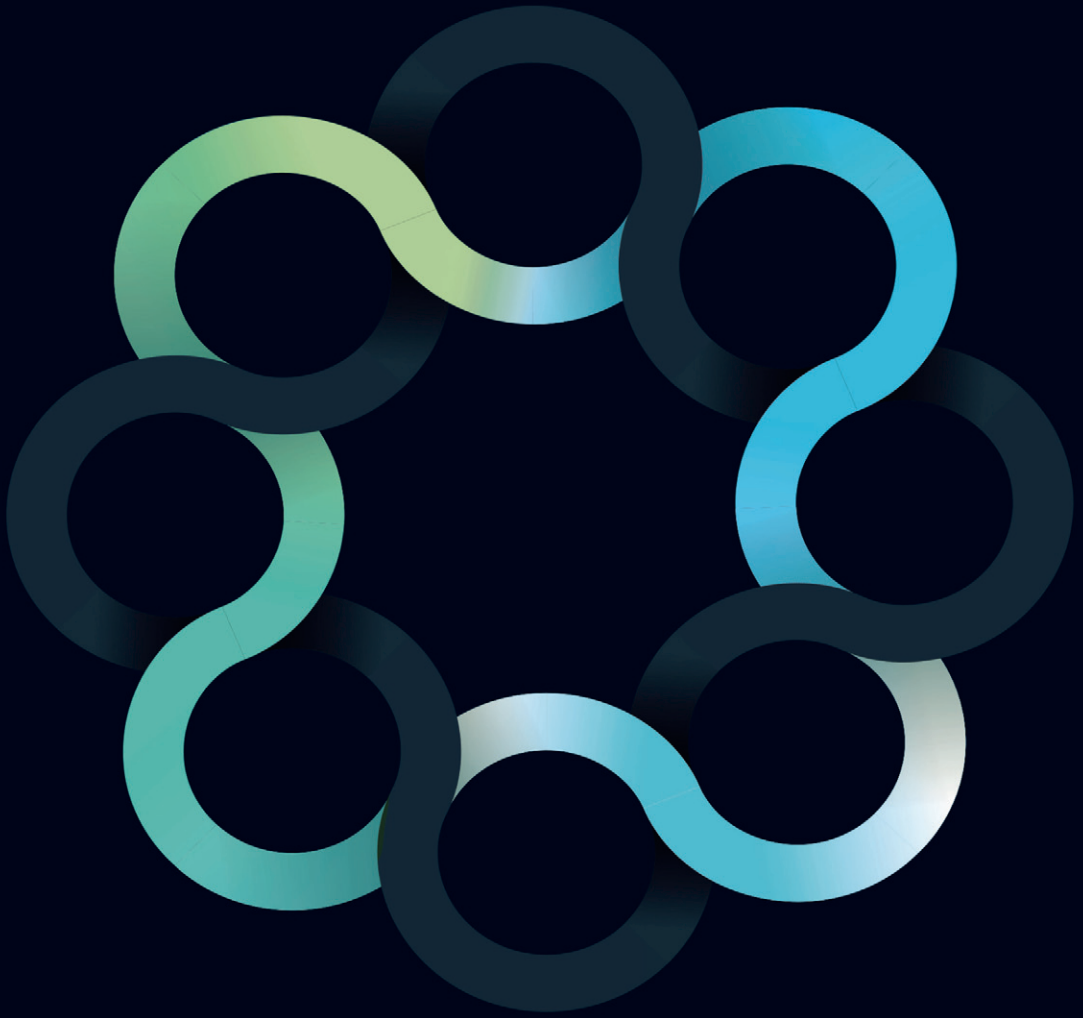


Glenys Caswell



TIME OF DEATH

A Sociological Exploration

Time of Death

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Time of Death: A Sociological Exploration

BY

GLENYS CASWELL

Independent Social Researcher, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To Alan for your care, support and belief during the writing of this book.

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List of Abbreviations

A&E	Accident & Emergency
AMRC	Academy of Medical Royal Colleges
APT	Anatomical Pathology Technologist
BCE	Before the Common Era
BMA	British Medical Association
CCTV	Closed Circuit Television
CE	Common Era
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NHS	National Health Service (UK)
ONS	Office for National Statistics (UK)
RSPB	Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
UK	United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization

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About the Author

Glenys Caswell is an independent death studies scholar and University of Nottingham associate. She is a sociologist by training and her area of research interest focuses on the social management of dying and death. She has researched and published on aspects of dying alone, time of death and Scottish funerals. This is her second book, the first being called *Dying Alone: Challenging Assumptions*, which was published in 2022.

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Preface

In 2017, I gave a paper at the 13th International Conference on the Social Context of Death, Dying and Bereavement, which took place at the University of Central Lancashire, in Preston in the north of England. The paper focused on the ways in which dying alone was represented in the media, and one person attending suggested that time would make an interesting lens through which to look at experiences and representations of dying alone. This seemed so obvious that I wondered how I could not have thought of it myself. It also prompted me to think about death and dying more broadly in terms of time. It also led me to think about the time when my mother died and to realise that although I knew she died in May 1999, I could not remember the date nor the time of day. And I also realised that it didn't matter. I remembered, instead, the overall experience which was one of a gathering of family. I searched the academic literature for research and thinking about time in relation to death. I found swathes of work on time, including in the social sciences, but not so much about time in relation to death. As someone who enjoys detective stories for the narrative tendency to tie up all the loose ends and restore order to a chaotic world, I began to look into how true to life fictional pathologists are when they state confidently when someone died. By following up on the ideas, theories and stories about time that I found, I fell down the proverbial rabbit hole and, realising that I had no idea what time actually is, I felt compelled to do some explorations of my own. This is the first outcome of that work.

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There are a number of people and organisations to whom I owe thanks, as I would not have been able to write this book without their different contributions. First, I would like to thank the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust for funding the research on which the book relies in constructing its argument. I would also like to say thank you to Katy Mathers and the team at Emerald for their supportive approach while I was writing the book. Most important of all, I want to say a sincere thank you to Home Office registered forensic pathologist, Dr Stuart Hamilton, and to all the people who took part in my research. I appreciate your generosity in sharing your knowledge, time and experiences with me, and I can truly say that without you there would have been no book. So thank you.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Agatha Christie's novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, was first published in 1926. In the book, Roger Ackroyd is a wealthy man who lives in a big house with members of his family as well as servants. In the story, he is murdered while in his study, and his body is left there while the murderer, Dr Sheppard, subverts time in an effort to escape detection. Dr Sheppard is the local general practitioner and he also has an interest in tinkering with contemporary technology, such as alarm clocks and recording devices. He makes a recording of Roger Ackroyd speaking on a dictaphone. Sheppard then kills Ackroyd, sets the recording to play at a certain time and leaves the body in the study where, he tells the butler as he leaves the house, Mr Ackroyd has said that he is not to be disturbed. Sheppard then goes home, and he arranges for a phone call to be made to his house later that day which makes it seem as if he has been summoned to Ackroyd's home, in his capacity as doctor. This means that he is on hand when the corpse is discovered and he is able to hide the dictaphone in his medical bag, before anyone else can see it. Dr Sheppard has established for himself an alibi, for witnesses who were in the house can attest that they know Roger Ackroyd was alive after the murderer left the house because they heard him speaking. The murderer appeared to be getting away with his crime but, unfortunately for him, Christie's Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, had moved into the village when he retired and he was able to solve the murder when the local police force could not (Christie, 1926/2007).

Sheppard subverts time, for no one can be in two places at one time, but Poirot reasserts time and reveals what Sheppard has done (Sandberg, 2022). A century later, Sheppard's actions still make sense to readers. Detective stories continue to be popular, in the form of novels, stage plays, films and television programmes. They often hinge upon the alibis which suspects have, or appear to have, at the time when the murder is believed to have been committed. The technologies involved might be different, but 21st century fictional murderers may also attempt to subvert time in an effort to escape punishment, and consumers of such literature understand the requirements of the genre.

The expectation for readers of fictional murders is that the time at which the victim is murdered will become clear, even if at first it is obscure. The work of the forensic scientists and the pathologist will combine to elucidate the details of how

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and when the killing took place; that is, the time of death will be described with a date on the calendar and a time on the clock. But this is fiction and, generally speaking, readers and viewers expect a tidy resolution to the case, suggesting that perhaps sometimes the world can be a place where justice prevails and loose ends tie together nicely.

However, in the world where we live our daily lives things are often messy and confused, and time of death as a concept is no exception. This book, therefore, tells a mystery story about the time of death and, unlike most fictional murder mysteries, there is no clear answer at the end. Instead, the book argues that time of death is not the straightforward concept we might assume. Time is embedded in our individual and collective consciousness, as the operation of 21st century society depends upon timing and synchronisation. We know what time is and how it works, even if we are unable to define what it is. And death is similar. We know that every living creature must die, even if we dislike thinking about it, and we know this applies to humans, too. We know what death means, we understand that the person is no longer with us and will not be coming back, we have been to their funeral and escorted them on the start of their final journey. So time of death must mean the moment when a person ceases to exist. But when does an individual cease to exist? Is that the moment when their body stops functioning, the moment when they cease to have social relevance or when we stop thinking about them and taking them into account in our lives? Or is it some other, completely different, time?

Core Argument

The central argument of this book is that time of death is a social construction, and one which is context dependent. It will explore whether it is possible to identify and record the date and time of an individual's death using the calendar and clock. Throughout the book, the question, 'when is the time of death?' is asked, suggesting that it is necessary to understand the context within which the question is being asked to be able to give a meaningful answer. The answer will vary according to the particular set of circumstances within which the individual responding to the query is situated. For example, if the question is asked of bereaved people whose close person has died in 21st century United Kingdom, the response is likely to be different from that given by a medical professional whose responsibility it is to either verify or certify a death.

Time is a concept which individuals and groups use to organise their experiences as they go through their lives, and this includes the period when they must engage with experiences of dying, death and bereavement. Every human goes through two deaths, which are the death of their body and their social death. Each death is a process, not a one off, momentary event. This complicates the way in which a time of death can be assigned, raising questions about what point in the process of dying should be assigned a time and how that time should be constituted.

The time of death concept seems to be straightforward when we speak of it, but the book will show that this is far from accurate. How people in a social setting think about the time of death as a concept is dependent upon their perceptions of both time and death. While different societies have differing views on these issues, time of death is important to individuals. Years of birth and death are commonly recorded on gravestones, while obituaries regularly include dates of birth and death, as well as age at death. The time of some deaths shock many people and reverberate down the decades, such as that of the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King who was shot dead at a time recorded as 6:05 p.m. on Thursday, 4 April 1968.¹ The impact which Dr King's death had, and the memorability of when he died, comes from the significance of the role which he played in the American civil rights movement and what an important figure he was internationally, both during his lifetime and today. We recall, perhaps, the time of death of people who are important to us when we have close emotional and personal ties to them, and we may also do so when the significance of the individual is at one remove and we have never met the deceased person. Historically, family, friends and kin attended the deathbed of a dying person as witness to this significant moment and this practice continues into the 21st century (Caswell et al., 2022).

There is much about the time of death which requires investigation. The taken for granted understandings that we have of time, that it is what is shown upon the clock face and the notion that time is something which flows unidirectionally from the past and into the future, require challenge. The idea that time does not always behave in an expected manner, given the regularity of clocks and calendars, is acknowledged by all competent users of time, yet the ways in which individuals experience the passage of time when they, or someone about whom they care, is dying have been little researched. The ways in which time and death link together, particularly in relation to time of death, is an under explored field of enquiry for social scientists. This book is intended to make a contribution to that field of endeavour.

Conceptual Background

People are surrounded by death. The leaves on deciduous trees turn brown in the autumn and fall from the tree, annual plants die at the end of their growing season and cut flowers begin the process of dying once they are removed from the parent plant. This is all part of the natural order and it does not appear to trouble humans very much. Even in the animal kingdom death is a familiar sight. Animals are killed for meat in many human diets and cuts of meat are put on view in butcher's shops and supermarkets. Foxes, badgers and hedgehogs can be seen dead at the side of the road, having fallen prey to motor vehicles, our cats sometimes bring us the birds and mice that they kill as presents, and we have to

¹Stanford University, Martin Luther King Jr Research Institute, 'Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr'. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/assassination-martin-luther-king-jr>

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deal with the deaths of our children's treasured pet rabbit, hamster or goldfish. The deaths of other people are also a staple of the media and entertainment industries, with news reports about wars and murders alongside a wide variety of cultural representations of both fictional and non-fictional deaths (Caswell, 2020).

The fact of death in the abstract is familiar to anyone who is at all observant of the world around them, but it is doubtful whether this knowledge is transferred to people's own particular situations. We do know that we must die, if we allow ourselves to acknowledge this, but fear of death may act as preventive mechanism and stop us considering our own mortality and eventual death (Menzies & Menzies, 2021).

What is regarded in any social setting as an appropriate time and manner of dying is dependent upon context. In the United Kingdom, for example, historically it was children who experienced a high mortality rate and they frequently died from an infectious disease (Doig, 2022). Overall, life expectancy in previous centuries was shorter than it is in the 21st century and people tended to become ill and die in the home where they lived, cared for by family members. Much has changed, so that today when children and young people die we say that they have been taken too soon, for it is older people who are most represented among the annual death statistics. In 2021, for example, in England and Wales, 852 deaths of children aged between one and 15 years were registered, representing a mortality rate of 8 deaths per 100,000 of population (Office for National Statistics, 2023). This is within a context where approximately 90% of all deaths take place among people aged 60 and over (Office for National Statistics, 2014).

Life expectancy in the United Kingdom, as in other privileged societies, is much extended, especially for the more affluent members of society. In contrast, it is estimated that approximately 741 homeless people died in England and Wales during 2021. For homeless men, the average age at death was 45.4 years and for women it was 43.2 years (Office for National Statistics, 2022a). This compares unfavourably with the age at death of the general population, which is about 74 for men and 80 for women, so being homeless takes over 30 years off a person's life expectancy (Webb et al., 2020). The most common causes of death have also changed and individuals in the United Kingdom are more likely to die from cancer, cardiac or respiratory disease in the 21st century than they are to die from an infectious disease (Ritchie et al., 2019).²

Proverbially speaking, death has been described as the 'great leveller' for, as in James Shirley's poem, *Death the Leveller*, everyone must die whether they are a prince or a pauper.³ That is true, of course, but only in the sense that death is inevitable for everyone. It is in the when and the how that inequalities in life become inequalities in death, as can be observed with the reduced life expectancy of people experiencing homelessness (Salisbury, 2022).

²This does not take deaths from COVID-19 into account during the period of the global pandemic which began in 2020, when greater numbers of people than usual died from an infectious disease. For information on the numbers of people who have died globally see the WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard: <https://covid19.who.int/> For UK figures on deaths from COVID-19 see: <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/deaths>

³[Bartleby.com](https://www.bartleby.com/101/288.html), James Shirley, 1596–1666, *Death the Leveller*: <https://www.bartleby.com/101/288.html>

Everyone, however, has to deal with the fact that they will die, whether they are in a privileged position or not, for ignore it as they wish, ultimately death will catch up with them when the time comes for their personal appointment in Samarra (Maugham, 1933/2017). It is also the case that along the way in their life they will need to deal with the deaths of other people. Some of the people they will not know personally, but some they will, perhaps as acquaintances or colleagues, and there will be others who die to whom they are close and whose deaths will leave them feeling bereft.

The lives of all living creatures are bounded by time, they have a beginning and an end, however long or short their lifespan may be. Time in the global north⁴ is conceived as being linear, running from the past, through the present and into the future, but other ways of perceiving the passage of time are possible. For example, some cultures see time as being cyclical, which resonates with the turn of the seasons and the ways in which the dead bodies of plants and animals return to the earth through decomposition (Baggini, 2018). Death comes for an individual human when they reach the end of their life as an embodied person. It only seems possible to make sense of one's own death and the deaths of other humans by reference to time. This, however, leads to questions about the nature of time, whether it exists and what it is or might be. Time is embedded not only in human dying and death but also in our living and lives. Take a moment before you read on to think about how you would define time, and whether you are like theologian and philosopher St. Augustine of Hippo, who wrote that he knew what time was until he tried to explain it to someone else (Hernandez, 2016).

The very familiarity and everydayness of time make it seem obvious and uncomplicated, yet there is a long history of thinkers grappling with time, its nature, questions about its existence and how to measure it. From the days of Ancient Greece onwards, physicists, astronomers, philosophers, social scientists, creative writers, scholars of religion and humanities and more have all addressed different aspects of time and temporality (Clark, 2023; de Jong, 2007).

Humans use time as a means of organising their life experiences, relating them to each other in a more or less coherent story (Sacks, 2015). The use of chronology, placing events in the temporal order in which they occurred, is for some a useful way of trying to make sense of events which appear confusing. Putting together a timeline or telling a story from the beginning through to the end can be helpful, as some things simply do not make sense if they are not in the correct chronological order. Take, for example, the famous comedy sketch by Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise, first shown on British television in 1971. In it the world famous conductor, André Previn, joined them to conduct the orchestra playing Grieg's piano concerto in A minor. Eric Morecambe was to be the solo pianist, and the sketch was intended to be funny, but the piano playing sounded wrong. This led to queries from Previn and the riposte from Morecambe that, 'I'm playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right

⁴The terms global south and global north are used here as shorthand ways of referring to countries which have lesser or greater access to the world's resources. The choice to use such terminology is not straightforward and is not intended to imply any form of judgement. See Horner and Carmody (2020) for a discussion of some of the issues involved.

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order'. As comedy it made sense, because both the audience in the studio and those watching on television at home knew that for music to be comprehensible all the notes must be in the right order, and these notes were definitely not in the right order.⁵ Life events often only seem to make sense when they are experienced and placed in the right temporal order, just like the notes of Grieg's piano concerto.

Time is important, too, in the context of people's understanding of their own lives. One theory suggests that individuals construct a narrative of their lives, telling themselves their own story which situates them within their personal and social context, and which uses their memories of the past to anchor them in the present. The belief is that this story defines the person (Sacks, 2015). The universality of this theory is not without its challengers, however (Strawson, 2015), although it does highlight that people live with, in and through time and that they lack choice in the matter, for it is difficult to remove time from our lives. Time is not just the backdrop to human lives but a constituent factor and an agent in the production of social life (Bastion et al., 2020).

Despite the difficulty in defining what time is, in their daily lives people know how it works. They understand how to use clocks and calendars and all that is involved in scheduling activities of all kinds. They also understand that there are occasions when it will seem to them as if time is not moving in its usual linear fashion but is passing more slowly or swiftly than normal. Given the ubiquity of time and its embeddedness in human lives, it is impossible to remove it from experiences of dying and death because they are part of the life and living of which time is a key constituent.

The Research Studies

The core argument of the book, that the time of death is a social construction which is contextually dependent, will be presented and supported using three different kinds of evidence. First, a wide range of literature will be drawn upon from differing academic disciplines, as well as from outside the academy. This will mainly focus on what is directly relevant and already known, as it aids discussion of the topic. Second, data from an interview with a forensic pathologist will be drawn on. This interview was conducted outside a formal research project and with the specific intention of informing the writing of this book. The third form of data come from two research studies and these are introduced here.

Study 1: Exploring Social Understandings of Time of Death

This was a qualitative research study, funded by the British Academy, which ran between November 2019 and March 2021. Its focus was specifically on the concept of

⁵Graham McCann, 2020, Comedy Chronicles, The Prelude of Mr Preview: How André Previn won over Morecambe & Wise: https://www.comedy.co.uk/features/comedy_chronicles/andre-previn-prelude-preview/

Clip from the show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMPEUcVyJsc>

the time of death. The aim of the study was to explore how bereaved people and professionals working in relevant spheres experienced and understood the time of death. The original intention had been to conduct face to face interviews with participants, but by the time ethical approval was received from the University of Nottingham Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee COVID-19 restrictions were in place. Interviews were therefore carried out either online or by phone, whichever the participant preferred. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data and these were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist to aid analysis. Analysis was carried out with NVivo© as a data management tool and using the constant comparative approach in order to ground the findings in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Bereaved participants were sought by advertising in a free monthly newsletter which was delivered to all homes in one postcode area; if anyone was interested in taking part or in learning more they could contact the researcher direct. Twenty people got in touch to enquire about the project, resulting in 17 interviews with bereaved individuals. Five professionals took part in interviews, recruited through social media or through an organisation with which they were involved. Further information about participants will be found in Chapters 5 and 6. In the text, professionals are referred to by their job role, and bereaved participants have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

Overview of Findings

Time as it is measured by the clock still existed for the bereaved participants, but it moved differently. Some participants were not at all aware of time, while others felt its difference for they were outside normal time parameters. Time was effectively suspended in an expanded present (Baraitser, 2017). The moment of dying is important, and most participants wished to be with their dying person at that moment and to be aware of it. This dying moment, however, was within and was part of the expanded present, which was made up of the period when their person was dying, the time at which they died and the immediate aftermath of the death, before their future began without the embodied presence of their person. Time was suspended for participants not so much in the sense that it stopped passing as they all knew that time continued to run, just as they all knew that their person had died; but for a period, time ceased to have relevance or importance.

Professionals working with people who are dying and with the bodies of those who have died experienced time in a different way from those who had been bereaved. For professionals, there tended to be responsibilities which had time implications and required them to pay attention to clock time. For example, the palliative care nurse was aware of guidelines outlining time limits within which the deaths of her patients should be verified and certified. The funeral director also had temporal responsibilities, including the need to embalm bodies as soon as possible after death, in an effort to delay the effects of decomposition so that families could view the body of their person.

Study 2: Exploring the Social Management of Lone Deaths

This was a study which ran between 2018 and 2020 in England and Wales, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Findings from this study and full details of the methods involved have been reported elsewhere (Caswell, 2022). The study used a range of methods, including the compilation of case studies, documentary analysis, interviews and observations. For this book, only one component of the research is drawn upon, and that is the set of 10 case studies that were established (Yin, 2009). These case studies were of people who lived alone, and then died while alone at home and whose bodies were undiscovered for an extended period of time which ranged from a couple of days to several years. The compilation of each case study began with the coroner's file on the death. When someone dies in England and Wales and there is doubt as to the identity of the person or the cause of death, or there is the possibility of third party involvement in their death, then it must be reported to the coroner who will oversee the enquiry if they deem one to be necessary (Dorries, 2014). In the case of deaths when a person dies alone at home in the way described here, the police will examine the home to ensure that there has been no one else involved in the death and there will be a post-mortem examination to exclude the possibility of homicide. The coroner's file thus includes police reports, post-mortem reports and witness statements, a report from the person's general practitioner, as well as the coroner's own report of the findings and the outcome.

This file was the starting point for exploring the circumstances in which the person lived and died. Other documents were added to the case, such as media coverage when there was any. Efforts were made to talk to somebody who had known the person, and a sister, a brother and a friend of three different individuals were interviewed. An interview was also carried out with a police officer who had been first on the scene in one of the cases. Data from some of the case studies will be referenced, particularly in Chapter 5.

As with study 1, ethical approval was given by the University of Nottingham Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences ethics committee. There were, however, particular ethical issues at play in this research project. The most resonant here is that the individuals who formed the subjects of the 10 case studies were all dead before the research began, so that there was no possibility of them consenting to participation. The ways in which they lived and died were such that making individuals identifiable in any publications could lead to the criticism of their life choices, assumptions being made about them and attention being drawn to them as individuals when they had lived private lives (Turner & Caswell, 2020). The decision was thus made to protect individuals' identities through the use of pseudonyms and by changing minor details without altering their story (Caswell & Turner, 2020).

Outline of the Book

There are a further 7 chapters in the book which, collectively, will put forward and support the book's argument as it has been outlined here. To begin to make