

## CONCLUSION

The curiosity I have is . . . how much of this does have an LGBT dimension and how much of it is what I would believe anyway if I was not gay. And I think somehow that the advantage being gay gave me – as a member of an out[sider] group, particularly in the times of emerging HIV – was that my generation had to be a bit more “on the ball” with these things. I have contemporaries who are straight who really have not thought about this sort of stuff and I would be really interested to know whether gay people generally, from this age group, are more sorted out about with plans and awareness than their more normative equivalents who can just muddle through and think, “Oh, it will all be all right”. (Wade, aged 66, England)

Emerging aspects of the data were how firstly the role of the family and secondly the idea of the ‘good death’ influenced participants’ end-of-life decisions and appointments in thinking about and preparing for death. In relation to family, it was notable that members of participants’ family of origin were often but not always the preferred choice in end-of-life decisions and appointments. And when musing on the sort of death that they hoped for, the idea of the good death often lay behind participants’ preference for a calm, quiet or easy death.

### THE ROLE OF FAMILY

Among the more unexpected findings from this study was that family members rather than friends were more often chosen as beneficiaries. While similar findings were reported in other published research on LGBT end-of-life decision-making,<sup>1</sup>

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1 See, for example: de Vries, B., et.al. (2020) ‘Advance Care Planning among older LGBT Canadians: Heteronormative Influences’ in *Sexualities*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460719896968>; Westwood, S. (2015) ‘Complicating Kinship and Inheritance: Older Lesbians’ and Gay Men’s Will-Writing in England in *Feminist Legal Studies*, 23: 181–197.

they were surprising for two reasons. In the first place, because of the assumed centrality of friendship in the family of choice,<sup>2</sup> a distinct preference for family members over friends suggested that the role of the chosen family was becoming less important in the lives of gays and lesbians. In its heyday, it represented a life experiment for gays and lesbians who wanted to live or try to live outside traditional family structures – and which the widespread introduction of marriage equality legislation could also make redundant. If the chosen family is becoming less common as this and other research suggest, it could be that as gay men age, the family of origin becomes more important to them and they have fewer qualms ‘returning to the nest’. Secondly, the privileging of family members seemed a slightly odd choice given that the common-law (or de facto) relationship was the most common relationship type and that almost a quarter regarded the couple relationship as their family.

Possible explanations for preferring family members over friends as beneficiaries included: (1) that choosing family members was the ‘easy’ option, that is, it required no special thought, was the standard, predictable choice and was unlikely to be challenged or questioned by family or friends; (2) even if more loosely connected or maintained, family relationships might be less likely than friendships to break up and could therefore appear to be a more dependable option, that is, in contrast to family relationships, friendships did not or were regarded as unlikely to last the ‘test of time’. Because both of these explanations are only speculative, further research would help test their validity.

Decisions concerning appointment of executors and power of attorney favoured the traditional as well and could be seen also as the ‘easy option’, that is, they required no special thought and avoided possible dispute or, on the other hand, simply reflected the enduring strength of the couple relationship. In the case of executor, the first choice was partner or spouse followed in equal number for each by family, professional persons, and friends. Slightly against the general trend of favouring family over friends was the fact that equal numbers chose friends for their executor as chose family and that each of these was only slightly less than those who chose partner or spouse. Of those who had a will and had appointed an attorney, just under half chose their partner or spouse and very small numbers chose a friend, professional person, or a niece or nephew.

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2 Weeks, J. (2000) *Making Sexual History*, Cambridge: Polity Press; Weston, K. (1997, 1991) *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press).

## GAY MEN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE 'GOOD DEATH'

Participants' beliefs about euthanasia and life after death were central to Chapter 4, while in Chapter 5 their funeral plans was the focus. As these chapters showed, a majority favoured euthanasia, a very small number believed in the afterlife, and almost all participants had some idea of the sort of funeral they wanted, if only about 40% had made funeral plans.

In Chapter 4, a possible connection was suggested between why a belief in an afterlife might help explain the views of those who opposed euthanasia, namely, that a belief in life after death went hand in hand with a belief in the sanctity of life and that this could therefore help to explain opposition to any form of the premature ending of life such as by euthanasia. This possible connection was not considered when the research project was being planned and the interview schedule written. Another possible connection was identified with afterlife beliefs and that was between them and funeral plans. My analysis showed that, while only a very small number of participants said that they believed in life after death, nearly all had views on the sort of funeral that they wanted, which might suggest that those who do not belong to an organization that offers rites to mark death could tend to spend more time considering it and certainly as their own death draws nearer.

The hope of being able to experience a 'good death' was often implicit when participants explained their advance-care arrangements or power-of-attorney appointments and gave their views on euthanasia. None specifically used the phrase, 'the good death' or expressed a hope for one; instead, they expressed a desire to avoid the opposite, that is, a drawn-out, painful or undignified death, which, as mentioned, Ariès called the 'dirty death'.<sup>3</sup> Important for many when considering their own death, were some of the following: bodily dignity by which they meant being able to communicate with other, to toilet themselves, and to avoid immobilization or incapacitation. Not living on in a 'vegetative' state was a frequently used phrase. These hopes often influenced their arguments in favour of euthanasia as did an awareness of how messy death could be, which many understood from the personal experience of witnessing the death of family members or friends, in the case of the latter, memories of friends' deaths during the AIDS epidemic were strong and still influential.

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3 Ariès, P. (1991) *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. H. Weaver (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 568–570.

Although less than half had made funeral plans, almost all participants had an idea of the sort of funeral that they would like for themselves. Notable among these was an absence of anything grand, grandiose or monumental, and, in Chapter 5, I speculated on the reason for this, drawing on the work of Thomas Laqueur who had observed in the burial plots of Jews and socialists in London's Highgate cemetery announcement of 'their presence and meaning by occupying space'. And I speculated if gays and lesbians might feel less willing to make a similar announcement because they are not part of the heteronormative structure. Being outside it, and understanding themselves to be outsiders, and with the exception of AIDS memorial cemeteries and gardens, do they feel less part of or less need to claim space for themselves and so announce their presence and meaning?

If there is any truth to this, will a stronger push to announce the presence and meaning of gays and lesbians increase along with their acceptance and the success of their normalization? Another less political explanation for the absence of grand funeral plans in the stories of the men interviewed for this book is that the sample might have comprised a group of relative unassuming participants who were content with their achievements, wishing for no fanfare or pomp to mark their end, and, as I wrote in Chapter 5, that their achievements in the spheres of the domestic and the intimate were sufficient.

In the quotation at the head of the chapter, 66-year-old Wade from England wondered if preparing for death had any special or particular relevance to gay men. As he observed, the AIDS epidemic not only marked his generation of gay men but gave them something of an advantage in that as young men they had to confront death when their friends were dying in the 1980s and 1990s and that this could have given them some remembered familiarity with the business of death. The trauma of the AIDS epidemic aside, the accounts provided in this book strongly suggest that concerns about the business of death are shared by gay and straight populations. As Laqueur argued, all of us find it very difficult to accept or believe that one day we will not be here,<sup>4</sup> and what this book has shown is that preparing for that time is not always easy.

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4 Laqueur, T.W. (2015) *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), pp. 55–58.

## REFERENCES

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