duffy explores the emotions of discovering that your spouse is gay and her paper appeals for more research into the experience of the straight spouse.⁴⁰ Andrew London and Aaron Hoy looked at marriages from the gay husband's perspective.⁴¹ Elizabeth Ortiz describes the reasons gay men choose to marry.⁴² Caryn Rubin wrote a Master's thesis in social work based on interviewing eight women about their experiences and recovery after divorcing their gay husband.⁴³

The testimonies bear witness to a discrepancy between the participants' expectations of modern marriage and their lived experience. Their expectations are often expressed as complaints experiencing inequalities in the division of domestic and parenting labour, expectations of intimacy, and commitment to honesty within marriage. Their testimony also shows that it was difficult to disentangle themselves from the legacy of their own parents' upbringing and experiences of

³⁷ Lynn Jamieson, 'Intimacy Transformed? A Critical Look at the `Pure Relationship'', *Sociology*, 33 (1999), p. 477.

³⁸ Frederick W. Bozett, 'Heterogeneous Couples in Heterosexual Marriages: Gay Men and Straight Women', *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 8 (1982); Mary Bradford, 'Couple Therapy with GIB-Straight Relationships', *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 8 (2012); H. Kushner and others, 'The Homosexual Husband and Physician Confidentiality', *The Hastings Center Report*, 7 (1977); Elizabeth Legerski and Anita Harker, 'The Intersection of Gender, Sexuality, and Religion in Mormon Mixed-Sexuality Marriages', *A Journal of Research*, 78 (2018); Michelle Wolkowicz, 'Making Heteronormative Reconciliations: The Story of Romantic Love, Sexuality, and Gender in Mixed-Orientation Marriages', *Gender & Society*, 23 (2009).

³⁹ Amity Pierce Buxton, *The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming-out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families* (United States of America: John Wiley & Sons, 1991).

⁴⁰ Thelma Duffy, 'When a Spouse Comes Out: As Told from a Straight Spouse's Point of View', *The Family Journal*, 14 (2006), p. 88.

⁴¹ Andrew S. London and Aaron Hoy, 'Same-Sex Sexuality and the Risk of Divorce: Findings from Two National Studies', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 68 (2021).

⁴² Elizabeth Thompson Ortiz and Patrick Ross Scott, 'Gay Husbands and Fathers: Reasons for Marriage among Homosexual Men', *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 1 (1994).

⁴³ Caryn Rubin, 'Divorce Recovery of Heterosexual Women Previously Married to Gay Men', (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2002).

marriage as it relates particularly to gender-roles, femininity, and the notion of an ideal wife. These ideas are reflected in the differences between women's and men's magazines during the period. Women were encouraged to communicate, and men were indulged with laddish role models and tips on how to hook up with a woman.⁴⁴

Participants were also firmly attached to the binary definition of sexuality expressed as either heterosexual or homosexual and were unwilling to engage with either the idea of fluid sexuality or the possibility that their husbands were bisexual. The recent emergence of challenges to this dichotomy, such as the numerous words to describe sexuality, were rejected. Adherence to religious ideals of marriage as a life-long commitment may have exerted pressure on these women to find a religious sanction for the end of their marriage to a gay man. The belief that sexuality is immutable and binary and therefore that a deception has taken place, could support a woman's sense of being wronged and being the injured party. Participants reported that they were not given the opportunity to explore the possibility of their husband's sexual fluidity before the marriage and therefore make an informed decision together about whether to continue with the relationship. Nicole expressed regret that she was not able to form a lifelong friendship with her ex-husband instead of entering what became a very traumatic marriage.

The women were recruited from an internet support group and therefore one of the confounding variables in this study is that they would represent women who had experienced a small sub-set of all possible marriages to gay men. Their stories might be interpreted as emblematic of all marriages where the man embarks on a long-term relationship with another man. It does not consider the stories of women who did not seek the support of other women after their marriages ended. Many of the women in this study believe that sexuality is not fluid. It follows that women who do not think they need support, including those who divorce happily, or women who see the end of their marriage as a welcome opportunity to continue a long-term extra-marital relationship

⁴⁴ Nick Stevenson, Peter Jackson, and Kate Brooks, 'Reading Men's Lifestyle Magazines: Cultural Power and the Information Society', *The Sociological review (Keele)*, 51 (2003), p. 120.

that they might have been conducting themselves, are not part of this study. A sociological study into this larger set of marriages is beyond the scope of this project, especially as it would involve recruitment techniques for which there was neither the time nor resources to employ. However, there are currently hundreds of UK women members of Straight Partners Anonymous, and these stories are representative of this group of women. The historiography of gay liberation from the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1959 to the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2013 also frames this work because the identity politics of gay men contributed to the rigid binary view of sexuality to which the informants adhere.

The historiography of marriage and divorce in the twentieth century and beyond is concerned with the interplay of romantic ideals, material gains, financial and domestic security, societal conventions, religious dogma, and governmental policy. From these works, it is possible to understand the spectrum of behaviours that couples expected to experience in standard marriages. These expectations are alluded to in the testimony of the women in the project, but they also demonstrate a layer of complexity that current scholarship does not take into account. When women are remembering their marriages after finding out that their husband prefers sex with men, they attach new meaning to behaviours that, up to now, historians have written about differently.

POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER AS INSIDER

Historians like Carolyn Steedman, Luisa Passerini, Barbara Taylor, and Michael Roper situate themselves within their research as historical actors. When reflecting on their lives, they see how forces in the past exert their influence on where they find themselves in the present, thereby revealing points of understanding. For example, Carolyn Steedman recognised the forces of poverty and outsider-ness that her mother underwent as the 'other woman' to her father - who was married to someone else - which led her to write about working class lives and the longing for the status that comes from owning a decent pair of shoes or being married. This gave her the authority to write about patriarchy and the working class as an insider, but also as a scholar. She is able to describe

the wider socio-historical landscape in which her mother and grandmother lived and thus argue that emotions like envy can describe much about the political landscape in which those feelings are learnt.⁴⁵ Passerini's approach was to interweave her own story of love and psychoanalysis into her book about a student resistance movement - bringing to light the lived experience of a woman (herself) writing about women (her participants) and showing how her individual tribulations with her lovers echoed the past conflicts between the female students and their male contemporaries.⁴⁶ This device not only makes a strong historical argument that men and women continue to negotiate their relationships as power-based transactions that differ between public and private spaces, but it makes the scholarship accessible and relatable. As she is quoted by Matt ffytche, "In his story I observe some of my own experiences; in his gestures I recognize some of my passions"⁴⁷

Similarly, Barbara Taylor wrote about her life in a mental hospital as well as documenting its history and showing the changes in mental health provision ('care in the community') and how that affected her lived experience. Her insider status supported the argument that legislative changes, made sterile by mere historiographic documentation of dates, impacted patients' and doctors' lived experience.⁴⁸ Michael Roper recruited his emotional reaction to reading a war diary in the archives to write about emotions and the researcher. His argument was that emotions help us to form a relationship with the historical records and that some 'expressions which are not consciously articulated by the actors *as* emotions [...] appear to lodge themselves un-thought within the reader's mind.'⁴⁹ These scholars paved a way for researchers to invoke their own life experience, which I have been conscious of whilst curating the audio recordings that form the basis of this thesis.

⁴⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, 'On Being Shorn of Grace: Sentiments of Inequality: Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives, Carolyn Kay Steedman', *Social research*, 89 (2022), p. 459.

⁴⁶ Passerini also wrote about men's experiences in her book, but here I am focusing on her treatment of the women's testimonies.

⁴⁷ Matt ffytche, 'Throwing the Case Open: The Impossible Subject of Luisa Passerini's Autobiography of a Generation', *History of the Human Sciences*, 33 (2020), p. 39.

⁴⁸ Peter Tyrer, 'Review of the Last Asylum: A Memoir of Madness in Our Times by Barbara Taylor.', *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 172 (2015), p. 1264.

⁴⁹ Michael Roper, 'The Unconscious Work of History', *Cultural and Social History*, 11 (2014), p. 173.

WORKS ON ORAL HISTORY

Apart from abovementioned works that were based on oral history, Svetlana Alexievich's account of Chernobyl and Garrett Graff's book based on the timeline of 9/11 were extremely influential in their drama and power to convey traumatic life experiences.⁵⁰ These works reinforce the way personal anecdotes act as evidence for historians to explain how societies and individuals process extreme events. The collective experience of an event like Chernobyl or 9/11 produces complementary narratives of disasters affecting people. This thesis supposes that the 'disastrous event' may have been a product of subconscious collusion, in the sense that some factors which caused the marriages to take place were not consciously accessible by the parties to the marriage, and therefore it strongly differs from most oral histories of that nature. An historical work which attempts to unpack subconscious motivations of people can merely present their descriptions as they were narrated and give evidence of socio-cultural pressures that may have been exerted at the time of the marriage. Oral history works such as Luisa Passerini's *Autobiography of a Generation* interrogate the subordinate players in political movements who do not have the voice or the authority to write history. She offers her own story of psychoanalytic process as a background to her testimonies, thereby introducing the reader to a psychoanalytic interpretation of historical events. For example, she writes 'we were convinced that orgasm combatted the repression of Bourgeois society.'⁵¹

Scholarship consulted on the practice of oral history includes working with oppressed groups, being an insider, links with psychotherapy, the appropriation of a story, the reliability of a narrator, the problems with contested memory, the theory of redemption, the problems with transcription and curation of audio clips, and the status of voice recordings compared to written

⁵⁰ Svetlana (Author) Alexievich, Gessen, Keith (Translator), *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (Picador, 2015); Garrett M Graff, *The Only Plane in the Sky: The Oral History of 9/11* (New York: Monoray, 2019).

⁵¹ Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 43.

transcripts.⁵² These subjects are discussed further in Chapter 5. In addition to these writers, Ann Day wrote about her relationships with the people she interviewed on Tristan Da Cunha to record their experiences of being evacuated to England for two years when a volcano erupted, and then being returned to the island. She outlines the obstacles that she overcame as an outsider to their lived experience.⁵³ The scholarship conveys an overarching sense of compassion and empathy for participants, which contributed to an understanding of oral history as a feminist means of knowledge production.

The persistent hope for, and belief in, the type of marriage where 'someday my prince will come' perfuses many of these stories. As soon as a woman chooses - or settles for - a romantic partner, it is as if she has kissed a frog, and he has turned into a prince. This concept, also written about by Anthony Giddens, describes the romantic narrative that women associate with sexuality and a life partner.⁵⁴ The 'prince' of the fairy-tale sweeps the princess off her feet and puts her on a pedestal and they live 'happily ever after'. The woman forgets that he is a fallible person and psychically manufactures a man who will protect her, comfort her, love her and support her. The

⁵² Sherna Gluck, 'What's So Special About Women? Women's Oral History', *Frontiers (Boulder)*, 2 (1977); Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop*, (1981); Katherine Borland, 'That's Not What I Said' Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research.', in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. by S. B. Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991); Jennifer Scanlon, 'Challenging the Imbalances of Power in Feminist Oral History: Developing a Take-and-Give Methodology', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16 (1993); Alison I. Griffith, 'Insider / Outsider: Epistemological Privilege and Mothering Work', *Human Studies*, 21 (1998); Sandy Polishuk, 'Secrets, Lies, and Misremembering: The Perils of Oral History Interviewing', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 19 (1998); Susannah Radstone, *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London: Routledge, 2003); Carrie Hamilton, 'On Being a 'Good' Interviewer: Empathy, Ethics and the Politics of Oral History', *Oral History*, 36 (2008); Mary Jo Maynes, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (New York: Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Erin McCarthy, "'Is Oral History Good for You?'" Taking Oral History Beyond Documentation and into a Clinical Setting: First Steps', *The Oral History Review*, 37 (2010); Patricia Leavy and Valerie J. Janesick, *Oral History Interviewing* 1 edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Nicole Alea, 'Does the Life Story Interview Make Us Make Sense? Spontaneous and Cued Redemption and Contamination in Life Story Scenes', *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 37 (2018); Valerie Yow, 'What Can Oral Historians Learn from Psychotherapists?', *Oral History*, 46 (2018); Emma L. Vickers, 'Unexpected Trauma in Oral Interviewing', *The Oral history review*, 46 (2019); Amy Tooth Murphy, 'Listening in, Listening Out: Intersubjectivity and the Impact of Insider and Outsider Status in Oral History Interviews', *Oral History*, Spring (2020); Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney, and Daisy Payling, 'Reflections on Remote Interviewing in a Pandemic: Negotiating Participant and Researcher Emotions', *The Journal of the Oral History Society*, 50 (2022).

⁵³ Ann Day, 'A Reappraisal of Insider-Outsider Interviewing: The Tristan Da Cunha Oral History Project', *Oral History*, 36 (2008).

⁵⁴ Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, p. 51.

image of the princess is further embedded in our culture with the increased emphasis on the wedding day. After the Second World War, where weddings featured modest dresses, and a small meal, weddings have become increasingly expensive; wedding dresses still princessify brides, the wedding breakfast is an elaborate affair fit for a king and queen. In 1950, the average cost of a wedding was £70 and in 2018, the average wedding cost £20,000.⁵⁵ This amounts to an increase from ten weeks' wages to thirty-five weeks' worth.⁵⁶

Women receive conflicting messages from the media, from their families, and from their own bodies. Children brought up to be 'daddy's little princess' were also told that they should have jobs, get married, raise families and treat their husbands as if they were still the main breadwinner and deserved to come home after a long day's work and have their dinner served to them - by a woman who had also had a long day's work, fetched the children from nursery, fed and bathed them and put them to bed. The participants have interacted with this notion of femininity in different ways, but they often speak about colliding with their husbands' refusal to accept equality of roles within the home. This dynamic, which plays into - and has helped to perpetuate - the patriarchy, is surprisingly prevalent in the narratives I have collected, but, I believe, has decreased rapidly in younger adults, who are part of the reason why marriage rates are declining. Marriage rates in England and Wales have decreased by half since 1972.⁵⁷ This is one element amongst many that situates these stories within this period and is a product of historical processes such as the formation of gender roles, the separation of men and women, and the types of stories that are told to children.

⁵⁵ John Bryson, 'Markle Sparkle and the Royal Wedding 2018: Frocks, Rocks, and the Local Impact of Weddings', 2018, <<https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/markle-sparkle-and-the-royal-wedding-2018-frocks-rocks-and-the-local-economic-impacts-of-weddings/#:~:text=In%20the%201950s%20the%20average,to%20close%20to%20%C2%A320%2C000.>> [accessed 7 February 2024]

⁵⁶ Welsh Government, 'Average (Median) Gross Weekly Earnings by Uk Country - English Region and Year (£)', *StatsWales*, 2023, <<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Business-Economy-and-Labour-Market/People-and-Work/Earnings/medianweeklyearnings-by-ukcountryenglishregion-year>> [accessed 7 February 2024]

⁵⁷ Faiza Mohammad, Nina Mill, and Kanak Ghosh, 'Marriages in England and Wales, 2019', *Census 2021*, 2021, <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2019>> [accessed 4 March 2024]

The number of people remarrying after divorce indicates that marriage is still seen as a desired state despite negative experiences. In the participants, those who remarried discussed largely positive experiences of their new marriages as having allowed them to avoid the problems they encountered in their first marriages. However, they also spoke about long-lasting feelings of distrust associated with meeting someone new.

ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITION

The relativist ontological stance acknowledges that the reality in this project exists in the minds of the participants as well as the researcher. It is worth noting that what is said here might be contested by the husbands of these women. This situation creates a tension when listening to these women speaking about their experiences of marriage because patriarchal and adversarial divorce frameworks demand fairness - the other person's point of view matters and might even be the 'right' perspective. This can be troublesome because many of the participants have felt that their version of reality has been called into question by their husbands (gaslighting). However, this feminist project is dedicated to hearing women speak their truth, with an emancipatory and pragmatic approach. Merely by speaking out and being heard, the participants reported that they felt empowered. Many were grateful for the recognition that women have been neglected whilst all the focus is on the gay man who comes out. Additionally, informants felt empowered because they saw themselves as members of a group rather than suffering alone. The subjectivist position adopts the stance that meaning exists within the subject, and these recordings of life stories allowed informants to discover along with the interviewer, the meaning that they can derive from their own narratives. The subjectivity of the author and co-creatorship of the interviews is acknowledged, as this positionality is what creates the meaning of the text.

LAYOUT OF THE THESIS

The structure of this thesis loosely follows a biographical timeline so that we can meet the participants, understand the way they see themselves, follow them through their courtship and marriage, look at the experience of finding out that their husband is gay, and finally, how they negotiate their divorce and its aftermath. The first and last chapters bookend the writing by discussing in the first instance, the methodology of oral history, and lastly, by reflecting on the lessons learned and the unexpected discoveries that were made.

Quotes are edited for readability and understanding. Participants' names have been anonymised. Two participants did not wish to be included in the British Library archive. Italicised text indicates words spoken by the informants. The audio clips that accompany this thesis are provided on a USB stick of mp3 files. They are copies of the original recordings and therefore may contain the participants' actual names where they refer to themselves. I have protected participants who do not want to be identified by not including clips where they refer to themselves.

The quantity of material is much greater than can be done justice to with one thesis. The guiding principles used in the selection of extracts were to offer enough evidence from the narratives for argument, whilst acknowledging exceptions and differences. Many of the transcripts contained scenes which were highly emotionally charged, and others would have been equally gripping if more questions had been asked. The number of women interviewed has also affected the thesis. Originally it was expected that around eight to twelve individuals would be interviewed, instead, twenty-two people came forward. Although this is a small sample size to draw general conclusions about the population, it is too large to use a case history approach where we meet each woman individually. The following chapter discusses my approach and the direction that the project took.

CHAPTER 1 METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This project has been designed to answer questions about how women have been affected by the experience of being married to a gay man in the historical period which has seen dramatic changes in ideas about marriage, divorce, sex, femininity, gendered roles, and homosexuality. Historical scholarship on these subjects to date have focused on earlier periods such as Claire Langhamer and Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, who examine love and sex in the early to mid- twentieth century. The rationale for this project was to understand how women talk about their experiences when they are given the opportunity to speak candidly and openly about them. Therefore, the design was based on interviewing as many women as could be fitted into a project of this duration and nature. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 prevented the recording of face-to-face interviews in the informant's own home, which necessitated changing the protocol to remote interviewing.

Oral history is a means by which an interviewer and her participant collaborate in creating an historical document, the audio recording, and its transcript.⁵⁸ This practice has matured immensely over the past thirty years or so, as is evident from the proliferation of recent scholarship on the subject. The suitability of oral history as a methodology arose because of the sense that some real effects of historical processes have been overlooked. Uncovering these effects by listening to testimony from women's lived experience is a means to address the imbalances of historiography based on - amongst others - standard marriages, or the gay liberation movement, or even the history of women's liberation. Robert Menninger has written about the positive emotions associated with giving an oral history. He acknowledges that at its most basic, the interviewee experiences satisfaction after recalling events in their life because they enjoy the 'chance to talk to someone'.

⁵⁸ Mark Feldstein, 'Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History', *Oral History Review*, 31 (2004), p. 9.

This meant that there was a more equitable relationship between researcher and subject even though the project did not set out to provide any form of therapy. As Robert Menninger continues, 'possibly the greatest therapeutic benefit is not conferred upon the interviewee at all, but upon history; our collective memory of what has happened to us - us referring to our group, community, nation, society, and world. Through constantly striving to clarify our past with the most accurate information possible, we can hopefully learn what has happened to us and where we have been.'⁵⁹

The outcome of this research rests partly on the decisions made during the interviews, and this required a particular type of awareness. Structured interviews with a formal set of prepared questions will yield different results to interviews which are entirely unstructured. For example, a participant may be distracted by an interviewer looking at notes during the interview and might be able to see the next question, which will affect her answers and the direction the interview might be predicted to take. The order in which participants were interviewed affected what each person told me because participants talked about their experience of the project with each other. Where the interviewer appears to be absent or only minimally present, where a story proceeds for pages without interruption, represents some of the most difficult work because one must be mindful of what might not be being said. As Rosalind Ballaster has shown, 'Quantitative research (questionnaires) is notoriously inclined to mould responses toward the production of unambiguous belief statements couched in a terminology already designated by the researcher.'⁶⁰ Even asking what I thought was the most neutral-seeming opening question included the phrase 'how you fell in love' which led to the phrase 'we fell in love' being repeated in the interviews and therefore might have prevented a different description.

The combination of rehearsed and unrehearsed stories has the power to change the participant's conception of her experience while the interview is still taking place, especially as the

⁵⁹ Robert Menninger, 'Some Psychological Factors Involved in Oral History Interviewing', *The Oral History Review*, 3 (1975), p. 75.

⁶⁰ Rosalind Ballaster, *Women's Worlds : Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 21.

interviewer was an insider to the group. It was important not to introduce terminology or ways of describing events that would affect the way the stories were told to capture the authentic meaning from the testimony. Unstructured interviewing with open questions reduced the impact of these effects, but this meant there was a risk that stories would be incomplete. Some participants were interviewed a second and even a third time, either because they had forgotten something that they later wished to add, or because exhaustion set in from the emotional work of the interview and it was agreed to speak again later.⁶¹

Mary Jo Maynes has written that 'Retrospective first-person accounts of individual lives provide counternarratives that dispute misleading generalisations or refute universal claims. [...] personal narrative analysis that maintains awareness of the interconnectedness of the individual and the social provides a basis for recovery of the individual as a focus of historical inquiry.'⁶² These scholastic predecessors made a solid foundation on which to build this study.

These women's life stories make a valuable and original contribution to knowledge about lived experience of marriage in late 20th and early 21st century Britain. As Tracey Loughran and Dawn Mannay write, 'fieldwork is not simply an exercise in data collection but an active process of production.'⁶³ Furthermore, although historians often collect oral histories from witnesses of historical events to build a picture of the event from multiple perspectives, such as Kolleen Miller-Rosser and others' oral history of nursing, this project uses oral testimony to derive participants' interpretations of social constructs such as marriage and divorce to complement the historiography of private life.⁶⁴ This chapter attends to the means by which material has been produced and contextualises the events that are being recalled and the language that is used to describe them.

⁶¹ Olivia, Shirley, Virginia, Kate.

⁶² Maynes, *Telling Stories*, p. 4.

⁶³ Tracey Loughran and Dawn Mannay, *Emotion and the Researchers: Sites, Subjectivities, and Relationships (Studies in Qualitative Methodology Book 16)* First edn (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018), p. 82.

⁶⁴ Kolleen Miller-Rosser and others, 'Analysing Oral History: A New Approach When Linking Method to Methodology', *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, 15 (2009), p. 475.

Michael Roper has constructed a methodology around the use of the researcher's emotional response in approaching primary sources.⁶⁵ He suggests that a strong personal reaction should be attended to as it can point to an important discovery. When historians have an emotional response to historical documents, it means that the originator of the document envisages the reader or listener and speaks to them to elicit emotions. He also argues that many historians overlook the important emotional states that might be communicated obliquely by historical actors. Accessing the emotion in oneself is a means to establish the emotion that the actor might have been attempting to communicate. This is explored in Chapter 5, where the effects of some of the participants' traumatic childhood memories might create a strong response in the listener. This practice serves to amplify the effect of emotional material because, as Chris Millard has discussed, our own experiences serve to position our research anthropologically - having lived the experience of these subjects - and psychoanalytically - having analysed one's own narrative.⁶⁶ This constitutes an interpretive framework for guiding the research. Hence, familiarising oneself with the testimonies of these women becomes an exercise in understanding how historians engage with oral history to lay down new ways of viewing the past. The opportunity arises to put oneself in the shoes of the narrator and to relive their experience with them.

Oral history is an excellent method to undertake research of this nature because it can capture the language, the emotions, and the experiences of women with a view to preserving them as part of the social history archive. It also is an empowering method of research which aligns with a feminist perspective. This methodology reveals what women say about their lives, their marriages, and their sense of self when viewed through the lens of an unexpected revelation about their husbands and contributes to the scholarship about how women construct their life stories and how their narratives reflect society's structural framework of marriage. When these women speak freely

⁶⁵ Michael Roper, 'Slipping out of View: Subjectivity and Emotion in Gender History', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), p. 62; Roper, *The Unconscious Work*, p. 170.

⁶⁶ Chris Millard, 'Using Personal Experience in the Academic Medical Humanities: A Genealogy', *Social Theory & Health*, 18 (2020), p. 9.

about their marriages, they provide the type of evidence for historians that is far less constrained than, say, a more structured questionnaire. The aim of the project, therefore, is to identify and document the experience of women being married to a man who has not disclose his sexuality and then how finding out that they prefer sex with men changes their concept of self and memory of events in the marriage. The methodology also invites both the researcher and participant to discover additional material which might lead to further research. Due to the primarily historiographical aims of this thesis, material must necessarily be omitted, which will nevertheless be archived, and it is hoped that these recordings will be used for more scholarship in the future.

Recordings become co-created historical documents spoken – then transcribed - in response to open-ended questions in a live moment and it might be argued, substantially different if recorded on a different occasion or with a different interviewer. However, participants thought intensely about what they were going to say and made notes. One participant reported that she had a sleepless night before the interview as she prepared what she was going to say the next day.⁶⁷ As Lynn Abrams has written, 'telling stories about the self is part of the process of self-formation. Telling stories gives rise to the confessional self.'⁶⁸ Abrams also describes the reflexive nature of storytelling, when the subject of the story is the self, the 'me' becomes a character in our story.⁶⁹

Emotions, memory, and knowledge work together to identify what is still not known about women's lived experience, as well as how women relate to, and comment on, their stories. This encroaches on the space between academia and activism because it adds the testimonies of previously invisible women to the archive of the lived experience of homosexual men who were married to women.

⁶⁷ Nicole

⁶⁸ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Routledge, 2016), Loc. 947.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 1032.

PROJECT DESIGN

The original design was based on finding at least eight to twelve women who would be willing to participate, but twenty-two women ended up forming a wider pool. Whether the number was ten or twenty or more, concerns about representativeness are valid, however, as Penny Summerfield argues, since there are so many variables to consider when selecting a representative sample, such as age, class, education, religion, profession, geographic location, to name a few, when analysing the results of research of this nature, their representation should take these factors into account transparently.⁷⁰ The approach was to discover whether there were any differences between women who had been married in earlier decades compared to women who had been married later. Factors such as religion and education were also relevant because they might noticeably be affecting attitudes to divorce and gender-roles. I am accepting of the fact that there may be different experiences that have not been captured in these recordings.

Additionally, as Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson have written,

[...] the form of qualitative analysis of discourse we have undertaken, what is required is not a representative sample, but extensive and detailed testimonies. As many historians have argued in recent years, close reading of a small number of rich self-narratives can offer powerful insights into not only individual subjectivities, but also the broader culture, the 'throw' of discourses and the process of cultural change, illuminating how individuals, 'struggling to make sense of [themselves] in the world... bend, select, recombine, amend or transform sources of meaning available in the public culture.'⁷¹

The approach was to discover whether there were any differences between women who had been married in earlier decades compared to women who had been married later. Factors such as

⁷⁰ Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), pp. 136-38.

⁷¹ Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Vernacular Discourses of Gender Equality in the Post-War British Working Class', *Past & present*, 254 (2022), p. 281.

religion and education were also relevant because they might noticeably be affecting attitudes to divorce and gender-roles.

Informed consent to the project was obtained as well as a recording agreement, which granted full copyright over the recordings. Since the collaborative nature of oral history interviewing can give rise to unexpected changes in the direction of the research based on what the interviewees wanted to talk about, recruiting enough participants and obtaining audio recordings as soon as possible, were of prime importance to the project's success.

The schedule consisted of interviewing up to two women per week to allow for processing time, which would then possibly affect the theme of subsequent interviews. Thematic analysis involved making notes after each interview of the themes that arose and creating a list of the ones that occurred most frequently, and then analysing the possible reasons for their frequency, which is discussed further in the section about participant selection below. Interviews were completed by the end of March 2021 to leave enough time for analysis and writing up.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The University of Sheffield ethics committee approved the project on 28th February 2020. The approval consisted of ensuring that participants' data was kept private, anonymised, safe and secure and that the interviewer and informants would not be harmed by the questions or the location of the interviews. Informed consent was sought and provided, and participants confirmed that they understood how their data would be used. However, in addition to these standard factors, it became apparent during the project that there would be other ethical implications. These were concerned with interpreting the testimonies and contextualising them appropriately to ensure that the conclusions reached reflected the material accurately.

Additionally, it would be unethical for the interviewer to seem to be providing psychotherapy to the informants. The positive effects of joining this project appeared to be that the women felt listened to, understood, relieved to be given the opportunity to tell their story, and

taken seriously. They also wanted to think that the sharing of their life experiences might lead to change in the real world, such as the laws on divorce – extra-marital sex with a member of the same sex should qualify as adultery - and mental health professionals should be made aware of the straight spouse's experience when consulted by a woman who has found out that her husband is gay. However, the research was presented as a history project with these possible outcomes hoped for but not committed to.

There was an ethical consideration that appeared during the interviews, which involved the distress experienced by the interviewer who conducted interviews remotely during the pandemic. The need for emotional support was underestimated and this has been addressed by Tracey Loughran, whose paper about hearing traumatic testimony helped to normalise my experience.⁷²

The potential for anyone who is mentioned in an interview to be negatively affected by the testimony, arose as an ethical issue later in the project. The decision was taken to close the recordings for three years, but the participant's names will not be searchable on any public database and the British Library will ensure that the correct guidelines against defamation are followed.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

The Straight Spouse Network in the USA indicated that they would collaborate with selected researchers who shared their aims.⁷³ Their sister organisation (Straight Partners Anonymous) in the UK agreed to publicise the project and invited their members to participate. Participants were asked to agree that their marriage had ended and that their husband was in a relationship with a man. Each participant was contacted by email and telephone before the interview to ensure that they fully understood what the project entailed. Initially face-to-face interviews were arranged, but the Covid-19 pandemic started, and interviews were all conducted remotely.

⁷² Loughran, Mahoney, and Payling, *Reflections on Remote Interviewing in a Pandemic: Negotiating Participant and Researcher Emotions*, p. 43.

⁷³ Now known as *Our Path* URL: <https://ourpath.org> [accessed 7 July 2023]

The leader of SPA was interviewed first for the following reasons: her story had already been published in the *Daily Mirror* and was therefore largely in the public domain, which meant that she was not overly concerned with privacy, and she was well-rehearsed in telling her story.⁷⁴ This was reassuring for a novice interviewer who wanted to be able to listen to her narrative and focus on the technological side, as well as not having to concentrate too much on coaxing a story out of a reluctant, unrehearsed interviewee. As chairperson of the group, having experienced the oral history methodology first-hand, she then reported back to the group and encouraged more participants to join the project. The interview took place on 6 November 2020 and lasted over 2 hours. Once she had posted her feedback, emails arrived from new potential participants and this continued. An interviewee would comment on their experience on the Facebook page and more requests would come in to join the project. By February 2021 sixteen interviews had been collected and there five or six more in the diary. No more direct requests for participants were made, and the final count was twenty-two contributors containing variations in ages, and duration of marriage.

Since all the participants came from an internet support group, there were some features which emerged, such as the high incidence of neurodiversity amongst the children of participants, which indicated that internet support groups attract women who have challenges and the tautology notwithstanding, deem themselves in need of help. However, although there were women who acknowledged their difficulties and vulnerabilities, there were also women who had overcome similar challenges but had continued to be members of the group to provide support to others. Therefore, there was a spectrum of women who joined the project from those in the middle of marital breakdown, to those who were many years on from their divorce. The implication of this phenomenon is that the women's testimonies contained phrases and ideas that might have been

⁷⁴ Emily Retter, 'Mum Using Her Agony to Help Devastated Partners', 2020, <<https://advance.lexis.com/document/?pdmfid=1519360&crd=64cba96e-20c2-43ca-9c3b-720f1114c60a&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A5Y67-12W1-DYTY-C2XX-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=145254&pdteaserkey=sr6&pditab=allpods&ecomp=hwmyk&earg=sr6&prid=19220443-6947-4f93-8c72-f52faab2e26e>> [accessed 26 October 2020]

discussed in the group and therefore impinged on any historically significant differences between older and younger women.

Table 1.1 Participants

Name	No.	Year of birth	Date Married	Age at Marriage	Date Marriage Ended	Duration of marriage
Alex	13	1964	14/07/1990	26	08/02/2020	29 years, 6 months
Alison	22	1958	10/12/1988	30	07/07/2008	19 years, 6 months
Anna	4	1969	14/09/2002	33	01/11/2017	15 years, 1 months
Belinda	7	1970	12/10/1996	26	May-19	22 years, 6 months
Candy	17	1970	21/08/1993	23	10/07/2016	22 years, 10 months
Carrie	15	1979	09/06/2006	27	05/01/2018	11 years, 6 months
Cheryl	18	1958	22/06/1996	38	01/01/2006	9 years, 6 months
Elaine	10	1988	13/04/2019	31	08/10/2019	0 years, 5 months
Eleanor	14	1965	17/06/1989	24	16/02/2011	21 years, 7 months
Frankie	8	1969	24/02/2001	32	09/09/2011	10 years, 6 months
Ingrid	11	1965	23/03/1997	32	01/12/2018	21 years, 8 months
Jackie	5	1962	01/06/1994	32	Jun-20	26 years, 0 months
Mandy	19	1975	21/03/1998	23	01/12/2009	11 years, 8 months
Nancy	1	1957	26/08/1978	21	18/03/2014	35 years, 6 months
Nicole	23	1985	01/06/2009	24	01/06/2015	6 years, 0 months
Olivia	6	1975	03/06/2000	25	Jun-06	5 years, 11 months
Patricia	16	1981	10/07/2004	23	22/01/2011	6 years, 6 months
Pauline	21	1958	21/08/1982	24	17/03/2016	33 years, 6 months
Penny	2	1973	20/03/1999	26	28/12/2018	19 years, 9 months
Sharon	3	1981	25/05/2013	32	07/07/2019	6 years, 1 months
Shirley	9	1971	18/09/1999	28	06/12/2019	20 years, 2 months
Wendy	20	1967	20/08/1988	21	01/04/2017	28 years, 7 months

INTERVIEWS

The privacy of a remote oral history interview also creates space for more intimate recollections which affects the dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. Since the subject matter to be discussed was of such a personal nature, the remote interview was particularly apt. Traumatic events were recalled, and difficult emotions were revealed. There was a sense that interviewer and interviewee were alone together. Interviews were conducted according to British Library guidelines, which ensured that all participants were well-prepared, had completed the required documentation

and consent forms, had already spoken to the interviewer, knew what to expect, and were alone in as quiet a room as possible.

The recordings all begin with various versions of the question; ‘Hello! Thank you for participating in my project. Please could you tell me about your life, your early relationships, how you met and fell in love with your husband?’ This question acted as a prompt which allowed the participants to speak uninterrupted for as long as they felt comfortable. The framework of the guided interview was necessary because of time and resource constraints, and it produced material which was pertinent to the subject under investigation.

Table 1.2 Interviews

Name	Participant No	Interview dates	Total duration of interview(s)
Alex	13	Tuesday, 19 January 2021	1:40:00
Alison	22	Monday, 22 March 2021	1:02:00
Anna	4	Wednesday, 18 November 2020	1:24:00
Belinda	7	Friday, 11 December 2020	1:15:00
Candy	17	Friday, 26 February 2021	1:25:00
Carrie	15	Wednesday, 3 February 2021	0:36:00
Cheryl	18	Wednesday, 3 March 2021	1:13:00
Elaine	10	Tuesday, 5 January 2021	1:15:00
Eleanor	14	Monday, 1 February 2021	0:40:00
Frankie	8	Wednesday, 16 December 2020	1:30:00
Ingrid	11	Wednesday, 6 January 2021	1:00:00
Jackie	5	Thursday, 26 November 2020	1:23:00
Mandy	19	Wednesday, 10 March 2021 Wednesday, 24 March 2021	3:53:00
Nancy	1	Friday, 6 November 2020	1:45:00
Nicole	23	Friday, 16 April 2021	1:28:00
Olivia	6	Wednesday, 2 December 2020 Friday, 18 December 2020	2:42:30
Patricia	16	Wednesday, 10 February 2021	1:24:00
Pauline	21	Tuesday, 16 March 2021	2:30:00
Penny	2	Monday, 9 November 2020	1:09:00
Sharon	3	Tuesday, 17 November 2020	0:44:00
Shirley	9	Thursday, 17 December 2020 Thursday, 18 March 2021	2:50:00
Wendy	20	Friday, 12 March 2021	2:10:00

At the end of the interviews, after the recording was completed, participants wanted to know something about me. Following on from the work done by, amongst others, Ann Day, Katherine

Borland, Luisa Passerini, and Amy Tooth Murphy researching subjects where the researcher identifies as an insider to the group being researched or is in some way connected to them, there was an opportunity to emphasise the equal and collaborative relationship in the production of the material.⁷⁵ Additionally, my credibility and authority to speak on the subject was explicitly recognised. This created a body of recordings which yielded glimpses of some very private and emotional topics.

During some of these debriefs, the participant remembered something that they wanted to be part of their official recording, which we then captured. This highlighted their understanding that the recordings were going to become part of the national archive and their awareness that they wanted their testimonies to be as complete and as accurate and as representative of their own experience as possible. It also showed that they replayed the interview in their minds afterwards and ruminated over what had been said and what had not been said. It is also possible, but unknown, that participants discussed their recording experiences with each other. Three participants chose to close their interviews so that they would not be archived with the British Library to protect their families.⁷⁶

TRANSCRIPTION

Transcription requires decisions to be made about readability, on the one side, but on the other, transmitting an accurate representation of the way in which a narrator speaks. Repetition, hesitation, verbal tics, and other non-verbal speech acts can be informative about the state of mind, the emotions, and the ease or difficulty with which the speaker is recalling the narrative. It is important to do these features justice in a transcript, but at the same time, it is equally important to be mindful of the needs of the reader. As Raphael Samuel has written, there are many ways to

⁷⁵ Borland, *That's Not What I Said.*; Day, *A Reappraisal of Insider-Outsider Interviewing: The Tristan Da Cunha Oral History Project*; Passerini, *Autobiography*; Tooth Murphy, *Listening in, Listening Out: Intersubjectivity and the Impact of Insider and Outsider Status in Oral History Interviews.*

⁷⁶ Carrie, Candy, Nicole

render an oral history transcript, and this means that every author will need to be transparent about the decisions they make.⁷⁷ Samuel argues that audio recordings themselves need to be available so that future researchers can bring their own research hypotheses to the material. Therefore, the transcription ethos for this project is to retain the feeling of listening to each audio clip as much as possible by transcribing the actual words and repetitions used by the narrator. Sometimes text is highlighted in bold to emphasise a particular point. People do not speak in paragraphs with punctuation, but punctuation has been inserted for the sake of readability where necessary.

The name of each narrator has been anonymised in the transcript even though she will refer to herself with her real name in the audio clip. Those narrators who wish to remain anonymous have been protected, and only those who have consented to archive with the British Library might be identifiable from their transcripts. The participants have agreed to make their stories available and are aware that they will be identifiable, which they spoke about as a means to empowerment. Their willingness to give their recordings to the archive is evidence of them recognising that their stories will contribute to scholarly research as well as no longer residing just in their own heads, but existing as a piece of public record.

There are a few instances of offensive language contained in the transcripts. They are indicators of the strength of the emotions expressed or are part of the narrator's vernacular and are therefore necessary to the sense of the story and have not been redacted.

ANALYSIS

Thematic Analysis methodology was used to curate the recordings. During the transcription process, a database of themes was created where emerging headings were recorded based on topics that during the literature review and from insider knowledge. This first list was broad and evolved into most of the prompts that were given during the interviews (See Table 1.3).

⁷⁷ Raphael Samuel, 'Perils of the Transcript', *Oral History*, 1, No. 2 (1972) [accessed 13 June 2023] p. 19.

Table 1.3 Interview Prompts

<p>Family sexual vocabulary Sexual/Gender trouble Relationship with father Relationship with mother Education Sexual experience Reason for marriage Family's response/support to/for marriage Sex during marriage: orgasmic, satisfying, regularity, what sort of things did you do? Did you have any suspicions? Sexual vocabulary Relationship with body Magazines read Have you had psychotherapy? Negative sexual experiences Religious beliefs</p>
--

The next phase of categorisation arose from phrases used by the participants. Table 1.4 lists these categories, and this was populated whilst listening to the recordings and editing the transcriptions. What followed was a process of choosing the appropriate clip to evidence a certain point and re-evaluating how much of the clip to reproduce in the text, as well as deciding how many examples of the same concept to demonstrate from multiple participants. Each iteration of this process added to the number of worthy extracts. Listening to the clips repetitively and playing them to other people to discuss their meaning, also added to decisions about which ones to include. As this work progressed it became increasingly apparent how fluid and changeable interpretation of a transcript can be. As with any interpretive or analytical exercise, taking into consideration one's own blind-spots and biases is key to understanding conclusions that arise. In this cohort, it was necessary to be mindful firstly, that the participants were members of an internet support group for straight spouses and would therefore have had the opportunity to discuss some of the themes with each other. Secondly, the assumptions that participants made of the researcher as insider to the group meant that controversial topics that outsiders to the group might not consider, were mentioned more freely. The first consideration meant that there was a high possibility that respondents would use language that had been learnt within the group - concealing the differences due to factors like age, education and religion. The second factor meant that there was a frankness and willingness to

speak about previously undisclosed topics. Unlike Ann Day, whose oral history project was predicated on her being accepted as an outsider and having to gain acceptability in the group of people she was interviewing, my informants readily disclosed personal details and answered most questions openly.⁷⁸

Early in the project each participant was identified in the text by an ordinal number according to the interview schedule (included in Table 1.1 and Table 1.2). This imposed an artificial narrative structure to the thesis, which led to assigning pseudonyms instead. However, the order of interviews does expose the trajectory of my interviewing competency and experience as well as improvements in the quality of the recordings. The responses from interviewees also changed over the duration of collecting the recordings because the participants talked amongst themselves about this project and the experience of being recorded.

Table 1.4 Emerging Categories

Topic	Notes
Age difference	Checking for patterns
Age of children when TGT happened.	Capturing data in case it is significant
Becoming 'me' again.	Narratives of Identity
Boarding School	Part of my own narrative
Body	A main line of enquiry
Childhood Sexual Trauma	Core thesis hypothesis
Children	Capturing data in case it is significant
Children with mental health issues/special needs	Emerged early on as a significant feature of many stories
Choosing a Husband	Core thesis hypothesis
Controlling behaviour	Core thesis hypothesis
Conversations in the car:	Emerged from a few narratives as being a place for powerful conversations
Divorce	Early idea for chapter heading
Emotions	Rage, Shame, Lack of self-worth
Friendship with husband before getting married	Emerged from a few narratives
Gaslighting	Early idea for chapter heading
Gay dating apps	Emerged
Holidays	often the revelation happens in close proximity to a holiday. Either just before or just after. Or holidays feature in the narrative as a landmark for changes in behaviour.
Husband with mental illness	Emerged
Illnesses caused by husband	Emerged
Infidelity as a means of testing your sexuality	Emerged

⁷⁸ Day, *A Reappraisal of Insider-Outsider Interviewing: The Tristan Da Cunha Oral History Project*, p. 50.

Intimacy stopping with birth of child	Emerged
Laughter	Noticed by me. Found interesting
Line of my questioning reveals hidden stories.	Revealing. Would not have been told if I hadn't asked (sometimes very gauche) questions. Part of becoming an oral historian
Malapropisms and language	A sign of tension/anxiety?
Mother's mental illness	Resonated with me
Other People	What other people say is a sign of cultural influence
Pandemic	Possible theme for feeding into broader research on the Pandemic
Rape	Emerged
Religion	Core thesis hypothesis
Self-deception	Ideas of the self
Sports	Ideas of femininity/masculinity
Suicide	Emerged
Therapy	Core thesis enquiry
Tomboys	Ideas of Femininity
Trauma	Emerged
Trust	Ideas of self
Unprofessional behaviour by Health-care professionals	Resonated and emerged
Where did the confession/confrontation take place?	Ideas of place and their associations. Bedrooms, kitchens, cars. Another possibility for further research
Wife's Sexuality	Key line of enquiry

The analysis yielded material which slotted into the chapters as they appear in this thesis and were influenced by resonances from insider experience as well as forming an obvious historical timeline. This methodology follows on from the work of feminist scholars, amongst whom Carolyn Steedman, Barbara Taylor, and Luisi Passerini stand out. The subjectivity that Mary Jo Maynes accesses was also applied to this research. She was indebted by 'Passerini's self-analytic mode in the psychoanalytic chapters [which] opens up deep-rooted dimensions of subjectivity, motivation and agency that would otherwise be virtually impossible for the historian or social scientist to observe or explore.'⁷⁹ Tracey Loughran and Dawn Mannay also legitimise the researcher's somatic response as effective ways of knowing.⁸⁰

Meaning is constructed in the way stories are told, with the choice of phrases and words being key to discovering attitudes as Adler and Ben-Ari have shown. For example, 'I am the only

⁷⁹ Maynes, *Telling Stories*, p. 46.

⁸⁰ Loughran and Mannay, *Emotion and the Researchers: Sites, Subjectivities, and Relationships (Studies in Qualitative Methodology Book 16)*, p. 83.

woman in his life' means 'he needs no other woman.'⁸¹ Meaning construction can evade detection when the analyst is a member of the population being researched. The methodology used to analyse the material has been built on the researcher's reflexivity, subjectivity, textual analysis, psychological understanding, in addition to it being underpinned by the historical temporality of the life experiences. Therefore, testimony which resonates because the narrator has constructed meaning in a historiographical context will be noted. This includes examples such as specific instances where testimony reveals evidence of resilient gender roles in marriage or attitudes about sexuality and contributes to the historiography of marriage and sexuality.

PROJECT PARAMETERS

The selection criteria for participants were that they be women who had been married to a man who later came out as gay and was, at the time of the audio recording, in a relationship with a man.

There are different combinations of sex and sexual orientation that are possible, such as gay women married to straight men, gay women married to gay men, and straight women married to gay men who are out of the closet. With access to a group of women who met these criteria, and being an insider to this group, I considered the ethical implications of appropriating stories for which I did not have the authority to tell. Focusing on this group of women gave sufficient variation over age, geographic location, and religious belief, to evidence the central historical argument of the thesis, which is that there are resilient themes of attitudes to marriage and relationships that appear to linger in certain populations.

The women naturally fell into different kinds of member of the Straight Partners Anonymous group. Nancy was interviewed first and was the leader of the group and a very long-term member who had recovered from her first marriage and was the first point of contact for newer members.

⁸¹ Adir Adler and Adital Ben-Ari, 'The Myth of Openness and Secrecy in Intimate Relationships: The Case of Spouses of Mixed-Orientation Marriage', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64 (2017), p. 815.

Some women were active contributing members, either as requiring support with their own issues or providing support. Other women were non-contributing members who had seen the advertisement for participants and who wanted to contribute to this project. Therefore, there was a mix of women in various stages of the marriage-divorce-recovery process.

FEMINIST APPROACH

These are women's stories. The objective is to add to the historiography of marriage and sexuality by accessing stories from voices who have not yet been heard. They were able to speak candidly of their experiences, which included stories of abuse and betrayal. They are evidence of how historical and cultural influences continue to affect the domestic and marital sphere of women. This thesis contributes to the history of women. It sometimes shows that even women think that women's stories are unimportant. By archiving their stories at the British Library and using them as primary sources in this project, we are beginning to dismantle the edifice of the patriarchy.

The oral histories of twentieth century marriage neglect to consider the sexualities of the participants and portray all man-woman married couples as heterosexual.⁸² The reports that some wives in those studies give about their experiences in these marriages often bear striking resemblances to those given here. This study therefore offers a non-heteronormative or alternate way to interpret that material.

Writing from emotions is a quintessentially feminist pursuit. As Mary Jo Maynes writes; 'Methods involving self-reflexive interpersonal encounters can be a form of resistance to dominant

⁸² Collins, *Modern Love*; Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution : English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Angela Davis, 'Generation and Memories of Sex and Reproduction in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Oral History Review*, 45 (2018); Claire Langhamer, 'Love and Courtship in Mid-Twentieth-Century England', *History Journal*, 50 (2007); Langhamer, *The English in Love*; Angus McLaren, *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Roberts, *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970* ; Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963*.

ways of acquiring and codifying knowledge.⁸³ The legacy of patriarchal scholarship is to privilege the objective position and views emotions as troublesome. History is the story of humans over time and humans are emotional beings. By engaging with emotions, and adopting a reflexive approach, this project continues the work of feminist scholars.

Oral history gives voice to the voiceless. Many of the participants spoke about feeling empowered by knowing that their stories would be recorded and would be available to listen to via the British Library archive. To be heard equally alongside men's stories, is to be recognised as having equal importance in the eyes of historians. What follows is the result of a collaborative project to remember, understand, and honour women's experiences, to bear witness to the circumstances of being married to gay men, and to lay down the stories for future researchers.

⁸³ Maynes, *Telling Stories*, p. 102.

CHAPTER 2 WOMEN'S BODIES, SEXUALITY, AND SELFHOOD

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, historians of women and gender have become increasingly interested in how women's bodies were represented, discussed and scrutinised, and how this shaped the ways in which women experienced their bodies and sexuality. Scholars have charted the changes from the constraints of Victorian corsets and bustles to the opposite comfort of the flapper dress in the 1920s to the donning of trousers as women won equality with men, to the bikini of the 1960s and then the explicit photographs of naked women in pornographic magazines.⁸⁴ Through these periods, women were conscious of their bodies being objects of desire or of demonstrating virtue and restraint. Women's magazines have promoted images of female bodies designed to look alluring to men, even though sometimes, at the same time as saying that women can have careers and be the equal of men.⁸⁵ This chapter looks at the way these different influences have affected the women in this cohort by asking how they thought about their bodies, sexuality and femininity. Their answers show how tenaciously the culture of the male gaze has endured. Considering the disruption to the narrative of 'I am attractive because my husband is attracted to me' when the husband comes out as gay, we have an opportunity to see where women are in terms of their embodiment of personhood and how it is subsumed into ideas of femininity.

The thread of selfhood connects bodies and identities through the filter of sexuality in this chapter. Women's relationship with their bodies includes observing themselves in mirrors, living in their bodies as they become pregnant, feeling objectified, as well as being aware of the male gaze. There was a strong recognition of the power of being able to bear children as well as the physical

⁸⁴ Carol Dyhouse, 'Girl Trouble : Panic and Progress in the History of Young Women', (2021); Bingham, *Family Newspapers? : Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978*, pp. 201-27.

⁸⁵ Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara, *Women and the Media : Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), p. 52.

costs of mothering. The memories of their husbands are disrupted and dismantled by the discovery of his non-attraction to their sex. Many noticed a difference in their feelings towards their body after discovering that their husband was gay and that their feelings about their bodies changed post-childbirth.

These accounts reveal a willingness to connect to their vulnerable selves in giving their stories to someone they see as a peer and insider to the group. Not only are the stories difficult to read and listen to, but we see an eagerness to explore this subject associated with the participants' obvious reaction to being asked questions about topics that no-one has seemed interested in before. Their answers are candid and intimate. The women seemed surprised by questions about their own bodies and their own sexuality. Most of them were primed to speak about their husbands but when the focus was placed on them, they found it very difficult to think about themselves. As Angela Davis writes, 'women's identities are not *legendised* in the way that men's are, and women frequently must fall back upon these male narratives to make themselves heard. [...] but another important purpose of oral history is that interviews allow us to hear neglected voices in both the present and the past, and to preserve these voices for future generations.'⁸⁶

This chapter examines femininity and femaleness as it relates to how the women see their bodies, their sexuality, and their selfhood. Many of the responses were to the question 'please can you talk about your relationship with your body, your sexuality and your femininity?' and therefore there was a uniformity to this section of the interviewing. Asking for a specific response was different to asking the participants to talk about their lives. However, the range of responses was very broad because each woman interpreted the question uniquely. The question was about more than one topic with prompts rather than directions. There was no rigid script to follow.

An unsettling theme which weaves these thoughts together is the experience of sexual abuse, especially during childhood. This might be shown to have damaged some women's

⁸⁶ Angela Davis, Andrea Hajek, and Laura King, 'Gender, Subjectivity and Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, 73 (2012), p. 362.

relationships with their bodies whilst confirming the patriarchal power structure and the limited extent of women's power to protect themselves from being violated. Many women have disrupted relationships to their bodies. The media, the patriarchy, and cultural norms explicitly direct and control how we use and see them. Literature on this subject is plentiful and diverse and it is beyond the scope of this project to discuss it, but the testimonies that are presented in this chapter are evidence of how insidiously women's bodies are claimed by the patriarchy and how women struggle to liberate themselves from unhealthy and disempowering thoughts.⁸⁷ We also see evidence that individual men (fathers, husbands, uncles, strangers) exert control over women's bodies and deny them agency. This cohort of women is interesting because they have encountered a specific challenge to both their femininity and their sexuality and therefore we might discover a thread of commonality running through their answers to my question.

BODIES

With regard to bodies, participants spoke about themselves in terms that related to how attractive they felt to potential partners. They spoke about their *boobs being big, which is nice* or being *flat-chested* and not feeling very attractive, or being slim and happy with their bodies, or curvy and happy with their bodies. There was a very broad range of shapes and sizes. Struggles with weight was a common topic.

⁸⁷ Kath Davies, Julienne Dickey, and Teresa Stratford, *Out of Focus: Writings on Women and the Media* (London: Women's Press, 1987); Lucy Delap, 'Feminism, Masculinities and Emotional Politics in Late Twentieth Century Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 15 (2018); Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (Aldershot: Gower, 1985); Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*; Hilary Hinds and Jackie Stacey, 'Imaging Feminism, Imaging Femininity: The Bra-Burner, Diana, and the Woman Who Kills', *Feminist Media Studies*, 1 (2001); Gwen Hunnicutt, 'Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence against Women: Resurrecting "Patriarchy" as a Theoretical Tool', *Violence Against Women*, 15 (2009); G. Murphy, *Media Influence on the Socialization of Teenage Girls* (2013); Scanlon, *Challenging the Imbalances of Power in Feminist Oral History: Developing a Take-and-Give Methodology*; Mark Smith and Jo Woodiwiss, 'Sexuality, Innocence and Agency in Narratives of Childhood Sexual Abuse: Implications for Social Work', *British Journal of Social Work*, 46 (2016); Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London: Pandora Press, 1987); Agnes Wohl and Gregory W. Kirschen, 'Betrayal of the Body: Group Approaches to Hypo-Sexuality for Adult Female Sufferers of Childhood Sexual Abuse', *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 27 (2018); Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies* (London: Sage, 1994).

Diana: *And I'd like you to tell me about your relationship with your mum and your dad and your relationship with your own coming-of-age as an adult. How you felt about yourself sexually how you felt about your body how you felt about your femininity. Tell me that story if you'd like.*

Cheryl: *I can't can't say I've ever thought about it very much hugely. You know just kind of been bimbled through life as an adolescent and teenager. And then as I say, I've got, even though I struggled at school, I've had a very affirming family and I've never felt you know, I was, I was very large for a long time, but I never felt bad about that. I always felt okay in myself. So I mean I've lost nine stone since Colin left. So as a teenager, I always had plenty of boyfriends, you know and didn't particularly feel pressured, you know felt strong enough to be able to say, 'No!' if I didn't want to do something I didn't want to do. Didn't lose my virginity till quite a bit later on than a lot of my friends [00:18:02] because I just didn't feel that I wanted to do that at that point. But yeah had a series of boyfriend some of which my parents liked, some of which my parents were quite despairing about like most people. Although to be fair. I never knew till afterwards that they didn't like them. My parents very much of the attitude of better the enemy you know than the one you don't. Keep them on side. [coughs][..] Which is why, so I never really rebelled, as I say, I didn't need to. As I say my dad was a vicar, and so when we were children we went to church, but once we were old enough to be left at home, we were always given the choice and never made to feel bad about it. So if I didn't go to church on a Sunday because I've been out on the Razzle the Night before and got a hangover - wasn't an issue. The hangover bit might have been an issue but not the not going to church. Yeah, so I was very affirmed of I've always been quite strong in myself about .. in my identity. That's never been an issue for me at all. I've always liked myself and even as I say when I was overweight and I was very overweight, you know, I was kind of a size 28, I never felt bad about it because I think I knew that I was valuable, and I had the me inside was different. I mean, I actually think I'm five foot eight, slim and blonde. It's just that none of you have noticed frankly.*

Cheryl is saying here that she has a robust self-image where in her mind her body does not conform to what she sees in the mirror. However, this contrasts with her actions of losing nine stone in weight after getting divorced. We also know that she was raped at the age of sixteen. Can we legitimately make assumptions about her relationship with her body, or do we take her words at face value? Research by Ava Ferguson supports the idea that body image is disturbed by incidences of sexual assault and in this transcript, we can see some evidence for ourselves.⁸⁸ It is plausible to

⁸⁸ Ava K. Ferguson and Amy M. Brausch, 'Resilience Mediates the Relationship between P T S D Symptoms and Disordered Eating in College Women Who Have Experienced Sexual Victimization', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37 (2022), p. 1019.

suggest that Cheryl disconnected from her body while she was married, and was unable to process emotions. When she finally ended her marriage, she felt able to reconnect with her body and look after it by losing weight. This reflects the redemptive journey that is discussed more in Chapter 5. However, another reading of this narrative might say that losing weight is affirming the male view of women's bodies and that she lost weight to make herself attractive to a potential new partner and that she is following the diktats of the patriarchy. It is this ambiguity of analysis that makes oral history both exciting and dangerous. Each researcher recognises or connects with specific parts of the testimonies and makes inferences that others could contest. The women themselves might not agree with the analysis. In this way, oral history has strong links to post-modernist textual criticism. There is the question of who owns the text or the story on the one hand and on the other, if there is evidence, then it must be acknowledged.

Nancy: And when the day came, you know, we got in the car and he drove me there and I said, oh, yeah, I think I know where we're going and I had guessed it right and we did stay there one night, had a meal there and everything and we did have sex that night and one of my big questions to him when he told me [that he was gay] was what was all that about you know, and he sort of said well, I thought it would be nice for you and .. actually if I'm truly honest, what I think he thought was that would be the last time you have sex... and I've never actually said that before even in the group but that's what I think because at that time I was about to go.. 7th April was my birthday as I told you so shortly after he told me I was going to turn 54 which now seems like very youthful but at the time seemed like God, I'm so old. [cough] and I'm deaf, which was another big worry to me like here am I because when you get [00:38:06] a marriage break up like this and I'm sure this isn't just when your husband turns out to be gay you, its very tempting to line up all the negatives. You know, I'm old I'd never say I'm old, but I'm a certain age. I'm overweight. I'm deaf and I've got absolutely zilch sexual experience as it turns out because the only person I've ever had sex with is gay. So it's the most massive rug pull under your feet that you can possibly imagine.

The above extract from Nancy's story talks about how unattractive she feels and how even though the marriage was close to ending, there was a sense of closeness, generosity, and a willingness to celebrate their anniversary. Nancy's comments about being overweight, old, and deaf and her subsequent fear that she would never be with another man points to the strong link that she has with self-objectification. She sees her body as being an enemy of her desires rather than as an

enactor of her desires. She splits herself off from her body. Eventually, she meets a new man and is accepted by him, despite being 'old, overweight, and deaf'. Interestingly, her ex-husband seems to be saying that he upheld her view of herself by reasoning that this might have been the last time that she would have sex. He, as a man, may be seen to be dictating her low self-esteem, and when she meets a new man, she borrows the new man's authority to feel sexual again. This can be seen as yet more evidence that women are likely to use men's opinions to direct their thinking about themselves.

Sharon: *So now I guess it's the same as any woman that's had a couple of kids! [laughs] But much happier with my body when it's firmly encased in lots and lots of layers of clothing! I struggled with my weight when I went off to University. I went from being a size 6 to a size 14 [noise], so that that sort of knocked my self-confidence a lot and sort of led me to steer, steer away from men generally. I also had a flare [00:10:02] up of psoriasis when I was at University so that sort of affected the whole of my torso and [noise] it was quite unsightly. And so that kind of again made me sort of feel very self-conscious very, you know, sort of not willing to bare all unless I was very drunk and so.. and you know, as as was everybody else. Actually not long before I met Scott, I sort of managed to start losing.. I was in a particularly stressful job at the time, working lots and lots of hours commuting into London and sort of all that stress sort of made me lose quite a bit of weight actually. Always a silver lining! So it was actually finally all those.. the psoriasis wasn't great but the weight loss helped a lot and I was actually feeling quite a little bit more confident in myself for the first time in a long time. Then when I got together with Scott as I say the fact he was so tactile the whole time, you know, there was there was always that general intimacy between us.*

Sharon's connecting her weight with her self-confidence is a common theme. She needs to lose her inhibitions by drinking to overcome her sense of shame about her body.

Jackie: *I suppose I've always been a bit self-conscious and always think I need to to lose weight, but I've never dieted strictly or had any eating disorders .. disorders anything like that. Never been totally happy, but I don't think anybody ever really is. I'm quite happy with my boobs! [laughs] and as my first partner said, 'they're your best asset, Jacks!' But Chris never .. never talked about me in that way at all. He never.. but I like this or you're really nice or you're.. [00 10 05] He never said you're sexy ever, never. And I once said to him you never say that I'm, never ever tell me I'm beautiful. He said, that's because you're not. And I said oh. And he said you're pretty. You can*

be pretty but you're not beautiful. And I said even on my wedding day? And he said, no. And that really was a bit.. anyway but body image; and after I found out, I felt really.. that knocked my confidence you know because I just realized at that point that it meant nothing really.

Here, Jackie speaks about her body-image being very much linked to her husband's view of her and eventually, his sexuality. The revelation that her husband is gay causes her to reflect on the instances where she needed reassurance about her attractiveness, and when she says 'it meant nothing really' she is acknowledging that her needs were misplaced and were never going to be met.

Ingrid: *It, I think I stopped seeing myself as a woman. I was this partner and this parent in this very difficult set up. And I lost any sense of self as a woman. I'd .. that sounds really odd. I don't know quite how to describe it. Because I was quite confident and okay about who I was as a human being, you know and did lots of stuff and then I went back to Uni at 50 because I decided I fancied doing a degree and you know, and, and this .. you know, but who I am as a woman .. and I honestly believed that I would never have another relationship again for a long time.*

Here, Ingrid is showing how her view of herself as a woman is in juxtaposition to a man. She sees a big part of womanhood as being separate from being a human being and more about being sexually attractive to men. She mentions going back to university as if this will make her less attractive to men. There is an underlying assumption that being independent, self-sufficient, and following one's own path is excluded from the characteristics of 'being a woman'. It is this duality that is written about by Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Simone de Beauvoir when they assert that womanhood is something that is performed, or chosen.⁸⁹ The audio clips and extracts in this chapter are evidence that cultural positioning of women as having less agency and of being inferior to men continues to

⁸⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), pp. 187-89; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), pp. 28-40; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 51,62.

be felt and experienced. The political work of oral history is to expose these positions in the hope that by naming and demonstrating them, we become more aware of their unfairness.

Shirley: And I'm only little any way. I've never really liked my body. I've always - I'm a size 8. I've got very small breasts. I don't like what I look like down there, but I think a lot of women think that.

This is evidence of women not understanding what normal female genitalia look like, a lack of knowledge which some feminists and cultural producers have sought to redress.⁹⁰ The 1991 film *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* contained a scene in which middle-aged women were encouraged to look at themselves with a hand mirror.⁹¹ Sculptors have made plaster-cast models from women's genitalia to encourage women to understand the diversity and variation in the shape and appearance of vulvas. 'The Great Wall of Vulva is made from plaster casts of 400 people's genitals. Spectacle and education combined. Knowledge is power. Freedom from shame and anxiety is the purpose.'⁹² The coyness that my participants express when talking about this aspect of their bodies highlights how deeply entrenched this lack of knowledge remained, despite these efforts to challenge it.

Olivia: And yeah, so don't, I don't, I think now, I mean my body is you know, it's quite strong still really, I'm a little bit unfit at the moment which isn't good, but generally speaking. I'm quite strong. I'm quite you know, I don't know what you'd say really. I think the men who I have met seemed to quite like my body and I don't have any.. I know some people dislike their body. I don't particularly dislike my body. It might be nice if I was a little bit taller my boobs were a little bit less saggy, maybe [laughs]. But .. I feel quite happy with it. And when I said to you I felt in the wrong costume. It wasn't I wasn't happy with my body. It was more I felt uncomfortable because I didn't have a place. I think really, you know, I couldn't quite find myself in them. [?] Yeah.

⁹⁰ Katie Brodie and others, 'A Study of Adolescent Female Genitalia: What Is Normal?', *J Pediatr Adolesc Gynecol*, 32 (2019), p. 27.

⁹¹ *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, Directed by Jon Avnet (Universal Pictures, 1991), loc. 00:39.

⁹² The Wilzig Museum, *The Great Wall of Vulva*, 2006, <<https://www.thegreatwallofvulva.com>> [accessed 7 July 2023]

Phrases like *my body is quite strong* and *nice if I was a bit taller* are associated with the masculine gender. *Boobs a little bit saggy* is expressing negativity about a feminine attribute. *Couldn't quite find myself* could be construed as not being able to find herself as a woman. This is worth examining because of the conflict some girls and women found themselves in if they were academically minded, or if they enjoyed traditionally masculine activities such as chess, car maintenance, DIY, and sports. Rejecting the feminine because they wanted recognition of their minds or personality, and not wanting to identify with femaleness because they noticed teenage boys staring at their chests during a conversation. Femininity is then associated with being objectified and masculinity with empowerment and agency (to be financially independent as a doctor or lawyer). When participants spoke about these issues, it explained how men who were attracted to men, were attracted to them.

Belinda: Body changes; I've had I had some surgery about nine years ago, 10 years ago now - I had my gallbladder removed. So I've got scars on my abdomen, which I'm uncomfortable with. So I [incomp]. I wasn't very happy with [00:48:09] the way I was anyway, and didn't really want anyone to see me particularly. And that's probably very much the same now. That's one of the things that concerns me about a new relationship is having to have a physical relationship. Well having a physical relationship with somebody. It's all a little bit scary after not having anything with anybody and being in a relationship with somebody for 27 years. I think it is now. So we would .. we were .. we've been together for 27 years in effect, and I haven't been with anyone else in that time. So to suddenly be with somebody else and having to start all over again. It's a little bit scary.

Diana: Do you see yourself wanting to be in another relationship with somebody else?

Belinda: I think so. I'm not in any rush to do so. David seems to think I'm going to rush off and get married next minute next minute, but I'm not I'm I'm very very keen to spend some time by myself with myself to get to know the person that I am now and rediscover the person that I was as well. Because over the last ten years probably I've completely lost.. I completely lost the person I was. And even my parents noticed.

Belinda speaks about her self-consciousness about her scars, which she associates with being imperfect or flawed and therefore unattractive. For this researcher, gallbladder surgery scars are not associated with sex as either a man or a woman can have them, and are less troublesome than caesarean section scars and/or stretch-marks from pregnancies. The researcher finds the c-section

scar and stretch-marks shameful because they signify an inability to give birth naturally and the skin's inability to stretch, which is associated with being a 'good' woman. Using a subjective perspective is informative about how participants negotiate their attitudes to their bodies. The intimacy of the oral history interviews together with the participants giving permission to publicise the recordings, goes towards creating a powerful political message about women's lived experience of embodied selfhood. As Michael Roper has written, emotions reveal important features of primary sources and legitimises the direction in which our scholarship takes us. An emotional response to the interviews renders new ways of interpreting and connecting with what is being said.⁹³

Frankie: I remember feeling intensely .. Oh anxious about like being naked. I'd have a bath with pants on at times if I had to share a bath with my sister or whatever. You know, I just didn't want anyone to see my body. It was very, very personal. And then early sexual experience sexual experiences weren't awful, but they weren't great. But I really felt at the time that I had such [00:36:02] low self-esteem. Sex wasn't about pleasure. It was about .. it meant someone fancied me my gosh someone fancies me! That must be that's amazing. I mean, I think I felt more attractive as the years went on but at that time at sort of eighteen/nineteen. It really was like, that's all it was it meant. Oh my God, so and so would get into bed with me that must mean that I'm quite pretty or you know it that's all it was. It was like a badge of honour or something that you just feel tremendously guilty about afterwards.

Frankie does not feel that she deserves to be sexually satisfied. Instead, she makes sex about the other person's desires and measures herself against how much someone wants to be in bed with her. In terms of embodying her own sexuality and enjoying her body, she does not speak about that, at all.

Elaine: Yeah, I suppose to be honest, with having the polycystic ovaries it already it massively impacts on your kind of feeling of femininity and your body image. Yeah, massively so with polycystic ovaries, I mean there's like excess hair .. em, hairiness and things so I would have been quite self-conscious about things like that. My skin wouldn't be great at times my I find it really hard to manage my weight. So I have to be really, really strict about exercise and what I eat in order to maintain my weight and if I go.. if I really go off the wagon at all, I put on weight really easily so I'd say I would yeah for a long time from teenage years. Like I would kind of have battled a lot with body image. And so I diagnosed myself when I was 16 and then I went to the

⁹³ Roper, *The Unconscious Work*, p. 170.

doctors and went for the like what is it? What do they do? Ultrasound thing and got diagnosed and so from the age of 16. I was very aware. I have this thing which for a few years. I've .. It was that kind of .. I felt sorry for myself, thought, god, well I can't lose weight and it was very much kind of self-fulfilling prophecy then. Then into my early twenties, I then was like no I'm going to go to Weight Watchers and lost weight and got more of a handle on low GI diet and kind of things to eat and stuff. So I'd say my self-esteem kind of would be .. [00:40:08] would go up and down, in line with where my weight's at to be honest.

Elaine's honesty about her self-esteem going up and down in line with her weight, here is typical.

Women have an impossible mission, which is apparent from any woman's magazine: to embrace one's body, whatever its shape, but also to look good, to be beautiful, and to attract the male gaze.⁹⁴ Whilst men do not seem to view their bodies in quite the same way, thinking more about bodily health and strength than cultural conceptions of beauty, as Donald Sabo writes, 'Life's too short to die small.'⁹⁵ Feminist literature encourages women to come to terms with a desire to take up less space and to think of bodies as their agent of representation in the world. This point of view is intended to be empowering and is an example of how conceptions of the body can be de-gendered. Women are exhorted to have healthy relationships with their bodies and to view them as strong and healthy rather than slim and beautiful. However, given the pervasiveness of society's demands on women's bodies, there are limits to feminism's ability to challenge this.

Ingrid: *In terms of kind of my .. I've never been particularly confident about my looks and who I am as a woman. I think I've grown into that a bit as the years have gone on. I was very tall and gangly with a brace, you know and glasses as I was, you know, when I was a kid and I think .. and I think it was a bit of a ugly duckling - swan, you know, sometimes when, when you're like that as you grow older you kind of grow into it a bit more and you know, you lose the braces and instead of being gangly, you're slim and you suddenly .. but it takes a while I think for your mental image of yourself.. and you've .. But certainly by the time I met my gay ex, I was pretty grounded in myself. Which kind of makes it all the more bizarre really, you know?*

⁹⁴ Ewa Glapka, 'If You Look at Me Like at a Piece of Meat, Then That's a Problem' - Women in the Center of the Male Gaze. Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis as a Tool of Critique', *Critical discourse studies*, 15 (2018), p. 88.

⁹⁵ Donald F. Sabo and David Gordon, *Men's Health and Illness: Gender, Power, and the Body* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE, 1995), p. 112.

Ingrid's testimony differs from Elaine's in that she does not speak about low self-esteem. She speaks about groundedness. She acknowledges that in spite of being grounded, she still did not connect with sexuality enough to recognise that her ex-husband was gay.

SEXUALITY

Sexuality is the way we use our bodies to gratify our need for sexual pleasure. It is our relationship with arousal and how we experience sexual pleasure with another person. In these extracts, we look at how women talk about their sexuality and their husband's sexuality to gain insight into both the lived experiences and the way sexuality is spoken about and thought about.

Jackie: *So okay, so there was a pivotal moment in 2007. I went on holiday to Cyprus and that was the last time we had sex and I made a mental note and I don't know why I just .. I want to remember this 'cause I was always the one to initiate sex. And after that, it never happened again, and we kind of from that point on we gradually distanced ourselves. And I'd got my family to care for but I must admit I put the whole of my life into my daughter. My daughter. I doted on her. I would take her to every ballet lesson. Every school event. I'd get involved with the school, I was the school treasurer, you know everything but the elephant in the room, which was Chris and the sex. So if anything came on TV about relationships and sex I had to turn it off because it become really awkward. And I'd forgotten what it felt like to have a sexual relationship and I'd forgotten what it felt like to be loved and appreciated and have any affection in my life. The only affection I had was from my daughter.*

[..]

Diana: *And [do you] enjoy your body?*

Jackie: *Yeah, yeah. I suppose yeah, but I have to say though, not very frequently. I think I pushed those sort of feelings back and just .. like [01 00 16] I said, I was really busy and I got used to not having anything like that in my life. So just now and again but not in a big way and it was more for me about.. I wanted affection. No, I missed that.*

Diana: *And in your relationship now, are you the one that initiates sex or ..*

Jackie: *No, not really we both.. yeah, it's more of a mutual thing. Yeah and everything worked, which I was surprised with [laughs]. Like I was so scared. I was so so scared.*

Diana: *What were you scared of?*

Jackie: *It hurting.*

Jackie's fear of sex hurting is a typical feature of female sexuality. As Sara McClelland discovered, surveys about the experience of sex by women compared to that of men say that men's most

negative expectation is being under-stimulated (and not reaching a climax) whereas women's is of sex being painful.⁹⁶

Some of the women speak of sex with their husbands being good and that their husbands seemed to be attracted to them but assert that 'being gay' is immutable. So for example, Cheryl said that her husband's body responded to hers, but she also said that he knew he was gay from the age of nine.

Cheryl: *It was a very healthy sex life. Very healthy. Maybe .. maybe he didn't enjoy it. Maybe he was just trying to convince himself, I don't know, but he certainly gave the impression of enjoying it and his body certainly responded to mine. So ..*

[..]

Cheryl: *[I'm] such a bad wife I turned him gay, clearly! [laughs] but he told me that he's known since he was nine. So obviously I didn't.*

The idea that someone can know that they are gay from an early age, as in the testimony above, has meant that participants must come to terms with their own binary models of sexuality and the memories of sex with their husband. At the moment where the husband admits to being gay, the wife collapses into a rigid narrative of gayness being set in stone. It seems as if this might be embodied somewhere in the woman. Sexuality is embodied in the way bodies respond to arousing thoughts or images, but it is also apparent that ideas of sexual orientation are never only about sexuality. This follows from anecdotes of people knowing they are gay when they are as young as nine years old.

A way that homosexuality is framed is to think of it as a rejection of a group of people as potential sexual partners. Therefore when a husband comes out as gay, their wife feels rejected because *gay* is understood to mean 'only attracted to men'. The wife falls outside of this group and is therefore rejected. Bisexuality is an inclusive term; bisexual people are attracted to both sexes and therefore a bisexual person does not reject a woman based on her sex. It follows that even though my participants are genuinely horrified and traumatised when they hear that their husband

⁹⁶ Sara I. McClelland, 'Intimate Justice: A Critical Analysis of Sexual Satisfaction', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4 (2010), p. 674.

is gay, they become attached to the immutability of sexual orientation because it means that they have something solid to react to and to blame for the failure of their marriage. This is where ideas of sexuality overlap with ideas of fidelity, and why Penny became angry when her husband told her he was attracted to her and he was *super fucking gay*;

Penny: *We did have a face-to-face discussion about this fairly recently because it annoys me that he .. he now says he's gay and yet he still maintains that he was sexually attracted to me and I said to him 'you can't have both. Either you're bisexual in which case - yes - I can get you are sexually attracted to me. You have to admit you just had an affair with a man and you're you know a cheater. You can't hide behind the "I'm gay and that's the get-out-of-jail-free card." Or you weren't sexually attracted to me because you are gay.'*

'Oh, I don't like being labelled, I see .. but I do see myself as gay.' And I was like 'mmm?' . *'But I was sexually attracted to you'. I was like, 'No. It's still this .. they .. you know, they they they spend so long lying about who they are, that they are very unlikely to ever be able to be completely honest with anyone, themselves included about who they really are and what they really feel.*

He .. he says, to quote, 'I'm super fucking gay.'

What do we carry in our bodies? The embodiment of sexual trauma from our childhood is part of what might draw us to a man who is not sexually attracted to women. But... does the future revelation work backwards in time to affect the memories of sex? Confirmation bias would suggest that during the processing of the new information about a husband's sexuality, memories of past sexual experience might be recruited to make sense of one's sexual identity. When reviewing memories of unsatisfactory sex with a husband, the wife might look into her own life for an explanation – hence a woman possibly thinking that childhood sexual trauma predisposes her to feeling numb during sex and then wondering why a husband couldn't penetrate that numbness. This can be a co-created dynamic because unbeknownst to the woman, the man might have his own reasons for not being able to penetrate that numbness. Sex might become functional - to conceive children - and once that is achieved, a couple might cease having sex completely. Olivia spoke about how her sex life changed dramatically after the birth of her children.

Olivia: *Yeah, we did that and it was very active sex life and I don't, I don't think it was I know some people who I've spoken to recently say oh, it was different.*

It wasn't. I, I can't say it was different to anybody else at all apart from after I had my first child then it was very different.

Ingrid implies below that her body became more feminine after she had children and therefore she concluded retrospectively that she was no longer sexually attractive to her husband. The meaning that might be constructed here is that women might think that gay husbands can imagine that a *skinny tall* childless woman is a man and can allow themselves to be sexually attracted to them but once the woman gives birth – something only a woman can do - and becomes more curvy, the mental picture collapses and sex is no longer possible.

Ingrid: *When it happened, I remember saying that when he came out as gay and I remember saying to him, 'I almost feel gender-neutral'. I can't .. can't remember what the word was that I used. But yeah almost like a sexless being. I think I'd .. sex and making love with him from the very, very beginning was always slightly.. he suffered from extreme premature ejaculation, which he never managed to get .. I was going to say get a grip on [laughs] But you know, and I did .. my body shape changed after I had children. So like I said, I was you know, I was pretty tall and skinny, I guess. And after I had the children, you know, I carry more weight. Wouldn't say I'm particularly huge or anything. But it I think it does change. It takes you know, and you know, I never had particularly big boobs, but my boobs have got bigger and that sort of thing, if you see what I mean. And looking back, I think that was a turn-off for him.*

When Ingrid says after she had children *I carry more weight* it bears two interpretations: firstly, her body is heavier and therefore more curvy and feminine, but also it suggests that her personal impact is greater because she is now a mother and must be taken more seriously. She has a purpose.

Hannah Woolhouse and others studied women's desire for sex after giving birth and found that women's sexual desire diminishes after childbirth and they give various reasons such as tiredness, lack of time, and feeling unsexy because their baby is using their body.⁹⁷ However, the

⁹⁷ Hannah Woolhouse, Ellie McDonald, and Stephanie Brown, 'Women's Experiences of Sex and Intimacy after Childbirth: Making the Adjustment to Motherhood', *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 33 (2012), pp. 298, 301.

participants do not talk about their own disinterest in sex but mention that their husbands lost interest in **them** after the birth of their babies.

Diana: *So what changed after you had your first child?*

Olivia: *So the change literally happened when I went into labour some of my friends; my friend Scott said well, we saw a change before when you were pregnant, [00:14:05] but it may have been just in all the excitement of being pregnant and everything that I .. I didn't really clock it.. may have been. But for me it was .. I went into labour in the middle of the night and when my waters broke and he just refused to get out of bed and take me to hospital. And it was eight o'clock in the morning before he was he would get out of bed, and he just was was just horrible.*

Olivia was talking about sex, but when asked about what changed after she had her first child, she segues into talking about intimacy and closeness. This signifies that for her, sex was about feeling connected with her husband. At the time when she goes into labour, she feels abandoned and unseen and therefore this becomes synonymous with a lack of sex.

Shirley also experienced a marked change in her husband after the birth of her first child.

Shirley: *Like I say from when I had my first boy and I think that's when the changes happened. I think that's when he crossed his line. And Harry would have been 18 months old by the time Harry was three my dad died and then within a year of my dad dying I had Freddie. I got pregnant, but I got pregnant with Freddy when Andy had been in London and he'd come back and not .. he wasn't comforting me and I remember this incident when I was .. I was crying as my dad three .. three months-ish had passed [01:10:18] since my dad and I sat in bed crying one night. Just heartbroken, so heartbroken and he came in and got into bed, just switched the lamp off and turned over. No comfort whatsoever. And I remember almost demanding sex off him.*

It is noteworthy that these participants behave counter to what is predicted by Woolhouse. It could be argued that women whose husbands come out as gay might forget that they are not interested in sex after a child because their husbands stop being interested in sex, or whether they mis-remember an event once they discover that their husband is gay. As in all such studies it should be borne in mind that participants might not be truthful about their sexuality, especially if they are being interviewed as a couple or if their responses are likely to be publicised. In the above clip, Shirley sees sex as possibly the only way to ask for and receive comfort.

Women speak about being able to express their femininity after their divorce. Here, Belinda speaks about doing a glamour photo-shoot and feeling empowered and delighted by the results;

Belinda: I just wanted to say that.. I'd completely forgotten actually, I had an opportunity to take part in a boudoir photoshoot. There was an advert that came on to Facebook by a photographer offering a free .. free photo shoot to anybody who wants to share their story and she felt and felt that it was deserved. So I messaged her back saying that explaining about the fact that I was going through a divorce, that my husband had come out as gay and I was turning 50. And she offered me a free Boudoir photo shoot.

I work for John Lewis and my job is a bra fitter. So I spend my whole working life fitting ladies and making them feel better about themselves. Getting them into the right.. right kind of underwear. And at work when we have new lingerie in, I always put it on to see how it fits and show my colleagues. So I don't have a big issue about the top half of my body or showing it to my friends, but to me to do to do something like a photo shoot was a bit different.

And .. and the focus would be on all on me. And so I decided to give it a go and took some of my .. ah cos I crochet blankets along as well. And we used some of those as props and and we had some shots with some sexy underwear on and some with some comfy clothes on and some with nothing and just a blanket and it was a really uplifting experience to do. [00:02:02] It was really good for confidence and self image. And what .. went one week went to the shop to do the shoot and in the following we went back and saw pictures. And I was really really surprised at them. They hadn't have done very little to touch them up or anything like that, but I thought I might come away with maybe one picture that I might like, but I ended up coming away with six. And I've got those in a box and I look at them every so often, but I've also got them on my phone and I quite proudly show people that this is what I've done. Would you like to see them? There's nothing, nothing overtly sexual I would say, in them. And everything is covered up. Just about! It's more implied, rather than, rather than graphic, but it was a really fun thing to do. It was exhausting and they get you into all sorts of weird and wonderful positions, but they get some shots of fantastic pictures out of it and then every so often I look at them go actually I'm not.. I do look alright. I'm not that bad. And it was it's a real confidence boost to do in what was quite a difficult time.

The above clip was pinned on to the end of Belinda's interview; *I had completely forgotten* and one imagines that she has been processing the body/sexuality question in the background whilst telling her (largely rehearsed) story. This story about the photo-shoot is about a blossoming encounter with her femininity and her feeling of power as a woman and it speaks of a conflict between wanting to be alluring and sexy but also wanting to feel empowered. The way the women speak about their

sexuality supports the arguments of much of the scholarship about women and the media, particularly about how women both internalise and seek to resist media images and the male gaze.⁹⁸

In the following extract, Anna finds a picture of her husband's erect penis on his phone because she scrolled too far back when he showed her photographs of their daughter:

Anna: So when I saw a picture of his erect penis. And I went really? Really? And he just.. 'my bad. My bad. I'm sorry.' And instead of talking about it, he then just walks out leaves the home. Then as he's obviously driven back to his flat and then he's messaged me. He said I'm truly sorry. I really am and I messaged him back and said, 'Fuck you!' You know. You say it's just a photograph. [01:20:32] It's not just a photograph. It's what that photograph represents. You never ever sent me a photograph like that ever. One day Holly was at preschool. Maisie was at school. We were going to watch Holly's preschool Christmas play. He's sitting at the kitchen table doing some work. I ran through with absolutely no clothes on going, 'Let's go to bed.' And he says 'For God's sake, Ann, put your clothes on. I need work.. I've got work to do. And I just.. I can remember relaying this to one of my friends. And saying for the first time in God knows how long there was just the two of us in the house and a bit of fun and a bit of spontaneity and I get met with that.

The interesting point here is that Anna understands that the way she is seen as a sexual person by her husband is different to the way he feels he is seen by his boyfriend - implying that in her opinion, he sends his boyfriends naked pictures of himself as a provocative enticement to sex, but fails to respond to his wife's invitation to have sex with her.

Specific sexual practices were not explored, which might have been easier to do in a face-to-face interview over a longer period of time and therefore not appropriate for this project. It was alluded by some members of the group (SPA) that they had heard of women having to perform sexual activities that they were not comfortable with or that their husbands always closed their eyes during sex. Some spoke of not being satisfied during sex.

There were a few women who spoke about specific sexual events which remained in their memory:

⁹⁸ Ballaster, *Women's Worlds*; Davies, Dickey, and Stratford, *Out of Focus*.

Anna: *And I can remember. One night. He spurned me in bed, and I'm not I'm not a vindictive or a nasty person, but I thought that's three times now, right? That's it. I'm going to leave it and I'm not and I'm not going to do the ..I'm not going to initiate again. I'll let him do it. It was two years later.*

Diana: *Yeah.*

Anna: *You know, it took two years*

Diana: *So you didn't have sex for two years.*

Anna: *No. Nothing else wrong in the relationship at all, but I've made myself .. I gave myself a promise that night when he spurned me for the last time and I thought I'm not doing this. And I think Holly was about 2 years old at that stage. [01:22:33] So we're going back a fair while. But yeah, it was.. it was over two years.*

This idea of not being desired pervades the stories of women in this study and the above extract describes it very well. The feeling of being 'spurned' might be more common for men, and has been written about and talked about; entering the popular culture; 'not tonight darling, I have a headache.'⁹⁹ So it is poignant that these women speak about needing and seeking sex with their husbands.

Candy: *We did actually, I didn't say this before because it again, I feel silly but we did actually sleep together once between me finding out and him moving out just the once. And it was probably the best sex we ever had. And I don't understand why and it was me who wanted it and he said I'm .. I'd like to too, which is strange but we did we didn't do it again. It was kind of a big knowledge knowing that it was the last time which was hard but lovely. So, yeah, so that was .. and then we went into the counselling and told the children.*

It is possible that Candy and her husband felt peculiarly intimate because they had finally been able to reveal themselves fully to each other. Candy had realised that she couldn't make her marriage to a gay man work, and had accepted that the marriage would end. Her husband had finally come out to his wife, which manifested as a willingness to have sex with her. Therefore, they both were truly intimate with each other and this is what contributed to the great sex. When she was asked if she

⁹⁹ Marie Chablis and Addie Michel, *Not Tonight, Darling, I Have a Headache!* (Houston, Texas: Ergode Books, 2008); Joanna Kempner, *Not Tonight: Migraine and Politics of Gender and Health* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

thought that the danger of sexually transmitted diseases had heightened the thrill, she categorically disagreed. She spoke at length about the fear of catching HIV after finding out that her husband had been sleeping with men at the same time that he had been having sex with her. A follow-up question encouraged her to talk about her feelings;

Diana: *Well, I have absolutely no judgment one way or the other but I'm really interested in understanding why you think it was silly and why you're embarrassed about it.*

Candy: *Because he might have been lying or he might have had some sort of disease and I think I was putting myself at risk of getting HIV or any other sort of sexual disease, but I think I was again hearing .. which I think was the truth .. from him that he was safe. But this wasn't a conversation that we were having about having sex. We'd had it before. Since when I found out we'd had you know, this discussion straight away, 'how safe am I?' What, you know, what risks have you been putting me at and he said look, you know, we'll get you checked out, but I have been being really safe. You know, I'm pretty confident. You're not any risk. So I wasn't in a hurry to have those tests and I think it was you know, it was it was like three weeks after I'd found out that we did we did it and then you know 10 days.. in the next couple of weeks. I went and had the tests. So and because they did I do remember telling them actually because there was [00:14:04] a you know, should I go and have the HIV test after another 12 weeks because it was quite close, but she said to me we'll do it, but I really don't think you need to. So I never did go and get that second test. I think five years on. But yeah.*

Candy's discussion about the health risks of discovering that your husband is having sex with men was echoed in many of the interviews. It is evidence of the legacy of the 1980s and 1990s when the public was told that gay sex leads to infection with HIV-Aids.¹⁰⁰ The extract also shows how Candy still trusted her husband in spite of his actions, *I'm pretty confident. You are not at risk.*

Diana: *It's ok, you don't have to answer this question, but what about your body orgasmically? What sort of erotic relationship do you have with your body?*

Olivia: [02:02:15] *In terms .. I haven't though that much about it. I've always liked sex always and really strangely. I've just thought about this so .. you know I said I had a friend called Scott? He was how I met my husband where when we were at College together, we were like what I thought was brother and sister. We were very close we did loads together and he was really my best friend at College even though I had the boyfriend at College called Alan. And Scott and I were much closer than Alan and I were really and Alan and Scott were also friends because it was in Bucks and there's not many people and*

¹⁰⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, *Making Sexual History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 142.

we were the only over 18 course there were there was one other actually we were kind of thrown all together the whole class. So we kind of all knew each other quite well and years later, so it was probably about four or five years ago Scott and I have had quite a strange relationship over the years although we were very good friends and his wife and my husband joined the Outdoor Centre at same time. So when I was living up north, we used to meet up with them and had quite long weekends with them and that kind of stuff. And in a discussion with Scott about four years ago, actually we hadn't been spoken for about a year and I was gutted I was really really upset that this friendship had broken down. Very very upset. And then he rang me one morning and I was so over the moon to talk to him and everything.

Track 2

[00:00:00] And he then confessed to me that he had always fancied me and this conversation got weirder and weirder.. to which I was saying. Well, I don't think you did. I don't understand what's going on here that wasn't us. But in the course of this conversation, he told me about a conversation he'd had with Alan because when I have an orgasm I sometimes ejaculate a little bit. Alan had told him! I'd forgotten all about this and it came up in the conversation and Scott in this weird conversation that I had with him; what was a whole inappropriate conversation that he started and its why we don't talk anymore - (Not just that but other things that happened after) told me about this and I was going oh my God I cannot believe Alan told you that. I was absolutely horrified. But I do and I you know, I said I had that relationship with the man who I actually was .. went on and off out with him for about five years and we are still friends, but he's in another relationship now.

Diana: Is that the man that you didn't kiss?

Olivia: No, no that that man. I never spoke to him again.

Diana: Which man was it?

Olivia: This man is a guy I did a bit of this online dating and I met him and I really wasn't very sure about him and .. but it and it took me about two years to really feel comfortable with him. And then eventually [laughs] I realized I didn't actually really fancy him that much.

Diana: Ah. I remember.

Olivia: I thought well he is a nice man and he was nice with the children. And so I kept going out with him for a bit longer then [00:02:00] I realized .. no I don't. So I finished it with him. And then I saw him again after a few months and things happened between us but he was in a relationship. So he then sort of ended up finishing that relationship, but it got really complicated then my husband died. And I think he didn't want to be lumbered with kids that .. it's a very complicated story. Anyway, when I did get this man started to feel comfortable with this, man and yeah, I suppose I did kind of realize. Yeah, I mean it I did used to orgasm with my husband but with this guy I kind of realized I could orgasm in a different way. I can organize orgasm two ways which just sounds a bit weird, but I kind of know what I mean in my head. So

Diana: So there's a clitoral orgasm and there's a vaginal orgasm. So ..

Olivia: I possibly have not thought about it in that way. But yes, that probably is a good way of saying it actually and so yeah, so I was horrified that this Alan had told [laughs] my friend and .. Oh my God. So anyway, so yeah, that was a little bit of a weird experience.

This was one of the few interviews where female orgasm was discussed. This kind of question would possibly have come up more frequently if participants had been interviewed for longer and/or in their own homes. This contrasts with the idea that remote interviewing is a vehicle for more intimate revelations, but remote interviews are much shorter than face-to-face interviews for several reasons; it is more difficult, for example, to take a short break and come back to the interview, it feels like a telephone call rather than a house-call, and it felt more like a formal scheduled meeting than a visit over several hours. This meant that sometimes rapport was more difficult to establish.

Olivia describes the invasion of privacy that she felt when she discovered that Scott and Alan had discussed the way she orgasms. She also seemed to be unaware of the two types of female orgasm that have been described in literature, and my interjection about clitoral and vaginal orgasms was a spontaneous gesture on my part to address the discomfort she felt from not fully understanding her body and of being violated. This reinforces the wider point about continued sexual/bodily ignorance well past the frankness of the 1960s. Olivia spends a lot of time in the above extract talking about the complicated nature of her relationships with men, but also leaving out much of the story, *it's a very complicated story*.

This extract also contains a very significant element for oral history, namely, that Olivia recalls an event in her life that she has *very strangely [...] just thought about*, which demonstrates how sometimes an intervention by an oral historian can stimulate a different train of thought from a rehearsed life story. Also noteworthy is Olivia's willingness to talk to a particular researcher about this very intimate matter. It shows that someone who is deemed trustworthy is given the authority to ask these questions.

The extract also gives us a glimpse into the relationship between these two men who both liked her and talked about intimate details of sex with each other. Although outside the scope of

this project, one can speculate about the power dynamics between them, as described by Eve Sedgwick in her book 'Between Men: English literature and Male Homosocial Desire.'¹⁰¹

Shirley: *And that was the start of my .. that was the start .. I'm forty-eight, I'm forty-nine now, but forty-eight! That was start of my understanding and my learning about my sexuality properly and it was delicious.*

This declaration seems to be linking sexuality to taking real pleasure in one's body, rather than being about the times Shirley had sex before reaching the age of forty-eight. It implies a landing in her body and an acceptance of what gives her pleasure. By articulating this thought, she is also clarifying in general terms, how the women understand intuitively what their husbands feel when they express their sexuality by having sex with men. *It was delicious.* And contrastingly, what they then deduce about what sex was like for their ex-husbands with them.

Diana: *So we started talking about sexuality and ..*

Shirley: *Okay. So where I am with sexuality and discovering myself, I just ended up with Andy and we.. I enjoy sex. I did enjoy sex with him. [00:58:16] I think he enjoyed it with me, but I was also aware that there was something not quite .. and I couldn't put my finger on what it was and then obviously meeting this other guy. Which I was getting like a chemistry from .. and then I was taking that home he was in my head and not my husband or my husband to be .. even at the time, but I was too scared to challenge it. Just thinking you've got a good fella here, you know. Shirl, you're getting married. Shirl, what are you doing? So sexually we just .. I don't think we were very experimental but you know we weren't just dead boring. I'm always always curious and I was happy to start buying toys and things, you know, and he probably felt a little bit put out by that but I don't know. I think one of the things .. and this has come up this year because since TGT¹⁰² last year I have had - I've had a lovely little fling with somebody. I had a one-night stand with somebody.*

Shirley is now much more aware of her sexuality since her marriage ended. This is evidence for, among other things, how young women were not prioritising their sexual satisfaction when they were looking for a husband, but how older, more experienced women do recognise that sexual compatibility with a partner is more important. Her sexual fantasy about the *other guy* suggested to her that something was not quite right with her husband sexually, but she was *too scared to*

¹⁰¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men : English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 21.

¹⁰² The gay thing

challenge it. This indicates that Shirley felt that her sexual fantasies were problematic as well as showing that she could not discuss sex and intimacy openly with her husband, and finally, that discovering that her husband was gay enabled her to reconnect with these memories and view them in an empowering way.

Patricia: *I just feel a bit boringly that I don't fit into this sort of exploring your sexuality kind of construct that a lot of teenagers nowadays seem to think is what they need to do and I find that quite bizarre, and I'm sure there are plenty out there who are but it seems to be a very popular.. that sounds awful. It sounds like a very popular thing at the moment; to have this period of exploring your sexuality in [00:18:04] a way that I'm not sure I.. even existed for me in that sense. I mean, I guess exploring sexuality in the sense of dressing up and going out. - maybe it's different for women than it is for men. Women have much more options in clothing and attitudes and that sort of stereotypical role of a woman isn't a role that is.. well it's a role that women can either embrace or they can choose not to. In a way, I think men have it potentially a bit harder because those stereotypes are there still of them being that sort of provider. Even friends where the man has earned less than the woman find it really difficult to cope with and it's it's almost like we need a gender revolution in the sense of men becoming less constrained to their gender stereotypes I guess but I think I'm just waffling on now.*

Patricia has clearly encountered young people and read media articles that discuss attitudes about more fluid ideas about gender and sexuality. There is now a shift in our culture to think of more permeable boundaries within sexuality and gender. However, the women in my study have largely continued to live by strongly dichotomised gender and sexuality definitions. This demonstrates that lived experience can lag behind opinions expressed in the media and politically. It shows that changes that gain traction intellectually have to battle against entrenched beliefs that are bundled with generational attitudes and mindsets. Parents and families act as repositories of traditional values and from a young age, people are pressured to conform rather than buck the system. Michelle Wolkomir writes about this in her work on heteronormative reconciliation in mixed-orientation marriages in the USA where couples decide to stay married when one of the partners comes out as gay.¹⁰³ She observes that what was once considered deviant is normalized and the gay

¹⁰³ Wolkomir, *Making Heteronormative Reconciliations: The Story of Romantic Love, Sexuality, and Gender in Mixed-Orientation Marriages*, p. 495.

'other' becomes accepted as part of a heteronormative reconciliation. Patricia is one of the most religious of my participants and is also probably on the best terms with her ex-husband, but she also admits elsewhere that she has found it difficult to *move on* from her marriage.

Ingrid: *You know being married for 25 years to someone who doesn't really notice you as a woman and never makes love to you in the in in the truest sense and who .. It definitely does something to your psyche I think. Yeah, and it happens gradually, gradually over time, [00:36:05] you know, you hard .. you hardly notice that you're disappearing .. or the womanly part of you is disappearing.*

Ingrid's words show how attached the idea of womanhood is with that of the male gaze. It speaks about the connection between being seen and having agency. The male gaze is not just about what the female body represents to the male beholder, but what is felt when the man and woman's eyes meet. Perhaps Ingrid feels invisible because she identifies with her femininity, which is not being validated by her husband. At the same time, by not having her femininity acknowledged, she feels dismissed and ignored. Her personhood is wrapped up in her being *noticed as a woman*. The above quote is echoed by many of the participants; the feeling of disappearing or being erased is about not being seen as a woman.

Candy: *He was lovely, he was really lovely. He was very what's the word respectful and I'm very affectionate and I particularly remember actually we're after we'd had our first child and that's always quite scary. I think having well, I don't know I was a little bit anxious about having sex after giving birth and he was particularly really very communicative and you know checking I was okay and very just really nice about that whole thing. So yeah, he's you know, and he's never made me feel like I was in the wrong which obviously I wasn't but I think it's easy for them to try and pass the blame, but I did feel my immediate reaction when I found out which I think he found really hard was I didn't want him to see me naked. So when I found out it was a very difficult time.*

Time it was on a Sunday in the next day. I was leading a trip to France with some year sixes and I couldn't not go and so I went and cried a lot and when I got back I realized that you know, my daughter was in the middle of her GCSEs and there's no way we could do anything. We couldn't say tell anybody we went to counselling but without telling the children.

And we couldn't tell them for six weeks. So we had to carry on sharing the bedroom. And obviously we were talking and we weren't, you know, I wasn't throwing things at him and shouting or anything else. We're trying to work through it, but I just didn't want him to [00:28:07] see me naked and I don't

really know why I didn't but I felt embarrassed of what he'd been looking at thinking that he I suppose. I was thinking he didn't like what he saw and so I didn't want him to see me so

So I would change in the bathroom and until he then he left once we told the children. But yeah, we had six weeks of all that and yeah, I was strange. I was surprised by my reaction, but I was very embarrassed and then I went through that whole feeling of once I started dating. Is anyone going to find me attractive because I kind of blanked out.

The above extract demonstrates that Candy wanted to preserve her naked body for the eyes of someone who finds her attractive and desires her. This suggests that her husband's betrayal of their marriage vows - 'Will you love, comfort, honour and keep her in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others be faithful to her so long as you both shall live?'¹⁰⁴ - means he no longer has marital rights over her body. Her embarrassment seems to point to her feeling inadequate as a woman somehow. When she says *he's never made me feel like I was in the wrong which obviously I wasn't but..* we could interpret her feelings to be about not noticing that she was being lied to or being made a fool of because she was taken in by her husband's seeming pleasure in her body. Again, this points to a view of male sexuality being set very early in life, and that trying to make sense of memories of enjoyable sex with their husbands is problematic for the wives now. In thinking about how we classify sexuality, it is useful to consider Zerubavel and others, whose paper on lumping and splitting describes how we create islands of meaning to categorise concepts as being either the same or different. The subjects in this study have re-arranged the way they categorise their sexuality which has changed the topography of their socio-cultural landscape and where they fit within it.¹⁰⁵ This idea of how meaning is created is central to theories of oral history, memory, and identity.

Mandy: But in some whole experience, our cultural experience is different. So people would say, well he you know, he must be really great at housework. No. He must be really great at cooking. No. He must be really great at dressing nicely. No. He must be great at doing your hair or your makeup or something. No. For me my femininity - I've always known that I was feminine. But I have also .. I was .. I was also brought up not to .. not to rely on that to get me through. So if I went for a job interview or something, I wanted to look professional I wasn't out there to show my legs and and win

¹⁰⁴ England, *The Solemnization of Matrimony*, pp. lxiii, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Eviatar Zerubavel and others, 'Lumping and Splitting', *Sociological Forum*, 11 (1996), p. 422.

people over with my cleavage. But on the other hand, I also wanted to feel like a woman and that does mean taking some care of myself and being complimented at least by my partner on my .. on my assets. So, you know, I .. when I was pregnant I had a great bosom. I really enjoyed [laughs] I really enjoyed showing off, you know bit of cleavage there now .. and it was .. and it was fun. I had fun. Sometimes I would wear really nice dresses but a lot of the time I would just be in trousers and a big jumper or a big sloppy t-shirt or whatever because I was outside a lot doing a lot of practical things. I was always in a rush. Dressing to go to work was challenging for me because I'm also a hi- I'm actually five foot ten and it's difficult to find clothes when you're not the size .. like a size 6. It's .. it's difficult [00:16:03] to find clothes that are comfortable and fit when you have broad shoulders and hips at the same time as well as a bust but not a huge bust. It's very difficult to find clothing that looks good on you without having to spend a lot of money to have it tailored to fit you.

So off my own I would go to work. I would just adopt a very office .. very kind of I guess school uniform, unflattering kind of dress .. dress code because it was so difficult. You know, I was always jealous of men who had you know, they had it easy because they just wore a shirt and tie and some trousers, you know, it was kind of easy for them. Even for the ones that were maybe overweight or the ones that were underweight. You know, you knew what you were wearing every day where as .. as a woman it was hard to be going out and leaving your .. your motherhood behind. And going into the office and pretending to be a professional. But not pretending to be a professional. I'm using that .. that pretending to be .. I was a professional. But I didn't always dress like a professional because of my underlying insecurities and so on about how .. how and who .. like how I was and who I was. I was always certain when we were having sexual relations, you know, like making love .. one thing I was aware of I never received much in terms of appreciation of myself and how I was feeling in those interactions. It .. there was a little bit of you know, you read articles all the time. You should be having this amazing sex. You should be doing this. You should be doing that. I'd try not to pay too much attention to that but on the other hand, it would have been nice to have more attention paid to me and my enjoyment.

What made me feel good, what didn't make me feel good. It felt a little bit like it was all about [00:18:03] just doing it .. getting it done and then you know proving .. or I guess almost proving that proving his masculinity. Oh here we are.

It is a powerful moment where Mandy realises during the interview about what might be going on with her husband's sexual behaviour towards her, which is explored more in Chapter 5. Mandy speaks here about her body under the male gaze when she talks about her cleavage and her bosom and her difficulty looking good. She seems conflicted about performing her sexuality; on the one hand she seems to be saying that if she used her body to get a job then she would be exploitative (both of herself, perhaps, and of the interviewer) and that looking professional meant not showing

herself in an overly sexual way. She talks about her ex-husband as not having the traits that are associated with stereotypical women or gay men. Mandy's dilemma is corroborated by Elizabeth Morgan and Laurel Davis-Delano in their paper which discusses how certain behaviours and mannerisms are enlisted to both identify others' and to signal one's own belonging to either a homosexual or heterosexual group. They also acknowledge how this binary conceptualisation of sexuality renders bisexuality and sexual fluidity invisible. Part of this performance is to signal your sexuality both to members of your own, and members of the opposite, sex.¹⁰⁶ This concept has become more complex in recent years with the debate about transgender identities and the lack of consensus about the meanings of/basis of gender and sexuality. It is unclear what views and beliefs are deemed to be prejudicial about gender stereotypes and sexuality.

Alison: *My mother would be saying well if you just could lose weight then you could .. we could do this or we could do that. Whereas its life should just be life without having to be thin or fat or whatever but I you know, that's not what I was taught.*

Alison's plea that *life should just be life without having to be being thin or fat* is a feminist call to action. It is noteworthy here because her mother seems to genuinely believe that losing weight will open doors for her. Patriarchal power is demonstrated when its objectification of women's bodies is adopted and policed *by women*.

Alison: *But, I couldn't I just couldn't take it anymore with the getting all ... just not knowing what was going on. And why are you being this way. And also not having you know, we had a sexual relationship obviously, but you know when I was 40 that died a death. Supposedly he was impotent, you know, and I'm like, well, I was understanding as women are. You know, we go to the doctors and we sort ourselves out. No question of him going to sort that out. Well, we clearly don't have a problem elsewhere. But you know, I couldn't give him what he wanted. But now that he couldn't give me what I needed. You know, there was no question of a lot of people say things like well, loads of people are not having sex? You know, I said, I'm forty!*

*No, and even at eighty I think I'll still be interested thank you very much.
[laughs] You know, and he was making me out to be a freak and I'm totally*

¹⁰⁶ Myra Macdonald, *Representing Women : Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), pp. 69, 179-80; Elizabeth M. Morgan and Laurel R. Davis-Delano, 'Heterosexual Marking and Binary Cultural Conceptions of Sexual Orientation', *Journal of Bisexuality*, 16 (2016), pp. 125-26.

'you're not giving me what I need' and 'you should be interested in what my page has got written on it not just me looking at your page and filling everything in for you. We should be on each other's page. You just you've just turned my page over and ignored it.'

Here, Alison recognises that she has sexual needs that her husband is not fulfilling and does not seem to be interested in meeting. The idea that her husband was *making her out to be a freak* for wanting sex, cuts to the belief - that feminists across the twentieth century sought to challenge - that women do not desire sex and do not have sexual needs. This is an example of societal gaslighting of women played out in a personal relationship. It also shows how Alison feels ignored sexually and unable to privilege their sexual needs in their marriage. The Madonna/whore constellation where women are seen as asexual mothers inside the marriage but as sexually available if they are single, is a convenient framework for the way women imagine their husbands might view them.¹⁰⁷ This is in marked contrast to the way their husbands appear to see themselves because they have been shown to conduct extra-marital sexual liaisons - both gay and straight alike.

Diana: *Thank you for that. So I just want to say .. you don't have to answer this question. But do you it's do you get an opportunity to enjoy your body by yourself?*

Candy: *I have done. Yes, and I did in my early teens as well. So I kind of know what I want and it's interesting [00:32:07] because I would often tell him what I wanted and he was happy to listen and he might then do what I wanted once and then he'd forget or forget. I don't know choose to forget there wasn't any you know was just how I like to be touched and yeah, it didn't seem to stick what I was telling him. But funnily enough. I never really did while I was married with him. I don't think, maybe the very odd occasion if he was away, but very rarely. But yeah, and I'm not comfortable with that at all. I don't know why because I discuss it with friends, you know, we all joke about it and it all seems all of them do and have toys and things and so I have explored that since I've been with him, but I've always got at the back of my head that it .. I think I kind of think if I'm having to do that then I'm sad and lonely. I think that's what I associate it with, whereas my friends don't. They've all got lovely relationships, well not all of them, but you know those and it they don't seem to associate it that way and I do. It almost makes me feel sad that I would have to do that. But I did when we first split up because I seem to have a very high sex drive when we first split up. It was like, you know, when you can't have something that you want and it was it was very difficult. So I did then and I think that's when I .. had been chatting with*

¹⁰⁷ For more reading on this topic see Estela V. Welldon, 'Mother, Madonna, Whore : The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood', (1992).

friends and realized that you know, I was just being silly and it's perfectly okay.

The above clip is the most intimate and vulnerable discussion of masturbation from any of my participants. It is evidential of the conflict that women have about giving men power over their sexual pleasure and then it not being used, or not being valued. Candy recognises the social acceptability of masturbation but does not claim it for herself. Her willingness to show her vulnerability here in the interview, is part of what makes this project so rewarding and meaningful. Research into women's sexual pleasure and their relationship with their bodies, has been far behind that of men, though there has been more published in recent years.¹⁰⁸ Considering that Candy was critical of her husband's ability to pleasure her, but then began to explore masturbation when she was single *when you can't have something that you want*, I think this is evidence that what she wanted was the physical intimacy which comes with sex with another, and that the pleasure she got from masturbation was totemic of that intimacy.

Diana: So how is your relationship now? And can you come can you talk a bit about your relationship with your body and your femininity and your sexuality now and how it was in your marriage?

Wendy: It's still poor, if I'm honest . It's getting better. I've never seen myself as a sexual object or a woman. Never. Some of that was growing up – I'm tall, I'm skinny by nature stuck out like a sore thumb. Bean pole I suppose when I was growing up. I always felt a bit self-conscious I think and then obviously because he hasn't been interested really in me in that way - sort of acted along and I mean over the years while we were together I .. I bought underwear 'try and sort of get him interested and the response would be .. it'll look better on the floor. [01:22:09] a-ha [mirthless laugh] Okay. I would get all dressed from coming into work when you know, especially when the kids were little and you know most time he'd come in and I'd be covered in baby sick or bits of dribble or whatever, and I would make an effort when he came in. I will try I mean I always had the tea on the table when he came in from work it was you know, he didn't have to do anything cause I stayed at home and looked after the kids and I looked after him and the house. Quite an old-fashioned view I suppose but that's what I did. But I would get myself ready, do me hair and put some nice clothes on. He wouldn't even notice. He wouldn't notice so I would go upstairs. Sort of

¹⁰⁸ Nancy Friday, *My Secret Garden* (Rosetta Books LLC, 1973); Shere Hite, *The Hite Report : On Female Sexuality* (London: Pandora, 1989); Ian Kerner, *She Comes First: The Thinking Man's Guide to Pleasuring a Woman* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008); Emily Nagoski, *Come as You Are : The Bestselling Guide to the New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life* (Brunswick: Scribe, 2015).

hurt, but not say anything, put a pair of dirty old joggers and a t-shirt, go back downstairs and he wouldn't even notice I'd been and changed.

The above narrative could have come from the 1950s or 1960s. Instead, the events it describes happened in the mid 2010s. One of the things it highlights is that gender roles of men having paid work outside of the home and the women having unpaid work inside the home are still perniciously clung to by some couples in spite of the social changes of recent decades as written about by Dolly Smith Wilson.¹⁰⁹ Smith Wilson writes about the larger social trend for married women to work but the controversies that she wrote about in the 1950s and 1960s have not entirely disappeared. The participants in this study still spoke vociferously about the unfair sharing of domestic work and the assumption that they would be the ones who stayed at home and looked after the children while their husbands performed community functions requiring evening meetings, such as school governors or town council members. Wendy speaks about not being seen by her husband, and the feeling of depersonalisation that she has because her husband does not notice what she is wearing. This element of testing the husband to see if he notices would possibly be due to having the sense that something is not all it seems in the marriage. The need to be seen, noticed, and appreciated has not been met here, with the result that Wendy feels hurt, *but* [does not] *not say anything*. The reason for not saying anything might be to avoid conflict or it acknowledges that by asking to be seen, one cheapens the act and it no longer fulfils the function of meeting those needs.

NEGATIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SELFHOOD AND SEXUALITY

Inappropriate touching by a caregiver in a woman's childhood might result in detachment from her body and a sense of numbness and non-arousal during sex. Suzanne Lemieux and Sandra Byers have written that child sexual abuse can lead to voluntary sexual abstinence.¹¹⁰ This then results in a lack

¹⁰⁹ Smith Wilson, *A New Look*, pp. 207-08.

¹¹⁰ Suzanne R. Lemieux and E. Sandra Byers, 'The Sexual Well-Being of Women Who Have Experienced Child Sexual Abuse', *Psychology of women quarterly*, 32 (2008), p. 126.

of interest in sex which can be used to define oneself as 'asexual'. The history of sexuality has accommodated narratives of female disinterest in sex but has not made the connection that one of the results of a negative childhood sexual experience might be the type of woman who could find herself in a non-sexual marriage with a homosexual man. Historians have tended to look at the sexuality of individuals in isolation rather than as an entangled interconnection between two people. See, for example, the discussion of sexual anaesthesia and frigidity in Cryle and Moore.¹¹¹

However, once a marriage has taken place, a woman who has suffered from childhood sexual trauma might begin to feel safe enough to try to explore a loving and intimate sex life with her husband, beginning to repair and process the earlier trauma. When these women attempt to rehabilitate themselves sexually because they begin to seek a full and satisfying life, they encounter a confusing lack of enthusiasm from their closeted gay husband.

Childhood sexual trauma is pervasive and unfortunately very common and women have developed many different ways of processing it and healing from it. Susan Bewley and Jan Welch estimate that as many as 30% of women have experienced some form of childhood sexual trauma (not necessarily penetrative), according to 'population based studies in developed countries'.¹¹² The history of marriage has not taken into account this possible form of mutual meeting of needs in a marriage; the husband using his wife's perceived lack of sexual interest to conceal his sexuality and to raise a family, and the wife using it as a means to protect herself from unwanted sexual advances. Bonnie Kaye has written about how women were seduced by men who were thought to be kind and understanding about their need to abstain from penetrative sex.¹¹³ Women did not question why their boyfriends found this easy, or why they wanted to marry them in spite their lack of interest in sex. They were relieved to find someone that they thought understood them and loved them for who they were.

¹¹¹ P. Cryle and A. Moore, 'Frigidity : An Intellectual History', (2011), p. 194.

¹¹² Susan Bewley and Jan Welch, *Abc of Domestic and Sexual Violence* (West Sussex, England: John Wiley & Sons : BMJ Books, 2014), p. 22.

¹¹³ Bonnie Kaye, *Straight Wives: Shattered Lives* (USA: CCG Publishing, 2008).

Therefore, questions about childhood sexual trauma came up in the interviews. The following clips reveal some of the stories, but this is a small subset of all women who have experienced childhood sexual trauma, and not all the participants mentioned having any negative sexual experiences. There are many different ways that people adapt after difficult or challenging childhood experiences. The stories reflect how recent attitudes have made women more able to talk about them.

Carrie: *There was some sexual abuse from my dad as well when I was about seven. So and I guess that's a strange one because me and my dad have a relationship now, which a lot of people don't understand. Like back when I was around that age. I'd say something happened; inappropriate touch - probably on about [00:16:02] four occasions. There was no penetration or anything like that but then after them four occasions I'd say that he was a normal dad after that. And after they split up I'd go with my brother every week to see him and it would be just like normal. Like he did nothing ever after that and then I did confront him when I was about 14 about what happened and we did have that out in the open and he apologized and .. but I've kind.. I want to say brushed it under the carpet, but I feel like I've dealt with that and moved on. I don't feel like I need to .. need that to affect my life in any way and I think it's people that that know about that say, 'How can you have a relationship with him now? I don't understand. Especially my mum because she knows. She don't understand what it's like. Well it's a really hard to explain but I said to them even though that happened there was many many years following that that was normal and it was like, how do I just one day say, 'I remember this now'. So I'm falling out with you. I don't know it's really hard to try and explain to somebody else who hasn't experienced that so I would say that now we're not particularly close, but we're we're on good terms and we do see each other regular but at the same time I'm very very mindful of him being around my daughter who's nine. I don't let them alone for any time. Not even in the same room together, so that is still affecting me in that way because even though I've forgiven what has happened. I've never forgot it. I think that's part of the reason I became a social worker as well because of issues with my mum and my dad.*

Carrie talks about her childhood with her psychotic, depressed mother and her abusive father and attempts to normalise it. It can be painful to both read and listen to this account, but important to recognise her need to tell her story and to process her experience as a child and her stance as an adult. She voices the difficulty with reconciling her father's good behaviour with his unforgiveable behaviour and attempting to negotiate her relationship with him. She is possibly expressing a need for absolution from continuing to love her father in spite of him performing the kind of acts that she would find abhorrent if he committed them with her own child. Early sexual abuse has life-long

effects on women, and this short transcript contains so much to corroborate this.¹¹⁴ When she discloses her experiences to others, she then also has to explain her stance to them, especially her mother - *she don't understand what it's like*. She distances herself from what happened to her by minimising its impact - *I won't let it affect my life*, however she acknowledges that it had a profound impact by stating that it was why she became a social worker as well as saying that she will never let her nine-year-old daughter be alone with her father. It appears that what she meant is that it won't *negatively* affect her life. This is true of Cheryl as well;

Cheryl: *I was raped when I was 16. I had been up to London to meet a friend after .. it was after my O-levels and I've been up to London to meet a friend for the day. I came back down to home. It was daylight. It was late afternoon. I missed my bus. There's only one bus in and out of the village or to actually not to the village, to a mile away from the village. So I thought well, I'll go for a walk along the [00:22:02] canal. Shops all down one side of the canal just tow path down the other side, but it's daylight, you know, it's the middle of the day it's like four o'clock in the afternoon or something. You think that's quite safe and a man came along grabbed me from behind and strangled me and raped me and, and left me and people on the other side of the bank and nobody did anything so that was a bit .. very horrific.*

[...]

The thing that my mum did first straight away was she said to me said in God's eyes. You're exactly the same today as you were yesterday. You're no different you're just as pure you're just as precious. You're just as valuable. And that [00:28:05] was very profound for me and it had a really big effect on me. So and I think also my attitude very much was I wasn't going to let him win. And I think if I felt very much that I let it affect other things in my life that was him winning and that was him having power over me that I wasn't prepared to let him have. And as I say many ways actually found the police worse because the police said oh, the police said are you pregnant and saying you're raped because you're pregnant and don't want to tell your parents. I wasn't pregnant. I just like to say. You know, and and that was really hurtful and in a way almost more violating which is an odd thing to say, but for me, they were casting aspersions on my character and I found that a lot worse.

Cheryl went on to become a strong advocate for changing police rape procedure and has worked extensively with young rape victims. Her story is poignant because it shows how traumatic the encounter with the police was; *almost more violating*. It is therefore unsurprising that she married a

¹¹⁴ Amongst others; Bewley and Welch, *Abc of Domestic and Sexual Violence*, p. 21.

gay man perhaps to subconsciously protect herself from any more sexual attention. Cheryl's story is sadly echoed by scholars such as Emma Sleath and Ray Bull, whose paper included the following distressingly similar quote taken from a rape victim speaking about her experience with the police:

About three days after it happened I was up at the station talking with (the detectives) and they turned around and said 'come on Kathleen, we know you are making this up. We know you were having an affair and you were having sex that morning and it all got a bit rough and you made all this up so your husband doesn't find out'¹¹⁵

This seemingly prejudicial treatment of rape victims by the police is yet another area into which my research has unexpectedly led. It should also be acknowledged that there is controversy over the use of the word 'victim' instead of the word 'survivor'. 'Victim' is used here because, according to Aanchal Setia and Seiun An, the word victim encourages more empathy – it 'elicits more compassion and sympathy' - for the person who has been raped, whereas the word survivor connotes strength, which, subtly exerts a patriarchal directive masquerading as a feminist exhortation that women should be strong and are not permitted to show weakness.¹¹⁶ They explain that male rape victims have also had to contend with prejudiced attitudes from the police. Two of my participants mentioned that their ex-husbands had told them that they had been raped to get them to take an STI test. It is therefore understandable, but no more justifiable, that police could be exposed to this type of lie and follow the line of questioning that Cheryl reported.

Penny: Three years before of my marriage ended, he .. he said that there'd been an accident in [surgical] theatre and they'd all had to be tested and it turns out that he tested positive for syphilis and I.. I needed to go and get checked and I said, how did you.. how could you have got syphilis from an operation? And he said well actually, you know, and I've never told anyone this before but I was raped as a teenager. I was fifteen and.. and he explained what had happened. And and so this is this is you know, it's latent syphilis. So I was like, okay. Well, you know, that's fine because that was 10 years before we met and, and I'll be fine. And he said yes, but you know, they're insisting you go to a sexual health clinic. So I went along [00:18:07] and fortunately for

¹¹⁵ Emma Sleath and Ray Bull, 'Police Perceptions of Rape Victims and the Impact on Case Decision Making: A Systematic Review', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 34 (2017), p. 103.

¹¹⁶ Aanchal Setia and Seiun An, 'Victim Vs. Survivor: The Effect of Labels and Consensual Sexual Behaviour on Observers' Perceptions of Sexual Assault', *The Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 28 (2022), p. 104.

me, clearly, they didn't believe his story and I was given medication even though I swabbed negative.

Elaine: And and I mean, it's all pretty sick to be honest like, because he's actually he works in rape crime as a policeman and his first version of the truth, truth was and that he had been on a stag do so he this is pure, this is a lie like, But he said to me he was on a stag do a couple of months beforehand and in a hotel and he needed to get some water and he went to the reception [00:06:03] to get water in the middle of the night and apparently two girls said to him oh, we've got water in our room. He went into their room, chatting, fell asleep and woke up and like basically they were or one of them was doing whatever to him like, so he insinuated to me that he had been the victim of a sexual crime.

And obviously this is my new husband. I thought, my God like there's no way he would be fabricating this especially given the work that he does, do you know? Like it's that would be beyond words like so I said, why didn't you tell me I can't believe that happened two months ago. And we need to contact the hotel. We can get CCTV. We can you know search surely there's some sort of way that we can identify these people you need to ring the police and all the rest of it and he had always said to me; if him or any of his family were the victim of sexual crime he wouldn't report it because it's so hard to get a conviction and and I'm looking back. I wonder I mean was this just him planting like, you know, sowing little seeds that if ever he needed to fall back on that story or whatever. But anyway, so that was okay and it was all a bit crazy and I went home that night and went to bed and went to sleep and he woke me up then at about 3 o'clock in the morning. And he said and I need to tell you something else. It was the same story but it was actually two men. Who .. this still happened? So, yeah. [cries] So that was okay. I was like hugging him. I couldn't believe it. I was like, oh my God, that's the most horrific thing I've ever heard, you know, [00:08:03] whatever. Why didn't you tell me? We need to go to see somebody you need to go see a counsellor. That's so traumatic and all the rest of it. And then the next day I got up and went to work. I was in work all day and I was.. I was texting him.

And I said to him just please just tell me if this is the truth. Please tell me if there's more to this. Please don't make a fool out of me like I just can't. And then over text message. He, he kind of admitted that he was a bit curious. And actually he said I could have pushed them off a bit quicker or whatever. So again, he still made out as if he'd got himself into a situation, but actually it wasn't really his fault and it just happened type thing. And then he picked me up from work and I just kept saying to him, tell me if there's more to it. Like please just you know, tell me the full story and then it turned out that that was an entire lie.

The above accounts are disturbing because they show the levels of deceit that my participants had to endure. These experiences should not be minimised, but to the extent that they are (confabulated) stories of male sexual assault, admittedly told by women, they fall outside the scope of this project, and are mentioned as a counterpoint to the female rape narrative and in response to the above-mentioned literature on police response to rape. This project is, nevertheless, about

women's lived experience.¹¹⁷ They are also stories that point to the very complicated relationship that men have with their sexuality and their masculinity.¹¹⁸

Frankie: Around the age of four or five me and my sister had some sort of sexual assault from a stranger in the village where we were growing up in Cambridgeshire. And that has affected me hugely, you know and even though I didn't .. I wasn't consciously aware that I knew I felt creepy around the idea of being naked and just all sorts of all sorts of funny things, you know, just that didn't feel right. Then in my very early twenties. I had a friend, shall we say who was .. he got drunk one night and still drunk in the morning. He came into my room and I don't know whether I would class it as ... I had such low self-esteem. I don't know if I can even class it as date rape, but somewhere between date rape and making .. taking massive advantage of some .. of something that I didn't want to do it that moment and certainly didn't want to do without protection. So that actually made [00:34:02] me decide to be celibate for a good couple of years, you know and and have an HIV test as well so that.. It was a very unpleasant unpleasant experience that knocked me massively.

[..]

Diana: Have you ever thought about whether you're a lesbian?

Frankie: Okay. Basically I've always felt very much heterosexual. I've always .. I suppose always had friends who are gay. Got a lots of lesbian friends, gay friends. There's times. I thought it'd be nice for could have been a lesbian because I think life would be you know, one of my close friends now is and she got life with her big great. But I'm just I'm just not and just you know when I'm glad I fancy men, so that I don't think there's any part of me that that is lesbian at all.

Frankie is another example of someone who was not interested in sex due to a childhood sexual trauma. Lesbianism came up because it follows that if one is not feeling sexual attraction towards a man, one wonders whether one is attracted to women. These thoughts describe the complicated way our bodily sexual sensations are incorporated into our identity. At each point in history, cultural norms expose us to a limited number of ways to explain ourselves. The accounts above took place

¹¹⁷ For interesting reading about the topic of lying, I recommend Lisa Bortolotti, 'Stranger Than Fiction: Costs and Benefits of Everyday Confabulation', *Rev Philos Psychol*, 9 (2018), pp. 227-49.

¹¹⁸See: Sabo and Gordon, *Men's Health and Illness: Gender, Power, and the Body*; Robert William Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); Kimmel, *Misframing Men: The Politics of Contemporary Masculinities*; Helen Smith, *Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England, 1895-1957* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Delap, *Feminism, Masculinities*.

before the discussion of transgender/homophobia dichotomies and are evidence that popular culture is referenced as a framework to situate problematic feelings.

The following question, which was only asked once, goes to one of the central ideas of this thesis concerning the work of a failed marriage in redeeming its parties. Nicole Alea suggested this question in her paper by writing about how ‘individuals express the positive and negative emotions they felt during an event and since, after reflecting on the experience.’¹¹⁹ The topic is referred to again in Chapter 5.

Diana: *Do you feel, considering the sexual trauma in your childhood? And do you feel that there was something redemptive about the person you chose to marry in terms of experiencing your body as not very sexual?*

Frankie: *Well, that must have hit the nail on the head as I can actually feel tears in my eyes welling up when you say that. There's a something I don't know. Redemptive isn't the word I'd have thought but I have already thought about this and you know, because I've been in therapy nearly a year and had bits of therapy before, I think that subconsciously, I what I had thought is subconsciously I chose someone who wasn't very sexually demanding. Yeah. And I think I chose someone soft and gentle. I thought was soft and gentle and wouldn't abuse me. Because I think I've always been a bit split in that part of me is quite sexual and part of me is a complete prude and the complete opposite of sexual. So I think part of me found him safe. And I wanted just to have a sex life, but then there's like half of me did and half of me wanted just to curl up and go to sleep and have a hug. Yeah, so I think what happened is that half of me, the prude who wanted to curl up and have a hug became bigger. And the sexual siren became smaller during [00:54:07] the course, but I definitely think yeah, that redemptive .. wish I'd put that in my essay now, wish I'd spoken to you two weeks ago. That's a great word. It's a great word. Redemptive. Yeah, because from that early experience that made me feel so horrible and then from those early sexual, chosen sexual experiences that made me feel so horrible. And I do believe in karma and then he's in some level, I just thought yeah, I picked a sexless marriage, you know, I put .. it wasn't like that at the beginning. But yeah, and I do believe we know things much more deeply than we think we do and we project things and we attract things so I think yeah that absolutely resonates.¹²⁰*

I can actually feel tears in my eyes welling up when you say that is a sign of emotions being recruited as part of remembering the lived experience in the now, and attaching meaning and a different

¹¹⁹ Alea, *Does the Life Story Interview Make Us Make Sense*, p. 272.

¹²⁰ For more information on this topic see: Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* Kindle edn (Penguin, 2014), Loc. 1183.

(positive) emotion (that of validity and groundedness) to what was first remembered as disempowering and negative. She demonstrates an ability to be connected to her body and what it is telling her. When Frankie says that she *picked a sexless marriage* it is an example of the 'somatic experiencing' that Bessel van der Kolk writes about.

Candy was inappropriately kissed by an adult family member when she was fourteen. She goes on to talk about feeling uncomfortable about being seen naked.

Diana: *Okay. So another question that you don't have to answer. Would .. did you have any inappropriate sexual experiences when you were growing up?*

Candy: *Yes, I did. Actually I don't dwell on them very much, but I just had one .. a cousin whose husband. It wasn't anything really major. But basically we .. twice he kissed me in an inappropriate manner once was we'd gone to stay at their house [00:42:11] and my mum and dad had gone to bed and so it .. my cousin .. and I was sleeping downstairs in the lounge on the sofa and he was just locking up and locking the back door and turning the lights off and he came to give me a kiss goodnight. And basically it was a proper kiss with tongues and I was 14 and you know, so it was you know inappro- but I didn't say .. I just remember being quite shocked by it and then he did it again at my brother's wedding in a less discreet manner really, but I don't think anyone else saw it. And I think we must have been outside by a bar or something and he kissed me.*

The above experience could be evidence for her marriage to a gay man being partly reactive to over-sexualisation as a teenager. Inappropriate sexual behaviour causes a multitude of different reactions, but the contention here, is that some who, as well as having experienced a trauma, have complicated relationships with their parents - not being able to process the trauma with them - and with their own bodies - splitting off and detachment - feel comfortable and relaxed with men who are not sexually attracted to them. It evokes trust, when a natural instinct is to distrust men as sexual predators. There is a desire that these men understand them and recognise their vulnerability.

Anna: *Okay, so I was 15 and I had my leg in plaster up [01:06:32] to my knee from having.. it what turned out to be a tumour in my Achilles tendon, but they used to put my .. they thought my Achilles tendon was too short and because I was too young and not fully grown. They would not operate on me. So to relieve the pressure periodically, they would put my leg in plaster for six weeks. Anyway, one of these times I was 15 and out and about in the little town I lived in.. smallest town in England I grew up in and Friday night there was a whole group of us in the pub. And I felt really ill.*

And I now I know it was because somebody had been putting vodka in my drink and I didn't ..I've never really.. I didn't drink alcohol and I know it's only 15, but it went on and I didn't like the taste of it. I didn't like what.. how it made me feel so and so ..one of my friends or one of the group said I'll take you for a walk. I was like my dad's coming if he finds me like this he's going to go off his head. So he took me for a walk and he was part of our group of friends and then he got out of hand and I was pushed to the ground and he was trying to force himself on me.

I don't know.. I couldn't have done a lot. I don't think to stop him. I don't know what stopped him. Maybe the fact that I went. as rigid as a plank or that I.. or he came to his senses. I don't know but I got away with it that night albeit a bit bruised and very shaken up by it and thinking, [01:08:32] you know, he's 19 and supposed to be one of our gang of friends. And he asked me not to tell anybody.

And you know, so that's that .. that was probably my first encounter of thinking .. shit. This is going to be it and it's going to be taken from me rather than my choice. But you know as I say wasn't. And then I .. then I started going out with my first proper boyfriend and it didn't happen for a long time. I don't think I was ready because I.. and I would think that that experience that one that previous Friday night. You know that one that one time that left its mark with me.

And as..inex.. completely inexperienced .. not knowing your own body. Anyway, I haven't even started my but I didn't start my periods until I was 3 months off 17.

The above chilling story exemplifies so many themes from women's narratives of sexual assault. The main theme that stood out was the way the man privileged his need to not be found out and how Anna complies with his request not to tell anyone. She felt the weight of responsibility for preventing the attack; *I couldn't have done a lot*. She mentions not starting her periods until she was nearly seventeen, which is extremely late, and this might indicate how traumatised she was. For evidence of normal ages to begin menstruation, see Marcia Herman-Giddens.¹²¹ It is another example of somatic knowing.

Anna: *I can remember being sent over from my PE teacher playing hockey to go and play with the boys for rugby. Er rugby.. because I can't stand hockey and the teacher was so rude to me. I was rude back. So she punished me by having to go and play with the boys at rugby. I had a great time for half the*

¹²¹ Marcia E. Herman-Giddens and others, 'Secondary Sexual Characteristics and Menses in Young Girls Seen in Office Practice: A Study from the Pediatric Research in Office Settings Network', *Pediatrics*, 99 (1997), p. 506.

term. You know. So I don't.. I've never doubted that I am straight. I am straight. I have no desire to be with.. with a woman, but I am not overly feminine.

Anna sees herself as sexual and enjoys sex despite her experience of childhood sexual trauma.

CONCLUSION

Structured questions revealed a large amount of material about bodies and sexuality. The answers can be taken to have different meanings depending on one's perspective. There are surely many ways to interpret these stories, however, these samples of women's testimonies are evidence for the continuing power of gendered patterns of thought in relation to bodies and sexuality, and that many women continued to internalise traditional ideas about appropriate behaviour and appearance. The late twentieth-century feminist challenge to these ideas certainly gave women greater expectations about sexual pleasure, as well as languages and intellectual resources to negotiate with or push back against partners, but this was rarely straightforward and many of the participants felt the power of traditional notions or were constrained by a lack of knowledge about their, and their spouse's, sexuality.

Historiography about women's bodies, sexuality, and femininity point to the mixed messages that women are exposed to from the media about how they 'should' relate to their bodies in a way that privileges men and men's needs. These societal attitudes continue to erode women's confidence in embodying their sense of self and the physicality of being human. Instead they often find themselves lacking when measuring against imaginary ideals, especially of femininity.

We have also seen how women feel ignored sexually by their gay husbands. Patriarchal structures and gaslighting that some women experience alongside the lack of sexual interest create a marriage with little intimacy or mutual respect and understanding. The wife does not feel desired by her husband, and this makes her think there is something wrong with her.

CHAPTER 3 COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades scholars have pointed to evidence of expectations of equality between men and women in marriage. Marcus Collins quotes a reviewer of the British Social Attitudes Survey data, 'there are no gender differences to speak of'.¹²² The survey was conducted in 1991 and painted a picture of spouses making joint decisions and sharing parenting duties. However, as we will see in this chapter, and the next, this pattern has not succeeded in all marriages in the UK. Contrasting with the results of surveys where both husband and wife are interviewed, the following looks at women's experiences of courtship and marriage as they remember their stories. Therefore, the interviews represent a valuable repository of first-hand experiences of women in modern marriages. On the one hand, these are representative of all marriages and on the other, they are unique, and represent a small sub-set of marriages where the husband is – or comes out as – gay. In scholarship such as Claire Langhamer's *The English in Love*, or Kate Fisher and Simon Szreter's *Sex before the sexual revolution*, marriages are presented as standard heterosexual marriages.¹²³

Each woman brought her own expectations and reasons for marrying into the relationship, but my thesis is that once she knows that her husband prefers sex with men, she has framed, or reframed, her narrative to reflect this knowledge. We cannot assume that these stories are unique to women married to gay men, or that they are any different from the courtships undergone by couples who go on to stay married or those who get divorced for other reasons. However, there are some striking elements to these marriages, which the women, themselves, were very eager to talk about. The manner in which a marriage ends offers a chance to review events in either a positive or negative light. I postulate that one of the ways to receive these stories is to remember that had the

¹²² Collins, *Modern Love*, p. 214.

¹²³ Langhamer, *The English in Love*, p. 4; Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963*, loc. 752.

same (negative) events happened in a marriage that went on to endure, they would be offered as amusing anecdotes. *He proposed to me while I was doing the ironing!* might be seen as a lovable, spontaneous, romantic impulse. However, when this very thing happened to Mandy, she related it as preposterous and insulting. Nicole Alea calls this contamination because a positive experience – being proposed to – is sullied by a negative outcome – the husband turning out to be gay.¹²⁴ Alea describes how viewing a life event as contaminated can affect the psychological wellbeing of the narrator.

A second way to view these events is as confirmation of the wrongness of the marriage; an 'A-ha moment' of suddenly being able to reconcile confusing events with a cause that makes perfect sense. 'Of course sex was mechanical - he is gay!' The women in this study repeatedly presented the negative events in their marriages as deriving from their husband's concealing his sexuality, but beneath this interpretation, are stories which contribute to the historiography of marriage in its entirety. Casting the husband as perpetrator and the wife as victim in a simplistic way does not allow for the many factors contributing to the way a marriage is experienced by both parties. It also shows how central these relationships are to the sense of selfhood, in contrast to the marriages looked at by Szreter and Fisher, which were less freighted with meaning.¹²⁵

It is also worth noting that my participants have been recruited from an internet support group. This might influence how they speak about their lives and the words they use, as any cultural context determines the language we use and the meanings we draw from our experiences. Common themes that are brought to the fore might be due to participants being practised in speaking about certain subjects and/or hearing about them from other group members. These topics might be viewed as safe or legitimate ways to speak about their marriages as they might carry the sanctioned authority of the group. Some of the stories elicit an emotion in the hearer, which serves to strengthen a sense of connection or sympathy. This process is what Michael Roper calls

¹²⁴ Alea, *Does the Life Story Interview Make Us Make Sense*, p. 272.

¹²⁵ Szreter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963*.

the unconscious work of history. In a vivid description of an oral history interview, Roper recalls how he forgets to switch on his recorder again after a tea-break thereby failing to record a vivid memory and 'impoverishing the historic record' as a result. He writes that we 'may focus unduly on an account that chimes most readily with our sensibilities, or skip over material that seems to resist our efforts to understand.'¹²⁶ With these words in mind, the extracts that have been used throughout this thesis chimed with this researcher's sensibilities, but it is acknowledged that other material was skipped over.

What happened before the marriage and what do women regard as important events in their pre-marital narrative? Women were eager to tell the stories of their marriage and sketched few details about their lives leading up to it. It was as if the life before marriage was not important, but this could have been due to the way the question was phrased, which was 'Tell me about your life before marriage, how you grew up, your relationships and how you fell in love'. Common biographical details would be the number of siblings, what birth order position they occupied, whether their parents were happily married, and what type of schooling they received. Some talked about their class origins - speaking about the availability or lack of money, what sort of holidays they went on, and whether they were popular at school. With regard to their relationship history they compared the man that they married with past boyfriends.

Once marriage is proposed, if women express ambivalence about marrying, their friends and family are reluctant to say that they don't think the relationship is going to work, but when they do, they are ignored or seen as rude. A few of the men's parents openly spoke about suspecting that their son was gay, only to be closed down with the comment, 'then why is he dating me?'. There is a trope 'the relationship survived in spite of everyone's predictions that it would fail.' And these women are particularly drawn in by the 'rescuer' role. They see a troubled person and think that

¹²⁶ Roper, *The Unconscious Work*, p. 177.

they will be able to 'fix' them with their love. In particular, Jackie marries a man who is eight years younger than she is, who moves into her house with very few possessions and no money of his own.

Most of the narrative would be devoted to the end of the marriage and the behaviours that the husband displayed and how it made them feel. Therefore, very little can be said about the intervening years between getting married and the marriage ending. We can deduce that people lead busy lives; furthering their career, raising children, worrying about how to pay the bills, domestic chores, hobbies, sports, watching TV, and spending very little time thinking about their relationship until something goes wrong.

Anna: *But I wonder if, because..I mean Justin's brother, for example, his wife sits him down once a month to discuss their marriage. How's the last month gone? This is like.. this is like 16 years down the line, you know, and you know.. let's discuss what's going well and what's not going so well. I'm.. that could be a good thing. I don't know, but that's not me.*

The monthly 'state of the marriage' talk that Anna speaks about is striking because of its rarity. No participants mentioned this sort of occurrence in their own marriages. This type of meeting between spouses to discuss their marriage could well have arisen from the increase in popularity of quizzes in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, as well as the increase in availability of marriage counselling. As such, it is symptomatic of the age of self-help. As David Shumway argues, couples have moved away from romance, into a new age of discourse where intimacy is highly prized.¹²⁷ The women in this research group often speak about the lack of intimacy in their marriages, which seems to be a necessary precursor to their story of marriage breakdown and could be symptomatic of contamination theory again. Later, the narratives include moments of intimacy which swiftly blossom and die when the husband comes out to his wife. We will look more closely at the way the marriages end in Chapter 4.

The transcripts that are discussed in this chapter are mainly to do with how the women met their husbands and how the marriages began. The thesis is that there was a complex interplay

¹²⁷ David Shumway, *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), p. 134.

between various factors such as feeling strong empathy for the (then) boyfriend, valuing non-sexual elements of the relationship like companionship and friendship, noticing a marked difference between previous relationships and this one and thus believing it to be 'the one'. It is evident that couples, and particularly women, make decisions about who to marry based on many different factors, and that they ignore very strong indicators that things might not be what they appear to be. As Fisher and Szepter have shown, in the twentieth century, 'young women were encouraged to hold on to unrealistic dreams by contemporary romantic literature' and one can still see this phenomenon in these testimonies.¹²⁸

The testimonies, show how women remember their courtship after they have discovered that their husband is gay. Their stories must necessarily be coloured by their subsequent experience and can be expected to contain more negative elements than the stories of women who stay married. It is important to be mindful of the selective choices that the narrators make in how they frame these events. Nevertheless, certain biographical facts carry discernible weight, such as relative ages, upbringing, circumstances surrounding the marriage, and life events such as deaths of parents. It is not to suggest that all women who experience these specific biographical details are going to marry a gay man, but *after the fact* it is possible to make some statements about how women integrate what they know about themselves into the narrative of their marriage to a gay man. This means that there is a historically valid element, as well as an interpretive element to the following transcripts.

This chapter explores women's negative experiences during their marriages. In the first section it discusses patriarchy and gaslighting - both terms have been the subject of recent scholarship - as a way to understand how memories of courtship and marriage are narrated. This will continue through to the next section which covers the timelines of the courtship, proposal, and marriage. Recovery from marriage to a gay man will be explored in Chapter 4. There is a temptation

¹²⁸ Szepter and Fisher, *Sex before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963*, loc. 5306.

to generalise from personal and interpersonal specifics; here examples are shown from the testimonies where individual women talk about what it feels like to be gaslighted. The participants' stories contain many examples that provoke a response from the reader, which is to do with how women's voices and women's reality are often challenged. Certainly, the women themselves use the word 'gaslighting'. It is a word which empowers women and offers them validation for their feelings of loss of self, as something that has been *done to them*. This idea is problematic though, because it casts women as victims and therefore accuses their husbands of being perpetrators. This model gives rise to adversarial framing of the dynamics between husband and wife, particularly when the marriage has ended in divorce.

Some participants adopt a victim identity in their stories, demonstrating that an adversarial view of a relationship arises at some point.¹²⁹ One way of looking at this is that the anger and stress-fuelled energetic arousal that conflict brings replaces the loving energy which the woman would have described as giving rise to the marriage and provides the impetus to overcome the inertia and stagnation of a loveless relationship.

Therefore, the terms *misogyny*, *patriarchy*, *gaslighting* are predicated on a binary, adversarial, conflict-driven view of society. Us vs them; men vs women. Although gaslighting, as a term, is not implicitly sexed, the heavy ballast of misogyny and patriarchy means that the gravitational pull of oppression and victimhood that women feel and that men appear to contribute to, has, within this project, allowed gaslighting to emerge as seemingly exclusively a male activity *done to* women (and in some cases, children). Whether the men would report having been gaslighted by their wives, or society, would be a topic for more research. Oppressed people(s) - including homosexual men – experience institutional and individual gaslighting, but a discussion of this is outside the boundaries of this project. In Kate Abramson's philosophical discussion on gaslighting, she notes the inherent sexism of gaslighting because gaslighters will use a stereotypically

¹²⁹ Penny, Sharon, Anna, Jackie, Olivia, Alex, Patricia, Mandy, Wendy, and Pauline

gendered feature of an oppressed group in order to undermine their agency. The following examples confirm her argument.¹³⁰ The historical factors at play here can be traced to the complex dynamic between female emancipation and the resulting sense of emasculation by men described by, amongst others, Betty Friedan and R.W. Connell.¹³¹

Language usage greatly influences our world view and the way we position ourselves in our stories. It is difficult to unpack quite how powerfully the discovery of the word 'gaslighting' has shifted my own and my participants' memories of our marriages. Although beyond the scope of this project, the linguistic features of (my) participants' stories are worthy of more analysis.¹³²

Since my work is with families of individual women, I am conscious of the micro-patriarchies that have arisen rather than the macro-patriarchy that is defined by power hierarchies in society. I see a circle of conceptions and a problem with situating events within the circle. This is akin to Hunnicutt's 'language of power'.¹³³ When one person dominates another within a relationship, they determine what language is being spoken at any given time.

So working around the circle, we have: [individual man and woman]->[familial power structures and psychoanalytical framework]->[societal power structures including patriarchal framework]->[overarching ideology concerning biological destiny and ecology]. The term, 'power-terrain' attempts to provide a more nuanced way of looking at this than the traditional 'hierarchical structure' where groups and individuals are seen to occupy a rung on the ladder of power. When visualising a power-terrain, we can begin to locate individuals and groups as relative to each other in more complex networks than one dimensional higher or lower in the structure.

All the above points can be seen to act within the lives of the women in this study.

Although, Hunnicutt provides a useful overview of the theories and problems with using the term

¹³⁰ Kate Abramson, 'Turning up the Lights on Gaslighting', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 28 (2014), p. 3.

¹³¹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, p. 69; Kimmel, *Misframing Men: The Politics of Contemporary Masculinities*, loc. 175.

¹³² Robert & Thomson Perks, Alistair (Eds), *The Oral History Reader (Routledge Readers in History)* 3rd edn (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2015), p. 44.

¹³³ Hunnicutt, *Varieties of Patriarchy*, p. 558.

'patriarchy' - particularly in its discussion of the relationship with power structures in different societies and how they correlate with the amount of violence against women, there are so many factors (economic, religious, race, class etc) which come into play here, that the term 'patriarchy' loses some of its usefulness. Intuitively, the way my participants have experienced their relationships with their husbands takes on a patriarchal appearance, but where women's experiences fit into a particular theory of patriarchy, is more complex than a man exploiting a woman because he is justified *as a man*. The sociological mechanisms at play are beyond the scope of my thesis, which is to argue that some twentieth century historiography of marriage and divorce has failed to consider the experiences of straight women married to gay men. Therefore, the term 'patriarchy' has value in that it highlights deeply entrenched structural inequalities of sex/gender, but that is not sufficient to explain all aspects of social relationships (given other structures/stratifications such as class, race, religion, etc.) These power structures, predicated on gender roles in particular, are the product of, and rooted in, history.

My interviewees are products of the historicity of their marriages (what was legal at the time, what type of marriage arrangements were available to choose from, what sort of prejudices were in place about homosexuality) and the sociology - what power structures are operating and how do men and women function within them in this society.

Women, who are raised to fit in with a patriarchal structured society often privilege their husband's experience over their own. In some ways this is like Stockholm Syndrome, and it contributes to the power of gaslighting. Empathising with one's abuser/captor is viewed as a coping mechanism and represents an alternative framework to the adversarial one outlined above. Both elements are present in the narrators' testimonies. Celia Jamieson quotes Dee Graham, the feminist psychologist;

'Many women are in relationships with men who oppress and abuse them because of a patriarchal system that sanctions men's use of physical force against women as a means of keeping

women as a class subordinate to men. The abusive context of many marriages contributes to the development of the Stockholm syndrome in many battered women.'¹³⁴

It is also possible to switch between a position where one feels like a victim, and one where one empathises with one's abuser. At least ten participants recognised that their well-being would be supported by a forgiving, compassionate attitude towards their ex-husbands whilst also having to put in the emotional work of processing their negative feelings resulting from their experiences.¹³⁵ Some six or so women admitted having been irreversibly changed by the way they had been lied to and betrayed by their husbands.¹³⁶ They spoke mainly about having difficulties with trusting new partners and losing confidence in their ability to judge people.

Kate Manne has described how misogyny acts as the 'policing of the patriarchy' by targeting women who do not conform to the patriarchal system of women, as a collective, being in loving and supportive service to men.¹³⁷ Individual women become effigies when this status quo is threatened, even if they, themselves, have not done anything overtly to destabilise the patriarchal structure. Gaslighting is one of the mechanisms whereby misogyny is expressed. A similar mechanism is also observed when the marriage ends and the woman finds a new partner, who becomes an effigy, made to bear the burden of symbolising the patriarchy so that she can express her newfound identity of autonomy.

Gaslighting entered the lexicon in 1961 after it was coined in the film *Gaslight* in 1944.¹³⁸ The film portrays a husband systematically and deliberately undermining his wife's sanity by hiding valuable items and insisting that she has misplaced them. Since then, it has become widely used as a description of a broad range of behaviours both interpersonal and institutional. Its introduction into everyday language has enabled women to recognise, name, and therefore begin to break free from,

¹³⁴ Celia Jameson, 'The "Short Step" from Love to Hypnosis: A Reconsideration of the Stockholm Syndrome', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 14 (2010), p. 344.

¹³⁵ Nancy, Anna, Kate, Lizzie, Alex, Eleanor, Carrie, Patricia, Pauline, Nicole.

¹³⁶ Penny, Anna, Olivia, Alex, Cheryl, Carole

¹³⁷ Kate Manne, 'The Logic of Misogyny', *Boston Review* 41 (2016), p. 10.

¹³⁸ *Gaslight*, Directed by George Cukor (1944).

its harmful effects. 'While 'gaslighting' itself may be a mythical crime, there is no question that any social attitude which interprets a given behaviour or experience as symptomatic of a generalized incompetence is a powerful creator of shame'.¹³⁹ Many of the participants reported being gaslighted and many report having trust issues, feelings of isolation and feeling unheard. These feelings are accompanied by shame, which can then be used by the gaslighter to further achieve their aims. Women who have been married to gay men experience a particular form of gaslighting where their husband knows something that they do not and they then sense a dissonance between their husband's ostensibly romantic intentions and his apparent reluctance to be emotionally intimate.

It could be argued that this is too small a sub-set of marriages from which to draw conclusions about the action of the patriarchy in these modern relationships, and that a different picture would emerge from interviews with men who were married to gay women, or women who were married to straight men. If men recognise some of the feelings and/or situations that are narrated, then it would not be correct to identify sexism as operating in those circumstances. An example of this is when Mandy had wanted to get married and spoke about her relatively low self-esteem. She had met someone who she thought was a good match even though there had been a few alarm-bells (how drunk he got, how he treated his mother) during their courtship. She had focused on the positive aspects of their relationship; he had grown up on a farm and she had always wanted to live on a farm. They got on well. They enjoyed each other's company. This set of circumstances might affect men as well and therefore not be an instance of the patriarchy, but something else. If only women's narratives are considered, might there be a faulty logic in the interpretation of their stories?

People of both sexes may elect to marry someone who is not ideal. For example, two men known to this researcher fell in love with women who did not love them back, so they each married

¹³⁹ Oxford English Dictionary, "*Gaslighting*, N.2" (Oxford University Press).

a 'less attractive' sister. But the point of this thesis is that the lived experience of women after they get married is very different to that of men. Mandy did not have all the facts about her husband before they got married. It is possible for men to have similar experiences with women who hide their sexuality from them.

The historicity of the term 'patriarchy' and its usage, can act as a useful framework for the participants' life stories. It became a popular topic for academics and feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, but it declined until recently, when it has emerged again. The participants would acknowledge their varying attachment to the trope of 'some day my prince will come' and that they have either consciously or sub-consciously let go of their agency and conferred rights of self-determination to their husbands. This dynamic is born of the patriarchy, where quite literally, fathers and daughters co-create this damaging constellation between husbands and wives. 'Listen to your father' and 'father knows best' or the more frightening, 'wait till your father gets home' are a few examples of how this toxic structure is maintained. Carolyn Steedman's biographical discussion of the patriarchy explores this idea further.¹⁴⁰

At some point in these marriages, the women are confronted with the reality that their husband prefers to have sex with men. The various ways that they responded are documented here. Many of the accounts involve feelings of exploitation, being lied to, and the realisation that their reality is not *his* reality. I do not want to imply that these feelings are solely the territory of women who are married to gay men. Moreover, I acknowledge that generalisations can not be made about this group of women based on that defining characteristic. Rather, as Matt Houlbrook has shown, certain types of stories are only possible because of the structure of society and the expectations (in this case, of marriage, but in Houlbrook's book, of law-abiding citizenship) that are systemic in this period.¹⁴¹ By looking at the individual experience, we can draw conclusions about this structure.

¹⁴⁰ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 7 and 16.

¹⁴¹ Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 2-3.

Taking a family group in isolation, the patriarchy re-creates itself anew each time a man and a woman become a couple, and more explicitly, when they become parents. It has been noted in my interviews that women comment that they have changed, that they are not the person they were before they got married. After the marriage they seem to re-appear again and report that their friends and family notice that they old 'them' has returned. They will also speak about feeling as if they are 'back'. What process might bring about these changes? In some marriages, the woman reports that her husband's behaviour alters, either soon after the wedding, or after the birth of a child. Fatherhood brings about a surge of new feelings and changes the perceptions of a man's identity as well as the way he sees his role in the family. Before becoming a parent, a man may view his wife as a sexual equal, and her body as an autonomous, separate entity.

Nicole: *And it wasn't ever like his refusals were never like .. like definitive. It wasn't like I'm not going to meet your friends, Nicole, because I don't care about it. It's kind of like, oh not this time or I'm tired or I have this thing to do this kind of like passive aggressive more. I'm going to be dead weight kind of sack of potatoes way of getting out of these interactions. So I always kind of thought. Okay. Well like maybe next time or you know, maybe that this maybe maybe maybe. So that was kind of like one thing that was quite quite bad and and then also like our physical intimacy changed and there had been like no problems whatsoever with that before and I mean, I hadn't been experienced before but also like there was no problem whatsoever. And then suddenly there was a problem like as soon as we were married and back in the UK like his interest in me, like sexually, really declined. His interest in having sex declined like like started having erectile dysfunction, like really dramatic, you know, they definitely the kinds of things you could notice.*

Nicole shows how her husband's behaviour was disrespectful, dishonest, and hurtful because he did not confront himself or indicate that he thought she deserved his ready and willing disclosure about his unwillingness to meet her friends. She also speaks about the decline in good sex after the marriage and interprets that as being another way that he has been dishonest with her because he is unwilling to let her try to help him. Naming this feeling as a need for respect enables women to ask for it to be met.

Alex: *'I've slept with prostitutes. I've ..' lalal ala 'male all male, all male' and he said and and he said; 'and of course, that's how you got your cancer'. Like I was stupid. [laughs]*

Alex reported feeling as if she was stupid because her husband lied to her about his sexual activities during their marriage. This underlines the way women blame themselves for how others behave. Historically, it stems from patriarchal conceptions of femininity, where girls are taught to be good and obedient, while boys are allowed to get angry and are praised for being 'naughty'. *Boys will be boys*. It is worth noticing how boys and girls were parented differently. The purpose of much of this project is to recognise and demonstrate the interplay between historical conceptions and current psycho-dynamic states.

Elaine: *And I, I would have been very emotionally labile, was definitely walking on eggshells and I was attributing lot of it to stress in work and really now, with hindsight being back at work now, I.. even in a pandemic, which is a stressful situation being back at work now, I'm not stressed. You know what I mean? Like work is fine. It's doable. It's not something beyond me but I had convinced myself that it was the reason for me feeling so anxious all the time and having a really bad gut feeling and just yeah, I put everything down to work stress and he encouraged me to put everything down to work stress, but in actual fact it was my relationship.*

Elaine is showing that she felt detached from herself and from her husband; she was not able to connect with herself about why she was feeling stressed and thought that her husband was being deceptive by *encouraging her to put everything down to work stress*. She recognises that working in the pandemic should be far more stressful, but the assumption that is inherent in this clip, is that now that she knows about her husband, she can cope with stress at work because her relationship stress is resolved. She accuses her husband of deflecting her attention away from their relationship to maintain the status quo, disregarding his role in her unhappiness, and privileging his needs. She therefore feels gaslighted and exploited (although she does not say this).

Cynthia Stark describes two strands of gaslighting.¹⁴² The first, *epistemic gaslighting* is where a person is challenged as a *knower* and/or being assigned less credibility based on their membership of a social group. It is based on a social power differential and is unintentional because it is based on testimonial injustice (a form of prejudice). The second strand, *manipulative*

¹⁴² Cynthia A. Stark, 'Gaslighting, Misogyny, and Psychological Oppression', *The Monist*, 102 (2019), pp. 222,23.

gaslighting, is associated with wrongful manipulation where the aim is to get another to see her own plausible perceptions, beliefs, or memories as groundless, not necessarily due to the hearer being assigned a credibility deficit; not necessarily a response to testimony about harm done to one; intentional, in that the manipulator always has an aim. Stark's work shows what can be gained from gaslighting as well as why it is so harmful. It provides a lexicon of concepts that modern scholars use when talking about gaslighting and offers a philosophical basis for the term. She illuminates the difference between justifiable complaints about another's behaviour as well as unjustifiable ones, which are gaslighting. For example, displacement is a tactic whereby the gaslighter attributes a flaw to the target to render her judgement not credible. In Elaine's example above, she was experiencing a lot of stress in her marriage, her husband refused to discuss their relationship and instead told her that the stress she was experiencing was due to her work. He rendered her judgement (that it was their relationship that was causing the stress) as not credible by dismissing her plea to talk about their marriage and making her feel as if her judgment was wrong. It later was revealed that he had been having secret affairs with men at the time. After her divorce, she experienced even more work stress as a result of the pandemic but said that the stress was nowhere near the levels she had experienced about her marriage. This is what made her realise that she had been gaslighted.

Gaslighting deserves a deeper discussion because it provides an explanation for so much of the outcomes for women, of these marriages. Stark overcomes the problem of men's lack of awareness of the way their actions affect women, by calling it 'displacement'. Therefore it is appropriate to list her description of the five different types of displacement in full.

1. The accused denies that the harmful event has occurred. (Trump mocking Christine Blasey Ford's testimony against Brett Kavanaugh.)

2. Claims that the victim is lying. (Holtzclaw accusing his victims of profiting from their accusations and the defect attributed to the victims was opportunism)

3. When it is implausible for the accused to deny committing harm, he downplays the harm. E.g. "I was only joking" or "why are you so uptight?"

4. Accusing the victim of bringing the harm on herself. The accused can't deny that he did the harm, but might say something like "but you were wearing a short skirt" or "you were drinking."

5. "Himpathy." Where it is impossible for the accused to deny that he committed the act, but he asserts that conviction will ruin his life and public are moved to side with him even if the victim has experienced serious harm (like raping someone while they are unconscious)

By listing these forms of displacement, (as Stark terms them) we begin to empower ourselves to recognise them when they happen to us. For example, hearing the phrase *I was only joking* can prompt us to recognise gaslighting.

Himpathy has occurred widely with my participants. They have often experienced little sympathy for their situation, whilst their husbands have been afforded widespread sympathy. When the accused portrays themselves as victimised then the accuser's 'defect' is her wanting to bring the injustice to light. Again, Stark writes 'If women can be condemned for protesting when they are unequivocally justified in doing so, then men, or at least elite men, are completely insulated - they simply cannot be in the wrong for harming women.'¹⁴³

Stark maintains that the psychologically oppressed have internalised subtle messages of inferiority. Women are urged to identify strongly with their bodies - to see their looks as having great impact, but they are then mocked for having these 'inferior' concerns. Gaslighting yields women who believe that their experience of reality and the hurt they feel cannot be trusted because it is a result of a personal defect rather than the conduct of men.¹⁴⁴ This explains some participants' experience of being medicalised for not enjoying sex with their husbands. When there is lack of desire on the part of the man, or sex is painful for the woman due to feeling unattractive, for example, then the woman will seek to label herself as at fault. Michelle Wolkomir has written that the need to be attractive to and desired by a man impacts a woman's sense of herself as

¹⁴³ Ibid. p. 229.

¹⁴⁴ For a discussion about women's sexual needs and why lack of intimacy affects sexual arousal read Nagoski, *Come as You Are : The Bestselling Guide to the New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*, pp. 265-66.

feminine, and that heterosexual marriage is an important venue for shoring up ideas of self as an appropriately gendered person.¹⁴⁵ Lynne Jamieson has shown that women carrying the burden of gender inequality can often be recast by medical and therapeutic experts as pathological individuals.¹⁴⁶ A man's misogynistic collusion with this state of affairs, can result in long term damage to the woman's self-image and ability to enjoy sex. When the man comes out as gay, it can bring feelings of relief because the fault is no longer theirs, alongside feelings of bitterness and angry resentment at being used and manipulated. The mental health community often colludes with this misogyny as the following transcript will demonstrate.

Penny: *I was perhaps slightly put off, given that the psychosexual counsellor that Keith had been seeing agreed to see both of us when .. when I discovered about the affair and so in that three week period where I wasn't allowing him in the house we met this woman. And it was just the most .. well, I would say one of the most abusive hours of my life. The fact that this woman had known Keith very intimately, I assume then, for the two years would know what was going on. I turn up, you know, about a week after discovering that my husband is actually having an affair with a man so somehow I think the sex [00:58:15] was .. was horrible, but it was he'd formed an emotional attachment to someone else. That was the part that was destroying me. And I just remember her saying, 'oh Penny needs to catch up and realize that her marriage is over. You have to realize, Penny, your marriage is over and you now need to work towards co-parenting. I think that was the point where I started getting quite angry and she went.. [laughs].. And then at the end she went.. 'Oh, that's time.' And I was like sobbing. And we stood up and she hugged Keith and I just walked out the room and no one gave me a backward glance. I walked through the centre of Liverpool, got on a train sat on the train crying my eyes out. I rang my mum. So, I felt really abused after that hour and would never want to put myself in [laughs] that position again But the psychiatrist/psychologist was very good. And I think actually he made me realize you know, he said he said actually I think you're doing very well. He just said, you know, you need to remember your husband is extremely manipulative and always be on your guard. This is a man who is capable of lying to you and has lied to you for 23 years. Just be on your guard and I keep that at the back of my mind always when I'm dealing with him.*

Penny and Keith's psychosexual counsellor trivialised Penny's feelings of anger and sadness and failed to recognise and validate the position she found herself in. She had just found out that her

¹⁴⁵ Wolkomir, *Making Heteronormative Reconciliations: The Story of Romantic Love, Sexuality, and Gender in Mixed-Orientation Marriages*, p. 496.

¹⁴⁶ Jamieson, *Intimacy Transformed?*, p. 481.

husband was having an affair with a man and that her marriage was going to end, but the counsellor was much further on in the chain of knowledge (having seen Keith for two years prior to meeting Penny) and therefore did not adequately hold or support Penny or help her to process her feelings. Penny's subsequent psychiatrist/psychologist did provide support and understanding for her, and the two different experiences of healthcare provision demonstrate the variability and range of competency in this profession.

Mandy: So it started with little [01:34:17] things. First of all, it was like .. we need to watch more pornography. If I watch pornography then our sex life will improve and I won't need to look at guys. So I'm not really into that and I want the real thing. I don't need other people. I started .. he started to get me to do things that I would never do. Like now I wouldn't do it because I have no interest and I would say no, but then I just wanted to .. I was so used to giving him everything. Because what was wrong with me? Sometimes I ask that.

Mandy muses about why she allowed her husband to make her do things that she didn't want to do. She alludes to a watershed moment; *like now I wouldn't do it* which indicates that she has changed since her marriage. Talking about what has happened to her appears to have set in motion the necessary actions which have empowered her to protect herself, draw boundaries around herself and to acknowledge who she is now. *I want the real thing. I don't need other people.*

Having extensively introduced the subjects of misogyny, gaslighting and the patriarchy, this chapter now looks at memories of courtship and marriage to shine a spotlight on the participants' experience and to examine the structures that have been in place which allow certain behaviours to manifest.

COURTSHIP

Mandy: *And he was entertaining, good company made me feel happy. But as the evening wore on he would drink more and more and more alcohol. Now as students we did do a lot of drinking but he was getting drunk every night that we went out. He was getting so drunk that he started to fall under the table and there was this one incident where the boy .. the man who was interested in me at the beginning of the year came up to me and in like the Student Union bar and said Hi! Where's your boyfriend? And I kind of looked down under the table and went - and he said .. and I remember him saying to me, like he leaned in close to my ear and said, you know, I wouldn't treat you like this.*

[...]

His mum had locked the car keys in the car so they couldn't get in the car and this was really strange because I understand that it's a stressful situation. But my .. my boyfriend started shouting at his mum and .. and was I how could you do that? That's so stupid. Like who does that and I said, well, you know, I think it happens sometimes. You know, so we kind of tried, you know, we tried to think about how we could get into the car and that though it was quite late in the afternoon there weren't any there wasn't anybody else around so in the end we set off walking. [00:26:07] My boyfriend and I set off walking. We said we go to the nearest house and call for help like call the AA or whatever and call for help because again, no mobile phones, right? [laughs] It's like what was life before having mobile phone? So we set off walking down this road and it was cold and he was not caring about me. He just charged off down the road and he was swearing about his mother. He was .. he was .. he used words like stupid .. stupid fucking bitch and things like that and I was quite shocked and I remember the reason I remember that incident is because of his attitude towards his mother. And the fact that he wasn't being warm and loving to me at the time either.

Mandy ignores warning signs that she is not going to be treated well but continues the relationship.

In the early stages of courtship a woman wants to feel admired and respected, but if they feel dropped and disrespected, they might ignore those feelings and pretend that they are not important, or even worse, not legitimate or valid. When Mandy's friend tells her that he would *not treat her like this* it is significant that she remembers this interaction over twenty years later. It has become a haunted memory - haunted by what might have been had she listened to the advice. The second incident, where her boyfriend (soon to become her husband) *wasn't warm and loving* towards her is baffling, in the context that this person, who is behaving so badly toward her and his own mother, could still be an acceptable proposition as a life-partner. Alain de Botton explains this

by hypothesizing that we are drawn to people who love us the way our parents loved us and each other. If we grow up seeing our parents fight or disrespect each other, then this is our model of how it feels to love and be loved.¹⁴⁷ De Botton argues that people who do not have these traits often do not attract us, or we find them boring. If this is the case here, then the end of the marriage is an opportunity for growth, when we realise that we can set ourselves free from the past if we are willing to do the work of forgiving ourselves for the earlier choices we made.

Mandy's experience also demonstrates how strong the drive is to be married. It harks back to a time where being 'left on the shelf' was shameful for women, who were called spinsters whilst unmarried men were called bachelors.¹⁴⁸ In that climate, in spite of feeling wary of the man she was choosing, Mandy is preferring marriage to being single. Therefore, we must admit that even in the later part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first, some women have still been sacrificing independence and autonomy by marrying unsuitable men rather than risking being single.

Sharon: He was dating my my ex-husband's cousin. So we sort of met a sort of big family gathering, got on well, there was a quite an age gap between us. So we were.. I'm eight years older and so at the time he was 19 and I was 27. So we were all very reluctant to even sort of, you know, do.. do we go down this path? You know, it's the age gap so it did kind of hold a bit of a.. my ex-husband didn't have a very sort of traditional upbringing. His parents both died when he was young was brought up by some extended family who weren't necessarily very good at the job. Didn't raise him in the best of ways and he's got a lot of issues with his mental health due to the, well.. he was brought up and his parents dying so young.

Sharon admits here that she was reluctant to pursue a relationship with a man who was eight years her junior and who came from a very disturbed background. However, it would appear that her empathic side expressed itself and she seems to imply that neither the setbacks that he suffered, nor the age difference, should have prejudiced her against the relationship. For D W. Winnicott, being too empathic is linked with an inability to connect with our own feelings and to look after ourselves,

¹⁴⁷ Alain de Botton, 'Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person', (YouTube, 2017).

¹⁴⁸ Iulia Grad, 'Words and Women. An Eligible Bachelor Vs an Eligible Spinster.', *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 5, No 14 (2006) <<http://www.jsri.ro/ojs/index.php/jsri/article/view/361/359>>.

which could come from having distant or mentally ill mothers.¹⁴⁹ Essentially, his theory is that if the mother is distant, and unsupportive of the child's developing self, then the infant does not develop a strong ego, and therefore fails to learn the skills necessary to look after herself.

The following extract offers evidence to support this theory:

Shirley: So I was loved, it was a loving family, but there were difficulties and also the economic climate of the beginning of the 1980s and Liverpool was crushed basically and it affected my parents. Both parents lost their jobs within the same year. So I witnessed depression in the family, anxiety and financial difficulty. So I think it all has an effect, I think I do. I don't think I know it also probably made me make decisions which as we all say in hindsight, you wouldn't make and also directs how you perceive love I think and how you .. how I perceived love, how I fell in love or thought I was falling in love.

Shirley's poignant admission that her parents were depressed and that this led her to make decisions about love, is another example of how someone (in this case, with the help of therapy) can make sense of their choices and experience healing.

Carrie: Following that I'd say me upbringing was difficult, my mum had mental health issues for a lot of.. well, she still has them now, but that was difficult to deal with from being very young. There's not really a lot else to say about my childhood.

Carrie does go on to say a lot more about her childhood later in her testimony, but the way she dismisses her mother's mental health issues by mentioning them almost in passing, hides a world of difficulty in how she must have experienced her early years. This also demonstrates the change over time of people talking about the way they were brought up. It shows that in recent decades people have become more aware of the effects of parental mental health on their lives as children, whereas in our parents' and grandparents' times, these observations would not have been made. Also, the use of the phrase *mental health issues* situates the speaker in a particular period of history.

One can well imagine Shirley and Carrie seeing marriage as an opportunity to express their own autonomy and independence. People with mothers who suffered from mental health issues are often likely to be overempathic and put other people's needs before their own. This is in

¹⁴⁹ D. W. Winnicott, *The Family and Individual Development* (Tavistock, 1965), pp. 15-21.

addition to patriarchal conceptions of marriage. It stems from early childhood, where, according to Winnicott, the child does not feel secure in the mother's attention and therefore must try to take care of her in order to guarantee adequate care for themselves.¹⁵⁰ When the child reaches adulthood, they are set in this pattern of looking after the caregiver, and this may cause them to overlook their own needs in a relationship and attract a partner who, like the mother, is not capable of giving love or caring for her.¹⁵¹

Jackie: *He, we worked together. He was much younger than me by about 10 years and I just sort of changed jobs. We were friends before we were in a relationship for a couple of years . And I just thought he's a genuinely nice guy. We got on really well and then we started dating and seeing one another but I got the impression quite quickly that his family were very religious. He wasn't religious much but his family was. We fell in love or so I thought. I did. [00 02 04] His family were quite restrictive. They.. his mum didn't like me in particular and his dad actually made a comment that 'we thought he was batting for the other side until you came along.' And I've dismissed that straight away. I thought well I know he's had a girlfriend before me so it's .. that can't be right.*

Jackie meets her husband via work and was friends with him for some years. The lack of sexual excitement is noteworthy. This can be interpreted as the man being caring and considerate of the woman's needs as described by Bonnie Kaye.¹⁵² However, it seems that this might well have been misinterpreted by her, and that the man might have been satisfying his sexual needs elsewhere (with other men). This lack of sex in a relationship which eventually becomes a marriage, especially when there is no longer a taboo on pre-marital sex, is evidence of how disconnected some people still are from their bodies and their desires. Elizabeth Abbott suggests that as a result of the HIV-Aids scares in the late twentieth century there were some gay men who refrained from sex with men because they thought it was too dangerous.¹⁵³ This may have created a scenario where people like Jackie went out with men who preferred sex with men and felt no sense of alarm about the lack of sex because they were oblivious to their partner's sexual orientation and believed the implied

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 75.

¹⁵¹ de Botton, *Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person*.

¹⁵² Kaye, *Straight Wives: Shattered Lives*.

¹⁵³ E. Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (Cambridge, England: Lutterworth Press, 2001), pp. 415-20.

message that they were interested in friendship and not bodies. In effect, they were lying to themselves and to their wives.

In the second part of the extract, Jackie dismisses the comment by her father-in-law to-be, who declares that he thought his son was *batting for the other side*. Jackie decides to ignore this information because she knows that her husband-to-be has *had a girlfriend before me*. This statement indicates that her view is that if her boyfriend was gay, then he would have dated men. Perhaps, in view of his parents' strict religious beliefs, this would have been difficult for him, and for his father to acknowledge a suspicion that his son might be gay, coupled with a strong religious animosity towards homosexuals, Jackie would have thought more about what he was trying to tell her.

Olivia: *He's five years older than me. So so he would have been late twenties.*

Diana: *Okay. And what made you fall for him?*

Olivia: *He made me laugh to be quite honest with you and we had very similar interests. So we were both into Outdoors. He was a PE teacher /outdoor instructor. And he at the time I met him was [00:06:03] working in a quite unique setting. It was a children's home, but it was residential and a school on-site. So he was the PE teacher and outdoor instructor for for this Children's Home and he knew loads about children and we both come from an environment.. well his job and I suppose my background was very much understanding and working with disadvantaged children and difficult children that have special needs that that sort of thing. So we had quite a lot to talk about and obviously I fancied him as well physically and and he just he was very funny and he made me laugh and we just seemed to get on really well.*

The above transcript documents one of the most mundane first meetings where the couple has a lot in common and it would seem that it would make a good match. Again, very similar to what Jackie has said about her courtship, except that here, Olivia talks about fancying her husband-to-be sexually. She mentions elsewhere that her mother was very involved with child-minding and fostering children and they had also adopted two children as well as having Olivia and her brother. Olivia is the eldest. However, of all the marriages, hers was the most problematic and traumatic, as it was most likely that her ex-husband was very disturbed and ill. He eventually died in Birmingham while having chem-sex with a group of men that he met on Grindr. This next transcript is Olivia speaking about her ex-mother-in-law:

Olivia: *I came back home to my in-laws. My son was taken off by my father-in-law and my mother-in-law just, just interrogated me. What went on what happens what's going on blah blah blah? Where's Pete? All of the this and I just said. He's gay. I felt so crushed. I felt like I was in a corner and couldn't get out, you know, and she went. Oh, I did always wonder. Hello? Is this like? Oh, okay.*

This is evidence for Olivia's belief that her in-laws manipulated them into marriage to have grandchildren. I have included it in this chapter because it speaks about how other people seem to be able to witness these marriages going ahead without feeling the obligation to speak up about the sexual orientation of the husband-to-be during the courtship. This might be evidence for how the autonomy of relationships is respected and how people feel a strong societal sanction against intruding into other people's lives. The longer audio clip from which it was taken is used in Chapter 4 below. It speaks to my thesis that parents are willing to overlook their son's sexuality and their daughter-in-law's wellbeing (or, alternatively, a couple who decide that they are going to get married are deaf and blind to other people's concerns).

Frankie: *And his best man, and I didn't know too well because Si's been friends with him before who must have known something about his previous life said to me Simon doesn't seem very happy. Are you sure he's .. this is what he wants? And it put through all this horrendous doubt into me. It was late at night. So in the morning, I rang him, you know I rang him to wake him up because he told me to give him an alarm call because we're getting married quite early. And I told him what Stewart said and he seemed very cross [00:04:02] about it and not too happy and he said yeah [incomp] and nothing to do with him. It's my choice.*

On the night before Frankie's wedding, she speaks to the best man, a friend of her husband-to-be from before they met. He expresses concern because the groom doesn't seem very happy. Frankie's use of the phrase *horrendous doubt* is a graphic description of how she felt and when she speaks to her bridegroom on the morning of the wedding, and he *seemed very cross* it is as if she now believes that these two men were more than best friends. When Simon says *it's nothing to do with him. It's my choice*. He indicates that he has decided to marry her. His words come across as pragmatic rather than romantic and are distinctive because he has not offered words of reassurance, love, or comfort to his bride on the morning of their wedding, who is trying to understand why he

might be unhappy. Frankie tells this anecdote, because it stands out in her memory, as one of the indicators that her husband was not marrying her for the same reasons that she was marrying him.

THE PROPOSAL

The women below speak about a lack of romance in the way they were proposed to. They attribute meaning to this after the fact and produce the story as totemic proof that the marriage was not built on the type of love that is essential for a lasting heterosexual relationship.

Frankie: He proposed to me. It was a bit odd, really because we've not been together very long. And I [01:22:10] think we both felt worried, you know, because we've known each other a long.. we'd been friends for a long time and then kind of like lost track for a couple of years. But really close really close friends. And so we knew each other really well. Felt really comfortable with each other and I suppose we were kind of that age, but we'd only been together four months - not even that and we've been out one night and he had a lot to drink and he said something along the lines of, 'I suppose one day you'd like to be my wife or something.' I said, 'you arrogant, you arrogant so and so. And I says you know, he said, "Would you want to be my wife?" and I said I'm not even going to deign that with an answer unless you ask me properly. And he goes, ooh will you marry me then?" And I said, I'm not even answering that. I says if you .. not while you're drunk and I just kind of like, I'm not even answering that while you're drunk. Anyway in the morning, he brought me a cup of tea and he was at the bed with on his hands and knees proposing. And, and at that point I said, yes, you know and then we took about a month to go and get a ring. There wasn't a ring, you know, at the time, but I said, yeah, but we kept it secret for a few weeks because it felt like too early. But yeah, it was a bit was an odd one really. It was an odd proposal. Yeah, I wasn't planning on.. I didn't think that was going to happen. It was a bit of a shock. You know and looking back, I'm a person who is quite cautious and likes to take a bit of time over things and I can see that that probably was not a great thing to say yes, but we live and learn don't we.

Frankie's proposal story is indicative of the ambivalence that they both felt about getting married.

She acknowledges that she should have given the proposal more thought before accepting, and she uses the fact that they took a month to buy a ring as evidence that the proposal was odd. It seems that it was odd because in her view, there was a lack of romance and planning. This shows that for women, brought up on fairy tales and romantic movies - which intensified during the second half of the 20th century - the proposal narrative becomes a way of measuring the success of a relationship and the worthiness of the suitor. Many of the participants comment on the mundaneness of their

proposals and how disappointed they were. However, I think this type of proposal is not limited to gay men marrying women, but more a means to hedge one's bets if there is a likelihood that the partner is not on the same page. Opening the discussion about marriage is loaded with powerful emotions; fear, excitement, trepidation, anxiety, vulnerability, to name a few. By not going for the big drama, the man can avoid disappointment and pretend that it was not a serious proposal. However, when the woman agrees to the marriage, they are left with a less than optimal story to tell their friends and this story, for Frankie, is woven into her narrative of being married to a gay man, who, in her view, was not really interested in her romantically or sexually, but for companionship.

When she says *I'm not even going to deign that with an answer* she meant either *not dignify that with an answer* or *not deign to respond*. These slips of the tongue reveal moments where emotions (disappointment, anger, or excitement) interfere with linguistic ability.

Belinda: *Because he said he wasn't sure whether .. we split up once before then he wasn't sure and eventually he certainly realized or he felt that I was, I was the one he wanted to marry. It wasn't a particular romantic proposal. It's like how about it? What do you think? That was it? We just had a phone call from his mum to say that his sister was getting divorced. So he put the phone down on her and turned around and said oh what? How'd you feel about .. how do you feel about getting married? I was like, oh, okay, then fine. Yes, and he was greatly went fine. Great. That's it. And that was it and the story he fell asleep and I lay in bed planning.*

Similarly to Frankie, Belinda did not get the proposal she was hoping for from her husband. *He fell asleep and I lay in bed planning* is symbolic of how separate they both felt at what is generally thought of as one of the most exciting and *together* experiences that a couple can have. The phrase *I was the one he wanted to marry* is noteworthy because it implies that he had decided to get married and Belinda was chosen rather than the couple deciding together that they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together. This is similar to Alex's experience:

Alex: *He went off to med school, felt more accepted for [01:02:08] just being him and made sort of friends, met me and thought .. I want to be the.. not revered as such .. but I want to be a well-considered hospital consultant who lives in a nice house, with a charming wife who I can phone and say I'm bringing six home for supper and she'll go yes, darling.
[..]*

Yeah, I don't think I was ever properly loved. I was never what he wanted. I was a commodity. That's how I feel. I feel like I was a commodity.

Alex's upbringing prepared her to accept this commodification:-

Alex: *When I was born my father apparently allegedly [took] I was going to be called Rachel and it was decided before I was born I was going to be called Rachel and my father looked at me and said God she's ugly, we're going to have to give her a boy's name.*

[..]

And the and the other very strong story from my early childhood is that my mother tells says that she was sort of terribly terribly depressed after I was born. She can remember standing at the top of the stairs and wanting to sort of throw me down because all I did was scream. I screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and then 14 months later. So a very short time really, you know, my sister was born and the cloud lifted as she was presented with this beautiful baby girl.

So here we find out in passing that Alex's mother was depressed and that just over a year after Alex was born, her *beautiful baby* sister arrived. When W.H. Auden wrote,

*The so-called traumatic experience is not an accident, but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting – had it not occurred, it would have found another, equally trivial – in order to find a necessity and direction for its existence, in order that its life may become a serious matter.*¹⁵⁴

He recognised that we build our sense of self from our responses to events, which we incorporate into our life story. I think Auden is trying to explain how individuals are prone to feeling traumatised by some events and are resilient and adaptive to others. Of course, there are levels of trauma, and I don't think Auden was speaking about severely traumatic experiences. However, this anecdote, about Alex's name, her mother's depression, and the birth of the beautiful baby girl, seemed to have produced in Alex, a feeling of not being worthy and of not being feminine. Beauty being a marker of femininity was evidently very important to Alex's father, which places this traumatic incident historically at a time where gender expectations were less fluid than they are today. This

¹⁵⁴ W. H. Auden, Katherine Bucknell, and Nicholas Jenkins, 'W.H. Auden, 'in Solitude, for Company' : W.H. Auden after 1940 : Unpublished Prose and Recent Criticism', (1995), p. 155.

demonstrates the intricate dynamic between individual psychological states and cultural expectations.

Elaine: *One thing is that my marriage will be annulled through the Catholic church because, because it was with men, you know, so I get a divorce in two.. after two years and then once that comes through, I'll do the paperwork for an annulment. And the priest said he spoke to a canon lawyer and it's indisputable really, the marriage was never going to work and it was information withheld from me that I would never have married him if I'd known. So for me, I, I do get some solace in that in that it means that there's some recognition that I was wronged and that I went into something not knowing fully what the facts were because one of the things and you'll know yourself or you'll know from speaking to other participants, that you can't cite adultery as the reason and which it was like, actually I just could not believe that when I went to see the solicitor and they told me [00:48:11] that. It's just .. it's actually mental when you think about it and .. yeah, it's just another way of thinking this is not fair, you know, so it means that on paper it looks as if it was neither of our fault. When actually obviously it was his. So and as a result of that I did write to the who was it Naomi Long, the Justice Minister in Stormont in Northern Ireland just .. I did write a letter saying just .. identifying and they're aware of it. I mean and I think they were then going to be soon changing the laws around divorce. To make it quicker or I don't know they were doing something. I so she said that it kind of wasn't really something they would be doing or really looking into. But anyway. Yeah, so in terms of getting engaged and things I mean Graham and I had been going out for two years. We had .. we'd done loads of things together. We'd gone to Cambodia and Vietnam on this massive holiday and over Christmas, just before we got engaged. And .. and yeah he proposed to me just we'd gone to a lovely hotel. And yeah, he proposed to me on a wee bridge when we were out for a walk one day. And it was lovely and I was so happy. Yeah.*

Elaine speaks about the injustice of their being no-one to answer for the failure of her marriage.

This is an important point because it counters the current movement towards a no-fault divorce.

Elaine wrote to the Justice Minister to complain because she felt wronged. Her strong religious beliefs contributed to this deep feeling of unfairness. She then turns her mind back to the question about how she had been proposed to; and she was able to recall it as a happy memory. She has the ability to picture herself on the day she was proposed to, without letting what happened in the future contaminate this memory. This skill seems to be connected to her having had integrative therapy which has enabled her to work through her feelings.

Nancy: *So I met Lee, you know just hanging around working in a group of friends and I think at the time I had a Saturday job was something so I was earning a bit more money than anybody else and I remember I was at my sister and girlfriend that I was very friendly with then still am actually [00:02:02] Lee came running after me and I said no you can't borrow any money. [laughs] He said no, no, I wanted to ask you out and I was quite amazed and he was.. I thought he was very good looking.*

Nancy speaks about earning more money than anyone else and therefore she assumes that Lee wants to borrow money from her. This little vignette reminds is reminiscent of Luisa Passerini's assertion that someone might *abandon a weak father for strong women*.¹⁵⁵ Nancy's financial independence may well have exuded a 'masculine' quality to Lee, which in some ways, she interpreted correctly when she thought he was trying to borrow money, because we now know that he was not sexually attracted to her.

Penny: *And then at Easter time all of the medics.. well not all of them as about third of our year.. about 50 of us went on holiday. That was then.. on this holiday where I met my husband, so I was going out with someone else at the time and my friends told him that, and we just met in a nightclub of got chatting and you know.. in those days obviously no mobile phones. We just swapped swapped numbers. So yeah, that was.. I had.. I had had a good number of boyfriends and I suppose if we talk because obviously, you know, the gay thing is about different sexual preferences preferences, you know, I'd had had a number of sexual relationships. So I kind of knew what ..what it should be like up until that that point so, you know, I think I was fairly confident in relationships.*

Penny frames her meeting with her husband as being after *a number of sexual relationships*. She is attracted to him, perhaps because he doesn't pursue her sexually. This corroborates the theory that women who see themselves as liberated (Penny is a medical doctor) and as having qualities that they want to be appreciated apart from their bodies, would be attracted to someone who appears to value the same things, and would not necessarily see a lack of sexual attraction as alarming.

Belinda exemplifies the gendered proposal narrative of leaving it up to the man to decide about who to marry and whether to propose; *realized..I was the one he wanted to marry*. It was noteworthy for Belinda that it was directly after hearing that his sister was getting divorced. But the

¹⁵⁵ Passerini, *Autobiography*, p. 46.

most resonant phrase is *he fell asleep and I lay in bed planning*. This speaks of the fairy story, where the woman creates her perfect wedding day and all the man has to do is turn up so that they can live happily ever after. Therefore, this clip contains both the old narrative of marriage, and the new; a couple who is already living together decides very matter-of-factly, to marry. It is typical of several proposal stories where couples appear to be trying to be modern, by rejecting romantic notions of couplehood. Interestingly, gay couples have now bought into romantic notions of marriage and their weddings disrupt the gendered performance of proposals and wedding ceremonies.

Candy: *I remember saying to friends. I'm not going to buy a house with him unless he proposes but in the end I still bought a house with him and he hadn't proposed but he proposed within two months of us being in the house. He went to .. I look back on it now because it was quite strange. He went to a .. an old school friend's and he came back and he'd been on like a .. like a stag do but it was very, you know, it was just the two of them really. They'd gone out to celebrate because this guy was going out to Australia to get married. So it was like a goodbye and a good luck and a mini stag do and he literally went and bought a ring on the way home and proposed that night. And .. and of course I said, yes and we got married the following year.*

Candy's then boyfriend is prompted by the knowledge that his friend is getting married, and so he proposes to her straight after a stag do. Candy admits that as she looks back on the memory it *was quite strange* because of the impetuosity *he literally went and bought a ring on the way home*, but apparently she was excited by being proposed to and she was swept along by the excitement of getting married. It is not apparent whether he had managed to find a shop that sold rings on the way home from a stag do, or if he had bought the ring earlier and had waited for what he thought was the right moment, finding courage after a night out drinking. The picture that is drawn in the minds' eye is different for each listener. Stag dos can go on for days and therefore it is not necessarily the case that it would end late at night when the shops are closed. Oral history transcripts can therefore serve as a literary texts which take on meanings for the reader possibly entirely outside of the 'facts'.¹⁵⁶ This again is evidence for the strong desire that women still felt to

¹⁵⁶ For an excellent paper on this subject, see Borland, *That's Not What I Said*.

get married, even once they had secured a long term partner who was committed enough to buy a house with them.

Mandy: *But whilst we were in that flat, he proposed to me. He proposed marriage. I was ironing. And he proposed marriage to me. Whilst I was ironing. Which again, made me crazy because he told me he had planned to do it in London. Like we were going to go out for dinner in London or something. But in the end like, he'd been asking me some questions like, you know, what kind of ring would you like when you got married and this kind of thing what kind of stones would you like? So obviously I had some kind of idea that he was maybe thinking about it, but he, he told me like he proposed me and I was really like I was happy and I said yes, but afterwards it was odd because we were talking about it and I said why did you propose to me over the ironing of all things not very romantic again because you know, and he said, oh I had these plans where I was going to take you, but you .. you made me propose over the ironing. I don't know. I must have said something where he thought if he didn't say it then, then it wasn't going to happen. That might have been it. I can't remember the whole conversation long time ago.*

In the above account, Mandy uses repetition for emphasis - to underline how disappointed (crazy) she was and to highlight how she must have been mad to have accepted the proposal given everything that happened since. A significant detail is how she reports her husband as saying *you made me propose over the ironing* as if he was aware of how tenuous the situation was. Mandy's story was the longest of all the interviews and contained some very troubling testimony.

Pauline: *I sort of rekindled my Christian faith came back to go out after having a had a bit of a detour and there I met Dave. We got on very well. We were just friends we both loathed the Halls of residence we were in so decided that we would find someone else and share a flat which we did. And one evening Dave and the other guy had a .. an argument and Dave was upset about it and asked if I'd go for a walk with him. So I went [00:04:02] for a walk with him and he just needed to vent and we dealt with that and we're on the top of a hill overlooking the city and God was speaking to him which probably non-Christians wouldn't get at all. But anyway prompted Dave to ask me to marry him.*

This clip contains the description of a very impulsive act of proposal. The couple were *just friends* and it appears that Dave was solving a flatmate issue by asking Pauline to marry him. It seems as if a moment of connection was felt, and the couple decided to marry. This proposal demonstrates that religious women might feel reassured and comforted if they have doubts because they a higher power, who would ensure that the marriage was a success. Their logic is if I love God and my

husband loves God and God loves us, then He will guide/support us to have a good marriage. This idea was suggested by all the religious women in my study, even when it was not overtly expressed.

MARRIAGE

What was marriage like for these couples? How do these marriages compare to those discussed in the historical and sociological literature?

Belinda: Can I have a day off? Can I have a day when I'm not doing the boys? When I'm not doing the food when I'm not doing the washing when I'm not do the shopping. Even if you just pick the boys up from school if I could just have a day when I'm not having to do all of that. That would be great. And that never happened. Or it happened once or twice and then it didn't. And and I said and I ended up saying to him. Look. I'm not sure whether I want to be married to you anymore because I don't .. I'm not happy living the way we're living.

This clip demonstrates that women often fail to negotiate time away from the family. As Lynn Jamieson has written, modern marriage still invariably produces situations where men systematically have more privileges such as free time.¹⁵⁷ Belinda opts for discussing an end to the marriage rather than trying to persuade her husband to meet her needs. This shows how, in a (supposedly) heterosexual marriage, the patriarchy still exerts enormous power and demonstrates the fear that men will lose out on freedoms if they give in to feminist demands for equal rights. In the following transcript, we see just how readily Belinda's husband abdicates from his role as parent, even in a potentially grave and life-threatening situation.

Belinda: And then two years ago again a parents' .. parents' evening for Will, with Will and I was just coming back and I got a phone call from David to say hi where are you I said I'm on the way home. Just got to drop Will off at football. He said okay said can you get home quickly? I went, yeah, sure why what's wrong? He said oh, there's the police or our house. I thought what why? He said, Oh, apparently Tom's Tom's sent a message to somebody to say he wanted to end his life. Right. Okay. He said yeah. There's a mental health nurse here as well. So if you could just get home, that would be great. So I'm just going into a council meeting. But give me a call if you need me. I was like, r-r-right, Okay. So I went home got home to find a policeman [00:22:05] on the sofa, mental health nurse they're trying to talk to Tom.

¹⁵⁷ Jamieson, *Intimacy Transformed?*, p. 486.

It was all pretty stressful . Really hard to deal with. And they and that said that it was I mean, it's okay. They come .. they everything was calm but it was just really difficult. And as the policeman was walking to the door he say he said I'm glad your son opened the door to me but a nice front door. I would have hated to have broken it down and that kind of really sunk in how serious this was. And then David rocked up at kind of nine o'clock he picked Tom up .. Will up from football. Everything all right? Any problems? Everything okay? I'm like, yeah fine you know don't worry about the fact that your son just threatened to commit suicide and we've had the police here and the mental health nurse. Don't worry about it.

Belinda's husband continues with his plan to go to a council meeting even when the police and a mental health nurse are at his house with his son, who has sent a message about suicide to a friend. Belinda recites this story to me as evidence of her being the default parent and of her husband's lack of involvement in family life. Underlying this memory, when read with the previous clip above, we see the thought emerging that Belinda is already a de facto single mother, and therefore when she states that she is not sure whether she wants to be married any more, she is acknowledging that her needs are not being met. Very often, these needs for parental involvement are met with bemusement by fathers who still seem to attach themselves to the traditional idea that men do their labour outside of the home and earn the money, whilst women work in the home and their ability to earn money is a luxury.¹⁵⁸

Olivia: *Yeah, we did that and it was very active sex life and I don't I don't think it was I know some people who I've spoken to recently say oh, it was different. It wasn't. I, I can't say it was different to anybody else at all apart from after I had my first child then it was very different but up until that point. There isn't there's nothing I could pinpoint that that was different at all.*

Diana: *So what changed after you had your first child?*

Olivia: *So the change literally happened when I went into labour some of my friends; my friend Scott said well, we saw a change before when you were pregnant, [00:14:05] but it may have been just in all the excitement of being pregnant and everything that I .. I didn't really clock it.. may have been. But for me it was .. I went into labour in the middle of the night and when my waters broke and he just refused to get out of bed and take me to hospital. And it was eight o'clock in the morning before he was he would get out of bed, and he just was was just horrible .*

¹⁵⁸ For an in-depth look at women's financial power (or lack thereof) read Smith Wilson, *A New Look*.

In the above extract (readers will be familiar with this because I used it in Chapter 2. I repeat it here to make a different point), the husband seems to be acting out his resentment of his wife's ability to have a baby in an archetypal representation of misogyny. If we take the view that the patriarchy originated because of the different reproductive roles in men and women, then it is apparent that the split which is described above, is experienced by each man and each woman in their actual lives. As Luisa Passerini quotes a woman saying, *I had never fully accepted being female. The first time I accepted it, right in my innermost being, was when I gave birth to my daughter, and I was twenty-seven years old.*¹⁵⁹ Therefore, this obvious fact of realisation of one's femaleness would cause a husband to recoil if he does not identify as someone who is attracted to women.

If a person has difficulties with his sexuality or his feelings about sex, then it follows that the transition between being a couple and being parents might be more challenging than couples in a standard marriage. One of the possible stressors is if the core identity of the man (gay) is split off from the performed identity (not gay), then it requires energy to keep up with the cognitive dissonance. Therefore it is obvious that intimacy between the man and the woman would be challenging. Lack of true intimacy leads to people progressively inhabiting different realities and lapsing into performing gender roles to feel contained.

The intersection between societal 'norms' of increased female agency, increased fatherly involvement with children and shared familial responsibilities, on the one hand - and on the other, the psychic alienation that is apparent in the couple when effects are attributed to false causes - creates an incubator for very pronounced unhappiness and issues with mental health. The most surprising of all, (although perhaps not, if you follow my argument) is the high incidence (50%) of children having severe learning difficulties and/or special needs and/or mental health issues. The stories of dysfunctional behaviour by all members of these families and how difficult it is to recover after the marriage ends, to regain a sense of self, is testament to this struggle.

¹⁵⁹ Passerini, *Autobiography*, p. 145.

My point is that the idea of what men are supposed to do and what women are supposed to do becomes complicated and impossible to resolve because of the deception and its associated confusion and alienation that occurs in these relationships. What has this got to do with the patriarchy? As Carolyn Steedman writes, it can be traced to when a man becomes a father.¹⁶⁰ In standard marriages fathers have more resources at their disposal and can integrate society's expectations of their role with their own expectations because they are not in continual identity-crisis.

Alex: *So when I get back I phone my consultant and I say I've got a lump in my neck, and he said well, you've got your final signing off - Goodbye forever scan in three weeks. I said, yes. I know I have I just thought I'd mention it to you. And I said, look, I feel a bit awkward saying this to you, but the real reason I'm ringing because I know I've got my final scan is that in the past, you know, you have permission to discuss everything with Ken and I would really .. because I you know, he hadn't [01:12:10] I haven't seen him in .. So I said I would really appreciate it if you didn't and he was he was very respectful and professional and said fine of course, I won't I will remove that from your notes and told me afterwards that he hung up and said to the nurse in the clinic, she's not got a lump. She's imagining it. It never, ever, ever comes back.*

This testimony illustrates how actors are unaware of the effects of their throw-away remarks and the casual way gaslighting occurs. A noteworthy feature of this piece of transcript is how the participant came to hear about it later. The doctor apologised to her for thinking that she had imagined that the lump had come back - because, of course, it had come back - *he told me afterwards that he hung up and said to the nurse in the clinic, she's not got a lump. She's imagining it.* He reported the conversation with his nurse back to her later. It also illustrates how people can be aware of certain approved behaviours (removing the directive about her husband from her notes) and not of others - a throw-away remark about imagining the lump. Whether this really is an example of gaslighting is also debatable, since the woman was not directly exposed to the remark herself, but the nurse would have been put in a difficult position if she had spoken out about it to

¹⁶⁰ Steedman, *Landscape*, pp. 7, 69.

her boss. Arguably, she, the nurse, would have had to internally collude in the gaslighting to feel safe in her job.

In marriage particularly, there is so much temptation to cast the other as wrong to bolster one's own self-image. The term, 'narcissistic insult' has been coined to describe how we protect ourselves from anything that does not confirm our central place in the universe.¹⁶¹ If someone else behaves in a way that does not conform to our beliefs, we are offended and go on the attack. Much has been said about institutional gaslighting, misogyny and the role of the patriarchy in propagating ideas of oppression by men of women, but in the close confines of a marriage, a relationship between two people, where the psychic entanglements reach far back into childhood, the result is that we fail to recognise the other as a fully realised human being like ourselves. We operate within the patriarchal systems of our culture, which over and over and over emphasizes the worthiness of men and the unworthiness of women. Therefore, in a relationship between a man and a woman, these systemic patterns act as grooves which are fallen into every day, with almost every interaction, unless vigilance is used to confront them. It is no accident, that we use the phrase 'as a woman, I think x' which, as Judith Butler points out, refers to our performativity and our requirement to consciously clothe ourselves in the characteristics of womanhood every day; hence the choice of some individuals to reject the gender of female and go about their daily lives as men. It can often be excruciating to wear the mantle of 'female' and to notice how we are perceived by men. When she marries a man who preferred sex with men, a woman is treated differently. She is seen as a person first and only incidentally as a woman. Unfortunately, that breaks down after she finds out more truth about her situation and the feeling of being recognised as a person is replaced by a feeling of being exploited.

Judith Butler here speaks about performativity and quotes Irigaray, who could also be uncannily describing features of the mixed orientation marriage;

¹⁶¹ I am grateful to John Seex for introducing this very useful term.

On the one hand, masquerade may be understood as the performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearing that makes itself convincing as a "being": on the other hand, masquerade can be read as a denial of a feminine desire that presupposes some prior ontological femininity regularly unrepresented by the phallic economy. Irigaray remarks in such a vein that "the masquerade ... is what women do ... in order to participate in man's desire, but at the cost of giving up their own."¹⁶²

It is plausible to suggest that some of the participants' over-identification with men (either their fathers, or other strong masculine figures) or their early experiences of sexual trauma which interfered with their sexual desire as women, may have subliminally drawn them to men who were sexually attracted to men.¹⁶³ The testimonies in this collection contain some strong and powerful statements about how some women's identity is predicated on the way they see themselves in opposition to men, and on the way they view their own bodies.

Olivia: And I remember saying I'd really like him to read some books about how [00:26:05] to look after babies because I was terrified. I was really terrified something was going to happen to my son. Really quite frightened be-.. because there had been a few accidents like he'd come back and he bashed his head and he hadn't kind of noticed and .. we ended up in hospital one time because my son hit his head and then threw up and, and I'd wanted to take him to a A&E and my husband was like no, no you're babying him. And so I was frightened.

Olivia's powerlessness to confront her husband is representative of the powerlessness women still feel when having to deal with a man who is bolstered by the patriarchal certainty that they are right.

Women's stories very often elide into men's stories. The participants would often switch from talking about themselves to telling their husbands' stories. Women privilege the man's lived experience and justify their behaviour but in the context of this project, they are starting to express their feelings and the impact of their husband's actions on their lives and on their identity. *I lost*

¹⁶² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 64.

¹⁶³ Richard Robertiello, 'The "Fag Hag"', *On the Cutting Edge of Modern Developments in Psychotherapy*, 10 (1978), pp. 10-11.

myself. He erased me. I re-discovered myself after my divorce. I wasn't myself. He stole my life. He stole so many years of my life. I was a completely different person during my marriage. This theme points to the way the concept of marriage pervades women's imaginations and how becoming part of a heterosexual couple demands the suppression of parts of women's identities and power. This can often subvert the ability for both parties to contribute equally to the marriage as complete and whole individuals.

Raising children is a case in point. Participants reported that life changed dramatically after the birth of the first child. *He didn't want to share my body with the baby. My baby needed my body more than he did. He went off me after I had my baby because it was incontrovertible evidence that I was female.* Many husbands explicitly left the childcare to the woman. The children in one marriage were recruited to collude in the husband's gaslighting of their mother; *your mother is crazy.*

However, the main thrust of this section is to explore the way women are victims of the patriarchy in their everyday lives, privileging men's demands and needs, their speech acts, their perspective, over their own. This can be demonstrated over and over again from the oral histories. Wives often reported feeling shut-down when uncomfortable topics of conversation are introduced.

Patricia: And the only reason he told me was because he got found out because he'd.. he'd given me pubic lice and so he had to admit that there was some physical contact with another person and then later on I found out through having a smear test that I had at some point had the HPV virus as well and considering he was my first and only sexual partner and I was his at the time and I know that could be transmitted through touch so it's not.. I believed him when he said he happens at that point..had a relationship with anyone or had have sex with them. But his definition was very specific in his mind.

Patricia discovers that her husband is experimenting sexually outside their marriage because having contracted pubic lice, she knows that she hasn't had sexual contact with anyone herself. She confronts her husband and he admits what he has been doing. She then discovers that she has HPV, also from her husband's sexual activities outside of the marriage with men. She then clings to an idea that her husband is not actually being unfaithful because he is not having penetrative sex; *his definition was very specific in his mind.* This need to minimise the wrongdoing, to somehow reduce it to a less serious action against her, is indicative of his patriarchal self-preservation and

manipulative gaslighting in that despite the facts of his actions causing her actual bodily harm, she still defends him. And yet, she still tells this story. Perhaps she needs to borrow my authority to make it okay to finally speak the truth about how she feels.

Olivia: *And you know, he was really, really distant from me really distant didn't seem to want to do anything with us. Everything was about I'm taking my son out for a walk! And all this kind of stuff and one night, I .. I mean I sort of confronted him and said, you know, I really don't I don't understand what's going on here. I really don't understand. You don't seem to want this or you're never here or you know, you don't show me any affection. And there would .. there was nothing between us and so I think in some weird effort, he made this effort we ended up in bed and it was painful and I kind of said; I need you to stop and he just carried on. And so .. and at the end he just turned around me said was that good enough for you? And I just was like .. I sort of went to the bathroom threw up.*

Olivia tells the above story of being sexually abused by her husband after confronting him about his selfish behaviour in the marriage. *You don't seem to want this* is about both of them not agreeing what *this* is. For Olivia, the marriage is about intimacy, shared responsibility for household chores, doing family activities together. For her husband, it seems, *this* is a house, a person who does his laundry and looks after his children, and a place to escape from to express his true identity, i.e. very much an older model of marriage. Then, in the bedroom, he is violent towards her, perhaps because she has exposed him. It is a very traumatic incident, and it points to the trust these informants put into this project that they can speak out about the pain they have endured.

There is a tension between heterosexual partners because of the fairy tale of *one day my prince will come and sweep me off my feet and rescue me from my mother, the evil witch*.

Unfortunately, in these marriages, there are two people who want to be rescued by a handsome prince, and one of the partners (the wife) is often treated as if she is the evil witch. There is not the space here, to interpret fairy stories, Hollywood, and Disney romantic tropes and how they impact boys and girls, nevertheless, they are powerful repositories for cultural expectations of marriage and gender roles.

The participants have spoken about a lack of romance in their courtship and imply that their husbands seem to resent this romantic identity. It is very confusing because of how women are

expected to be. The absence of honesty between the two partners is alarming. Women are hiding their misery and men are being dishonest about their sexuality and what they are spending their time doing. One participant's husband was "reading German newspapers for relaxation" whilst on holiday, but was actually messaging his boyfriend.

Alex: *Then the minute we got back, he was just on his laptop on his laptop and I did say, you know, what is going on? What is this about and and he just said I.. my life is so stressful. My job is so hard you do not understand and I need [00:38:06] I need an absolute break from and he said I just want to read all the newspapers and I like reading the German newspaper. He can speak fluent German. I like reading German newspapers. I like this. I like that so I would say yeah, tell me what what are you, you know, just share it with me. What are you reading about? And he would say Jo I read them. I read the equivalent of the Sun in the German newspapers and I just just for just for light relief and I said my I really want to know who David Beckham's been shagging this week. Tell me you know, not yeah, I know I.. I'm not judging. I mean, I.. I enjoy the trash. Yeah, and it was like and he was like no, I just I need I need space I need space and it was just awful.*

Here, the husband's reported need for space is given as a reason for not connecting with his wife.

Alex makes several attempts to engage her husband in conversation about what he says he is doing (reading the news in German) when in fact, as she discovers later, he cannot tell her because he is actually messaging men to potentially date. Alex is really asking for connection and that is why *it was just awful* and why I use this as an example of lack of honesty. As well as the lack of honesty, this can be seen as a form of gaslighting, as Kate Abramson puts it; one person rendering another incapable of challenging their demands or behaviour by virtue of undermining their agency.¹⁶⁴ Alex's agency is undermined because her implicit desire for connection is refused with a lie. Her husband is not reading German newspapers. He is messaging men with a view to having hook-ups. It is not just that there are lies, it is that in this exchange, there is no sense of love or kindness or recognition of the need for connection.

Wendy's husband was 'going to the gym' but she found his gym clothes clean and folded and unused in his gym bag because he had really spent the 'gym time' with boyfriends.

¹⁶⁴ Abramson, *Turning up the Lights*, p. 10.

Wendy: *Yeah, and like when Steve .. I mean Steve'll go Wendy, you me world. I wanna grow old with you, you know. I mean we do, we have a lovely relationship. We just [01:46:10] we just rub along and I'm me I can be me. With my husband and I didn't realize this but with me husband he because he was older - seven years older. I mean I was like I said, I was 16 and he was like twenty-two, twenty-three just twenty-three. I felt I had to behave. I felt I had to behave myself and not act like that 16 year old and I continued to do that throughout our marriage where now I can be daft and silly and do what I want and Steve just laughs and says, I'm daft. So in that in that respect, it's lovely. I feel in a way like I've been freed a little bit in that respect. But the deceit is things are hard to get your head round, it really is. Like I said, I think if it had happened years earlier. It might have been easier, you know, if we'd only had a ten-year marriage or something. But 34 years and, and if I felt I knew he was up to something and thought it was a woman and I just knew. And he denied it and kept denying it and denying it. I mean I checked his gym bag a couple of times and he's .. his stuff was still our [incomp] rolling about the washing machine. You know, he'd not had them on and he's still denying it. Just because I folded them back. I mean they were fresh out the washing machine. You could smell the clean washing on them. I've just rolled them up right away – you try to say I stink? Just got turned around on us. So I don't know but I hope I can move on .. I hope that does in time diminish*

The casual way that Wendy's husband gaslights her in the above extract makes it very difficult for her to protest. She discovers that his gym clothes have not been worn and he responds with *you try to say I stink?* Immediately undermining her agency and her reality. If she says *yes* then he can be hurt. If she says *no* then her reality is questioned about whether he has worn his gym clothes at the gym. She also speaks about her new relationship and how she can be *daft and silly* rather than tread on eggshells. The absence of the person who questioned her sanity liberates her playful side. She expresses the sadness about her marriage having lasted so long *34 years* and how it was characterised by deceit.

Many of my participants report gaslighting as a feature of their marriages.¹⁶⁵ These range from overt statements like “your mum is mad” made by the father to his children to subtle undermining of the wife’s position and her view of reality; to outright declarations that what the wife has seen with her own two eyes, is not actually true.

Wendy: *He would just step back and I was just left to deal with everything. Now I've later found .. much later after everything's broken down that even from them being small. When he left me to deal with those things behind me*

¹⁶⁵ Shirley, Elaine, Cheryl, Wendy, Alison, and Nicole

back, he's been saying to the kids your mum's round the bend. Your mum's mad.

The father seems to casually discredit his children's mother. This is an instance of the informant comparing her life to her husband's; *I was just left to deal with everything and he's been saying to the kids your mum's round the bend.* In other words, this woman does not feel understood or supported, and when she goes out to claim some time for herself, he undermines her by gaslighting his children. It is as if he is inoculating them into his distorted view of reality so that they are unable to validate her truth. He appears to recruit his children to gaslight his wife.

Gaslighting could be seen as problematic because it implies agency on the part of the *doer* or that they know at some level that they are doing it. *He gaslighted me* is not as transitive as *he hit me*. As Stark points out, 'manipulative gaslighting is an attempt to get someone to do or to feel something, nevertheless, he may be unaware that he is doing so'.¹⁶⁶ In the example above, whether the husband consciously thought about undermining or discrediting his wife is irrelevant. The damage was done. When gaslighting is observed and named, it can be prevented from recurring. These extracts add to a growing repository of real examples which help to identify this type of behaviour.

Alison: *But, I couldn't I just couldn't take it anymore with the getting all ... just not knowing what was going on. And why are you being this way. And also not having you know, we had a sexual relationship obviously, but you know when I was 40 that died a death. Supposedly he was impotent, you know, and I'm like, well, I was understanding as women are. You know, we go to the doctors and we sort ourselves out. No question of him going to sort that out. Well, we clearly don't have a problem elsewhere. But you know, I couldn't give him what he wanted. But now that he couldn't give me what I needed. You know, there was no question of a lot of people say things like well, loads of people are not having sex? You know, I said, I'm forty! No, and even at eighty I think I'll still be interested thank you very much. [laughs] You know, and he was making me out to be a freak. and I'm totally you're not giving me what I need and you should be interested in what my page has got written on it not just me looking at your page and filling everything in for you. We should be on each other's page. You just you've just turned my page over and ignored it.*

¹⁶⁶ Stark, *Gaslighting*, p. 223.

The above extract from Chapter 2 is repeated here because it exemplifies aspects of marriage that resonate with the theme of this chapter as well. The assumption in this marriage is that Alison's husband should be giving her an active and loving sex-life. The comment that *supposedly he was impotent* calls out her exasperation about this situation of stale-mate, where he will not go to the doctor to *sort it out*. She reports that when she attempts to address this with him, he talks about *a lot of people are not having sex* and she responds that she is [only] *forty* and expecting or hoping to have sex at the age of eighty. Here, we see a couple who are sublimating their need for intimacy into whether they are having sex with each other. Not having sex can be seen as a consequence and a symptom of lack of intimacy and therefore it can be a talisman for both spouses to hold on to as proof that their marriage is in trouble. Alison's complaint in this extract, is that not only are they not having sex, but her husband seems not to care about her happiness - *you've just turned my page over and ignored it*. It seems that she feels invisible. It might be more accurate to view this type of behaviour as an institutionalised by-product of the patriarchy which is lived out in some marriages.

The husband fails to see his wife as separate to himself, an equal agent, with her own needs, her own values, her own right to determine her actions. He labels any differences which prevent him from following his own path, as 'crazy'. He refuses to enter into a reasoned discussion. What is going on here? Does this stem from his childhood, where his mother pandered to his every whim, never saying 'no' to him? Do fathers roll their eyes at their sons when their wives/mothers express opinions (as mine did)? Or are these men, husbands of my participants, entirely caught up in their own misery and unable to connect with their wives?

CONCLUSION

We started from a position of examining women's hopes and aspirations for marriage in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In this changing context, women had higher expectations of intimacy and equality in marriage than early generations. However, the marriages we are looking at have all apparently been entered into by men who at the very best, were already curious about

having sex with men, and at the very worst (in terms of their ability to enter into the marriage whole-heartedly) lying and exploiting women in order to meet their needs: of feeling love towards a woman, wishing to hide or eliminate their sexual orientation, dissatisfaction with the gay world, negative feelings towards gay lifestyle, familial pressure, and a wish to have children within a socially acceptable framework.¹⁶⁷ None of these needs having been shared with their prospective wife (except, perhaps, the first), the marriages begin. Given the greater social acceptance of gay sexualities and the more visible nature of gay lifestyles, later it becomes more likely and easier for the men to explore these paths. Eventually cracks form, and as we have seen, the marriages become unsatisfying to both partners.

The willingness of these women to open themselves and speak about their experiences has given rise to intimate testimonies. These testimonies are memories that are recovered after discovering that their husbands are gay. We have engaged with these stories in two different ways; first we have tried to feel into what it was like to experience the events described, and secondly, we have taken the way women speak about themselves and asked whether it fits into a framework of patriarchy, misogyny and gaslighting. As Laura Thomas writes, 'in an abusive relationship, small moments of self-assertion are impossible to maintain because of the isolation engineered by the abuser'.¹⁶⁸ We have seen that many of these women are isolated because they are the default at-home carer for young children.

It is evident from the testimony that the idea that women do not really matter and that men's lives are somehow more important remains very strong in these marriages, and there remained a disjuncture between rhetorics of equality and daily experiences. Many of my informants report feeling as if they had disappeared during their marriage. When asking their husbands questions, they are met with silence, they are not respected enough to be given a response. Although, the husband does not comprehend the injustice when women are expected to behave

¹⁶⁷ Adler and Ben-Ari, *The Myth of Openness*, p. 805.

¹⁶⁸ Laura Thomas, 'Gaslight and Gaslighting', *The Lancet. Psychiatry*, 5 (2018), p. 118.

differently if he asks them a question. A woman who respects her husband and trusts his word, is exploited, and told that she is stupid for believing what (to her) is obviously an outright lie.

Individual stories can shed light on some broader themes. Some of the common threads that we see repeatedly is that at some point in the marriage, intimacy and trust is lost. These are difficult, abstract qualities and appear to be at odds with what women want from a marriage which suggests that the changes of the period have created mismatched expectations. Esther Perel talks about how men have affairs because they are bored and fear intimacy and women have affairs because they are lonely and hunger for intimacy.¹⁶⁹ These themes of loneliness, boredom, hunger, and fear are played out in most of the women's stories. Not a single participant admitted to having an affair, which is interesting. Most talked about how much effort they had to put into being a mother and running the household. Many of the participants had children with special needs, which made their mothering tasks even more demanding. These marriages were traditional in nature, with the mother doing most of the parenting and the husband going out and earning the money. There were a few notable exceptions; Nicole supported her husband while he continued with his degree. Nancy supported her husband while he tried to change careers, Mandy supported her husband because she worked in a high-paying job whilst he was training to be a teacher. The testimonies demonstrate the resilience of traditional roles in some marriages from the period studied.

¹⁶⁹ Esther Perel, *The State of Affairs : Rethinking Infidelity* (London: Yellow Kite, 2017), p. 5.

CHAPTER 4 DIVORCE: DISCOVERY, REALISATION, PROCESSING

INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at women's experiences of their marriage ending and how they negotiated their divorces. Historians have documented the changes to divorce laws and guidance over the last fifty years which largely consisted of recognising the separation of church and state and acknowledging that if a couple wishes to separate and divorce, then they should be supported to do this in a way that safeguards their children and no longer lays blame with either spouse.¹⁷⁰ Historians will also have to address the very recent changes in legislation. The women in this group challenged these changes because they did not think that their husbands had been honest with them at the outset of their marriages. Therefore, there were expressions of disappointment because they felt like the innocent party to a wrongdoing. Finding themselves on the cusp of changes where children were not familiar with same-sex relationships, participants expressed concerns over their children spending time with a father in his new relationship. Often fathers would have come from conservative backgrounds and children were raised conservatively which meant that the experiences of finding out that their father is in a relationship with a man had to be carefully managed, largely by the mothers. The testimonies in this chapter show that after these divorces, it is still often the woman who must manage the household and the family.

After they experienced all the vicissitudes of marriage, and bearing in mind that they are telling their stories *after* discovering that their husbands prefer sex with men, we now turn to testimony of how it was for the women to find out that their husband is gay, realise that their marriage was over, and the manner in which they tell the story of divorce. Many of my participants

¹⁷⁰ Weeks, *The World We Have Won : The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*, pp. 74, 89, 122, 70; Jane Lewis, 'Public Institution and Private Relationship: Marriage and Marriage Guidance, 1920-1968', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 (1990); Roderick Phillips, 'Untying the Knot : A Short History of Divorce', (1991).

had to deal with the discovery of their husbands' sexual orientation while they still believed that their marriages were strong.¹⁷¹ Also, many had children who were still at school, or younger.¹⁷² Whilst some women were kind and understanding towards their husbands, and sought to find a friendly resolution to the marriage, most were shocked and felt traumatised. The testimonies contain indications of a very wide range of serious mental health issues. As I have written earlier, I believe that drawing the stories from an internet support group might skew findings to women who are more vulnerable than those in the general population. I acknowledge that there may be women whose marriages have ended with less trauma and they have therefore not felt the need for support. However, I offer these stories to show that for some people, a husband's closeted sexual orientation and all its accompanying choices conflicts at a profound level with cultural expectations of wives in standard nuclear families. By highlighting these stories, I show that in the early twenty-first century there is still a marked adherence to twentieth century expectations of marriage and gender roles in this cohort, as described by Clare Langhamer.¹⁷³ The maladies of any particular period are contingent on the expectations that society has of its citizens and therefore, these stories highlight how certain individuals have tried, and failed, to adapt to the demands of marriage as prescribed by our culture. We will delve into the events experienced by my participants to reveal their expectations of marriage. As Sharon puts it so succinctly:

Sharon: *Wouldn't ever want to see my children in this situation where, where you know, they're; they're married to somebody who has had to live a lie, whether they subconsciously know it or consciously know it. Deep down, you know, they've got married because of what society says not because of what they actually want and you know, I want my kids to grow up marrying for love, not for, for anything else?*

This chapter will look at instances of realising that a marriage is over, the experience of divorce, and how women recover afterwards. As before, we are mindful that memories of events are moulded to

¹⁷¹ Nancy, Penny, Anna, Elaine, Ingrid, Alex, Patricia, Candy, Wendy, Pauline, Alison

¹⁷² Penny, Sharon, Anna, Olivia, Frankie, Alex, Eleanor, Carrie, Patricia, Candy, Cheryl, Mandy

¹⁷³ Langhamer, *The English in Love*.

fit the narrative that best fits our view of ourselves.¹⁷⁴ The themes that repeat are those of being used and manipulated and of feeling betrayed. Though divorce is pervasive in contemporary society, it still happens only once (very rarely twice or more) in a lifetime and it comes with many strong feelings. It has been likened to experiencing a bereavement.¹⁷⁵

Curating and editing the stories has been particularly difficult for this chapter. All the women spoke extensively about how they found out that their husbands were gay and how their marriages ended. Some also used the interview like therapy; taking the opportunity to sort through their emotions of anger, sadness, grief, and feelings of powerlessness. Many stories are very disturbing and shocking. I have questioned my reasons for including them because I do not want to be accused of sensationalism, however, without their inclusion, I am in danger of dishonouring the hardships that these women have had to experience. I recognise that my interviewees entrusted me with their painful experiences with the knowledge that they would be retold in this document, and therefore, if I do not tell the stories, I am betraying them. Nevertheless, I have had to leave some out because of space restrictions. The stories I have chosen to include contain important points that contribute to my thesis, but there are others that could also be used in further research. Some stories have been omitted because they are very similar to each other.

FINDING OUT

Elaine: *Yes so that night, he was like 'I need to go and see a doctor. I need to go to A&E and need to get tested. I.. I don't know what's wrong with me.' I went to A&E with him and sat for like four hours in A&E and it was actually when I went in to see the nurse and be triaged and I had taken my engagement ring and my wedding ring off because I was so humiliated. I thought I don't want someone to know I'm his wife and yeah it like that. It was actually the first time I'd said it out loud to anybody and I just burst out crying and the nurse said to me, 'do you want Graham to leave the room?' And I said 'Yes.' and I just knew like I can't.. my marriage is over. I can't stay with this person. And*

¹⁷⁴ Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet, 'Narrative Structures, Social Models, and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story', in *Women's Words*, ed. by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), (p. 77).

¹⁷⁵ Christopher Francis Clulow, 'Divorce as Bereavement: Similarities and Differences', *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 28 (1990).

yeah, so we went in to the doctor and it was actually in the A&E that Graham said to the doctor, 'it happened once before marriage, once after' and then I spoke, and then he said to the doctor, 'can I revise that - it was actually five times before we got married and once after.'

So again, it all adds to the trauma and I'm finding out in front of a stranger, a doctor that actually it's prolific like I mean it's clearly not something that happened just once. It's clearly a lifestyle choice or he's being totally living a double life completely.

So yeah, we went home that night and I got up to go to work the next day and I just went into autopilot and I thought I can't let people down that I've booked in. I had a training thing the next day and different things and I had every intention of going into work. And I got up and I just like literally fell to the ground and I said I can't go in. I actually don't know when I'm going to be able to go back to work. I am totally [00:12:04] dead inside like so traumatized I was stammering. I just .. and so I rang my manager and [incomp] at that point Graham kept saying to me, just tell her that if you've got a stomach bug and I said no and he said don't tell her anything else because you know, you want to say it you can't go back on it type thing. And I said Graham like I don't tell lies and actually there's no point in me saying to my manager I might I'll be back in two days time when and actually for an actual fact. I took 4 months off work, you know. So there was no point in me. I didn't want to mislead my manager and I didn't go into details. I just said that I'd found something out and my marriage was over. And that I would be in touch with her and thank God my manager is incredibly kind incredibly supportive and she.. I met up with her various times when I was off and she couldn't have been nicer to me and she very much said don't come back until you're ready to come back. It's worse to come back and then have to go off again. Take the time that you need to kind of start to recover and rebuild yourself but don't rush back, you know, so so that was fine .

[...]

It actually, he was the one who had done it and actually he'd been living the double life like but so he basically said to his mum and I feel like Elaine was a delicate flower who had been damaged in childhood and I picked her up and like helped her to bloom again and now I threw her on the ground and trodden on her. So like even at that I remember sitting in our sofa thinking what are you talking about? I'm not a flower. I'm not an object. I'm actually a person [00:16:04] you've done this to me. You have like this is going to impact the rest of my life! You know what I mean? It was just a really, it was very odd thing to say and I suppose .. from speaking to counsellors and different things, I mean that was him just totally disassociating himself and making me into an object.

The presence of third parties for Elaine and Graham appeared to affect them in very different ways.

Graham used the opportunity to give Elaine the facts she needed to end the marriage. Elaine felt humiliated finding out in front of another person. She had already taken off her rings because she felt embarrassed and humiliated. Elaine's was the shortest marriage of my participants - it lasted

five months. After the shocking revelation in hospital, she attempts to get up the next day and go into work, where she is a speech therapist and does not want to let her patients down. Very often we see women putting other people before themselves as this is what our culture demands. However, Elaine realises that she is highly traumatised and ultimately is off work for four months. The trauma speaks to her expectations that her husband is going to be her partner for life and that he would not lie about something as significant as his sexuality. Her belief in him as an ally is destroyed, as well as her trust in herself as a competent chooser of a mate.

Elaine's husband was comfortable that a nurse knew about his sexuality, but interestingly, he does not want Elaine's manager at work to know, and he asks her to lie about why she can not go to work. This reveals the way men and women often compartmentalise their lives differently. Elaine was comfortable telling her manager at work because she was then able to borrow her authority to legitimise taking so much time off. Her trauma was witnessed and therefore it was real. The second part of the transcript shows Elaine adopting a victim role where she talks about being objectified. This objectification is expressed by borrowing the authority of her counsellors, who have explained to her or shown her a different perspective on what has happened. She does not see her husband attempting to apologise; *I threw her on the ground and trodden [sic] her* she sees herself as having been manipulated and as having to bear the consequences of his retrospective framing of himself as the hero who rescued and protected her *delicate flower*. It is a compelling narrative which has arisen from romantic notions of marriage where a fragile princess is rescued by the heroic prince from the dragon's tower. There is a rich seam of meaning that can be drawn from the language used by women in relation to marriage and relationships. I use the shorthand phrase *some day my prince will come* to signal where I think this magical fairy-tale-type influence is felt.

Where Elaine states *its clearly a lifestyle choice* she might be talking about him being in the closet or him being gay. If the latter, then this points to ideas of sexual orientation being within someone's control, rather than being immutable. If the former, then she is accusing her husband of deception and falsely entering into a heterosexual marriage when he is aware of facts that would

delegitimise the union. Most of my participants hold the belief that sexual orientation is immutable and set at a very young age.

Candy: *Okay, so I had subconsciously I think you know, I knew I was in an unusual situation where my husband had a close relationship with a gay man, and he used to have messages quite a lot because we might be arranging to meet this person. He was you know .. friend of the family so he did get messages and his phone was always set to his messages to appear with just the name of the person. So if I sent him a message it would just come up with Candy. But he had a problem with his phone this particular weekend and it.. So he had to reset his phone and his iPad and we went out to get some petrol and he left his iPad on the bedside table and I just happened to look at it because it lit up and it was a message from this .. from Doug saying love you and lots of hearts and that was it. That was all it .. but that was enough for me to realize there was more going on than just a friendship. So I waited till he got back from petrol .. getting petrol and didn't say anything for a little bit .. was sort of in my own space for a bit. He was in the garden and then I text him and said we need to take the dog for a walk. And so we did and I was going to wait until we got a long way from the house, but I literally got out of eye-shot of the children and just collapsed and said I've seen your message from Doug. Saying that he loves you. And his immediate response was why did you look at my phone? [00:02:02] And I said, I didn't I saw your iPad. It just came up on view and he went.. he just put his arms around me and said, oh Candy. And we then carried on walking and sat down on the bench and just had a long, long, long chat and he kind of told me, you know, I said how long has it been going on and you know, he didn't have any time to make up a story and there was no story because I would know when he met Doug. The only lie I had been that you know, he .. he wasn't a client . They'd met in a gay bar. And before he even introduced me they'd been having a relationship and so I knew, you know four years at least. Might have been longer and maybe .. probably four and a half years. And I just sobbed I just sobbed and sobbed and said what are we going to do? And he said we'll be fine. I don't want to lose you. We'll be fine. We'll work through this and. And I can't remember a lot more about the details of the conversation. We were out for about an hour just talking - me trying to make sense of it.*

Candy's husband declares *I don't want to lose you*. A statement that sums up so many of the experiences in this study. It contains within it, given the context, something depersonalising, because it fails to contain an apology to her for causing the end of the marriage. It fails to take responsibility for his deception and betrayal. In many of these stories, I sense a menacing undertone of men's voices speaking men's truths about how they privilege their needs and narcissistically plan to keep their wives in order to have someone to look after them and their children while they have fun (not only men who prefer sex with men). These might give more insight into why other men commit crimes against women, particularly domestic abuse. There is a failure to see women as

people. We also see how Candy's husband only confronts his acts of infidelity and betrayal when he is found out. However, since this is about women's lived experience, I am cautious to infer much more about men's internal world. The description of what happened when Candy found out that her husband was in love with a family friend, who she had believed for years was his business partner, should speak for itself.

Jackie: *And he kind of... I forget how it escalated but he kind of come up to my face and said well, what do you want a divorce? Do you? Do you? I just said you know what? Yeah Yes. Actually I think yes, I do. I do this time. And it took him by surprise and he sat down and he just said Oh, I really love you. I thought, What? Where's that come from? I think he really wasn't expecting my reaction. 'I love you with all my heart!' Were his words. And I thought actually he's not .. never ever said that to me. And I said, well it's.. it's what I want. It's the best thing. You know, we need to get on with this. And that was that really. But, and then I said these words to him .. and this is really pivotal. I said, 'I need to ask you one thing though.' I said, 'are you gay?' And there was a gap where he said, 'No.' And it's that gap that made me think. He didn't say, 'No! Of course I'm not. No of course I'm not.' You like. It was that hesitant. And that's when I knew.*

Jackie's memory of this pivotal moment in her marriage centres around a question and a hesitation on the part of her husband when she asks him if he is gay. Capturing a small domestic conversation between two people who are in the actual moment of ending their marriage is what makes oral histories with women so moving. This couple struggled with their relationship as parents of their daughter. Jackie was very close to her daughter, had also had to look after her own elderly parents and her severely autistic brother. Her husband, ten years her junior, suffered from depressive mental illness and had attempted suicide previously. The love that he professes in the above clip seems to stem from a filial bond with his wife rather than being a romantic, marital love. They had not had sex for years by the time this conversation took place. Their daughter had been begging her to leave him for years. Therefore, it is as if all the stars fell into alignment in this one moment; a hesitation to deny he was gay. The moment of deciding may seem as if it is a sudden act but really it is the culmination of long periods of rumination, processing, feeling, and testing how things might be different. The material I have collected here will provide other researchers with testimonies enabling more understanding about the process of making life-changing decisions.

Just as in Candy's testimony above, Jackie confronts her husband with the inevitability of their marriage being over, and he becomes angry and tries to backtrack with professions of love. The failure to recognise that his actions have brought the marriage to this point, is a form of gaslighting. It seems as if he is saying that she is being unreasonable to want to end the marriage because he can still use the words *I love you with all my heart* as if they are a magic spell, making his acts of infidelity inconsequential in his eyes.

Nancy: *I had to force him to a conclusion and he was trying to get out of making a decision and I said, 'You've got to [00:54:09] decide, you've got to decide.' And he said 'okay, then well I'm going to go.' Upon which obviously I forced him to that conclusion and knew that was the conclusion. I was obviously but at that particular point actually I was quite angry not just upset I was angry [..]*
But yeah, I was just absolutely furious that he would scupper what we had and that I think again if I'm honest I was furious to have what control ripped away from me. And this is what I say to members I say, 'start getting control back over your life because it is the most aggravating thing to have put your whole genuine love and effort into something and just have someone else rip control of it out of your hands in a way that you cannot fight back. It's not another woman. You can't go get more attractive or sexy or anything else. Nothing is going to fix this.' And you know, believe me I had been racking my brains because I'm a problem solver and I've been racking my brains to try and solve this thing. It couldn't be solved and when we got back to the Villa, I just stormed into this four-poster damn bedroom and took all my stuff out. Luckily my daughter had a big twin-bedded room and I said is it okay if I move in with you? Yes, sure. And moved all my stuff and that was the last time that we slept in the same bed. When we got home. I said to him, 'you're not coming in this bed. You can sleep downstairs.' I made him sleep on the settee because although we had quite a big house the bedrooms were all filled with kids. So that was that was the time that happened.

When Nancy finds out that her husband wants to leave the marriage for his gay lover, she speaks about how furious she is to have *control ripped away* from her. Essentially, she is speaking about a world where it is not possible to stay married to a man who prefers to have sex with men. This is evidence for how we expect sexual fidelity in marriage as a given. Not only does Nancy expect her husband to be faithful to her, but she also expects him to find her desirable and attractive. Therefore, the idea that control has been ripped away from her by her husband, can be contested and instead, the locus of control could be demonstrated to reside in her views about marriage.

In the context of whether a marriage has ended, Nancy feels as if she has not got control because her husband told her that the marriage was over.

I am struck in the above narrative, by the sentence *I just stormed into this four-poster dam bedroom and took all my stuff out*. It has a cinematic quality to it and it reminds me of how the big moments of our lives might be scripted by what we have seen in movies, which is a late modern sensibility connected to ideals of romance. Life imitates art. People seem to be propelled by what they should do by cinematic tropes, which dominate their thoughts when they have experienced this type of trauma. The 'rejected wife' trope is embodied and knowledge of how to react is accessed from scenes in romantic films. She storms into the room and begins to pack her things. Nancy's story is worth listening to in its entirety as she is very eloquent. Her marriage contained many moments of tenderness even though it was her husband who had pity sex with her because he thought she would not go on to have another partner after their divorce.

In the following clip, Anna has just discovered naked pictures of her husband on his phone and the Grindr app. After confronting him about this, the following event is recalled:

Anna: *And eventually he came [00:16:01] out and said, 'can we talk?' I said 'yeah'. He said. I.. he said, 'I think you've always known I've struggled with my sexuality and I..' 'No - I haven't.' And he said 'but I'm not gay. I'm not gay.' I went. 'Okay, I don't think after what I saw this morning, that's quite the case. Because I don't feel the need to look at women's parts and send pictures of myself to other women. So let's not even..' at the moment.. 'I'm just trying to put myself in your shoes and thinking would I do that? Would I send pictures of myself to women? No, I wouldn't, so there you go. I don't.. don't question my sexuality. I never have I have no need to' You know, and I said to him, 'you know that's the marriage over don't you?' and he said 'but I still want to be married' and I said 'I can't be a wife to you anymore, Justin when this is going on. I'm, I'm not sharing you with another woman let alone whatever journey of discovery you're going on.' And I and I said to him 'I, I will support you while you go through this. I will.' I said, 'I don't want to destroy anything we've got in terms of children, and I don't really want anything to change under [00:18:01] the house roof at the moment if you like because there's too many other things to think about.'*

In contrast to Nancy, above, Anna seems to firmly take control and dictate the terms of their relationship. She asserts that she cannot stay married if her husband is not sexually attracted to her any more and/or can not be faithful to her. It is interesting that her husband says that he still wants

to be married - essentially privileging his needs over hers. It looks as if he is unable to understand that she needs to be desired. Particularly when she is confronted with his desire for other people. There does seem to be, on both parts, a desire to care for their children together, but they both discover, in this moment, that their marriage is over. With reference to Nancy's admonishment to the SPA members above, Anna has *taken control*. The subtext of her husband's declaration *but I still want to be married* is that she has finally raised the narcissistic insult where his view of reality cannot be sustained and he must see her as an independent person with her own needs.

Olivia's story of her marriage is disturbing and it is difficult to curate extracts which do it justice. Since her husband has subsequently passed away, and exhibited many symptoms of severe mental illness, it is an outlier to this project. At the same time, many of the marriages in this study contain very disturbing testimony. Olivia had a particularly traumatic experience in that her children had very pronounced safeguarding issues and her husband seemed to be very unstable. In the following clip, her sister-in-law comes to see her..

Olivia: *So she came round. She said you know, 'is he hitting you? Is he?' and I said 'well no.' I said, and explained what had been going on. And she said 'oh my God.' She said 'Don't tell my parents that.' but she said 'what I am going to tell my parents is about the drink because the drinking has to .. that needs to be sorted out like definitely.' So I said, 'yeah, okay.' [00:42:05] And so and then this .. he left so I had to go round .. we were due at his mum and dad's house for Sun- .. it was a Sunday. We were due there for dinner and I didn't have any dinner! [laughs]. So I went dutifully to their house. And walked in the door and they said 'where's Pete?' And I said, 'well, there's a bit of an issue' and kind of then.. 'All right,' so they kind of ushered me in. My father-in-law took the children, well, my son off. And my mother said what's going on? What's going on? I said, 'well, he's left.' And she said, no lie, she said, 'oh my God, this means you're going to move down to Croydon!' And I was like, I was absolutely, you know, I hadn't comp- I had no idea what was going on in my life. I didn't know what I was doing the next two minutes, let alone my bigger life plans. And I kind of just kind of stood there and went, 'am I?' I really didn't know what to say. I was absolutely stunned. I couldn't take it in. I could not take in what she was saying. I was just and, and so we had this meal and then kind of I went home and and they kind of said 'do you think you need to do something?' You know, 'what's going on? What's happening?' Kind of thing? And I was like, 'well, I don't really know!' And so somewhere in all of this they suggested we went to see a counsellor. So I said, well we actually have already been to see one. So I mean I didn't hear from him for a couple of weeks. He didn't contact me, he .. nothing. So I didn't know where he was, what he was doing. I don't*

think he contacted them but I don't know. And so then I said then somehow we arranged going to see the counsellor. His parents came around to look after the children, [00:44:05] but they still didn't know about the gay thing. That ..they didn't know about that. They only knew about the alcohol and there's quite a lot of alcoholism in their family. So I don't think it was a new thing for them. So .. went to see the counsellor, and Pete had obviously been told by this counsellor to bugger off. Basically. I came back home to my in-laws. My son was taken off by my father-in-law and my mother-in-law just, just interrogated me. What went on what happens what's going on blah blah blah? Where's Pete? All of the this and I just said. He's gay. I felt so crushed. I felt like I was in a corner and couldn't get out, you know, and she went. 'Oh, I did always wonder.' Hello? Is this like? Oh, okay. I didn't respond because I just didn't know what to say. I really, really had no clue what had hit me. It really really didn't I didn't even really acknowledge it until about three, three years after? Maybe, maybe that I actually understood it. So I sort of existed.

In the above extract, we see a glimpse of Olivia's in-laws and their dysfunctional life; *and so we had this meal and then kind of I went home.*¹⁷⁶ Her husband subsequently dies of an accidental overdose in a Birmingham hotel with men he has met on a gay dating app before they finalise their divorce. Olivia describes three possible situations where a marriage might end: two which are socially acceptable reasons (*is he hitting you?* and *alcoholism*), and one that she dare not mention: *he's gay*. This is striking because it points to how concepts of sexuality are becoming less certain and more confusing. Olivia says she felt cornered and crushed, particularly when her mother-in-law appears to have known that her son was gay, or at the very least, wondered about it.

Stories of finding out that your husband is gay tended to take up large tracts of narrative and the participants seemed to use the oral history interview as a means of organising important memories and marshalling evidence for how they were feeling. This was apparent with Belinda, who was going through her divorce at the time of our interview, and her husband was still living in the same house whilst conducting a relationship with another man. His boyfriend was not living with them, but they spoke on the phone 'all the time'. Belinda kept insisting that she wanted separate

¹⁷⁶ The song; *Ode to Billie Joe* by Bobbie Gentry springs to mind here, where one member of a family processes a very traumatic event over a meal whilst the rest of the family is heartlessly oblivious. See: Lydia Hutchinson, 'Bobby Gentry's "Ode to Billie Joe"', 2013, <<https://performingsongwriter.com/bobbie-gentry-ode-billie-joe/>> [accessed 15 March 2023]

rooms and to sleep in separate beds but her husband continued to act as if the marriage was still viable.

Belinda: I haven't met this guy and I don't really want to. But David talks to him every morning, every evening. They do video calls with each other. David walks around the house talking .. has been what .. has been known to walk around the house talking to him which I find particularly awkward. There was one situation earlier this year where he was talking to him in the bathroom, and I needed to get in there to get ready for work and he couldn't understand why I felt it uncomfortable going into the bathroom. And I do I end up saying to him, 'look, please can you if you want to talk to him, that's fine. But please could you confine it to your office and your bedroom because I don't feel comfortable with it in the shared shared spaces' and he couldn't quite understand why that was a problem either. So it's all been a little bit like that, but we get on okay. I was very keen to try to keep things amicable and make sure that it was. We're still living under the same roof. Our house has been up for sale this year. We've just well we accepted an offer from it for it about a month ago. And that's all going through. We are going through the divorce at the moment and that's all going through it. So by .. and by the end of January, the house should be sold and the divorce should be finalized. But it's taken a while, but I am very much looking forward to a new start and him not being around anymore.

The above clip shows how Belinda is processing the events in her marriage contemporaneously with the interview and that she is trying to make sense of the day-to-day events that are happening to her . We can see that the memories have not yet been formed into a coherent story. However, this also gives us a window into the very intimate day-to-day lives of a separated couple who still live under the same roof. Belinda has clearly separated emotionally from her husband, whereas he appears to be oblivious to the changes that he has brought into the house. *He couldn't quite understand why that was a problem* again points to the narcissistic insult of the sudden realisation that the person he saw as 'the wife' was actually a person with needs incompatible with his. Again, there is no contrition, no move to be considerate or empathetic towards his wife and to respect her boundaries. *I am looking forward to him not being around anymore.*

Frankie: She goes, do you think it's possible you could be gay, Simon? This was the last two minutes of this counselling session and he just said Yes. She was.. 'Simon, are you attracted to men? Do you think you're gay?' And he said 'yes.' So she ended up which, having known, known counsellors a lot now. Very, very unusual it must've been her last appointment. She gave us an extra half an hour. And she talked about it and you know, she said basically sent us off and I was .. I was .. I was actually almost laughing because I just

thought .. I wasn't laughing with happiness.. and it's just it's so in shock at this point; I have asked you this question. I've gone through all these years blaming myself for everything being wrong with our marriage. And the only thing that's wrong is you're gay. And I was just I was so kind of furious and wound up that I was laughing. So we went off afterwards and we went for a meal and I don't know how I managed to sit and eat through it .. get through that meal. And we just chatted and then we had a couple of drinks and then we decided to go to the pub when we got to the pub and he just burst into tears. And gave me a hug outside the pub and just said, I think I'm gay. And I says I know you are Simon. I know you are it'll be alright, it'll be alright. I just knew at that point it just I knew. I knew he was. There was no point in me, I know there were a lot of wives will give it a second go or [00:24:02] think oh maybe they've made some mistake. I knew from the second he said that I knew he was gay and there was absolutely no way I was gonna twist my.. I've got very low self-esteem, but there's no way I was gonna force a man to stay with me who don't want to be with me. So we sat in the pub and reminisced and got drunk and then we got home. We sat up talking all night and at five in the morning.. well, this is it. That's it. We can't stay married. It's over.

Frankie has used her husband's sexual orientation as a container for everything that is wrong in her marriage; *The only thing that is wrong is you're gay*. In other words, because he is gay, the marriage must end. It is interesting to note the way this categorises the marriage. It is predicated on the man's behaviour (having a gay affair) which affects his identity (*do you think you're gay?*) which is a consequence of political activism to claim equal rights for gay men. Frankie says *We can't stay married. It's over*. It seems that this reason to end a marriage is categorically different from ending a marriage due to infidelity with another woman or for domestic abuse. The statement *We can't stay married* is true for Frankie because to her, marriage must be founded on sexual attraction, and she is implying that sexual orientation is absolutely binary.

In addition to the above comments, it is refreshing to note that the counsellor was intuitive enough to ask the husband whether he was gay, and then give the couple an extra half-an-hour of support.

Nicole: *I didn't have .. I think an accurate sense of the labels that would actually be attached to the stuff that I was experiencing inside our relationship.*

This sentence is incredibly powerful and insightful because it encompasses the idea that when we have the vocabulary to explain concepts, we are then able to recognise them. Linguistically, this is a very interesting topic - we have all heard about how Inuit people have multiple different words for

snow, because they live in snow and need to be able to recognise safe snow, dangerous snow, snow that is good for building, snow that might hide a seal-hole, etc.¹⁷⁷ The words that Nicole is referring to are descriptors for different ways that her husband behaves (for example: gaslighting, coercion, deception, grooming, etc) and they become empowering words which help her to recognise what is actually happening. It is only in recent decades, because of feminism and other anti-colonial and civil rights movements, that we have a more sophisticated language to describe and understand oppression. Therefore, giving women a voice and a vocabulary is vital to educate society about unacceptable behaviour. This archive of recorded material contains extensive data for linguistic research and analysis.

Nicole was unable to articulate what was going on for her, and she only realised how badly she was being treated when she was given the words to describe it.

Nicole: *And and then I found this this little device. This little black camera and I thought like I've never seen this before and immediately - immediately my gut was like this is bad. Wherever this is. This is bad, like warning danger! Will Robinson danger! That kind of immediate thing and so I .. I looked at this camera and it was very small. Like I don't know what like a thumb drive. So it was maybe a bit bigger than a thumb drive - very small and it had an SD card in it. And so I put the SD card in my computer. And and it was it was videos of him having sex with .. with tons of men in our various apartments. Like on our bed with a photo of me right next to this guy and there were like there was group sex, [00:06:03] people had like there were substances that were being used. I didn't know what they were, but definitely I mean something. And it was like really like deeply horrific and I was like shaking like having a real trauma response. [crying] I can't stay in this house like can't be here like anymore. I don't know. So like I kind of threw a bunch of my stuff together and I tried getting a hold of a couple of friends, but they were all like out of town. But one one wasn't and she she had a spare room and this person was somebody like, I was like borderline friends with. Like there were some ways in which I thought we could be quite compatible as friends, but then there was always something that made me want to put like a boundary with this person. So not my first choice for like a life emergency, but, you know, I needed to not be in that room and I didn't have like a credit card. I couldn't go to a hotel. I like needed another human who knew me to go somewhere.*

¹⁷⁷ For a fascinating discussion of the relationship between environment and language, see Terry Regier, Alexandra Carstensen, and Charles Kemp, 'Languages Support Efficient Communication About the Environment: Words for Snow Revisited', *PLoS One*, 11 (2016).

Nicole uses the words *trauma response* here to underline how bad her experience was, of finding out about her husband. It is traumatic to listen to her audio as she spends most of the interview crying. She disclosed to me that she had spent most of the night before the interview unable to sleep because she was aware of how re-traumatising it might feel to talk about the above experience. The framework for these stories is, I think, an assumption that in a marriage, there is the expectation that each partner will do their best to respect and care for the other. In all these stories, there is a breakdown of this fundamental element, which is promised at a wedding and then abrogated some time later. Whether we engage with the material linguistically, psychologically, sociologically, religiously, or philosophically, we also recognise that *historically* marriage has changed over time such that deception and manipulation by husbands is defended, excused, explained, and often forgiven. We live in a society which privileges and protects patriarchal attitudes and these stories are evidence of how far it goes, and how many lives suffer as a consequence.

THE DIVORCE

This section uncovers the varied experiences of the participants during and as a consequence of, divorce. In some respects, it can be inferred that their experiences are similar to all divorcing couples and in others, they are unique to the wives of gay men. The extracts I have chosen reveal qualities in the women which I think are noteworthy, as well as giving evidence for widely held theories about the impact of divorce. The two main threads are financial and parental. The divorce laws are currently undergoing many changes to do with making financial settlements easier and for removing blame as a reason for marital breakdown.¹⁷⁸ However, there is still the category of adultery, which can be cited as a reason for divorce, but not for adultery with a member of the same sex. This fact generated disbelief and outrage and a sense of injustice in my participants.

Olivia: *I said, 'well if your partner's coming to stay and you're in a shared house and you've just got the one room, where are the children going to sleep?' And he*

¹⁷⁸ 'Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Act 2020: Chapter 11: Pga Ch 11 2020', (Dandy Booksellers, 2020).

said, 'well they can just share the bed with us' and I said, 'What?' He says, 'well, they can just come in with us?' And I said 'well how you gonna explain who this man is that you're sharing a bed with?' and he said 'well, I'll just say it's a friend'. And I said 'but men don't share beds with their friends, but just men don't do that.' So that doesn't make any sense and you're setting him up big time here - for all sorts of things going forward.'

At the time. My son didn't know the difference between men and women and he's struggled to tell the difference because of his autism and all kind of related to things so I was having to teach him in a very rote fashion. This is what a man looks like. This is what a woman looks like which in this day is .. we tried to .. not teach that but actually my son needed to be taught that and [00:10:03] and I said, 'well, I don't really understand how you're going to set to deal with all of this. We're teaching him .. or I'm trying to teach him' ... Pete was completely oblivious to all of this. He can't even see his son had special needs actually. He was so focused on his own life. He just .. I don't know if he didn't care. He didn't want to see .. I'm not sure so trying to explain that to him while I'm trying to teach him the difference between men and women and you're going to get in bed with a man and then you're going to say, oh, he's my friend. I said, 'that's just way, way, way too confusing for any child to deal with let alone a child with special needs' and he got really, really upset about that and seemed to think I was being unreasonable.

I hesitate to include this testimony here because of the extreme safeguarding issues that have been raised previously as well as the mental health problems that Olivia's husband had, but I think that even disregarding those troublesome topics, the extract reveals some of Olivia's attitudes about gender and sexuality; when she says *but men don't share beds with their friends*. Olivia's attribution of importance to being able to recognise people's sex places her at a time in history where these matters have never been more discussed and debated. It would have been common in earlier times for family members to share a single room and/or bed out of necessity but this is not an accepted practice today. This extract also demonstrates the difficulty that divorced couples have in creating a safe place for children to spend time with each parent.

Cheryl: And then he was very cross because I was suing him for divorce and he said 'well why .. are you getting divorced with unseemly haste?' And I said 'well, there's no point in staying married. You're gay!' And he said 'Oh! Why should that mean we are getting divorced?' 'Well,' I said, 'I'd like to think I could get it at least once more before I die. Preferably from someone who finds women attractive.' To which, to my horror, he said 'well, I could come home once a month.' 'What and service me? I don't think so thank you! I don't know where you've been or what you've got.' Yeah. It was just terrible. Terrible. So, I said 'no thank you' and I have a really cracking solicitor and I was divorced by the August. Just on the basis that it was unreasonable behaviour because it's unreasonable to expect me to stay married to someone who's gay.

Cheryl reveals here that for her, sexual orientation is a deal-breaker in whether the marriage can continue. It appears from what she reports that her husband does not agree. There is an argument that for him, it is convenient to stay married, especially as we have seen elsewhere, he gets to be involved in family life without the onerous tasks of domestic chores and childcare. He has much to lose, whereas Cheryl has her freedom and selfhood to gain. She says she was in a controlling marriage. The extract shows how in this marriage, the cost to the woman of staying married (no sex, feeling controlled, no autonomy, etc) is higher than the cost to the man, who would probably continue his extra-marital liaisons. It is noteworthy that Cheryl does not consider an open relationship in order to keep the family together because she has other issues aside from sexual orientation and fidelity, which she discusses here:

Cheryl: I suddenly woke up one day and I thought 'oh, I feel like me' and I hadn't realized that I didn't feel like me. Yeah, that's how disempowered I was. So that's quite interesting and he'll say now, he'll say 'oh, I don't' .. 'you've turned into this awful person' and I said, 'well, no, I haven't, I've turned back into the person I was when you first met me - the difference is you can't control me anymore because you're not here and I'm not going to let you and I'll never let anybody do that again.'

The idea that the marriage could continue even if he was not living with her (*I could come home once a month*) demonstrates his belief in marriage for his convenience and a failure to understand his wife's position, thus depersonalising her.

Elaine was married for just six months when she found out that her husband was gay. As a Catholic, this meant that she could have her marriage annulled.

Elaine: And one thing is that my marriage will be annulled through the Catholic church because, because it was with men, you know, so I get a divorce in two.. after two years and then once that comes through, I'll do the paperwork for an annulment. And the priest said he spoke to a canon lawyer and it's indisputable really, the marriage was never going to work and it was information withheld from me that I would never have married him if I'd known. So for me, I, I do get some solace in that in that it means that there's some recognition that I was wronged and that I went into something not knowing fully what the facts were because one of the things and you'll know yourself or you'll know from speaking to other participants, that you can't cite adultery as the reason and which it was like, actually I just could not believe that when I went to see the solicitor and they told me [00:48:11] that. It's just .. it's actually mental when you think about it and .. yeah, it's

just another way of thinking this is not fair, you know, so it means that on paper it looks as if it was neither of our fault.

On the one hand, Elaine's husband's sexual orientation means that her marriage can be annulled by the Catholic church, a fact which validates her need to blame him for the marital breakdown. But on the other hand, the law does not recognise adultery with the same sex and therefore she feels unfairly treated because *on paper it looks as if it was neither of our fault*. As the testimony stands, this is a valuable snapshot of how this marriage is viewed by the church; it is only valid between a man and a woman who are sexually attracted to each other. With the legalisation of gay marriage in 2015, comes the ushering in of an era where categories of sex and sexual orientation may become more and more separate from family law's jurisdiction.

Sharon: So the last thing I wanted was my kids to sort of grow up thinking gay equals divorce equals bad. And yeah, so then you know, sort of Scott moved out got in a house very quickly got in a relationship, introduced the kids to him and that point you know, we sat down and more so for my son than my daughter because she sort of a bit too young really to get it, but sort of sit down said, 'oh, well, actually the reason Mummy and Dad split up is because daddy likes men' and my son just sort of turned around and went 'Yeah? And?' And you know just completely; 'So What?' [laughs]. Didn't care at all which which is brilliant and you know, it's exactly the way that we need sort of future generations to be around around homosexuality. Yeah, since then we've had a lot of arguments but most of them tend to be around finances; you know, sort of child maintenance, access to the kids, his mental health. He's still sort taking a battering [00:18:01] and very much still leans on me unfortunately for that. So there's been a lot of times when he's not been able to have the children because he's not been feeling so mentally well enough. So it's been quite exhausting because I'm not getting a break at all. But then on the other hand, at least I know the kids are safe with me, but you know so he now sort of seems to be settling himself into his new life and most of the time, touch wood, we get on we get on great. His new partner is .. is a really nice guy - gets on well with the kids and again, he's older than Scott. So it's somebody that can look after him and he hopefully will move away from me mothering him to having somebody else that can be his parent.

Sharon talks about being divorced from someone with mental health issues related to their sexuality and then juggling issues around childcare. She also explains that her children appear to be unconcerned about their father's attraction to a man. This prompts us to consider what the children actually might be more concerned about, which are not mentioned at all: where they will sleep, what possessions will be at which house, how will they invite their schoolfriends home, how will

they know where they are going to be on any given day in the future, etc. These questions are covered by her saying *I know the kids are safe with me*. She also mentions her husband's need to be parented himself and acknowledges that this might have formed the basis of her relationship with him, that she was more a parent to him than a wife. *Somebody else that can be his parent*.

Jackie: *So he just wanted me out of the equation before he could come out. Which is what he did. And we made this decision that I would come back to my parents' And that we would.. our assets.. and he told me not to take legal advice. And friends were saying no, you should anyway, he said, oh I've found this divorce site called Wikivorce which was really good and we can keep the cost down and do it really cheap and on our own. [00 28 10]And I said, okay, I'll go along with that but, oh, the timing was like .. because I dealt with all the finances, he was like, 'Well, how did you pay this and how to do that?' And I said, I'll show you. I [incomp] he is getting really anxious about it all. So I went, I'll show you, I'm going to be here. I'm going to be round the corner. It's not like I'm going anywhere. It'll be fine. You know, you'll be fine and I was the one reassuring him. You know, because I was always the one that looked after absolutely everything in the house. And in his life. And I did everything for him. And more like his mother I'd say! I remember one night he came in the room and he was getting frustrated. He didn't understand something I was showing him on a spreadsheet and literally threw it across at me. Threw it across the living room, and I said, I'm not doing this tonight. And then he was insistent that you know we were doing it fifty-fifty, he was entitled to my inheritance and half my mom's house and after all he'd helped out and I just thought you know what? Do I need this? And it became such that I was scared of him. I know now looking back I was scared of him, but I think it was the aggression I was scared of. .And he put me under a lot of pressure and he said 'Oh, I think for your peace of mind and mine we should have this legal agreement and it forms the consent order.' And I said okay, so we sat down and we wrote down what the house value was, what my mom's house value was. Which was a lot less. What cars we've got, and what savings we've got and we split in two and the difference he was agreed to pay me, but he wouldn't give me the difference in money, which I needed to .. to renovate my parents' house. He wouldn't give me that money until I signed the legal agreement. So he pushed me in a corner, really [00 30 10] and my cousins were saying 'I don't think this is fair, Jackie.' You know, this don't seem right and I said no. 'No, it's what .. it's fine. It'll be be okay' blah blah blah. I'm all right with that and and I knew that people had said to me inheritance can be a grey area.. it depends on when you had it and everything, but I was stupid that I'd co-mingled my mum's and my brother's.. and I think it wasn't a big deal of cash think it was about 30,000 pounds, but he kept saying why is this separate? And I said, 'well, because it's my mom's money. I just kept it separate, you know, because I just thought that we could use it towards Charlotte's wedding one day or something.' And he said 'it needs to be in our account.' So I transferred it and didn't think anything of it and looking back he was very manipulative. So that's how the divorce started.*

Jackie also feels more like a parent than a wife, as she says near the beginning of the above extract *And more like his mother I'd say!* She speaks of feeling intimidated and manipulated by his display of aggression and his request that she sign the consent order giving him money that she had earmarked for their daughter's wedding. This extract highlights the murky area of who is entitled to money inherited during a marriage. It also demonstrates that in some instances, if solicitors are not retained, intimidation tactics can yield unfavourable results for women going through divorce. This is an important source of qualitative data for research into divorce reform.

Olivia: *And I was getting more and more and more worried because the children were getting older and older that at some point he would want to take them to wherever it was he was living. He didn't; he was always camping down here or in a hotel down here. I got more and more paranoid about it; the life he was leading and you know, what kind of danger they might be in as they got older [00:54:06] especially as they've both got special needs. So I bought a dog in the hope that if anything ever happens, the children would always want to come home because they had a dog. It sounds really crazy, but it was all I could think of as yeah, you need to come home because you've got a dog to look after. So. Bought the dog at Christmas, had this puppy. So we were going to dog training lessons on the Tuesday night. Came home. My mum and dad were here. It was eight o'clock at night. And I was kind of like what you doing here? And my mum said your dad will take the children inside and my mum said Pete's dead.*

I have included the above extract because the decision to get a dog to give the children a reason to come home to her is indicative of the fragility of her state of mind around the time that she was trying to get divorced. It speaks to the relationship that she has with her children as well as being evidence for her feeling that her in-laws were overbearing and had designs on her children. I do not have the space to include the story of why her parents were the ones to deliver the news of her husband's death, but we can see that there was a large amount of parental involvement in the marriage. Olivia's testimony contains much that I found difficult to engage with because of the severity of the behaviours that were described and this would have been something that I could have sought help with, had I been more aware of how it would affect me.¹⁷⁹ Olivia describes her fear

¹⁷⁹ Loughran, Mahoney, and Payling, *Reflections on Remote Interviewing in a Pandemic: Negotiating Participant and Researcher Emotions*.

which masks the lack of agency she feels to protect her children from something that their father might do to them while they are in his custody. At the same time she acknowledges that the children don't want to come home *all I could think of as yeah, you need to come home because you've got a dog to look after* is her way of expressing her fear and need for control.

Frankie:*But we did have lots of rows. I remember one night this .. he'd drop me off. To have a meal with my friend and bear in mind we co-owned the car, my mum had bought us the car not long before we split up, and I didn't drive so I felt justified for a few lifts. So he gave me a lift to meet some friends after we'd got babysitters and we'd had counselling and then he started talking about wanting to pay off the mortgage and like I'm really concerned that we need to pay off this mortgage. We've got to have got to .. and I said, what are you going on about? Cos you're gay, you .. you want to leave me you want to get a new partner? I want to get a new partner. Why in God's name do you want to think about paying off the bloody mortgage? You know, that's we're years off of paying off a mortgage. Why is this a thing and I remember having this row. And I met my two friends that night and I hadn't I don't think I'd even cried. I don't know if I'd even cried at that point. That night. I think Helen said something to me again a bit sharp. She can be like that. And I stormed off to the toilets and I just stood there and [01:12:10] cried and cried and cried us probably about two, three weeks after splitting up. Cried for hours and she came back in and she gave me this massive hug and she told me this lovely thing; and she said when her marriage split up and everything was all over the place in every way financially with kid, childcare and.. just everything, self-esteem on the floor. She said she had this vision all of this weird vision of this future self coming to her and saying look everything's alright now! Settled! Everything's great. Things, .. this was best move you ever made. She said it was very real at the time. It felt really real when this kind of .. this vision of the future embraced her and she said that will happen to you too. And it kind of did. It kind of did not quite so much as that, but I can think back to me stood there in that toilet crying my eyes out just for the sheer unknownness of life and think it was all going to be. All right, you know. And yes, it was a really tough ride.*

Frankie speaks about the emotional turmoil of divorce, particularly the financial elements and how her ex-husbands made demands about paying off the mortgage. Her friend's advice about being visited by her future self after everything is resolved gives her hope and helps her to feel stronger. She ends by saying that life is unknown and therefore there could be something good just round the corner, but that her divorce was incredibly emotionally draining. The clip shows how important it is to get good financial advice during a divorce. I think that many women were unsure about whether they needed a solicitor, or thought that they were unable to afford one.

RECOVERING AFTER DIVORCE

When women eventually meet men who do not gaslight them, and who do value their opinions and treat them with respect, they find it very difficult to believe. Women who come out of these relationships find themselves frightened to trust their new partners. They report being triggered frequently and closing themselves off, as if their new partner was going to treat them in the same way as their husbands did. The act of getting divorced is often a very draining experience and is where the most harmful gaslighting is manifested. It is also a time where the woman can feel vindicated and begin to demonstrate to her husband that her take on reality is believed, especially by her lawyer. Husbands are reported to have acted in frightening ways after hearing that they must pay large divorce settlements when they thought they would be understood and supported by the courts. It is often the divorce which brings a huge amount of satisfaction to the wives.

The following participant talks about her bitterness about having to work part-time because she gets no help from her husband in the parenting of their daughter. When they divorced, her husband got her to tick the box on the divorce form which says 'have you received legal advice?' so that they could get a cheaper divorce through the website 'Wikivorce'. When she read the proposed settlement figures, she found them unfair as he had applied to keep his entire pension and half their house (which she had paid more towards than he had). When she sought advice about the settlement from her solicitor, she was told that because she had ticked the box, she would not be able to change the consent order. This piece was in part as a response to my asking her how her daughter felt about her existence, once she had found out that her father is gay. But she quickly steers the conversation around to her own feelings about the divorce and her husband's behaviour as a parent:

Jackie: It was me and her even though yes, it was a dad and he went out to work full time. It was never us, it was always me doing everything for her. I couldn't rely on him for anything ever and I and it was, I made a joke of it you know I cant say can you pick her up from school today, I'm not going to be there. So as a result of that I had to sort of find a job that worked around the school gates, which is really hard. So my career suffered massively, not that I had a really big career, but I could never take promotion. I had to work part time

and he was so resentful of that. You know, what you're at home with her whilst.. a last year, but are you going to fetch her from school or do I have to do it? And so I did that and as a result, obviously, I've got a part-time pension which is peanuts and he's not recognizing that either. But I brought up his daughter. That really hurts as well. That's why I think he shouldn't have any part of her. It's her choice. She's an intelligent young woman, but I just feel bitter that I've done all the groundwork, the hard work and I've got nothing for it and you're having all the credit for her. You know, she's a successful young woman. And why should you take the credit for bringing her up because you didn't. That makes sense?

Diana: *Definitely*

Another participant talks about the difficulties of divorcing due to having a poor credit report. One of the consequences of Margaret Thatcher's 'property-owning democracy' means that many couples are forced to stay married due to the burden of owning a property between them from which neither can afford to buy-out the other.¹⁸⁰ The interviewee recognises the pros and cons of this situation - on the one hand she can not move on with her life, but on the other, she also acknowledges that as soon as the finances are divided up, her ex-husband will move away and this will effectively leave their daughter with no father. Therefore, a jointly owned property can act to keep a family unit together for the benefit of children.¹⁸¹

Diana: *Can you talk a bit about your divorce? Are you going to get divorced or what?*

Carrie: *Yeah. Yeah. We are going to get divorced but we're both said well, there's no rush and I don't know if that's probably both of us subconsciously holding on. [00:32:03] Because we don't want to have that final break. I don't know. But because I live in the house. He's very much. He wants his share of the assets. He wants his share of the house. We looked at buying each other out and I guess we want to do it all in one go, where when we come to financially supporting assets have not been able to buy each other out because he's not he's not in a very well paid job, so he can't physically financially buy me out and I can't buy him out because I've got a poor credit history because I was in Australia. My dad actually rented this house out with his partner. But he moved out four months before we moved back from Australia and the house was.. the mortgage wasn't getting paid. Even though I said to the bank, I can't pay my rent in Australia and pay the mortgage.. there's going to be a few months where it's not paid and the bank was fully aware. It.. so it went on my credit report. So I'm not .. even though I can afford to .. I can't with my*

¹⁸⁰ Matthew Francis, 'A Crusade to Enfranchise the Many': Thatcherism and the 'Property-Ownning Democracy', *Twentieth Century British History*, 23 (2012), pp. 296-97.

¹⁸¹ Helmut Rainer and Ian Smith, 'Staying Together for the Sake of the Home?: House Price Shocks and Partnership Dissolution in the UK', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series A, Statistics in Society*, 173 (2010), p. 567.

credit. It's really frustrating because I feel like that's, that's holding us back from moving on as well. To have that separation of assets and divorce in a way. He said it .. he said it feels quite nice still to be married in a way. That we're not divorced and I feel like I it's still a connection to that life in a way. I don't know. I know that we should get divorced. But it's not something I've rushed to do. Like I said, I feel like it's something that might come when we, we do. We're hoping to do the the dividing assets with a consent order hopefully to try and keep things more .. well .. to save on cost as well, but we don't need the solicitors back and to, when all of that .. we're hoping to do it without all that in the mix. So hopefully it will be straightforward. But I guess it's a worry when it comes down to splitting finances always more conflict, I guess .. I'm a bit worried about that as well. When that happens. I'm hoping it will be this year because in July it will have been three years since I've been back and hoping that'll be enough.

I've tried to get the assets .. I've contacted a couple of different [00:34:03] brokers and been turned down because of the credit - I've attempted a couple times to buy him out but not been able to .. so that's dragging on I feel. So maybe I'll feel a bit better when that's all done and he can get his money that he wants. I'm thinking that when he does get his money he's going to go back to Australia. That's maybe something that I'm worried about not necessarily just for myself but for our daughter because I don't want him to just get his money and leave. I want him to be in her life for as long as she need. Well I said hopefully it'll be at least when she's gone through .. up until fifteen, sixteen, you know, when the teenagers didn't really need or want you to parents around so much anymore, but at the moment she's very very much attached to him. Very, very close to him and I feel like if he left now it I'd do a lot of damage to her. So I'm hoping that he stays around for a good few more years for her sake .

Carrie expresses her two main concerns with divorce: the children's relationship with their father, and her financial situation post-divorce. She sees an interplay between these two issues; if she antagonises him about money, then she will risk alienating her children's father. This contrasts with Jackie, who as we have seen above, resents what she deems her husband's undeserved place in his daughter's life. Naturally, many of the testimonies document concern about relationships with children before, during, and after the divorce. In a couple of rare cases, the mother herself, has seen her adult children take their father's side. It is challenging to make sense of some of these outcomes when limited to just one person's perspective. However it is indicative of the therapeutic-like nature of the oral history interview, that some women spoke openly about situations where they are shown in a less favourable light¹⁸². Caroline Shanholtz and others discuss reasons why adult children of

¹⁸² Olivia, Pauline,

divorced parents might become disenchanted with one or both parents merely because it can cause logistical nightmares around family celebrations if the parents do not want to see each other any more.¹⁸³ Divorce disrupts children's lives, even the lives of adult children, but this project does not have the space to discuss this aspect fully. However, there is plenty of material in the oral testimonies for researchers who are interested in this area.

Carrie has given a lot of thought to the logistics of organising her finances around the divorce and is coming to terms with financial decisions made during the marriage, when renting out their house whilst in Australia and then going into arrears with their mortgage and receiving a bad credit report. These financial aspects of divorce are a consequence of any divorce and not only one where the husband comes out as gay. However, these marriages demonstrate what modern divorce feels like. The women speak openly about their difficulties, and this results in an archive of oral history testimony from voices that would not necessarily be heard without this project.

Cheryl discovers that her ex-husband had not been keeping up to date with the bills and after she separates from him, she is at risk of losing her home. Her parents had to step in to pay the mortgage.

Cheryl: And then, so I say .. I'm quite resilient and I managed to find some resilience from somewhere despite being so disempowered and so browbeaten. The other thing that happened was that very Monday. I got a letter or a letter came for both of us. Saying that the house was going to be repossessed and he hadn't been paying the bills. And I was rapidly discovering that he had this whole other secret life that I hadn't known about and [00:08:02] so I called my mum and dad and told them what happened and they were incredibly supportive and didn't have a lot of money. They were .. he was .. my dad was a retired vicar at that point. My mum was retired as well, but they agreed .. they pledged to help me pay the mortgage and I was a trainee - I was training to be a teacher. So I was a student teacher although I was on a salary I was doing a GTP. It wasn't very much and they agreed that they would pay the mortgage, make sure that I had enough to pay the mortgage every month until I got a full-time job. And I went to court and fought the repossession and I won and the magistrate said that because my mum had sent a letter saying that she would pledge to pay 50 pounds a month off the

¹⁸³ Caroline E. Shanholtz, Megan S. Irgens, and Connie J. Beck, 'Are the Adults Alright? Reviewing Outcomes for Adult Offspring of Parental Divorce', *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development*, 18 (2021), p. 10.

arrears and make sure I had enough to pay them all until I.. I got a full-time job, that that was okay. The mortgage company was said it wasn't and the magistrate said yes, it is. Suck it up. [laughs]. I'm still in the house today!

The above clip highlights the financial trauma that many women undergo when they get divorced. Not only was Cheryl the default carer for their (autistic) foster-child, but her husband had been hiding the fact that he had not been paying the bills. Many couples stay married because they recognise that they would not be able to afford to live apart, and so they live lives of quiet desperation. However, once a husband comes out as gay, then there is no longer a culturally sanctioned way to stay married. Our society has only recently recognised coercive control as a crime; this has yet to impact individual marriages because of the financial consequences of getting divorced yet being gay was acknowledged to be catastrophic for these marriages. In some ways, the husband's coming out forced couples to find creative ways to manage the financial sting of separation. Since they recognised that the marriage was over, they had access to more support from friends and family than they would have if they had not had this very relatable reason to end it. Hence, Cheryl's parents stepped in to pay her mortgage. Whether they would have done this if the marriage had ended for other reasons, we do not know.

Penny: And to some extent it was a relief to not have to pretend anymore, but in some some respects it was worse because I had managed despite all of those things for my kids to have absolutely no suspicion and to sit down, and tell them and watch their faces crumble is you know, it's the worst thing ever, you know, just to destroy their.. their innocence really, you know, and and then I went through a stage where I really wished he'd died rather than come out for me. It would have been easier if he died because I would have got an enormous amount of sympathy from everyone. Everyone would have known why I was upset. I wouldn't have had any sort of legal fallout of feeling I was going to have share the kids or any financial worries. And in my mind at that point the man I had married had died, you know suddenly this person who I've been with for 23 years was [00:26:10] suddenly someone capable of such utter deceit and not just that, you know a year long affair with someone but but you know, 23 years worth of pretending he's something he wasn't and then compounded by this realisation that actually he put my physical health at such enormous risk by doing what he's been doing with but just but just bare-faced lying to me.

Penny confirms my argument here, that marriage can be endured for a variety of reasons, but once the husband is out of the closet, it ends. *A relief not to have to pretend anymore.* However, her description of watching her children's faces crumble when they heard about the divorce is testament to the trauma children must deal with. Penny's preference for her husband to have died is a very candid confession of her rage at the unfairness of not deserving what has happened to her. Since legislation came into effect to remove punitive measures for the faulty party in a divorce settlement, this rage can be very difficult to process.¹⁸⁴

Many women spoke about being astounded by the law surrounded same-sex adultery. At the time that they were divorcing, no-fault divorce was not an option. There were five reasons that could be cited in a divorce: desertion, adultery, unreasonable behaviour, two-years separation, or five years of living apart. The law did not recognise sex with a same-sex partner as adultery. In my own divorce, I cited unreasonable behaviour and listed 'sex with a man' as the primary unreasonable behaviour, but I still had to list another four instances of behaviours which were unreasonable and that meant that my husband was subjected to accusations which affected the way he responded to the divorce petition. Elaine, Olivia, Mandy, Alison, Pauline, and Nicole all spoke about this archaic and unfair legal issue, which shows how the legacies of the past shape the contemporary legal situation.

Carrie talks about her inability to move on from her marriage and how this has affected her new relationship. She is a social worker, was sexually abused by her father when she was eleven years old, and her mother had mental health difficulties. I empathise with her very much - her self-awareness and willingness for introspection is at odds with her inability to engage with a therapist. That she has trust issues is clear. Her testimony touched me because I identified with the consequences of the way she was parented.

¹⁸⁴ Thorsten Kneip and Gerrit Bauer, 'Did Unilateral Divorce Laws Raise Divorce Rates in Western Europe?', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71 (2009), p. 593.

In the broad sense, this is a story of someone who is in the throes of recovery, whose life path has been changed unexpectedly, and who appears to be depressed because she recognises that she is living in the past and cannot engage with a new partner (yet!).

Diana: *Thank you. So you have already touched a little bit about this but going forward in your life. Do you feel that the experiences you had in your marriage will affect your future relationships?*

Carrie: *Absolutely. Yeah they already have. So when I first got back from Australia, I quite quickly met a man. I didn't want anything too serious, but I just wanted to date. And I need to feel good again about myself and to meet somebody and take them out and try consciously to get over what happened and hope that that would help. And yeah, we do. Yeah, that's lots of things and what I find hard is that we had so many things in common, so I was dating this guy on and off for two years. We went to New York together even last year for my 40th and we had some good times and we found that we had a lot of same interests. We had lots to talk about he was more than helpful with everything - he'd help, he'd come round and help clean the house clean up, he would do anything for me.*

We enjoyed relaxing, watching the same programmes.. he was going for me everything and I was focusing more on his .. the bad things about him rather than the good things. I found so it's sabotaging your relationship. But also because I feel like I'm not capable of falling in love with him. I feel like after all that time. I've not felt that.. them deep feelings. So why waste his time and my time, so I ended it last month and I'm thinking well, I wish it would have fallen in love with him [00:28:02] because he would have been a good life partner. He would have been very supportive and he got on very well with my daughter and that's quite rare for him. I don't know I feel like there's many good men in you know, any any more. I feel like they're very rare to find and he was one of the good ones. I just feel got it. I guess that I didn't really have those feelings for him that feel like I'm not capable and that's my worry going forward that I feel like I'm not capable of developing feelings for anyone else. and the same level as what I had for my ex-partner and it's going to be a long way. Only 41 and people always say, oh don't be silly. You've got lots of time and feel like well, I feel like I'm not capable. I don't know what it is .. not, not, I feel numb.

The essence of the above extract is that Carrie does not feel capable of loving someone again because of how she has been betrayed by her ex-husband. She seems to have detached herself from her feelings (*I feel numb*) and even though she did meet a man who would have been a *good life partner* she could not allow herself to love him. This raises the enormous topic of people's attitudes to love and how they place importance on feelings when they choose a partner.

Frankie: *He said he had a number of friends where it turned out the man had .. was gay and they were married, and they decided to stay together because they loved each other and the woman apparently wanted that security but he*

suspected it was the man that wanted that security. And he said that the men aged at 40/50 were having a whale of a time with wife and kids at home being fed, looked after, and then having their social life .

Frankie recognises how some women are taken advantage of when they decide to stay together with their husbands who have come out as gay. This shows how marriage is still an important part of a woman's status and identity and it demonstrates that while for some women, sex and sexuality defines their marital relationship, for others it is less important. We, in the twenty-first century, are going through a period of sexual freedom where there is no longer a stigma attached to being unmarried whilst having an active sex life. However, this is accompanied by a strong expectation of intimacy if people do choose to wed. Where sex was once impermissible outside of wedlock, marriage is deemed to be less justifiable if it does not include satisfying sex. Where sex is acknowledged to be a necessary part of human relationships, and fidelity is still expected, wives want their husbands to be sexually attracted to them. If this is not the case, and the husband comes out as gay, then she also must process the feelings of being lied to and betrayed alongside the feelings of unattractiveness. In marriages (outside of the scope of this project) where gay men marry women who consent, under conditions of full disclosure, to marry them, the contract becomes much more ethical, even if both partners decide to have sex with people outside of the marriage. If a marrying couple keep secrets from each other, which later come to light, the damage is amplified more than it would have been a hundred years ago, because of the way we expect marriage to consist of authenticity and honesty.¹⁸⁵ Even so, the law still demands that marrying couples declare that they "know not of any lawful impediment" to their marriage. The sexual orientation of one of the parties might be deemed to be an impediment, but as we see in this chapter, a husband who has sex with another man is not legally committing adultery, according to divorce law. This law is currently under review. Gay couples say that they are being discriminated

¹⁸⁵ Langhamer, *The English in Love*, p. 42.

against if they cannot cite adultery when their spouse is having an affair with someone of the same sex.¹⁸⁶

The enormous range of responses to the information that one's husband is gay demonstrates how wide the definition of modern marriage is. People no longer have certainty about how marriages are supposed to be and this can cause difficulties because individuals have to determine what they want for themselves without recourse to narrow, socially sanctioned ways of being married that were the norm in the mid-twentieth century and earlier.

Frankie also acknowledges that even in some modern marriages, the wife looks after the children and does most of the domestic chores while the husband has more leisure time. This was confirmed by most of my interviewees.

Sharon: We booked a family holiday for my son's birthday – we were gonna go [00:14:01] to a Caravan in Wales for a week. We got there. I had no signal whatsoever on my phone. Sort of stuck in the deepest darkest Wales, but he had signal on his and so he was just constantly on the apps the whole week and I was there pretty much for childcare for the kids. It was, you know, absolutely horrendous and I've never felt so lonely that whole week I couldn't ring any of my friends and talk to them and I couldn't contact anybody. The only adult interaction I had was with him and he wasn't interested because he was just texting these guys. And he was .. need to .. sort of met this guy and was it going to happen and he didn't know and .. sort of filling me in all these details about .. and I was like, what the hell, you know, mate? This .. I'm not interested. You know, it's what you do with your life now. Yes, we may want to be friends after all of this and we may want to you know, sort of try and keep things amicable for the kids, but they're that you can't discuss your sex life with me. I'm your ex-wife!

Sharon finds the ability to put some boundaries up after she discovers that her husband is gay. It is apparent that once the information is out, her husband feels free to conduct his affairs openly in front of her without considering her feelings. If her testimony is accurate, it shows how polarised the gender-roles are in her (and many other) marriages. The children are the territory of the mother, while the father is essentially on holiday by himself, being fed and looked after by his ex-wife.

¹⁸⁶ John Haskey, 'Some Scenarios on the Numerical Implications of the Proposed New Divorce Reform Legislation for England and Wales', *Family Law*, September (2019), p. 1046.

Elaine: *The trauma that comes from it [00:30:05] that actually like it literally destroyed my self-esteem, the humiliation. So many layers it like, I don't know how many years it's going to take me to even come close to being the person I was before I met him. And and yeah all his all he thought of was that he was going to do the right thing financially and the only reason that he did was because it would have made him feel better, you know, when it's all about him.*

[..]

And yeah, so that's what Graham's dad said to me to bottle .. bottle what I was feeling. And, and yeah, so incredibly traumatic [00:20:05] and I .. that was the other thing then .. so Graham's dad left and just after he left, he rang Graham about an hour later and said and just having to rethink here Elaine - Graham, and just wondering do the full details of this need to emerge? Okay, so this was basically them saying to me; we don't want you to tell anybody what Graham actually did. And that was a bit of a theme for the coming months then because they very quickly made it clear that Graham would be more generous to me financially if I didn't tell anybody what he'd actually done to me.

So yeah that just added a whole other layer to it because they yeah I basically felt muted, you know. I felt that I couldn't speak the truth you know?

Yeah, so and then the next day I went to my aunt and uncle's house and I'm very close to my mum's brother. He's like a dad to me and so I went to his house and, and we had long conversations about it and the next day, my aunt and uncle said to me you need to ring a solicitor, because you need to get some advice and you need to ring X, Y & Z and we had got married in the Catholic church and then they said you should ring the priest. So the priest who had married us was a family friend of ours and I rang him and he said I'll come and see you tonight. And he said I'll either come to your marital home or else your aunt and uncle's house.

So then that that day then my aunt took me to a solicitor. And yeah, I mean just craziness to be honest. It.. going [00:22:05] to see somebody it's also clinical. It's just it's like it's not happening to you! It's out of body experience. And the guy basically said to me and your marriage was short-lived like basically didn't happen type thing. Like it was just so short-lived. No children involved. Graham owned the house before you got married. Like just blah blah blah. He said basically you're not entitled to anything really financially. And that's really hard because I had totally invested in our relationship. Do you know, I totally put in everything that I had and I actually expected to be married to this person for the rest of my life.

And yeah, so then so he said to me I would I would advise you to go back to your marital home and ask Graham to leave the home. Because it was him who was in the wrong and just see what kind of comes of that type of thing. And so my aunt and I went over to the house and yeah, Graham was there and Graham said that he would leave the next day. And I said to him about the priest and I said priest would be willing to meet both of us and for some pastoral kind of conversation. Or else just me and yeah, it's just it's it's all probably.. but it was also manipulative whenever I look back, because Graham, what he had .. he had said oh the priest could come up to our marital home. And then I went upstairs to go to the toilet and he followed me and he said to me. Maybe it's a better idea [00:24:05] if the priest goes

to your uncle's house because your uncle's kind of the most important person to you and you've probably would be better having him there as a support. So maybe you should just go down to his house. So and I was like, oh, right, okay, okay. And that I was so controlled by him to be honest, Diana, you know like .. and then I got into the car with my aunt and we were driving off and my aunt said to me, Elaine, I don't understand. The solicitor said to go back to your marital house and we're now leaving it and that's just.. yeah, that's how controlled I was by him, do you know? I would have done anything that he told me to do even though it was completely against what somebody else who actually was on my side was telling me to do.

The above long extract is an example of what happens to the various stakeholders in a marriage - not just the couple, but the families on both sides, when the relationship ends. The husband's family blackmails Elaine to not talk about Graham's sexuality by promising her a better financial settlement. This is one of the consequences of the de-regulation of divorce where it is now encouraged for couples to reach a financial consent order between themselves without a need to go through the courts.

When Elaine tells the part about how her husband manipulated her, she invokes my name. When this happens, I feel pulled into her world and when I read this story now, I feel very angry. Whether this feeling should be addressed here in an academic text, is uncertain. If the reader feels angry at this point, I want to reassure them that they are not alone. Part of the purpose of this project is to acknowledge the unfairness and injustice that these women talk about and to use their stories to give weight and legitimacy to claims for women's rights. Therefore, it seems justified to validate the feelings that arise from listening to and/or reading these testimonies.

Ingrid: *It was only when June, my mom-in-law moved in and she looked at me and she went there's something really, really wrong, and then literally within two weeks of that, so she'd literally only just moved over and the day after my grand-daughter's first birthday. He .. we found him in a terrible state and he'd tried to hang himself, and then he told us that he was gay. So that was not long before Christmas two years ago. Yeah, just over two years ago now. And I think like so many, you know, he was desperate to stay together desperate, you know, and you know and through work because he worked for the Civil Service. They have the kind of gay and lesbian support people and they offered counselling and you know, so quite a lot of support was put in place really quickly and I just.. it didn't occur to me to split up at that point. I just thought I can't even describe how utterly shocked I was. I had no idea. I mean they've been kind of this hint years and years before about another woman, but certainly not men. It just wasn't even on my*

radar and .. but we so we kind of limped along for a few months and .. but he was [00:14:02] all over the place and he kept disappearing and sometimes he really wanted to talk and a lot of the time he was quite weepy.

[..]

Yeah, but his mum said in-.. some interesting stuff. I mean she said, you know, he .. he was an incredible liar all through his childhood. She said, you know and really convincing . Now, I never knew that. I kind of .. there was a bit of me that did think, 'I'd really like to have known that.' Actually because it you know, I thought you was is utterly as honest as the day was long and so did all my family, you know. So they've been a few things like that, but has he got borderline personality disorder? I think my personal view is that he desperately, for whatever reason, he desperately, desperately, does not want to be gay and he desperately [00:40:05] I think, wanted to be married to me and stay married. But for whatever reason he cannot seem to stop himself from doing the very things that he knows are going to implode his life.

And yet at the same time, he doesn't seem to be able to just go; 'do you know what I'm 55 years old. I deserve an honest life of integrity who cares if I'm gay?' You know and instead he's just messing himself and other people up more and more. And then each time he goes round that cycle he runs away, but then he can't live with himself. Then he tries to commit suicide again.

Ingrid privileges the story of her husband's battle with his sexual orientation and mental health. She describes how her mother-in-law confesses to her that *he was an incredible liar* and how she had *really liked to have known that* but most of the extract is dedicated to her husband's needs and desires. This extract is evidence of how keenly women observe their husbands, as well as showing how much empathy Ingrid has. We have talked about how women married to gay men might have too much empathy; Shirley says this about herself as well, and many of the testimonies demonstrate this quality, which I describe as being detached from one's own feelings and only able to feel what another is feeling. So many of the women also have autistic-spectrum children, who are people who have difficulty recognising other people's feelings. More research is required to see if there are any constellations of meaning between over-empathisers and autism.

Ingrid's recovery from divorce will hopefully centre around processing her reaction to her ex-husband's mental health issues and understanding how to regain connection with herself. It is the absence of self-reflection in the above testimony that is evidence for this need.

Eleanor: Yeah. so I, obviously I filed for divorce initially. He was very shocked and obviously didn't want me to and I think he felt we could we were living in a five bed house at the time he could sort of live in the annexe and we could all

just carry on and I think for the first couple of weeks I probably thought that and then I thought no, hang on a minute.

[..]

Diana: Were you satisfied with your divorce solicitor?

Eleanor: Yes and no. I mean, I think she .. lots of times I felt she was repeating things that didn't need to be repeated and was trying to eke out the costs and I think things like that. She wasn't the best. I don't think she wasn't particularly dynamic. I had a good Barrister. But again, you know they're it's a game to them isn't it? And it's your life on the line and it's just very much you think you're sitting there thinking this could go either way and you know, it's very difficult. And of course there's this no blame divorce now which is .. just seems so wrong when you're in the situation. I'm in, but I think it sort of came out right in the end. I think you know in some ways. I think I could have got a little bit more but [00:28:03] he's got a very good police pension, which I can access once I'm 60, which is another four years for me. I've got my NHS pension and I've had a sum - of his lump sum and then I got some equity from the house when that sold last year so, you know and just really because of family because of my .. my dad and unfortunately also I lost my brother and in a few years ago and that as we know because of what he's left that sort of helped me out no end and if I hadn't had that I would be in a very different position to where I am now. So, you know have got some independence now and yeah financial security, which I wouldn't have had if I was still with him because we had a huge mortgage and he'd racked up all sorts of bills and credit cards and all sorts of stuff that I knew nothing about absolutely nothing about.

So that all had to be sorted and I think most of that did end up with him at the end because it was realized obviously that they were in his name and various things. But so yeah, it was just a very long, drawn out and that's the trouble every time something arrived from the solicitors. It was like another sort of heart sink moment where you think what have I got to deal with now? Which is very difficult when I was in at the time working full-time and although my kids weren't all at home. My son was, but the girls were backwards and forwards and obviously still needing support. So just dealing with all of that was very hard. Yeah, but I think yeah, people have different .. different stores. Don't I am but I think in terms of mine, I think it's okay. It came out okay. I mean there's no winners in any of it anyway, but in terms of how things panned out in the end, I think I've done okay.

At first, Eleanor considers staying married and having her husband live in the annexe of their five-bedroom house. However, she quickly recognises that she wants physical and emotional separation and is prepared to go through the pain of a divorce to achieve this. She is the one who files for divorce, which is another way of saying that women often must end the marriage and articulate why that is the case. Husbands, even if they have a boyfriend, appear to be held back by the inertia of family life with all its conveniences.

Eleanor goes on to speak about her finances and the way family bereavements have left her with enough money; *I think I've done okay*. This is evidence for how having financial security can be invaluable for recovery, not just materially, but it can boost self-esteem if a woman feels as if she has been treated fairly in the divorce. Eleanor recognises that her solicitor was instrumental in the success of her consent order. She also mentions that her ex-husband had *racked up all sorts of bills and credit cards .. which I knew nothing about*, which unfortunately is evidence of the lack of intimacy and the deceit that she endured. However, the discovery of this behaviour contributes to the feeling that one is justified in divorcing if the fact of his sexuality is not enough.

Wendy: *And quite frankly, I'm waiting for me Absolute¹⁸⁷ to come through and if I never clapped eyes on him again, I'd be very happy. I would be very very happy because although now I'm with Steve, and Steve's moved in [01:14:08] and we very happy and I sort of can see what a relationship is meant to be like. I struggle. Because I've got a little devil that sits on my shoulder. And Steve's very open. He's very emotional. He's very loving. But when he says all these lovely things to me, I have this little devil sits on my shoulder that goes yeah, you heard all that before look where that got you. And it is sometimes .. he'll say something to me and me face must change. I don't say anything but it must be something about the way I look at him and he'll go please don't tar me with the same brush. And I'm sorry I know I shouldn't do it but I'm not quite sure how to get rid of this little devil. And I think the deceit is more upsetting than the the infidelity, you know. People can get over infidelity. You can. It's the deceit and it what the deceit has done? Because he said I'm not bi, I am gay. What that has done has is .. it is wiped out those thirty-odd years we were together because I don't trust any of it. I can't .. I can pull a happy memory, but I don't trust it. I don't trust that it was genuine.*

Here we get a sense of the long-term damage that Wendy's experiences have wreaked on her self confidence and her future relationship(s). She wants to move on with her new partner, but she feels the presence of her ex-husband's deceit and she mistrusts her ability to interpret his behaviour towards her. She is fearful of trusting her new partner and she cites her husband's deceit and lies as being far more damaging than his infidelity because he pretended to love her (*you heard that all before*) but now has admitted he is not just bi-sexual, he is gay. She implies that all the loving memories that she has of the marriage were obliterated by the disclosure of his sexual orientation,

¹⁸⁷ Decree Absolute

and as such, she can not comprehend of a type of love that he might have had for her that was alongside or despite his sexuality. So she is saying that a loving marriage is contingent on both partners being honest with each other about their sexuality and that a lie about something as important as sexual orientation casts a shadow over all the other expressions of love.

Pauline: It wasn't just for him a way out of chaplaincy work. It was a way out of the marriage and I think that was the unspoken subtext for him. I think that when people are struggling with their sexuality and this is certainly a pattern I've seen in Straight Partners Anonymous, they become so skilled so adept at keeping things hidden. They've been acting for years. They've been putting things in the box on the shelf for years and they can hide it from those closest to them quite effectively. And I think he was just strategically setting out a new career in parallel with the old one. I don't think that he has a narcissistic personality. I don't think that he has NPD at all, but I do think that there are a few covert traits. I think he was shifting gears really. Planning a way out.

As Pauline reminisces about her husband, we can see that she thinks he was duplicitous and that she was being played by him. She considers whether he has a diagnosable mental health issue, perhaps because that would enable her to feel less used. Yet again, we see a woman observing her husband and trying to make sense of his actions rather than being able to talk about herself and how she feels.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have looked at the interplay between expectations - based on upbringing and cultural norms - and the reality, when these marriages end. We have borne witness to events which have had the power to radically shift the way the participants feel about themselves and the way they live in the world, and the way they form new relationships. Marriage is still an important part of a woman's status and identity. In recent decades there has been a new expectation of intimacy because of the removal of the stigma of singlehood and women being more equipped to support themselves financially. Therefore the revelation of a material fact well into the marriage has more

power to harm the relationship than perhaps it would have done during the period where marriage was a more pragmatic arrangement.

I have identified several areas which would benefit from further research. The extracts are evidence that support many findings that have been written about in a variety of papers about marriage break-up and divorce. When the stories of individual women are combined and presented together, they amplify otherwise isolated incidents and show patterns of behaviour that can be recruited for the purpose of understanding more of women's lived experience. It should be recognised that participants agreed to take part in this project because they wanted their experiences to be recorded and made available for future research. The scholarly use of their stories is intended to show that they contribute to the historiography of marriage and divorce.

All the women spoke in depth about the discovery that their husband preferred sex with men. Citing this behaviour as a reason for divorce as well as considering the lack of intimacy and honesty, the participants have revealed almost forensic examinations of the end of their marriages. The way they describe these events creates meaning which can be applied to our understanding of the way relationships are viewed in recent decades. The memories were vivid and strong emotions were evident during their narration. Although outside the scope of this project, participants reported a positive emotional effect of telling their stories.

I showed that women are shocked and feel discriminated against because they could not use adultery as a reason for divorce. This imbalance has been removed by recent changes in divorce legislation -since these divorces took place - which allows for no-fault divorce. The experience of divorce was aggravated by some wives not being given accurate financial information from their husbands.¹⁸⁸ Divorce was generally felt to be detrimental to future financial security. These findings might be true of any divorce and are not assumed to be much different because the husband is gay. However, a realisation that one has been deceived in one area of the marriage (sexual orientation)

¹⁸⁸ Olivia, Shirley, Eleanor, Cheryl, Alison

and then to be deceived in another (financial) made it very difficult to trust a new partner and this contributed to problems with future relationships. Recovering after the divorce was seen to be a function of being heard by counsellors or therapists, feeling that the divorce settlement was fair, and ensuring that childcare responsibilities were shared well. Divorce recovery was hampered by feelings of distrust, feeling betrayed by the ex-husband's family, and lack of confidence in their own ability to negotiate new relationships.

CHAPTER 5 REFLECTIONS ON ORAL HISTORY AND NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter asks what it means to fully engage with oral history methodology as an historian. Since historians are observers of change over time, the memories of the participants interact with historical events when they happened and when they are recalled. This gives researchers an opportunity to learn about the effects of living through some of the most dramatic changes in marriage, divorce, sexuality, and femininity from a group of women for whom these changes are most vividly experienced. As Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson write, ‘recurring tropes and formulaic narratives highlight the interpretive frameworks and cultural scripts which gain purchase among individuals as ways of understanding their own lives, and which shape the meanings they invest in their experiences....Dominant discourses can shape and reshape the way individuals understand their own experience over time.’¹⁸⁹

The psychological assumptions made between interviewer and participant must be foregrounded because the material that is produced sits within a co-created space of mutual sharing and understanding. In order to draw historical conclusions from the material, we need to recognise the circumstances from which it arose. This includes, but is not restricted to, the understanding that the participant has of the reason that the oral history is being recorded, the type of research that the interviewer is undertaking, and the research questions that initiated the study. Where the purpose of the study is to determine how changes to the discourse of marriage, divorce, sexuality and femininity have affected women who are married to gay men, we must be alert firstly to how women speak naturally about the suggested topic and secondly, to our interpretation and understanding of how their narrative fits into a contemporary historiography. This entails familiarity

¹⁸⁹ Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Thomlinson, *Vernacular Discourses of Gender Equality in the Post-War British Working Class*, p. 283.

with psychological constructs because the women themselves are overtly processing their experiences during the recording. 'This means that women's life stories, unlike men's, deal not only with the relation between the self and the social sphere, but also, and above all, with woman's condition and with the collective representations of woman as they have been shaped by the society with which the woman being interviewed must deal.'¹⁹⁰

The implied contract between interviewer and interviewee in an oral history recording session is that the interviewer listens empathically to the interviewee and faithfully preserves their story in order that it be added to the stories of others and improve our understanding of a certain group of people. This chapter discusses the issues that were confronted on this project by acknowledging how the various strands of interest came together to produce the set of audio recordings. It explores what it was like for the women and me to be doing oral history at this time, when we did not fully comprehend how powerfully our emotions and our combined experiences would blend to create such evocative material. Practitioners of oral history for the purpose of historical research are interested in how the stories people tell about themselves provide new ways of interpreting the lived experience of historical actors. Primarily, this chapter explores the current state of psychological interpretations which have changed both for researchers and participants due to multiple advances and media representations. Therefore, the narratives are evidence of how resilient certain ways of thinking about the self, femininity, patriarchy, and the body continue to be as well as demonstrating how women now empower themselves after a traumatic marital break-up. The formation of a support group, the sharing of stories, the offering of advice, and the willingness to go on the record, are all instances of this. The content of this chapter necessitates the extensive use of the first person because I must be seen as the originator and the interpreter of this thesis. Fully inserting myself into the research follows from the scholarship of Passerini, Taylor, Day, and

¹⁹⁰ Daphne Patai, *Women's Words : The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 78.

many others. This enables the researcher to use her emotions as interpretive tools to create resonance.

This chapter arises from the way I developed as an oral historian during this project. Initially, I was influenced by the narrative power of works by Alexievich and Graf as well as reading diverse scholarship using oral histories to immerse myself in the methodology.¹⁹¹ It is the nature of oral history to be self-reflexive, meaning that both interviewer and participants speak about the changes that both experience during the collaborative effort of recording memories. These changes to our relationship with our selfhood have had impacts over the course of the project and will be documented here. The interviewing process was, in some ways, like psychotherapy, and there were moments where both I as interviewer and the participant as interviewee, openly discussed the analogy to therapist and client. Having experienced long-term psychotherapy as a client, myself, I understand some of the ways being fully listened to without judgment operate to heal the effects of trauma. Instances of these effects were noticed and remarked upon when they were observed during recordings. Possible psychotherapeutic consequences of the oral history interviews were not discussed either in the pre-interview information sheets or introductory telephone call. The beneficial effects that some participants reported during and after the interviews was entirely spontaneous and there was no prior indication that this was a possible outcome.¹⁹² However, including observations about therapeutic effects after the fact was deemed important because they build on scholarship by the oral historians Valerie Yow, Emma Vickers, Erin McCarthy, and others.¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*; L. J. Blake, 'An Oral History of British Food Activism', (University of Sheffield, 2018); Graff, *The Only Plane in the Sky: The Oral History of 9/11*; Margaretta Jolly, Polly Russell, and Rachel Cohen, 'Sisterhood and After: Individualism, Ethics and an Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement', *Social Movement Studies*, 11 (2012); Steve Mee, 'It Gets Me Upset Talking About the Royal Albert: Collaborative Analysis of the Ethics of an Oral History Project', *Educational Action Research*, 20 (2012); Lisa Power, *No Bath but Plenty of Bubbles: An Oral History of the Gay Liberation Front, 1970-1973* (London: Cassell, 1995); Diane D. Turner and Molefi Kete Asante, 'An Oral History Interview: Molefi Kete Asante', *Journal of Black Studies*, 32 (2002).

¹⁹² Alex, Nicole, Shirley, Frankie

¹⁹³ McCarthy, "Is Oral History Good for You?" *Taking Oral History Beyond Documentation and into a Clinical Setting: First Steps*; Vickers, *Unexpected Trauma in Oral Interviewing*; Yow, *What Can Oral Historians Learn from Psychotherapists?*

Should oral historians make claims about the positive effects to interviewees as part of their work?

There is an overlap between the work of historians and that of clinicians, who have reported that interviewees enjoy speaking about themselves. It is arguably beyond the scope of this project to make any claims of this nature. However, the observations were made, and are recorded here for completeness. It must be stressed that there was no expectation that the interviews would be analogous to therapy before the start of this project.

The role of emotions in the interviews is also discussed; touching on which emotions were expressed, which emotions resonated, and which did not. Although facial expressions were not recorded, they were visible during the recording sessions. My gaze and my own expressions and gestures served to encourage and validate many of the emotions that participants expressed. I laughed and cried with my informants and even expressed my love for one participant after the recording had ended. Reflecting on these moments will add to the new body of research on the role that recalling memories and emotions play in the construction and reconstruction of the self over time. The purpose is also to continue the work of Roper, Steedman, Taylor, Passerini, and many others, in summoning one's own response to the material to inform us of its importance in historiography and add to our understanding of emotional history. The phrase 'emotional history' can be understood to mean two different things; it can mean our own personal emotional history – the emotions we experience when contemplating events in our lives can change over time as we revisit the memories on different occasions. Emotional history can also be the history of the way we write about emotions and the historiography of emotions. In this chapter, I write mainly about the former, but the latter meaning is noted particularly within the framework of feminist writing.

The use of some long extracts in this chapter further acquaints us with the participants and tells their stories, but it also serves to evidence my arguments and demonstrate how an oral historian develops.

The impact of feminist scholarship is also mentioned, and how its stance in relation to the gathering of oral history testimony from women and by a woman can be both problematic and

empowering.¹⁹⁴ Many participants expressed gratitude that this work was being done.¹⁹⁵ It is becoming apparent that historians might have a duty to restore justice to the human beings that are the subjects of historical research. It is beyond the scope of this project to delve into decolonising history, or re-writing, white-washing, or other revisionist scholarship, but being part of a type of historiography that empowers women has been immensely gratifying and humbling. This chapter, therefore, attempts to tie together some of the many threads that have become visible over its duration.

Nancy: [01:36:24] *Because sometimes you know what you say can make a difference and set them on the right. They do the healing I don't heal anybody but and all the group contrib-, contributes and you know, this is what I say, you know, if people thank me I say, well, it's not me it's a group and you are also now contributing because you know, there's this sort of grief cycle thing and part of the end stage of it can be when people use their experience to help others. I don't know why I clicked into it so early but I think that's part of the strength of the group is that from someone can come to us in a really broken state, but they start reading other people's stories and they still want to reach out, help them and I think it's and it's through reading other people's stories that they allows them to analyse themselves better and see what it is they might need to do and you know, that's been a whole big revelation to me just how a completely free group of people concentrating on the same thing, how empowering it could because I don't like I've lost count of the number of people that have said to me this group has saved my life and you know, it helps us all is still helps me but sometimes I think like I've got this. I mean this might come to nothing but this new guy on the rise and I'm thinking the person who rang is a journalist wanting me to do my story again, and I've discussed it with the other group leader and I think I'm going to say no to her because I can't keep going out in public with all this private stuff.*

In many ways, this project is given in recognition of the thoughts expressed in the above transcript. Nancy is explaining how there is a complex risk and reward relationship between making personal information public by exposing oneself, and the power of the knowing that one is not alone. The feeling of shame that participants have identified when acknowledging that they must speak about their lives can be traced historically to the patriarchal expectations that women be good supportive

¹⁹⁴ Abigail Brooks, 'Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: Building Knowledge and Empowerment through Women's Lived Experience', in *Feminist research practice: A primer*, (2007), pp. 53-82.

¹⁹⁵ Nicole, Nancy, Olivia, Belinda, Shirley, Mandy, Terri, Nicole. Some in their interviews and some in emails after their interviews.

wives. As participants in this oral history collection, they know that breaking silence is empowering, but that it also risks alienating men. Nancy speaks about having a new 'guy' and how her name is searchable on the internet, and he will find out about her past.¹⁹⁶ She gave an interview which was misquoted, and she agreed to participate in this project partly to set the record straight. The interplay between deciding to go public and feeling as if they are betraying their husbands is part of what feminists are negotiating in politically empowering women to speak out about their marriages. This act of group participation enables women to borrow each other's authority when they feel the fear of speaking from a place of isolation. This is also apparent in the aptly named #MeToo movement, where sexually harassed women started using the hashtag on Twitter to expose men who had exploited them.

INTERPRETING RECORDINGS

After Freud introduced a new way of reading human behaviour, historians have grappled with psychoanalytic concepts and how they relate to historiography. As Roth suggests, 'historians represent the past, and often in doing so also act out their unconscious or hidden investments in the objects of their research.'¹⁹⁷ The aliveness of some of the material that surfaced during these recordings is testament to this phenomenon. Roth's argument is that psychoanalysis exposes pitfalls in the way an historian might colonise the subconscious territory that a participant produces in their testimony and then draw conclusions from intruding themselves (the historian) into the narrative. This is also alluded to by Katherine Borland, who justifies this method of engaging with oral history because the historian is free to interpret what she hears within a scholarly framework that is not apparent to the narrator, whilst still 'grant[ing] the speaking women interpretive respect.'¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Retter, *Mum Using Her Agony*.

¹⁹⁷ Michael S Roth, 'Psychoanalysis and History', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 33 (2016), p. 22.

¹⁹⁸ Borland, *That's Not What I Said*, p. 64.

We understand that our objectivity is influenced by our own relationship to our area of study, and objectivity is both valorised and questioned. As feminists, we are suspicious of being objective because it signifies a position of superiority towards our subjects.¹⁹⁹ We therefore must always be mindful as far as possible, of our own position and attitude towards the material being studied. The similarity of some of the recordings to therapy sessions, and the way some participants openly admitted to the interviews feeling like therapy, is an overt recognition of the collaborative work that an oral historian and her subject perform. Together they produce material that is a personal history as well as a historiographical commentary on the remembered events, and also an opportunity to change the past by exploring it together. The theme of my project, which, amongst other things, examines our relationship with ourselves, has much in common with therapy, since attempts are made to interpret and analyse what is spoken about and the feelings that arise.²⁰⁰

It is important to recognise the interplay between the discovery of psychoanalytical concepts, their adoption by the media and mainstream cultural influences such as cinema and literature, and their influence on individuals' experience of family and relationships. The history of these influences is reflected in some of the testimonies when my participants speak about their upbringing and their husbands' upbringing. Therefore, women who have been exposed to psychoanalytical concepts either as part of their education or because they have had therapy, will construct meanings around the way they have been parented and the way their partner(s) have been parented. I listen for instances where behaviour can be interpreted psychoanalytically because I am searching for a way to explain my own experiences and those of the participants as a means of personal integration. The present cultural landscape is a result of dynamic, changing, forces on individuals and society. Conceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and language are constantly being evaluated in the media, particularly social media like X (formerly Twitter).

¹⁹⁹ Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, quoted by Valerie Yow, "'Do I Like Them Too Much?': Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa', *The Oral history review*, 24 (1997), p. 67.

²⁰⁰ S. Armitage and S. B. Gluck, 'Reflections on Women's Oral History: An Exchange', *Frontiers (Boulder)*, 19 (1998), pp. 6-7.

Therefore, some of the ways in which these women speak about their experiences can already seem out of date. For example, the way sexual binaries are taken for granted; boys and girls, homosexual and heterosexual orientations etc. This means that even for a contemporary history project, we still must consider the period in which these stories were collected (2020-2021) and that changes to the cultural landscape have accelerated such that ways of speaking about sexual binaries are becoming weighted by moral judgments. This paragraph began by acknowledging the psychoanalytical influence over interpreting life stories, but it is important to foreground the researcher's own positionality with respect to education, age, class, religion, and other cultural referents as these may become blindspots.

A key area of interest is the way women interpret femininity, since this is called into question when one discovers that one's husband is attracted to men. It relates to the above discussion by virtue of some well-known psychoanalytic concepts such as Freud's Oedipal complex and Winnicott's attachment theories, amongst many others. Part of women's femininity is predicated on how attractive they feel, which has been fostered historically by girls and women's fashions, women's magazines, advertisements, the cosmetics industry, and the slimming industry, to name a few. Women see themselves through the male gaze, which has been emphasized by cinema, studio arts, and advertising. Femininity is challenged when part of the meaning that is attributed to a husband being attracted to men is that he does not find his wife attractive, or that he was attracted to her because she appears masculine. This is not to suggest that this is actually what is the case for the man, it is the meaning that the woman attaches to the information and how it acts psychologically on her sense of self. The attributes of femininity and the formation of sexual orientation towards women or towards men, are currently very politically charged subjects. Here, evidence is presented of the struggles that this cohort of women have had to navigate which are recognisably congruent with women's position in socio-cultural history. Where possible, this positionality is acknowledged.

Acknowledging the interplay between historiography and psychoanalysis means that when the testimony contains references to personal history and upbringing, the historian can understand and explain why these memories are relevant. Works which address some of the psychological reasons for women to have married gay men inform historians because sexual attraction has become more of a reason to marry than it was in the past. Therefore, the feelings that arise from discovering that one's husband is gay have to be understood within the historical framework of marrying for love. It is beyond the expertise and scope of this project to posit a psychological theory of women attracted to gay men but useful to attend to how women have described themselves because those descriptions are evidence of how marriage is viewed at this point in history. A participant who describes themselves as a 'daddy's girl' or one that speaks about their distant and unaffectionate mother invites interpretation. There is limited scholarship addressing women's attraction to gay men, but Robertiello wrote a case study about a woman who sought sex with homosexual or bisexual or otherwise 'unmasculine' men because of a 'symbiotic relationship' with her mother and a father who wanted her to be a 'narcissistic extension' of himself. The paper discusses the psychotherapeutic implications of the 'fag-hag' and the possible psycho-active constellations that might have been present in the woman.²⁰¹ Heinz Kohut also writes about this way of understanding narcissism.²⁰² A father who wants his daughter to be a narcissistic extension of himself, could for example, teach her to change the car tyres, mend a fuse, splice a rope or perform DIY around the home. This speaks to concepts of gender-roles specific to this period.

Critical skills acquired from scholarship in text interpretation, literature, and media studies can aid researchers in analysing meanings in the content of the recordings.²⁰³ This is in keeping with the interdisciplinary ethos of oral history research, which stands on the shoulders of anthropology, sociology, psychology and history and aims to both interpret and respect diversity in individual

²⁰¹ Robertiello, *The "Fag Hag"*.

²⁰² Heinz Kohut and Paul H. Ornstein, *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut* (London: Karnac, 2018).

²⁰³ Jack Drescher, 'An Interview with Kenneth Lewes, Phd', *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 23 (2019).

narratives whilst teasing out the collective message. It is not the intention to generalise to the point of erasing individuals, but to draw out commonality from amongst the group to give authority to individual experience. As Abigail Brooks has written, 'The kind of dialogue that feminist standpoint scholars encourage is one in which every woman's unique lived experience and the perspective, or standpoint, based on her experience, gains a hearing.'²⁰⁴ This chapter builds on the work by Susan Moch and Marie Gates, who use personal narrative to explore the transformative effects on both participant and interviewer during the telling of sensitive stories.²⁰⁵

TELLING A STORY

In this next section, a long piece of a recording is analysed because it demonstrates how the telling of a story can take the narrator and the listener through several emotions and reveal truths that are not be fully realised until thoughts are expressed out loud. Although it is one woman's story, it contains good examples of many themes that other participants also express. As co-creator of these recordings, my positionality comprises a unique authority over interpretation because my name is invoked by the interviewee. Therefore, this long extract is a means of taking the reader into the interview so that they, too, can appreciate the emotions that are being processed by the speaker during her narration. Unlike textual analysis, where it behoves the reader to have a copy of the primary source material, the material is reproduced here.

Alex: *And I am very tidy. I'm very organized. I run a tight ship and I remember looking in the bin and thinking.. well that was Ken - I'd said to Ken at Glastonbury, what have you eaten? And he just told me the meals he'd eaten while we've been away .. just conversation and I remember looking, putting some rubbish in the black bin, and thinking it's empty. How can it be completely? It was empty when I left and it's still completely empty and looking in the fridge and there was just nothing in the fridge. Nothing. And I thought.. but he said he cooked this and he cooked that and you know, you think well he'd have used half a pot of cream. Where's the other half? You know ..*

²⁰⁴ Brooks, *Feminist Standpoint Epistemology*.

²⁰⁵ Sheila K Smith, 'The Researcher Experience in Qualitative Research', 2013, <<https://methods.sagepub.com/book/the-researcher-experience-in-qualitative-research-srm>> [accessed 19 May 2023]

Anyway because I could, because of running the business. I accessed his bank account. And that.. on the Thursday that I went to Glastonbury, on his way home from work, he had gone to Sainsbury's and he'd spent £70 on food. It wasn't petrol it was food. He'd spent £70 on food. And like I said, there was.. I thought he cannot have eaten £70 worth of food. The one who had turned twenty-one on the Sunday at Glastonbury had sort- also said when we were all at home together will you make mojitos [00:54:07] dad? He, he could make really good mojitos. So I have to .. used to have to buy this special sugar for his mojitos. So I bought the special sugar and I and it was unwrapped. It was wrapped.. you know, not opened.. and it was opened! And I thought well, you know, you might have a glass of wine on your own but, you know make yourself a cocktail. I don't think you make.. The man I knew wouldn't make himself a cocktail to drink on his own and I thought I knew some friends of ours had been wandering past because our garden was quite open on an alleyway to the river and friends would.. but he would have said oh so-and-so and so-and-so and I made them all a mojito, but he hadn't said any of that. So when he .. that was the other thing.. over the last two years, I would either say oh, I'm really tired, I'm really tired and I would go to bed and then I was aware that he wouldn't come to bed for a couple of hours or he would say, I think a really really enjoy this programme and I'd start watching it and he's go to bed. So it would be another hour or so before I would go to bed and then quite often he'd be on his phone when I got to bed.

So I said I was going to stay up that night and he went to bed and I looked in his wallet. He left .. had left it on the bathroom shelf and I looked in his wallet and I found a drug. A tablet. Used. It was like, you know, the little little foil so the tablet was missing but it was still the foil and it was hidden in his wallet. So I took it out of his wallet and I think I must've just photographed it or something and put it back. And so the next day I Googled what that was and it ..I mean, I mean, I remember thinking somebody .. you could not make it up. It was actually described as works like Viagra, is basically Viagra, but mostly only used by medical profession because it's quite expensive, but they know it has less risk factors than Viagra. So I thought yeah, he's done his research. Yeah, and so that was the Tuesday and so I just thought he's having it. He's having [00:56:07] an affair. Someone has been in my home and he's taking Viagra and something is going on. There's something I, you know..

So on the Fri- so at this stage the one who had turned twenty-one and finished her degree had come, was home. So she finished her degree, went to Glastonbury had her twenty-first came home. So she was at home all week. I can just remember being in this complete daze all week, but thinking I've got to get through this. I have got to get through this week. Friday night, she was going out with some friends. She then said to me about eight o'clock Friday night, oh I'm not going to go anymore. I'm really skint and blah blah blah and I remember thinking, saying to her no, no, it's really important that you go really because I wanted her out the house so I could talk to him [laughs] and I remember just kind of giving her £20 and saying go! Go! Have a drink! See your friends! You must go! You must go! You know, like forcing alcohol someone into someone is only just finished Uni, you know, and

anyway, I've got the youngest one off to sleep. Ken went to bed really early. I went in, checked the youngest was asleep went in and said can we talk and he said yes, and I said are you having an affair? And he said no, I'm absolutely not having an affair.

And I said, well, I've looked at your bank account and you spent £70 on food. You know, what have you done well he said well he said well, I ate it all and I said nobody eats £70 worth of food. You can't have done and he went well I did I just ate it all, I ate it all. He said I can't really explain maybe maybe there's something at the back of the cupboard you haven't seen and I said no there isn't you know, and he said well, I drank a bottle of wine and I said, well, you know, what, did you buy yourself a £40? He's not .. that's not him. You know, that's not us. We're not you know comm- [incomp] I said you're not someone who bought yourself £40 bottle of wine. You know what and I said and why isn't your rubbish in the bin and it was and he said it was full and I said, but you never empty the bins anyway, and it can't be that full from one person, one weekend that you emptied everything in the bin and [00:58:08] and then I said and why are you buying .. I can't remember what it was called but .. say Viagra but what .. I said the real name and he looked really shocked and I said, why, why are you taking that? And he said well because I don't think that our sex life is particularly good and I did it for you and he said I did it for you, Alex. I did it for you. I have and he said but I still couldn't get it to work. I've definitely got real problems, you know in my head and I'm so stressed and and I remember sitting there thinking I am the most evil human being in the world. I am. I am sorry but, and then I just suddenly went well, who did you drink a mojito with? And he just said, yeah, you're right. I'm having an affair.

And I just and I said and that person has been here and he said yeah, they were here all weekend and all I can remember thinking is.. all I could think at the time was I.. thank God because I know for a fact it wasn't my sister or my best friend. Because I was with them at and that's the first thought was it's not my sister or my best friend, you know that every scenario can always be worse, can't it? I remember thinking it wasn't them. They were with me at Glastonbury. So then I just said well, who? And he just said, well, it's really terrible. I can't tell you and he and I said, who?

And anyway he then said I'm having an affair with a man and then he said I have been having affairs with men from when number four.. just after number four was born. Which is why I told you the story about me wanting to move and him acquiescing. I think there was a guilt thing. He thought you know, I and I think he also thought maybe I need to get her to a place where she won't be completely isolated.

He said he had gone on a conference to America and he'd been in Boston. And I can remember him coming home from that conference and telling me how he'd gone on a boat trip to look at whales and how [01:00:08] the people on the boat had said, you know .. warned them all that for the last six weeks, they'd not spotted one whale you know, but you get an amazing look at the harbour and you know, but then you have to under- and actually not only did they see a whale but they saw a whole shoal and it was amazing

and then, and then and even the people on the.. who run the tour had said they'd never seen .. and I remember him coming home and telling me the story and he'd had this .. and he said that apparently that night in the bar, he was telling a colleague but this is a male neurologist from the North. So not a colleague as in you know, so there were neurologists from all over the world there. But from the north of England, this one was from the north of England and they'd oft- their paths had often crossed on different conferences.

And so he was telling so he was sort of a friend in very inverted commas, you know so he was telling him about it and he said he'd had a few beers. He was obviously quite animated because it was an amazing day and this fella just said to him. Do you want to share my bed tonight? And he just said yes! Like that. And he did. And he spent the night with him and then the next few conferences, they managed to wangle it so that they had adjoining rooms. Then my understanding.. so basically this was say ten o'clock at night. I didn't sleep or even lie down all night. and stayed up all night, and I talked and he just told me everything and as far as I know, I don't think he held anything, anything back at all. I don't think.. he .. he told me so he knew he was gay from when he was at school. So it was difficult as his say Mom, Dad made him integrating at school by not allowing him to join in. He also didn't really want to because he had this fear. He's always held a fear that other males can tell. So he knew that. He went off to med school, felt more accepted for [01:02:08] just being him and made sort of friends, met me and thought .. I want to be the.. not revered as such .. but I want to be a well-considered hospital consultant who lives in a nice house, with a charming wife who I can phone and say I'm bringing six home for supper and she'll go yes, darling.

You know who will have a number of children and he said when I chose you because I knew you were competent and capable and you would do the job that you needed to do and he said and then I decided that I was going to put it in a box and never ever ever ever acknowledge my sexuality and he said when I got propositioned that time I said, yes, and he said and then after that Alex.. and he said I've met many many people I've had a number of high-risk encounters. I've slept with prostitutes. I've lalal ala male all male, all male and he said and and he said and of course, that's how you got your cancer. Like I was stupid. [laughs] Of course, that's how you got it.

And then he said and then two years ago when we were on holiday rather than hook up with total strangers. I made myself an online account. And of course, that's what he was doing that whole holiday, and he said I never asked but I'm a I mean I'm assuming it was Grindr and he said I met a number of people and I mean and.. an incredibly intelligent human being he was going. No, they're my friends! [01:04:09] You know, like, you know. Anyway, and he said and then a year ago, I met a man and we've been dating ever since and I go there every Thursday afternoon. And, and we've planned our wedding and we're gonna you know, we're gonna get married and, and and that was that. And yeah, and then I don't know what. I was really I mean I sobbed I'm sobbing and sobbing and I didn't once raise my voice. I didn't get cross. He went and phoned this guy and told him and said,

you know, I told you she was you know, I told you she was an amazing person, you know, she's even taking this with dignity and dignity and elegance. And I just remember thinking, you know, and then I remember saying to him, over the next few weeks kind of really begging him to stay and saying, you know, we can work this through obviously children don't need to know.

And actually letting him tell me things like, you know that Gareth, who's this other man is absolutely the love of his life .. he's never met any you know, he had no idea what being in love felt like and he's this, he's that. Gareth is the man who built the chicken house.

The transcript begins with Alex telling the story of how she put together the pieces of the puzzle which eventually led her to accusing her husband of having an affair. She builds a defence of her position because later in the story, her husband gaslights her with his lies. She talks about how she 'runs a tight ship' which is how she knows that she emptied the bin before she went to Glastonbury with some of her children. Later in the story, her husband declares that he emptied the bin, which she knows is not true, however, she feels *really terrible* because his assertion makes her doubt her memory of what actually happened. She begins to search for more evidence and finds the supermarket amount of £70 that he spent for the food for the weekend. She also waits for him to go to bed before searching his wallet and finding a foil wrapper for a drug that treats erectile dysfunction. In the telling of these details, she builds a narrative that props up her burgeoning sense of validity and begins to reform her identity from gaslit wife to empowered single woman. By using phrases like *he'd have used half a pot of cream. Where's the other half?* She invites us into her world. We are with her, looking into the fridge. She creates a detective story and knows how to insert relevant details in the appropriate places, so she sets up the mojito reveal by talking about the special sugar that she bought and finding that it had been unwrapped. Finding the used blister pack for the erectile dysfunction drug in his wallet points to his desire to hide his need for the drug from both his wife and his lover.

Alex's storytelling style is very surefooted and confident. She builds to the climax of the mojito revelation and makes sure that the listener understands why this is the husband's undoing, because he 'would never make just himself a cocktail'. So when this revelation is what induces his

confession, we are both incredulous at his commitment to the lies he has been telling (as was Alex) and shocked at how this one particular detail would be his downfall, even though we are led through a series of anecdotes which makes his behaviour consistent. Lie number one: *No, I'm absolutely not having an affair.* Lie number two: *I ate it all.* Lie number three: *He said it was full.* Lie number four: *I did it for you.* Eventual truth: *Yeah, you're right. I'm having an affair.* When Alex speaks about her relief that he couldn't be having an affair with her sister or her best friend because they were both with her in Glastonbury, this demonstrates the way we often try to find something good to cling to when we are hearing very bad news. We comfort ourselves with ideas of how things could be even worse than they are.

We then go back in time and discover how she is reconstructing the stories he has told about his time at medical conferences whilst in the present (the moment of the confrontation) he is adding the details of his affairs with men. She splices the two elements of the stories (his wonder at the whales and his first sexual encounter with a man) together for us and recreates her realisation of the person she is actually married to. We might insert our own feelings of incredulousness here, where, having built a sense of his untrustworthiness due to the lies about the shopping and the 'Viagra' she still finds herself thinking that he is giving her his complete truth. We get a sense that he is either unburdening himself fully, or constructing a narrative which will have her admiring his ability to confide in her. She tells us that he breaks off to phone his boyfriend and tell him how amazing Alex is. This act demonstrates how objectified she feels (the husband is calling his boyfriend because he has finally freed himself from his marriage with no thought to how the wife is feeling) - and how emotionally abandoned she is and therefore she is able to acknowledge her vulnerability by finally admitting that she 'sobbed and sobbed.' Even in the middle of realising how he has treated her, she gives him credit; *I think he also thought maybe I need to get her to a place where she won't be completely isolated.*

The husband privileges his needs by telling her that he is *planning his wedding* to the boyfriend, and this also evidences her depersonalisation by him. Finally, she ties the thread of the

narrative back to her earlier story (not included here) of how she admired her husband for being so compassionate towards the man who built their daughter a chicken coop. Her humiliation is complete because he is the boyfriend to whom her husband plans to get married.

One gets a sense that the act of telling her story enables Alex to separate herself and to become the listener and curator of the narrative. The transition from devoted wife to angry sobbing victim and the realisation that her husband objectified and used her, is well set up by the story. In the beginning of her marriage, she colludes in her husband's need for a dependable wife and believes that in return for raising the children and looking after the home, she will have a soulmate who loves and appreciates her. She even begs him to stay and work this through and not tell the children.

Alex: *I, I suppose what I would say Diana is the - I do I think about him all the time.*

When she invokes my name, she reminds herself that she is involved in a dialogue, that someone is listening, that she is not alone and that her story is being heard. She emphasises her relationship with me and the collaborative nature of this enterprise. By unpacking the story for me, she is processing the events of her life again. The presence of a sympathetic listener validates the conclusions that a narrator draws from their own life story and can help to make apparently meaningless suffering meaningful. To invoke a listener is to engage with others in the hope that one's suffering will resonate with theirs and not be in vain. In a therapy session, the therapist performs a similar function (amongst others). This is not to suggest that psychotherapy was being provided, but that there appeared to be a therapeutic quality to parts of this interaction.

What Alex is also saying here though, is that she cannot get him out of her head. There is a sense of the two of them being joined together and that the psychic separation is very difficult for her. This points to how women, and especially mothers, feel strong connections with their loved ones. Men compete, whereas women collaborate and work together. So, Alex finds it very difficult to adjust to her new single state of being rejected by her husband. As a case study, Alex's story contains many elements that draw sympathy. From being called an ugly baby to contracting cancer

because of her husband's sexual promiscuity with men throughout her marriage, this experience supports the historical argument that cascading ideas of femininity and the patriarchy have an ongoing effect on contemporary women.

EMOTIONS

REFLEXIVITY AND EMOTIONS

*'There can be no meaningful human relationship into which feelings do not enter.'*²⁰⁶

One of the things that must be negotiated by the women in my research group is confronting themselves about how long it took for the marriage to end. This is coupled with the strong belief that a marriage should last until death. There is a sense that the marriage is an impregnable fortress that protects the couple from harm and when the events unfold to erode that fortress, women are left feeling destroyed and stupid. To allow a discussion of emotions, it should be acknowledged that this is a new field within historiography, but that much is being discovered latterly about the role of emotions in both the researcher and the subject.

Viktor Frankl writes that we cannot choose what happens but we can choose our response to what happens.²⁰⁷ Adopting an attitude to how we have been treated, how long we have endured a marriage, and negotiating with ourselves an acceptable way of talking about our experiences is part of the type of research that feminist scholars are currently exploring. The work I have done contributes to this research by providing evidence at an individual level of what this personal labour entails and at what cost. The participants are in the process of understanding how to incorporate perceived suffering into a coherent self-view and recovering their identity. One of the ideas that must be grappled with is the "what if?" question. What if I had found out he was gay before the marriage? What if I had married someone else and had a different life? How can I know if I would

²⁰⁶ Barbara Taylor, *The Last Asylum: A Memoir of Madness in Our Times* (Penguin, 2014), Loc. 2426.

²⁰⁷ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (London: Pocket Books, 1985).

have been more content? Feminist scholarship claims the legitimacy of exploring emotional content and I fully support this claim. But it involves exposing myself emotionally, and recognising the vulnerability of both my participants and myself.

Diana: Okay. Again, this is a question that you don't have to answer if you don't want to. How about your sexuality when you're just by yourself and experiencing your own body.

Frankie: I think I'd rather not answer that actually

Diana: That's perfectly alright, okay. So, can you talk to me about how you [00:46:06] are experiencing yourself in your new relationship?

I still feel shame reading the above extract. It makes me uncertain about my connection with her and I doubt myself as an interviewer. I was worried about making her close off or mistrust me and I wonder if I come across as stupid or crass or insensitive. Even though most of the women were very grateful, I'm not proud of this moment. But I tried to recover myself and to continue with the interview so that she felt comfortable. It was a moment when I realised what it might be like to be a therapist and be entirely 'blank' so that others might use me to project their own feelings onto me. It was an instance of me concealing my true feelings so that she could continue - not imposing my emotions on her. So being aware of the emotions later, is often part of the skill of listening. By allowing myself to feel this shame and to interrogate it, I can become a better oral historian.

Olivia: So, so I ended up, you know having to tell him I'm pregnant and he was just .. I had .. I wrapped it up actually. I put "I'm pregnant!" And wrapped it up and gave it to him and he went what's this then? I hope it's not what I think it is. Of course I opened it, "oh it was what I thought it was." And that was it and so it was kind of like, oh my God. So he just went into this strange thing then and then somewhere along the line, he said to me, do you think we need to get some counselling? So I was like, yes! [laughs] I think we do. So we went to see this counsellor at Relate and we went round and round in circles, never seem to get anywhere. But his behaviour, it did improve a little bit but it was it was just bizarre and I can't really put my finger on it and he'd do things like go in the garden and have fires and just just not clear up. And then he went through a stage where he was basically crapping all over the toilet everywhere, which was really difficult when you're trying to potty train your child. And just, just staying out. He came home a few times black [00:24:05] eyes in the middle of the night came home in a police car one night just very very weird behaviours. And he just was so strange with my son. He wanted to be a dad, but he had no ability with watching for safety, he'd give him a like a knife to play with

and just leave him, and walk off and just and he was a person who worked in the children's home with .. and it oh, that's the other thing. He bought business with some friends whilst this was all going on, which is .. was an Outdoor Centre and he didn't really want me any to do anything with it, which is a bit strange.

So second child came along and we stopped the counselling just before yeah,

Diana: I just wanted to ask you sorry to interrupt when you were in marriage counselling with Relate, did you .. were you able to talk in front of the counsellor about any of these things that you've just spoken about?

Olivia: Yeah, so so they all mentioned apart from I can't remember. I don't remember ever mentioning about the night, I got pregnant. I'm not sure.. I can't .. we might of, might not of. I can't really remember but certainly his behaviour around my son was mentioned a lot because of that was my prime concern.

Diana: And how did the Relate counsellor to respond to that?

Olivia: From what I can remember, she just she just talked about him maybe, I remember her one time saying what would, what do you want Pete to do? And I remember saying I'd really like him to read some books about how [00:26:05] to look after babies because I was terrified. I was really terrified something was going to happen to my son. Really quite frightened be.. because there had been a few accidents like he'd come back and he bashed his head and he hadn't kind of noticed and .. we ended up in hospital one time because my son hit his head and then threw up and, and I'd wanted to take him to a A&E and my husband was like no, no you're babying him. And and so I was frightened actually. So we talked a lot about that. I don't .. I don't remember a huge amount about the counselling at at that point other than we never seemed to get anywhere. I remember thinking that it wasn't getting anywhere here. We're not you know, and I remember saying I love you, you're my friend and I don't understand why you can't.. I remember.. that's it - I remember saying things like that. I don't understand why you can't tell me or talk to me or I don't really understand what's going on. You don't seem to love me. Yeah, I remember that.

Diana: Do you think? I'm choosing my words carefully here. If you were a Relate counsellor listening to somebody tell the story that you've just told me. How would you respond to it?

Olivia: I don't know. I don't know actually I'm .. I think I'd want to know what was going on with him and we did go and see the counsellor afterwards [00:28:05] later on and and she she did explain some things to us as well, which was interesting [muffled noise] and she's.. Sorry! That's my dog! She's been next to me and suddenly made a noise.

So yeah, we did we did go and see the counsellor and then I saw the counsellor on my own for a while afterwards as well; the same counsellor. So yeah, so in she did say at that point .. but basically after he came out. Well, no, I found out we went back to see the counsellor and the counsellor sort of said right, what's going on? She said what's gone on and he said I'm questioning my sexuality and she said, Pete, you sat in here. You watched your pregnant wife go round and round in circles and never seem to be able to get anywhere and the whole time you knew what was going on. She said you've made a mockery of my profession and this relationship is over. She said, I'm putting a stop to this relationship and she said, you need to get

yourself some help, Pete and goodbye. I never want to see you again and then she asked him to leave.

Diana: *How did it feel when that happened?*

I was gobsmacked. I was gobsmacked because I've done a little bit of counselling training at that point .. part of my job and I was like, oh my God, that's not counselling me! Counsellors aren't supposed to say that and I was quite .. I was like, oh my God, I can't believe she just said that! But in time, I think I needed someone to say that. I needed someone to say that because everybody is so gay friendly. Oh, poor Pete – oooh, imagine what it's like for [00:30:05] him. blah blah blah. No one actually stood up and said, actually this is wrong. He's made her go through all of this. He knew what was wrong the whole time. She was asking him. She was saying .. and he wouldn't say. And I think I needed someone and I think I needed someone to put him in his place a bit as well.

In the above extract, it can be seen how my emotions were difficult to handle in the light of what I considered to be extremely serious safeguarding issues. My interruptions attempted to demonstrate how believable I found her story to be, to ameliorate the experience of not being believed at the time and to show empathy. This exchange shows not only how the patriarchy supports men's world views, but also how an oral history recording is a co-created artefact by both interviewer and interviewee.

In the above exchange, the therapist's act of throwing the husband out could have been her way of giving permission to Olivia to leave her husband. *I think I needed someone to put him in his place a bit as well.* When she says *everybody is so gay friendly*, she is implying that she feels ignored and overlooked; she has not been heard or validated.

It is also worth recognising that the stories Olivia tells about her husband's behaviour around her children are very upsetting and alarming. *He was basically crapping all over the toilet everywhere [...] my son hit his head and then threw up and, and I'd wanted to take him to a A&E and my husband was like no, no you're babying him. And and so I was frightened actually.* Many of my participants speak in a matter-of-fact way about witnessing very alarming behaviour from their husbands.²⁰⁸ This felt as if they were placing a huge burden on me; not only because I was empathising with the suffering about which they were testifying, but because they highlighted the

²⁰⁸ Sharon, Jackie, Olivia, Shirley, Ingrid, Alex, Mandy, Pauline, and Nicole

unacceptable suffering that I allowed myself to experience in my own marriage. This is one of the consequences of gaslighting; it is often only when we encounter the stories others tell, that we begin to give ourselves permission to acknowledge that we have been mistreated. It is not *babying* a child if they have hit their head and lost consciousness and need to be taken to A&E, it is good, responsible parenting.

To what extent is Olivia manipulating us in the way she tells her story? This uneasy question arises from hearing only her version of events. She recruits the therapist's behaviour to borrow authority, legitimise her narrative, and validate her experience, but is she a reliable narrator? Paige L. Sweet²⁰⁹ uses women's narratives of being gaslighted by their abusive intimate partners to assert that the narrated episodes are facts. She uses statements like 'the abusive husband forced her to go to his psychiatrist' and 'the abusive husband called her a crazy bitch'. This class of assertion can be avoided in my work because I quote the women directly and invite the reader to determine the veracity of the reported incidents for his or herself. This speaks to the nature of truth and facts as spoken in oral testimonies.²¹⁰ Is Olivia unable to feel her feelings until we (or the therapist) feel them for her?

Cheryl: *So when I was dating Colin, I asked him if he was gay not because I thought he was gay or was suspicious but because of what happened with Paul and he said don't be so stupid, of course I'm not gay, get a grip! You know, so he a) lied to me deliberately and then b) lied to me by making me live a lie that I didn't know I was living. And that that does irritate me. That said it's very interesting because I'm not a person who gets angry. So my best friend got really really angry about what Colin did to me, on my behalf and she said, I don't understand why you're not angry and I said just don't see the point. It's not in my nature, it doesn't change anything. I'd much rather just get on with trying to find out how to feel better and how to process it.*

And I get - I do get angry at things. I get very angry about injustice and very angry about what's happening to Palestine. You know, I get angry about that kind of thing. I get angry about idiots that won't wear masks and put us

²⁰⁹ Paige L. Sweet, 'The Sociology of Gaslighting', *American Sociological Review*, 84 (2019).

²¹⁰ Further reading; Bortolotti, *Stranger Than Fiction*; Feldstein, *Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History*; Judith Butler, 'Giving an Account of Oneself', *Diacritics*, 31 (2001); Erin Jessee, 'The Limits of Oral History: Ethics and Methodology Amid Highly Politicized Research Settings', *The Oral History Review*, 38 (2011).

at risk.²¹¹ *If you don't wear a mask, it's nothing personal, you know, so I get angry about the fact that families can't afford to feed their children, you know, I work with a lot of families that can't afford to feed their children or afford to feed themselves. Things like that make me angry but there's no point in getting angry with - about what happened with Colin. It's not going to change it [00:52:05] getting angry at that. The families can't feed their children, you know and campaign about it. I can change those things. I can't change what happened to me by getting angry. What I need to do is process it, deal with it, and move on and that's what I've done. I probably completely digressed from your question...*

Diana: *Even digressing is very valuable in terms of my research. So that's good. Can I take you back to that night after the party where you were driving home? You're the designated driver and he told you what he told you.*

Cheryl: *Yeah*

Diana: *Can you tell me a little bit about what you spoke about then and how you .. what sort of conversations you had around ending your marriage and how you felt about that.*

Cheryl: *That night we didn't talk about ending our marriage, I was just so, so upset. I couldn't talk about it and he just kept saying you're driving erratically! And I just said well what the fuck to you expect? Get a grip! Mind the sea! [Laughs] I said I'll drive into the fucking sea if I want [laughs]. You bastard.*

The above demonstrates a complex relationship with anger. Like jealousy, it seems to indicate that denying one is angry helps to reject the victim identity and minimises the perceived damage that one has incurred. Lucy Delap has explored the naming of emotions and how they have intricate resonances with the male gaze.²¹² Here we see this process at work. As humans, we are skilled at reading emotions. How do we process the other's emotion when they refuse to admit that they are experiencing an emotion even when they are behaving as if they have it? Cheryl's use of the F- word seems to indicate that she is angry, and yet she chooses to use the word 'upset' to describe her emotion. When she talks to her friend about her experience, her friend becomes angry on her behalf, which seems to suggest that she has told her friend the narrative in such a way as to

²¹¹ Facemasks which were required to be worn by law during the Covid-19 pandemic

²¹² Delap, *Feminism, Masculinities*.

successfully project the anger onto her, thereby avoiding the need to acknowledge it or own it. This, in turn, protects her from giving some power to her ex-husband to make her angry.

This creates questions around who gets to name an emotion? There seems to be considerable and powerful consequences to naming an emotion; how we name our emotions is closely connected to our self-image. How do we validate the name of the emotion we are having?

JEALOUSY

In Esther Perel's *The State of Affairs* she spends a chapter discussing jealousy and its absence from people's accounts of their partner's infidelity. Perel states that 'jealousy is denied in order to protect the victim's moral superiority.'²¹³ Some of the testimonies are informative about this emotion.

Candy: *I don't feel any jealousy towards his partner, but I know if it had been a woman it would have eaten me up, but I just never felt any jealousy towards him and my .. you know friends find that quite they don't understand that at all, but I don't. And so I didn't want to you know, I could see they just been [01:06:13] terribly, terribly naive and both were hurting and neither are still happy. And so I didn't see the point in making a point of that really in the divorce papers. So we left it as it was there.*

Candy supports Perel's hypothesis although she asserts that *if it had been a woman it would have eaten me up* but we cannot know if this would be true - other factors might have come into play if her husband had an affair with a woman.

Nancy: *He was part of the reason why I wasn't able, I did cut myself off from Lee but part of the reason I couldn't come back with him as [a] friend earlier was because of Kwe²¹⁴ because he was just very very jealous of the idea that I would even see him. So which of course was something I haven't had to deal with before; jealous men.*

Nancy articulates a positive aspect of jealousy here, that of being valued by a male heterosexual partner. This was something that resonated with me in my own situation.

²¹³ Perel, *The State of Affairs : Rethinking Infidelity*, p. 94.

²¹⁴ Kwe (correct spelling) is the name of Nancy's new boyfriend

Mandy: *It's like if I have been left for another woman, I'd have something to compare myself to. I could get angry about oh, she was younger. She was prettier or she was more accomplished or she was something. But I have .. or you know, or even I'm better than her and I you know, obviously, you know, he's better he's missing out with me. But on the other hand, it's just really odd when you don't have that ability to compare .. to make comparisons. I mean, I have no ill will towards his partner whatsoever. I have none. Like I really don't. I don't think. I don't feel worried at all about him. Never did. I didn't feel jealous? I didn't feel .. What is it .. wronged, and I don't put any of that on the partner at all. It's funny. It is all directed at him.*

Therefore Mandy also reinforces Perel's hypothesis.

PONDERING MY OWN COMPLICITY IN THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM

Lynn Abrams writes that feminist oral historians have pondered their complicity in the rise of individualism²¹⁵ and I think I should answer this criticism for myself. By adding to the voices that are already being recorded, I am adding to the community of women whose lives have been affected by mixed orientation marriage. Part of the problem for women is the isolation we feel because we have been limited to living at home and raising children while our husbands have been 'out in the world'. Therefore, we have had to suffer the negative effects of individualism in opposition to them. Also, individualism can live alongside community-mindedness because a strong sense of self can inform one of how one fits into society as well as enabling members of society to construct their communities to better enable and take care of individuals. This reflexivity between groups and individuals is how humans have created their environments and sought to maximise their agency²¹⁶.

Diana: *Well, it's a very compelling story and I think one of the most difficult things in my work is to swing the attention back to you, the woman. It's .. but I would like to do that if that's okay with you?*

Ingrid: *Yeah very much so.*

Diana: *So I would like us to sort of go back now in time and talk to you about your childhood and you growing up and your [dog barks] relationship. With your*

²¹⁵ Lynn Abrams, 'Heroes of Their Own Life Stories: Narrating the Female Self in the Feminist Age', *Cultural and Social History*, 16 (2019).

²¹⁶ Jane Lewis, *The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations*. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2001).

own sexuality and your relationship with your body and how you see yourself as a woman. [dog barks]

These questions are part of the work I undertook to empower women by encouraging them to focus on themselves, and their needs. I think that we, as a group of women who were married to closeted gay men, but furthermore as any woman might confirm, we put men's needs first. Often because we are not even aware of what we want or need. It can be easier to go along with what men want because they appear to know what they want and we cannot exert any authority or override their decisions. My insistence that the attention be brought back to the woman, was a conscious attempt at empowerment. I still have to remind myself sometimes that this project is not about the men.

Mandy: He was still a man all the way through this. He may be homosexual but homosexuals are men and they think like men and they do things like men. And so when people say that, you know, I have a gay friend who's in touch with their feminine side. There is no feminine side. It's not feminine. It's it's something else certainly. Not my kind of feminine.

I think Mandy was trying to articulate the idea that men are masculine no matter what their sexual orientation is and that only women are feminine. Her words stuck with me because they remind me of how closeted gay husbands collude with the patriarchy in exploiting their wives.

Wendy: When you're trying to deal with it and trying to put things in perspective there's a .. there's a lot of because it's a man .. same-sex relationship. You can't voice what you really want to say? Because the sympathy lies with your .. my ex-husband. All the sympathy lies with him. We don't get any.. me and the kids at all. And if we try to put our point of view across we're seen as being homophobic and we're not. We're far from it, but we are seen that way so .. for example a very good friend of mine who I would have thought better of said to me .. she said it must have been absolutely terrible for living like that for him for years knowing he was gay. And I looked at her I went I couldn't believe you just said that. She said oh come on. It must have been terrible for him to live knowing, in this big lie, and I said, yes, but he he got into that lie. I said he instigated. I said he knew .. if knew he was he didn't have to get involved with us. He didn't .. he asked us to marry him three times. He didn't have to ask me to marry him. We didn't have to have children. He could have stayed single. I said I know in the eighties it was diabolical. It was. There was a lot of gay bashing. It was diabolical. It was AIDS adverts all over the TV with AIDS kills. Tombstones and it was quite shocking and I sort of get why gay people wouldn't come out as being gay [01:38:09] but you don't have to get married and you don't have to settle down and deceive someone.

I think people tend to forget that. It, how can I put it - That you haven't asked for any of this. None of it is your doing. You haven't been any part of setting any of this up. You haven't turned them gay. You haven't made him go to a man. That's just genetically how he is. But there's no sympathy for you? It's all for them. It's all for them and how bad they must feel. And you can't voice that opinion.

Wendy is describing the way the patriarchy works, *all the sympathy lies with him*. Just saying these words is empowering, and therefore demonstrates how we can use oral history as a feminist methodology, giving voice to the voiceless. Wendy felt safe enough to voice what she considered to be dangerous thoughts to do with complaining about how her husband had used her. As I am an insider, she thought that I would understand and therefore she could tell me how she really felt without feeling judged.²¹⁷ In many ways I have acted as a release valve for pent up feelings of rage.

Nicole: And I said that I reserved the right to tell [00:54:12] my story to anybody outside his family that I thought appropriate because it wasn't, you know, as soon as he involved me in this it became my story too and it was entirely unreasonable for him to think I would keep something a secret. But I've always been like quite cautious about .. about sharing it because it's you know, like I don't think he set out to use me as a beard. You know, I don't think he thought gosh I can finally have these covert gay relationships that I've always been wanting to have. I think he wanted to be straight because of a whole bunch of shitty things that had happened to him in the time that he grew up in and he's kind of like collateral damage of all of that and sure, he should have gotten therapy and he should have dealt with this stuff. But he's also like only human and I think our connection at some level, like our compatibility as people was probably legitimate and if he had been like an openly gay man, then he and I would have just been very, very good friends, you know, and that that relation that friendship could have could have run the distance, you know.

The above clip shows again, how the patriarchy acts to make women privilege men's reality over their own. Nicole explains that her husband didn't set out to use her as his beard. But she cannot be sure about his motivations and neither can we. We can only relate to the actions of his that Nicole reports. This could set up a difference between our interpretation of his behaviour and the

²¹⁷ Day, *A Reappraisal of Insider-Outsider Interviewing: The Tristan Da Cunha Oral History Project*; Tooth Murphy, *Listening in, Listening Out: Intersubjectivity and the Impact of Insider and Outsider Status in Oral History Interviews*; Lisa-Jo K. van den Scott, 'Role Transitions in the Field and Reflexivity: From Friend to Researcher', *Emotion and the Researcher: Sites, Subjectivities, and Relationships*, 16 (2018).

narrator's which is part of the problem of appropriating personal stories to make a scholarly argument. This problem is explored by Katherine Borland, who interpreted a story told to her by her grandmother about what she, Borland, considered to be her sexist treatment by her (the grandmother's) much-loved father. Borland showed her grandmother what she had written and used the response it generated in a new paper.²¹⁸ Nicole talks about her husband more than she talks about herself and excuses his behaviour. However, later in her interview, she is able to express her feelings of trauma and being gaslighted. This phenomenon, of processing memories and drawing conclusions from them in the moment is evidence of the power of oral history; when all the events have already happened, but recalling them, telling them, and feeling in to them with a sympathetic listener, can actively shape relationships to those memories. Nicole has compartmentalised aspects of her husband as well as taking an inventory of how his behaviour has affected her. She has even requested that her interview not be archived with the British Library. The following is an extract from an email that she sent me after her interview:

However, the position I've come to after some serious reflection is that I don't feel it would be right for me to make this public (even with a great time delay), and so I'm not going to put my recording in the British Library. As I said in the interview, this story isn't just my ex's story. It's also my story, and I've basically insisted on that from day 1 after I found out everything. I also think that I can ethically justify the amount of detail I told you about my ex because I feel that it's impossible for me to accurately express what I went through in a way that I think is honest and meaningful without what I consider to be the appropriate context. His and my story have become intricately intertwined across time and space, at least in my mind. That said, I do feel it's not just my story, and in sharing these larger parts of his story in order to better explain my own experiences and feelings, I've shared some very personal, traumatic things that he didn't consent to being made public, let alone with my voice as the sole voice representing that trauma. Although he ended up being extremely careless with

²¹⁸ Borland, *That's Not What I Said*.

my/his/our shared wellbeing as a part of avoiding dealing with his trauma, I am capable of behaving with care. Not adding my recording to the public record is going to be one of the expressions of my ability to behave with care so as to be sure that I don't cause inadvertent harm. For me, and my situation/story, I feel this is the best course of action.

...

The other thing I forgot to mention is that I have managed to 'retrieve' quite a lot of good out of this situation (in addition to finding myself again, learning to trust myself and others, etc.). The good has increased with time. I was empathetic before, but my capacity for empathy and compassion has increased a lot because of this experience. I am now significantly more patient, and resilient than I was before, including having a high tolerance for living in the moment when there are no other real options (e.g. such as is required when one is in tight lockdown during a global pandemic!). I now understand much more about healthy relationships than I did before. I take these good things and use them. They are my silver linings, and I'm grateful for them.

I have, over time, also managed to 'reclaim' a lot of memories from the taint of them having been associated with my ex and our relationship. Being able to emotionally lay claim to a vast swath of my own life that I had, for quite some time, basically put off limits for myself because it was too emotionally fraught, is such a massive thing.

But getting to this point has been a process, and required a lot of support. Today, I'm looking back nearly 12 years on from having gotten married, and there were some things that I've only felt ready to 'reclaim' very recently. I don't doubt that in time I'll reclaim everything. Had you been doing your PhD 3 years ago, however, I probably wouldn't have participated even though for all intents and purposes in my day-to-day life this was well and truly in my past. This is why it's so important that the support structures available to people become better acquainted with what it means that a person is a straight spouse. There are many parts of myself and my life that with less skilled and consistent support I very well may never have reclaimed. The difference between finding silver-linings, resilience, oneself again - reclaiming all these lost things - and a person being in some kind of

torturous limbo, perpetually feeling lost or only half-realised as a person very well might be the quality of the support they get and the degree of understanding that is shown to them. There's a lot on the line if a GP or therapist doesn't realise the nuances of the situation.

The last thing I want to share is the following excerpts from an article that came out when that Philip Schofield person came out (from this excellent piece: <https://medium.com/@plwsheffield/so-philip-what-is-your-wifes-story-780e73c93796>)

"She [Schofield's wife] has a narrative around her life that now has suddenly been literally, shattered...Discovery results in a tumultuous crisis...Like many straight spouses shocked by such sudden and often brutally delivered revelations, I then had to begin to question everything about my personal history. It is as if a computer virus infects your life narrative and corrupts every memory...It's like looking at my life on two movie screens. There is the movie of my life I saw, and then there is one that was the 'reality'. It is an exhausting and disorienting process to figure out what my life narrative really is. How do I integrate the two? Will I ever be able to? I feel paranoid. How will I know what is real going forward in my life? ...You love this person and then it turns out they are not who you thought they were. There is no solid narrative ground to stand on...The fear and paranoia are real as a betrayed spouse questions their ability to assess reality accurately, often after having been through years of gaslighting that have depleted their ability to trust their own feelings...that held me in place and destroyed my self-confidence... While I support anyone's right to live as they want to, there IS collateral damage..."

I was discussing this article with someone in WhatsApp when it came out and wrote: "I didn't write this, but it's strongly accurate, and I agree fully. I wish the news media would learn to treat this situation with balance and care, because all around, it's full of damage." Then there is a message from me with some other text; I don't remember authoring it, and thought it was a quote I pulled from elsewhere. However, I can't find a source for it in Google or the Straight Spouse Network Forum, so maybe I did author it: "As people we can cheer someone for finally being honest at the same time that we can acknowledge they have caused real harm and stolen something from others they cannot

give back. And that matters too. And society can reflect on the role it played in creating the situation from which this harm emerges."²¹⁹

This long extract from Nicole's email discusses three main themes. Firstly she talks about her ownership of her story and the fact that it contains a one-sided view and that makes her reluctant to put it out in case damage is caused to her ex husband. This is an example of the extreme lengths she is prepared to go to to protect a man who, even she argues, has inflicted an enormous amount of pain on her. This follows what I wrote in Chapter 3 about the different types of displacement. Nicole is displaying *himpathy* by privileging his 'right' to not be damaged by her testimony over her right to justice for what he has done to her. I felt compelled to include this email because it goes to the very heart of how the patriarchy operates.

Secondly, Nicole writes about the need to recognise in a formal way, what these women have suffered. In her testimony she spoke about consulting a therapist who had experience with women who had been married to gay men, as she wanted someone with this specific skill. It is hoped that increased awareness of the occurrence of mixed orientation marriages might assist therapists and other gateway mental health or relationship therapy providers to support spouses in this situation.

Thirdly, Nicole eloquently summarises a core finding of my research, which is trying to understand the relationship between how we see ourselves and how we tell our stories when we discover that we have been lied to about a fundamental aspect of our marriage. She expresses a need for coherence and cognitive harmony in the story that she tells about her life. She also re-asserts her support for gay men who come out, but wants to receive acknowledgement that they have caused enormous amounts of suffering, which is partly down to the cultural pressures that have been placed on both men and women. The pressure on gay men has been well-documented, but my research focuses on the harm that women have allowed themselves to suffer in the name of

²¹⁹ Email from 'Nicole', who gave permission for me to reproduce it here, but wishes to remain anonymous.

the fairy-tale of 'someday my prince will come' and thinking that being married is living 'happily ever after'. The stories documented here show that some women are still trapped by the idea that husbands' lives matter more than wives' lives and Nicole's email and her refusal to have her story archived at the British Library is a clear product of that culture.

I carry the burden of having heard Nicole's story in its entirety; listening to her cry, hearing about the trauma, and promising to keep her identity a secret. The consequence of this is that there is a man who has very little idea of the pain he has caused and there is a society that has been protected from bearing witness to his cruel acts. There is a woman who, through no fault of her own, is living with the fear of not being able to trust people, and the multiple traumas of discovering her husband is having sex with men in their bed, and having him lie to her about them.

Women's experience of counselling and psychotherapy varied but some of my participants drew my attention to the privileging of their husband's experience and needs over their own.

Olivia: And so a little while after that I went to my GP and and I went in and I think now my God, what a stu-, what was this GP thinking? Because I see myself then in a very different light to how I see myself now and I was surviving really. I was getting by each day just .. however way I could. So I walked in. I was exhausted I had what was a five-month-old baby four/five month old baby. I had a two-year-old who was displaying more and more strange signs [laughs] and I walked in and I said, I don't really know what to do. And I don't really know why I'm here, but I said I've my husband I found my husband has he's .. he's ringing gay chat lines and he's strange and he's left me and I don't really know what to do. And the GP said oh, well, has he been abroad and I said no. And he said, oh okay then, that's all right. He said I've got this phone number you could try and encourage him to ring this number. It's especially, it's a helpline. So if you give him this number, he'll he they can probably help him I said, oh, okay then and he sent me off on my way. [00:48:06] I got no visit from a health visitor or anybody which I think now I should have probably had.

[..]

I actually, I almost got going to complain about it because I felt what she had done was really unprofessional but actually in the end I just decided that was emotion that I didn't need to expend. But I think you know, it's true. You know, when I went to the sexual health clinic, you know, there's all sorts of leaflets that are you know, you confused, you know, are you bi-? Trans? The support's there but no one who said, Oh, well, we need to support you because your husband's been having sex with men. And actually when I discovered about Straight Partners, you know, I took their poster back to the clinic and said please, if you have people and your demand people are most likely to see the people in my position, please offer them support because it

was that feeling of [01:02:17] feeling abandoned and that sort of well, the supports' there for anyone who is coming out as gay and bi and trans, but what about everyone else?

Olivia's experience was corroborated by other participants - who did not feel seen or understood by the healthcare professionals they consulted.²²⁰

A type of displacement has occurred widely with my participants. They have often experienced little sympathy for their situation, whilst their husbands have been afforded widespread sympathy. The accuser portrays themselves as victimised. The accuser's 'defect' is her wanting to bring the injustice to light. 'If women can be condemned for protesting when they are unequivocally justified in doing so, then men, or at least elite men, are completely insulated - they simply cannot be in the wrong for harming women.'²²¹

CONCLUSION

Part of what this thesis has done, is to track my development as an oral historian. When I first decided to conduct this research, my expectations were that my writing would be predominantly about the way marriage and divorce are experienced by women who have been married to gay men. I would collect their stories, analyse their narratives, and write an analysis of lived experience as it was given to me. I would act as a receiver and disseminator of their reported lives. The oral history methodology was a means to an end.

However, the more women I recorded and the more stories I transcribed and edited, the more I came to realise that this is where my expertise resided. I had so many moments of discovery and excitement during this process of listening and editing. I began to read more scholarship from oral historians who were grappling with emotional and sensitive material. I discovered that many were in the same position as I found myself; concerned about safeguarding our narrators and

²²⁰ Jackie, Candy, Pauline, and Nicole

²²¹ Stark, *Gaslighting*, p. 229.

ourselves, surprised by the rawness that we were witnessing, and recognising that there was more work to be done; not only in collecting and processing stories like these, but in how we respond as scholars to everything that we find.

Becoming an oral historian is also about being mindful of what kinds of material would be most useful to future researchers and ensuring that these testimonies are captured and kept safe. It is therefore a two-fold enterprise; collaborating with informants and extracting their stories as well as analysing the resulting narratives and parsing them for a diverse audience.

The most powerful and interesting material comes from the transcripts themselves, however my approach and reactions to the women's testimonies directs our attention to uncovering emotions and attitudes not overtly expressed but revealed in the dynamic co-creation of these historical documents.

I have demonstrated how it is possible to attend to our own feelings as we hear the oral testimony and have them inform our response. I have shown how a researcher can engage with narrators who share her experience of a particular life event, and how, by looking at similar occurrences from their lives, more knowledge can be obtained about the history of emotions. The process of relistening to audio recordings and being mindful of one's own reactions as well as noticing how a story is told and which events are chosen, gives rise to an intimate account of women's lived experience. We also come to understand how these women make sense of their lives. Part of the aim of this research is to invoke feelings in the reader which draw attention to the lived experience of women who were married to gay men. This chapter included long extracts from some women's narratives because *their* words and *their* stories are important. The curation of these extracts was carefully considered. In presenting these longer transcripts, individual stories have been revealed but they are also representative of a universal story. This project was a collaboration with the participants and it demonstrates how it is possible to draw on concepts from psychotherapy and literary criticism to aid understanding of the interplay between oral history narrator and the oral

historian herself. I have shown that in some instances participants report a sense of healing from the act of telling their story to an empathetic listener, as suggested by recent scholarship.

Resonances between the participants and the interviewer have been confronted and processed. These feelings and effects have been amplified by remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic, the experience of which has been corroborated by researchers who have also had to work in isolation due to the lockdowns.

The material continues to challenge us to think about the complexity of human life that cannot be reduced to a progressive reading of history. The human life cycle that starts with a child growing into an adult and then having children of their own is played out regardless of the period of history in which it occurs. This project has attempted to unravel the interplay between intimate human relationships and the societal structures which impinge on them. It has then brought into the spotlight the lives of women who have experienced this interplay and have been affected in a way that historians might have overlooked. A possible follow-on project is to collect the life stories of adults whose parents divorced, which will further explore this interplay between domestic and public lives. However, it is also hoped that these recordings will continue to inform researchers and historians beyond this project.

CONCLUSION

The women in my research group were born between the years 1958 and 1988. In the UK, this was a period of dramatic change in how we experience gender, sexuality, marriage, and divorce. I have shown how some marriages have resisted the recent changes in gender role expectations and that traditional views about marriage have often persisted in this cohort. Since all the marriages in this research project have ended in divorce, I have also shown how the recent changes in cultural and legislative attitudes towards divorce have been experienced by women who were married to gay men. Modern attitudes to homosexuality and the availability of gay dating apps have arguably created an environment where women have discovered their husband's secret life and have had to confront their own expectations of marriage. Ideas of a pure relationship with intimacy and equality between the partners was challenged by the discovery of their husbands' closeted and secret sexuality.

This research shows how in recent decades marriage has remained an important part of a woman's status and identity and it demonstrates that while for some women, sex and sexuality defines their marital relationship, for others it is less important. We, in the twenty-first century, are going through a period of sexual freedom where there is no longer a stigma attached to being unmarried whilst having an active sex life. However, this is accompanied by a strong expectation of intimacy if people do choose to wed. Where sex was once impermissible outside of wedlock, marriage is deemed to be less justifiable if it does not include satisfying sex. Where sex is acknowledged to be a necessary part of human relationships, and fidelity is still expected, wives want their husbands to be sexually attracted to them. If this is not the case, and the husband comes out as gay, then she also must process the feelings of being lied to and betrayed alongside the feelings of unattractiveness. If a marrying couple keep secrets from each other, which later come to

light, the damage is amplified more than it would have been a hundred years ago, because of the way marriage is expected to consist of authenticity and honesty.²²²

Thanks to historians like Michael Roper, Tracey Loughran, Luisa Passerini, Carolyn Steedman, Barbara Taylor, and a host of others, emotions revealed themselves to be valuable tools which aided the research into meaning creation. Connections were made between the oral history testimony and scholarship on emotions, gaslighting, patriarchy, and historiography on marriage and divorce and sexuality.

Historians of standard marriages have not recorded the possibility of a difference in sexual preferences between couples and therefore this thesis adds to the scholarship both of non-standard marriages and the lived experience of divorce. It was found that these couples continue to expect the kinds of gendered roles that were thought to be confined to the past. Conducting oral history interviews during the pandemic corroborated some of the research that has begun to appear on this subject, particularly how interviewees seem more able to report traumatic experiences when interviewed virtually, and this has yielded more understanding of the dynamic between oral history interviewer and informant when traumatic memories are evoked.

The stories told to me will also be told to countless listeners, both academic and non-academic, who might access their recordings once archived with the British Library. It is important to note the obvious differences between psychotherapy and oral history interviewing, the former being private and the latter being public, from which it follows that the motivation of participants to contribute came from knowing that their stories would be added to the scholarship on women's lived experience. This knowledge then appeared to strengthen their resolve to share intimate stories about their marriages and divorces. As a feminist project, this demonstrates how being part of a collaborative effort leads to empowerment, because individual participants no longer feel alone.

²²² Langhamer, *The English in Love*, p. 42.

It was possible to derive knowledge about the circumstances in which the women lived; how they present their stories tells us about their position in history. A story of exasperation because a man is not looking after his children very often, tells us that the speaker lives in a time/society where men are starting to look after their children more often. A woman who tells the story of hiding from her father the fact that *as a teenager she read girly magazines*, is making a statement about how concepts of femininity are being disrupted. Therefore, listening to individual stories has produced a fruitful examination of the historic specificity of the period covered. As an oral historian, I have encouraged people to speak by offering them a non-judgmental space where they will be listened to and heard. As an historian, I have tuned in to the information *behind* the story to reveal the historical landscape in which events were enacted.

The thesis was organised into five chapters. Chapter 1 discussed the methodology and the hypothesis that I was going to research, namely that women's lived experience of marriage to a closeted gay man would provide evidence firstly of what it is like to be married in this period as well as what it is like to look back on one's marriage after finding out that your husband is gay. The ethical considerations and methodological decisions were explored and these explained how my conclusions were reached. The relationships between the participants was foregrounded so that we can understand the way their testimonies could be both representative of a historical phenomenon and also singularly distinct when matching them to the larger population of all women. The difficulties of representativeness were acknowledged and the chosen methodology was defended.

The second chapter explored women's attitudes to their bodies and their sexuality and how these concepts might have been negotiated within their marriages since they would have brought up vivid challenges. Since these women have been exposed to some dramatic changes in recent decades, they were in a unique position to reflect on how aspects of femininity, sexuality, and gender are negotiated in marriages spanning this period. Since earlier marriages lasted longer than more recent marriages, this could indicate that there have been disruptions to the stability of traditional roles within marriages in recent decades. Women spoke of their femininity in words

which echoed those of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler as being performed under the male gaze. They also demonstrated that the work of feminists to demystify the female body sexually is far from complete and that some women still lack confidence in knowing themselves intimately.

Chapters 3 and 4 followed the course of my participants' relationships from courtship through to marriage and finding out that their husband is gay, then on to their divorce and beyond. The narratives contain evidence of the persistence of ideas around gender-roles and sexuality as documented by historians of marriage from the mid- to late- twentieth century. Women spoke about being gaslighted and exploited and subjected to misogynistic treatment. These stories demand a critical response due to the phenomenon of recasting memories to confirm one's idea of selfhood whilst simultaneously taking into account the influence of other members of a support group introducing new terms into the vocabulary. These words enabled older women to identify with younger women and to speak about their experiences with new understanding. These effects masked generational differences, nevertheless there was evidence that newer marriages ended more quickly than older marriages. Obviously marriages contracted recently which are still ongoing may end in the future, and therefore we cannot draw specific conclusions about all newer marriages. We acknowledged that memories might change to fit the new information and how life events are recalled that serve one's narrative of hero or victim. It was shown that women who enter a second long-term relationship report difficulties with trust which adds to the scholarship on the pure relationship as well as the history of marriage and divorce. The changes in recent decades to the laws governing marriage and divorce and the ongoing secularisation of marriage means that couples are able to choose how they conduct a new long term relationship.

Chapter 5 explored the process of making oral history and looked at some long extracts from my recordings which showed how we recover ourselves during the narration of our story. It also discusses the effects on the interviewer of hearing distressing testimonies, particularly during the Covid Lockdown, where interviews were conducted remotely. This led to more intimate details being discussed as well as making it more difficult for me to process my own emotions in response

to emotionally powerful memories. The chapter gave examples of long extracts to demonstrate the way narratives are constructed to convey life experiences. The extracts chosen were from individual testimony but were representative of women's stories. The chapter engaged with the emerging scholarship around experiences of recording and listening to emotionally charged testimony. Scholarship around the overlaps between psychotherapy and oral history interviewing was acknowledged and we noted that some women mentioned positive feelings from giving their life stories. This outcome was identified as a by-product of the historiography.

As part of my work has been to make life story recordings in partnership with the British Library, I look forward to offering them for further research. One of the results of this archive is that family members, and particularly the children of my participants, may be curious to listen to these recordings. Several participants were mindful of this possibility, and because of the type of subject matter, they were at great pains to not mention too much detail. I want to stress that each recording is made in response to my research question and is not intended to be a comprehensive life story interview. Some of my participants chose to not archive their stories with the British Library at all. This project has been hugely rewarding and challenging and an enormous privilege for me personally, and, I believe to my participants as well, to whom I will remain forever grateful.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A.1 BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

	Year of Birth	Region	Religion	Date of Marriage	Date of Marriage breakdown
Nancy	1957	Woking	Unknown	26/08/1978	18/03/2014
Cheryl	1958	Bognor Regis	Practicing Christian	22/06/1996	01/01/2006
Pauline	1958	Milton Keynes	Practicing Christian	21/08/1982	17/03/2016
Alison	1958	Perth	Unknown	10/12/1988	07/07/2008
Jackie	1962	Sheffield	Non-religious	01/06/1994	Jun-20
Alex	1964	Usk	Non-religious	14/07/1990	08/02/2020
Ingrid	1965	Doncaster	Non-religious	23/03/1997	01/12/2018
Eleanor	1965	Eydon	Unknown	17/06/1989	16/02/2011
Wendy	1967	Durham	Atheist	20/08/1988	01/04/2017
Anna	1969	High Wycombe	Non-religious	14/09/2002	01/11/2017
Frankie	1969	Sheffield	unknown	24/02/2001	09/09/2011
Belinda	1970	Princes Risborough	Non-religious	12/10/1996	May-19
Candy	1970	Godalming	Unknown	21/08/1993	10/07/2016
Shirley	1971	Liverpool	Roman Catholic upbringing	18/09/1999	06/12/2019
Penny	1973	Warrington	non-practicing Christian	20/03/1999	28/12/2018
Olivia	1975	South Croydon	unknown	03/06/2000	Jun-06
Mandy	1975	Balsall Common	Unknown	21/03/1998	01/12/2009
Carrie	1979	Ashton-Under-Lyne	Unknown	09/06/2006	05/01/2018
Sharon	1981	Colchester	Non-religious	25/05/2013	07/07/2019
Patricia	1981	Leighton Buzzard	Licensed Lay Reader in the Church of England	10/07/2004	22/01/2011
Nicole	1985	Edinburgh	Christian upbringing	01/06/2009	01/06/2015
Elaine	1988	Belfast	Strict Catholic	13/04/2019	08/10/2019

INFORMATION SHEET

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Information Sheet

Oral Histories with Women who were married to Gay Men.

This study forms the basis of my PhD research in Contemporary History. I will be recording Oral History interviews with women who were married to gay men in order to document how they were affected by cultural attitudes to marriage, sexuality, and family in the late 20th Century. It is important that the historic record includes women's experiences in order to make them more visible in relation to the history of men coming out as gay in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The Oral History interview is designed to give you control over how you tell your story and what you say about yourself. You do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable; however, this is an opportunity to contribute to the production of knowledge about women's experience. I am particularly interested in your story and how you tell it. This project is about women and about how they feel about their sexuality, their experience as wives, and their experiences before, during, and after their marriage.

As a participant, you will be interviewed by Diana John ("the Interviewer"), the doctoral researcher in this project who has received specialist oral history training. In the interviews the key aim is to allow you to speak about your experiences, for as long as you wish. The interviewer will have a set of topic areas aimed to gently guide the direction of the interview and to ensure we cover relevant historical moments and themes. The pace will be entirely led by you. We envisage that the interviews will be between two and four hours in duration, but they can be longer or shorter, depending on your wishes. The recordings will take place at a time and in a place that is convenient for you. Please ensure that you are in quiet room. It is important that we are not disturbed during the interview to ensure that the recording is of a high quality.

The interviews will be recorded remotely on a digital recorder with professional standard microphones connected to the interviewer's phone. Video content will not be recorded, but the use of a video calling App such as WhatsApp will aid the interview by making both parties visible to each other and able to communicate non-verbally. You do not have to discuss anything you wish not to. Many people find telling their story interesting and are pleased to have had the opportunity to place their memories and experiences on record. However, some people may find remembering in this way difficult. The interviewer understands this and will be happy to take a break during the session if required. After the interview is complete, the audio recording will be summarised. A copy of this summary will be sent to you. The interview recordings will be deposited in The British Library where they will become part of the national collection cared for by the British Library and preserved as a permanent public reference resource for use in research, publication, education, lectures, broadcasting and the internet.

In order to collect and use your personal information as part of this research project, we must have a basis in law to do so. The basis that we are using is that the research is 'a task in the public interest'. As we will be collecting some data that is defined in the legislation as more sensitive (information about sex and relationships), we also need to let you know that we are applying an additional condition in law: that the use of your data is 'necessary for scientific or historical research purposes'.

Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

The interviewer will be placing a 3-year embargo on **all oral histories** conducted as a standard, to allow first access to material for research and publications, from the date they are deposited. If you wish to extend this (for all or part of interviews), you will have the opportunity to state this after the interview is done, before deposit, in the recording agreement. Any material used for research purposes by the Interviewer will be anonymized with a pseudonym (e.g. job title) agreed between the Interviewer and the Interviewee to ensure anonymity and data protection for PhD and publications (during or subsequently). In the Recording Agreement you will be asked to stipulate any access restrictions for public access at the British Library. The sound of the voice and the details within the recordings will likely make anonymisation impossible, so the British Library cannot agree to anonymise the interviews. Instead, an interviewee can close the recording to public access (all or in part) for a number of years. This should be discussed with the Interviewer and listed on the Recording Agreement. However, as all interviews will be deposited by October 2022, restricted access will apply until at least October 2025. After this date they will be opened to the public (**unless requested otherwise**) and will no longer be anonymous.

There are two parts to the permissions process for your interview:

1. Participation Agreement

This is signed by each participant *before the interview session takes place*.

This form captures your agreement for the project team to use the interview material for the project. It confirms that you have read this information sheet and understand what the project is about, the ways in which the interviews will be used, the interview questions and who to contact with any queries. It also shows that you have agreed to the collection, storage and processing of your personal data so that both the University of Sheffield and the British Library comply with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

The researcher will analyse the interviews, picking out key themes. Research generated may be used in the following ways:

- As transcribed extracts in doctoral thesis and external publications (e.g. journal articles, books)
- Clips and extracts may be used in films, podcasts, or exhibitions
- Scientific, historical and environment-focused lectures, workshops and research
- Other general conferences, broadcasts and publicity

The University of Sheffield and the British Library have in place processes to attempt to avoid the publication of the interview causing substantial damage or distress to any third parties mentioned in the interviews.

2. Recording Agreement

The Recording Agreement is signed *after the interview is complete* and it aims to specify the terms under which the recording will be archived and be accessed at the British Library. All material will be treated as confidential until a Recording Agreement has been completed.

It would be possible, for example, to request that part, or all, of the recording is closed to public access for a specific period of time. Any closed material is bound by a duty of confidentiality for the interviewer, research team and any curatorial staff who have access to the recording for preservation and cataloguing purposes.

Copyright for the recordings will be assigned solely to the Interviewer until deposited at the British Library, after which copyright will be assigned to the British Library.

Withdrawal

Your participation is voluntary and you will be free to withdraw from the project without giving any reason and without penalty. If you wish to withdraw, you simply need to notify the Interviewer (details given below). If any data have already been collected but have not yet been archived at the British Library, upon withdrawal, your data will be destroyed.

Once the recording is deposited at the British Library it cannot be deleted from the collection, but you can contact the Oral History Curators to discuss with them any necessary immediate amendments to the access conditions for your interview.

Thank you once again for agreeing to take part in the project.

Project contact details for further information:

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ORAL HISTORY PARTICIPATION AGREEMENT

The purpose of this form is to explain how the recorded interview which you agree to undertake with the University of Sheffield will be collected and processed by the University of Sheffield and then archived at the British Library. When you sign this form you are agreeing to take part in the interview and are allowing both the University of Sheffield and the British Library to store and make use of your personal data now and in the future in order to administer and archive your interview.

After your interview we will ask you to complete an Oral History Recording Agreement to sign-off the terms under which your interview may be used by the University of Sheffield, and under which it will be accessible at the British Library and through the British Library's online services.

Oral history at the British Library

The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom and one of the world's greatest research libraries. It provides world-class information services to the academic, business, research and scientific communities and offers unparalleled access to the world's largest and most comprehensive research collection. The Library's collection has developed over 250 years and exceeds 150 million separate items representing every age of written civilisation, among which the oral history recordings are considered vital to the Library's intention to preserve the nation's memory.

The British Library's oral history collection is one of the largest in the world and covers a huge range of topics encompassing diverse voices, from artists to steelworkers, doctors to postmen, Holocaust survivors to authors. The oral history section on the British Library's website has more information: www.bl.uk/oralhistory.

The collection to which you are contributing

You have been invited to take part in **Oral Histories with Women who were Married to Gay Men**, which seeks to document how women were affected by cultural attitudes to marriage, sexuality and family in the late 20th Century. It is important that the historic record includes women's experiences in order to make them more visible in relation to the history of men coming out as gay in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The project is being managed by Diana John of the History Department at the University of Sheffield as part of her doctoral research. The project is guided by a PhD supervisory team comprised of Professor Adrian Bingham, Dr Chris Mallard, and Dr Michelle Winslow.

Your personal data

Data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR] which came into effect on 25 May 2018, and its implementing legislation, the Data Protection Act 2018) has changed the way in which we inform you about how your personal data is stored and processed, and how you can get access to it.

For information about how the University of Sheffield will collect, process and use your personal data see the [University of Sheffield's Data Protection Policy](#)

For information about how the British Library will use your personal data you can review the BL's Privacy Policy at www.bl.uk/aboutus/terms/privacy/. Information contained within the interview itself will be processed in accordance with the BL's Collection Materials transparency notice at

www.bl.uk/aboutus/terms/privacy/Collection%20Materials/. The Oral History Section at the BL also follows the Oral History Society's best practice guidance on data protection (www.ohs.org.uk/advice/data-protection/)

What we will do with your personal data

The data contained within this form will be held securely and not shared with anyone, unless the University of Sheffield or the British Library is obliged to do so for legal purposes, such as evidencing ownership or demonstrating a valid Agreement.

For the duration of the oral history project, the project team will store, process and retain your personal data in order to pursue the project's aims, objectives and activities. All data generated (audio files, transcripts, summaries) will be kept securely on an offline storage medium and [audio files and summaries](#) will be deposited by October 2022 at the British Library for long-term archiving and public access. You can request a copy of the personal data the University of Sheffield hold about you at any time by contacting the lead researcher at dejohn1@sheffield.ac.uk.

After deposit at the British Library is complete, the University of Sheffield will delete all copies of data. All data stored at the University of Sheffield will be subject to the University of Sheffield's data protection policy and access will not be given to anyone outside of the project team. The interviewer will retain an encrypted copy of the recordings on her own password-protected computer for use in work arising from this project.

Once transferred to the British Library, the information contained within the interview itself will be made available (subject to your agreement) through the Library to researchers, academics and other members of the public who access oral history content. We will keep this data in perpetuity, so as to preserve the oral history of the United Kingdom and inform the research of future generations.

You can request that part, or all, of your interview is closed to public access for a specific period of time partial or complete closure of your interview to public access using the Oral History Recording Agreement which you will complete [after](#) your interview has been completed. You can request a copy of the personal data we hold about you at any time.

Your agreement to take part

This Agreement is made between the University of Sheffield and you ("the Interviewee", "I"):

Your name: _____

Your address: _____

Your email: _____

Declaration

I hereby agree to take part in an interview for **Oral Histories with Women who were Married to Gay Men**, which will be archived at the British Library and am fully aware that the content of this interview will be publicly available, subject to any closure or other restrictions that I might request when the interview has been completed.

By or on behalf of the Interviewee:

Signed: _____

Name in block capitals: _____ **Date:** _____

RECORDING AGREEMENT

The Department of History
University of Sheffield
Jessop West
1 Upper Hanover Street
Sheffield S3 7RA
dejohn1@sheffield.ac.uk



Oral History
The British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB
020 7412 74304
oralhistory@bl.uk

Oral History Recording Agreement

Recordings of oral histories are integral to the British Library's intention to preserve the nation's memory. Your recorded interview will become part of the national collection cared for by the British Library, where it will be preserved as a permanent public reference resource for use in research, publication, education, lectures, broadcasting and internet access. The purpose of this Agreement is to ensure that your contribution to **Oral History** is added to the collections of the British Library in strict accordance with your wishes.

This Agreement is made between Diana John ("the Interviewer"), The British Library Board, 96 Euston Road, London, NW1 2DB ("the Library") and you ("the Interviewee", "I"):

Your name: _____

Your address: _____

in regard to the recorded interview/s which took place on:

Date/s: _____

Declaration: I, the Interviewee confirm that I agreed to take part in the recording and hereby assign all copyright in my contribution for use in all and any media to the Interviewer. I understand that this will not affect my moral right to be identified as the 'performer' in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

If you wish to limit public access to all or part of your contribution for a period of years (beyond that stated in information sheet), please state these conditions here:

This Agreement will be governed by and construed in accordance with English law and the jurisdiction of the English courts.

All three parties shall, by signing below, indicate acceptance of the Agreement.

By or on behalf of the Interviewee:

Signed:

Name in block capitals: Date:

By the Interviewer:

Signed:

Name in block capitals: Date:

On behalf of The British Library Board:

Signed:

Name in block capitals: Date: