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## Developing inclusive later life learning environments: insights from intersectional analysis of ageing and lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual identities

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### Abstract

*To date there has been minimal empirical inquiry on what may constitute inclusive learning environments for older (50+ years) lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) adults. This paper draws upon a recent life-histories study with older LGBT adults in Scotland to consider how such environments can be developed. To do so, intersectional analysis is applied to interrogate how participants' lived realities and sense of self are enabled and constrained by the interactions between their diverse ageing, LGBT and other identities in the particular contexts of later life, post work. The paper argues that by adopting this approach to intersectional analysis, critical educational gerontology (CEG) is equipped to more effectively realise inclusive, meaningful and potentially empowering learning environments for older LGBT adults. These will be more attuned to their later life realities, enabling them to reflect on the changing significance of being LGBT as they age, while allowing potential for personal growth and renewed sense of self.*

**Keywords:** age and sexuality; critical educational gerontology; intersectionality; later life learning

### Introduction

... the other word I used was man and I mean that is different from all the others because I have not had to engage with the issue of gender in the way that I have done about, sexuality, disability or age, you know. I mean this is a world for men. And I know that I benefit from that. You know there are things that I can do that women in my situation would find more difficult to do. I have become more aware of that over the years, that, it is, it is, like a privilege, eh being a man Yes, and it's also like ... middle class. Because that is something else that I am as well. And so being a middle class man is definitely, you know eases life a great deal.

(Andrew, b. 1945)



Intersectionality provides a standpoint with which to interrogate the processes of identity construction from which we can gain insight into the inter-defining, conflicting and mutually constitutive nature of multiple identity categories and how they are subjectively experienced (Dean, 2010; Taylor, 2010). In making sense of how his identity has developed to this stage in his life, Andrew draws upon intersectional analyses. His reflections are taken from a recent study with older LGBT adults in Scotland from which this paper will draw further examples. As indicated here and more fully elaborated in his narrative, Andrew's sense of self has developed through his navigation of the combined impact of becoming gay, older and disabled. He recognises that because of how they intersect with his gender and class identities, he occupies a privileged social position.

Andrew's reflections provide an opening example that responds to current critiques of the intersectional study of sexuality that will be further considered and applied in the context of education for older adults. The main concerns relate to the need for empirically substantiated exploration of intersectionality as lived reality, shaped by the complex, nuanced ways in which sexuality, inter- and disconnects with other identity categories, not just as constraining, but also enabling of privilege across time and space (Adams, 2016; Cronin & King, 2010; Taylor, 2010). That Andrew has 'engaged' with these aspects of his identity and their interaction reflects another productive use of intersectionality: it avoids the risk of creating a descriptive list of separate social categories and instead analyses the ways multiple social identities interact in different contexts over time (Few-Demo, Humble, Curran & Lloyd, 2016). I propose that in these ways, intersectional analyses have possibilities for understanding how later life learning environments can be better developed for older (50+ years) LGBT adults through being more responsive to the processes involved in the construction of their multiple identity formations and lived experiences.

In its application of intersectionality to consider the particular relationships between ageing and LGBT identities, this paper is also timely. It seeks to address the absence to date in adult and lifelong learning research in Scotland that has focused on older LGBT adults. This is particularly important in the context of contemporary Scotland. There has been an intensive period of unprecedented socio-legal change that has sought to extend social justice and equalities to LGBT adults in Scotland (Equalities Network, 2015). However, several national surveys in recent years report that older LGBT adults feel vulnerable and express higher levels of anxiety than heterosexual peers: they fear discrimination, increased social isolation, reduced independence and exclusion from older adult community groups, compounded by concerns that health and social care agencies will have limited understanding of issues related to sexual orientation and ageing (Equalities Network, 2015a; Scottish Government, 2016; Stonewall, 2011). However Pugh (2002) and Stonewall (2014) provide alternative understanding of older lesbian and gay men's potentially more positive adjustment to the ageing process and later life. This confounds some of the stereotypes of and assumptions made about older lesbian women and gay men's lives. Rather than being inhibitive, the repression encountered in their youth and painful coming out processes in their early adult lives can lead to a so-called crisis competence or an individual stamina. This raises important questions about the particular role and character of critically orientated education for older LGBT adults: how it can address such concerns and counter discrimination, in balance with harnessing the resilience and richly diverse life experience older LGBT adults may have had. In particular it invites a rethink of critical educational gerontology (CEG) and how its use of intersectionality can be extended to inform more inclusive and potentially empowering later life learning for older LGBT adults.

The paper firstly considers the possibilities of intersectionality as an analytical tool for CEG. This explores how the empowering later life learning environments CEG envisions can be more purposefully attuned to and be inclusive of older LGBT adults through intersectional interrogation of their identity formations and lived experiences. The study's interview design, participant recruitment issues and use of an abductive strategy for data analysis are then considered. I also reflect on how I addressed the ethical implications of my insider researcher positioning as an older gay man and developed relationships that sought to eliminate any potential power imbalance between myself, and the participants. The analysis section then applies intersectional interrogation to explore how the study participants understand, express and navigate multiple identities in the context of later life and the particular constraints and advantages they experience in doing so. The value of this picture is then considered in the extent to which it can effectively guide CEG to develop later life learning environments more inclusive of older LGBT adults' complex and intersecting lived realities. While the paper partly considers the experiences of transgendered and bisexual women, the discussion is largely drawn from the narratives of participants who identified as lesbian (n.13) and gay (n. 16).

### **The possibilities of intersectional analysis**

Intersectionality as theory and political practice draws attention to the multiple nature of individual identities and experience of social inequality as shaped by mutually constitutive categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, age and (dis)ability (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016; Nash, 2008). In this frame we are therefore not defined solely by sexuality or social class or ethnicity, but by how these and other aspects of identity uniquely interact; how they are 'routed through each other or [are] mutually constitutive' (Monro, 2015, p.59). Intersectionality therefore focuses on understanding how a 'minority status' related to being LGBT can be managed when we have identity formations in which other minority and majority statuses interact (Köllen, 2015). In short, discussion of sexuality cannot be narrowed down to it alone; rather, how it inter-relates with other aspects of identities is key to greater understanding of the processes of identity construction (Taylor, 2005).

Current debates on the more productive use of intersectionality demand a shift from overly abstract theorisation to a refocus on how it manifests as concrete lived reality and experiences across time and space (Taylor, 2009, 2010). It is further argued that for sexuality, intersectional interrogation focuses on how it is '...really lived' in relation to class, ethnicity and age, as the "sexual advances, limitations, intersectional negotiations and negotiations [that] feature in everyday lives, beyond the abstract academic page" (Taylor, 2010, p.4). As Weston (2010) further demonstrates in interviews with lesbians, intersectional interrogation reveals how different aspects of identity have greater significance in different contexts, are in conflict and ever-shifting. Ultimately she argues that: "Class, age, gender, and such come together not only in the doing, but in the perceiving. They can be separated in thought but seldom disentangled in practice". (Weston, 2010, p.36)

These views on the possibilities of intersectionality thus represent an important analytical dimension within which to interpret the inter-relating nature of the ageing, LGBT and other identities older adults construct, significant in the context of later life. However in the context of CEG as theory and practice, and in the later life learning environments it promotes, it can be argued that its use of intersectionality in these productive ways is limited. This is compounded by its minimal focus on older LGBT

adults' experience. The following discussion therefore proposes that by extending its application of intersectionality to engage with, and build a picture of how older adults' ageing, LGBT and other identities interact and shape their everyday experience, CEG can be better placed to develop inclusive and responsive later life learning environments.

### **Purposefully extending CEG's use of intersectionality**

The modes, purposes and impact of later life learning are the subject of on-going enquiry from the evolving perspectives of CEG. CEG is concerned with development of educational and learning practices that can lead to the empowerment and emancipation of older adults (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Formosa, 2011). CEG has been shaped by, and builds on, developments in critical social gerontology for better understanding of the nature of ageing in social contexts and how social justice can be attained for older adults (Bernard & Scharf, 2007; Findsen, 2005; Formosa & Higgs, 2013; Holstein & Minkler, 2007; Phillipson 1998, 2000, 2006; Tulle, 2004; Withnall, 2010). Critical social gerontologists challenge the normative ideals of successful ageing which dominate ageing discourses to uncover the nature of oppression and inequality experienced by older people (Holstein & Minkler, 2007). Drawing on such analysis, CEG challenges the overly optimistic view of retirement and moving into later life, through analyses of the impact of socio-economic disadvantage that can lead older adults to have differential experience, mediated by class, gender and ethnicity (Phillipson, 2006). These are understood through political-economic, feminist and humanistic lenses which claim successful ageing is attainable but dependent on class positioning and material well-being (Holstein & Minkler, 2007).

Intersectional analysis is therefore foundational to CEG, focusing on the interconnectedness of age, class, gender and ethnicity and how they mediate differential experience. This mirrors patterns in wider critical educational research and practice which has made longstanding use of intersectional perspectives (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). This recognises that to understand the complexity of the self, intersectionality prevents elevating one aspect of social division at the expense of others. For example, a single, isolated focus on class oppression over that resulting from heteronormativity and homophobia can omit analysis of their inter-connectedness and the ways they shape everyday life and human experience (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008).

However, albeit that it can powerfully expose the nature and impact of ageism in the context of adult learning, CEG can be seen to employ a limited use of intersectionality which leads it to neglect potentially deeper understanding of the nature of older LGBT adults' later life realities as shaped by the intersections of ageing, LGBT and other identities. This has parallels in social gerontology. In terms of understanding their interconnectedness, Cronin (2006) argues that heteronormative thinking and assumptions in social gerontology have contributed to a marginalisation of and limited insight into the experiences and complex identities of older LGBT adults. Warner (1993, p. xxvi) first conceptualised the notion of heteronormativity as an analytical category through which the operation of power in social relations can be understood. Heteronormativity operates the 'regime of the normal', through which heterosexuality is privileged and dominates as the natural, obligatory, inevitable and normal basis of all social relations and in which sexualities are valued and devalued (Adam, 2002). In Sumara and Davis' (1999, p. 202) terms: 'Living within heteronormative culture means learning to "see" straight, to "read" straight, to "think" straight.' do Mar Castro Varela, Dhawan and Engel (2011) analyse heteronormativity as a category of critical social analysis and how it might be resisted.

They expose the difficult, diffuse, ever-changing and slippery nature of heteronormativity that defies singular explanation. As Ruffolo (2009, p. 2) contends, heteronormativity and exposure of the power relations it seeks to preserve have ‘monumentally framed the ways in which we think about how subjects are subjected to the normative discourses of heterosexuality’.

The ways in which CEG could support a heteronormative reading of learning and educational practice therefore demands critical attention. Without a widening of its scope to consider older LGBT adults and the experiential aspects of intersectionality, it risks overlooking the socio-cultural heterogeneity of ageing and the nature of how older age and sexual diversity interact and feature in everyday life. This in turn risks an uncritical acceptance of the dominance of a heteronormative presence and a queer absence in CEG that Cronin (2006) argues is pervasive and reductive of wider ageing diversity studies.

In how it might develop inclusive later life learning environments attuned to the self-knowledge older LGBT adults accumulate over their lives, CEG is also overlooking intersectional interrogation that usefully positions marginalised subjects with complex identities as having an ‘epistemic advantage’ (Nash, 2008, p.3 ). Through this individuals produce valuable insights on, and knowledge of, lived experiences shaped by the interactions of class, race, gender and sexuality (ibid.). Thus in extending its use of intersectionality to consider the lived intersections of ageing, LGBT and other identities, alert to this epistemic advantage, CEG has possibilities for developing more responsive later life learning environments.

The possibilities afforded by intersectional interrogation of identity and lived experience for CEG is also based on current understandings of older adults’ motivations and outcomes for engagement in later life learning, specifically where it has a positive impact for sustaining their self-identities (Withnall, 2010). In relation to identity, Formosa (2014) adds that later life learning is far from being the simple acquisition of ‘commodities such as skills, knowledge or understanding’ but should provide ‘retirees with the opportunity to undergo a continuous process of personal construction and reconstruction’ (2014, p. 12). In coming to understand and openly express their sexual orientation, through and/or against other identity formations, older LGBT adults have faced and navigated particular forms of institutionalised religious, moral and social opprobrium in Scotland and further afield (Cant, 2008; Meek, 2015). Consequently it is proposed that if later life learning environments are to encourage change and growth in older LGBT adults’ self-identities, CEG can benefit from intersectional perspectives on ageing and sexuality, allowing it to challenge past and present “heterosexualising discourses and heteronormative ways of being, believing, desiring, acting, becoming and belonging” (Grace & Hill, 2004, p. 177).

### **Methodological issues**

For the purposes of exploring the complex relationships between ageing and sexuality across the life course, first person oral narratives were recorded in semi-structured, in-depth interviews and discussion groups. These encouraged the recounting of significant experiences and events that were transcribed into text form. Having such extended biographical and life history narratives provided opportunities for intersectional analysis that could focus on ‘the creativity, complexity, and variability of individuals’ (or groups’) self and reality constructions’ (Chase, 2008, p. 84).

The life histories and biographical focus very consciously aligned with the study’s adoption of a critical educational research paradigm. This meant that:

- Learners' stories were privileged given their capacity to provide substantive narrative material that captures rich, complex and competing versions of reality, lived experience and learning in diverse settings;
- Through an abductive approach to analysis, biographical narratives on experience were brought into critical, productive conversation with existing theory, informed by a fundamental principle of critical theory as a process of on-going critique in which: "the claims of any theory must be confronted with the distinction between the world it examines and portrays, and the world as it actually exists" (Giroux, 2009, p. 27).

Adoption of the abductive strategy raised a series of challenges for me in the process of analysing the data set. I went through a number of iterations in which I struggled to maintain the balance demanded by abductive practice: theory and empirical data should be interpreted in light of each other, with the primacy given to theory is subject to close scrutiny so as to avoid imposition of overly rigid interpretive boundaries on biographical and life histories narratives (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; Anyon, 2008). In the earlier stages of data analysis the latter was the case. This in effect stifled the data, and closed down opportunities for a more fluid, open-ended and productive analysis that could allow themes to emerge more organically and that could analyse the complex intersectional relationships between ageing and LGBT identities. This impeded attainment of the 'critical holism' of abduction (Anyon, 2008, p. 21). I was trying to map an overly technical, unwieldy framework onto the narratives that imposed a pre-configured shape and structure. I moved from a fragmented analytical approach in which the main research variables were artificially separated out and disconnected, to one in which their interplay could be more fully drawn out. I did so by arranging and breaking down the participants' narratives into a simpler chronological ordering of childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, midlife, post work and later life. In each life stage I then brought together extracts of how participants articulated their identities. I then considered these narratives more closely, focusing on family, schooling, workplace and formal educational contexts in terms of on how they positioned participants and influenced their identity construction over the life course. This allowed for abductive processes of analysis in which the interpretive power of theory could be both demonstrated and challenged by the narratives.

### *Participant recruitment*

I anticipated and sought to address several, limiting methodological dilemmas in participant recruitment. One of these was in relation to the implications for access and research design in trying to reach those older LGBT adults who may represent a 'hidden community' that can be: "social groups...difficult to access for the purpose of social research; where issues regarding access, emotions, power and the politics of representation ... [are] ... particularly posed" (Ashe, Fraser & Piacentini, 2009, p. 3).

The reasons for being a hard-to-reach research constituency are thus complex. I assumed that for older LGBT adults in particular, whose life histories and biographies may have been shaped by oppressive socio-historical circumstances, they would wish their sexual identity to remain invisible for fear of further discrimination. Consequently, as in previous studies, the research relied in part, on self-selection (Heaphy, Yip & Thompson, 2004). However, to balance this and extend the possibilities for reaching a wider, possibly hidden population and to be sensitive to the complexities of why older LGBT adults choose to hide their sexuality, purposive and snowballing sampling was

used. Once I had completed 10 interviews I sought participants' permission to use some of their comments for an advert promoting the project that I then sent to a range of LGBT organisations. This led to recruitment of several more participants. I also visited the majority of organisations in person to meet with co-ordinators, volunteers and group members to discuss the project with them. Snowball sampling within these informal networks proved the most effective means of recruiting other participants to the study, enabling access to accessing and interviews with 21 individuals, and a discussion group with 9 members of Highland Rainbow Folk. It would be difficult to maintain the view that, of the 21 individuals recruited, any one of them was hidden or reluctant to participate as a consequence of the factors above. For those participants finally interviewed, the ways in which they have led or are currently leading hidden lives may confound expectations and challenges assumptions of what a hidden community may be. Vulnerability and fearfulness were explicitly and understandably characteristic of the maintenance of a hidden life at different points in the life course of many participants. However, different levels of agentic action, choice, creative self-preservation and insightful negotiation of complex and multiple forms of homophobia and heteronormativity became evident. Overall a more nuanced and complex picture emerged that captured open and hidden lives as created within, and inhabiting marginal, but not necessarily constraining 'different worlds' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 68).

#### *Reflections on being an insider researcher*

The study demanded careful consideration of ethical issues that arose in the discussions with participants, particularly in light of my insider researcher positioning as an older gay male. For Sikes and Potts (2008, p. 5), insider research holds radical promise to 'make things better'. It has capacity to challenge assumptions, in this case about the nature of being LGBT and becoming older. However, this carries ethical risks for the researcher who may become over identified with the particular research issues and participants' experiences of them. This was a difficult balancing act because I am gay. However I took the approach that inevitably the study was shaped by my experiences, interests and commitment to equal rights for LGBT people. I was therefore prepared and sufficiently self-aware that participants' personal stories, particularly of homophobia and discrimination, would have an emotional impact on me and on them. Fontana and Frey (2008) argue that this is inevitable in qualitative fieldwork and my approach to this was to be as honest as possible with participants about my interest in the study and to double check emerging themes to ensure that it emerged from the data rather a preconceived idea or personal opinion.

As much as possible I also wanted to create a welcoming and conducive setting that eliminated any potential power imbalance between myself, and the participants. Over the two-year process of data collection, I reflected on the importance of my subjective positioning as a gay, middle-aged insider researcher and what this meant for the nature of the inter-subjective processes that were played out between myself and LGBT participants in our discussions. I was sensitive to how subjectivities might be produced in the particular context of the research relationship with LGBT participants, as well as in their wider past and present lives. In my attempts to create a setting in which open, friendly and free-flowing conversations could take place poststructuralist perspectives were informative, particularly the focus on the impact of different contexts on how subjectivities can be produced. Subjectivity signifies how adults:



... understand and identify themselves in relation to multiple contexts in which they are positioned and position themselves. The production of subjectivity is always an interactive, inconsistent and unstable process interlaced with and mediated by social, emotional, cultural, textual and discursive practices and relations. (Burke, 2008, p. 202)

Viewed in this way, it was important to create a research context in which participants were enabled to talk openly about their sexual identities and did not feel inhibited. This was particularly significant given the discussions with many of the participants, in which we explored how we had witnessed at first hand, experienced and learned from the destructive effects of homophobic attitudes and violence. For myself, and participants, alienation and marginality were perpetrated to differing extremes in changing educational environments in Scotland and in wider life, at a range of points across the lifespan. At the same time, I shared with participants the impact of learning from engagement in protest and celebration, with varying degrees of participation. These have resulted in an increased sense of individual agency, collective power and progress towards greater understanding of becoming LGBT. Overall, such discussions demanded an ethics of care on my part and the creation of a productive balance in the researcher-participant relationship in which our experiences and knowledge as LGBT adults could be understood as equally valid. I was able to explore sensitively and openly questions raised by previous research: of the complexities of asserting 'gay rights' and the claims we make about the centrality of our sexualities to our identities; of the on-going struggle to problematise and identify experiences of what it is for us to feel equal, authentic, included and open.

## Analysis

### *The changing intersectional nature of ageing, LGBT and other identities, post work and in later life*

I begin with exploration of how participants understood the intersections of their ageing LGBT identities in the contexts of post work and in later life. Participants attached varying levels of significance to being LGBT, mediated by becoming older and the heterogeneous contexts and multiple realities of their later lives. Andrew's comments on ageing are representative of several other participants who articulated an acceptance of growing older, partly based on having faced adversity and challenges regarding their sexual identities.

So I think I accept that I am getting older and I think partly that it is possible to do that because of things I have had to accept in the past, particularly accepting that I am gay, which wasn't easy, sort of in the 70s, accepting that I had a disability in the mid-80s. So when comes to actually getting on a bit in my 50s and 60s and so on, this is just kind of something that really I have to get on with. (Andrew, b. 1945)

As noted earlier, crisis competence or an individual stamina may be developed at the intersections of ageing and LGBT identities (Pugh, 2002). While it may not be defined as crisis competence, it is the case that across the biographies of those participants who are now post work, and in later life, diverse and cumulative experiences directly linked to their development of diverse LGBT identities have led to a resilience and self-belief:

I think I am quite a resilient person now and quite secure in myself. Well you would hope so wouldn't you – [laughter] It's been a long journey. I think on that basis you probably are better prepared, particularly as a woman. I mean I look at other people around me, heterosexual women of around about my age, women in the pottery class and so on, and I

wonder, they don't really have a strategy. You see that they want things or whatever. But they sit and say I don't want to make a fuss and I'll wait and I'll wait. I am not used to be in milieu where that would be the case... So yes I think being gay does make you more aware and more able to respond to [ageism] and have a strategy inside your head so that okay I am not going to be pigeon holed ... I am going to nicely assert myself to get what I came here to get. So yes I think that would be true that I am better at dealing with it [ageing] (Mary, b. 1954)

At the same time Mary does express some concerns about ageing as a lesbian. These parallel those comments expressed by participants when they were in childhood and adolescence about the absence of role models of lesbian and gay people:

I suppose I do see some difficulties in that when you are younger you see yourself as being kind of radical and it's a bit cool and whatever you know. At least it became that in your peer group. And when you are older it doesn't seem to fit so comfortably. And you think oh I don't want to be some kind of stereotyped old lesbian! [Laughter]. I don't think there are many positive role models of older lesbians. I am struggling to think of any there are. And there are lots of stereotypes of the older lesbian. So I guess I maybe have some issues with that...

Kevin (b. 1965) has a confident and hopeful view of later life and from his experiences a trust in LGBT people's inventiveness for creating new role models and ways of being older:

I think that part of what we do is define, we're defining all the time. You know we are the first generation that are living in this liberated time when we can marry, but actually what are our role models for gay marriage? Well there are actually no very many so you to seek them out somewhere or you just invent. And I think a lot of being gay is about inventing, you know and I think that is really exciting and liberating.

Other participants' perspectives on and experiences of getting older and being LGBT reflect a less optimistic view and predict a loss of identity. Some focused on the continued significance of being LGBT and there not being care and educational provisions which are inclusive of and sensitive to their distinctive needs: "I kind of think God,... we [LGBT people] have survived and grown up through so much to get to where we are now, but that whole bit about care and support I am not filled with confidence." (Stewart, b. 1958).

Others reflected a more pragmatic approach and asserted that their sexual orientation will not have continued prominence. Rather questions of identity are much less focused on being LGBT and concerns about getting older are shared with those common across all groups (Stonewall, 2011):

... the older you get the more disempowered you get anyway. Will that be different for LGBT folk? Possibly, possibly not. Fewer folk having children means you are the mercy of public services which isn't a cause for optimism. Do you actually think that the people who run these places actually have a view of older people having a sexual orientation full stop of any description? ... So I don't know. But do you know what I think the biggest thing that is going to determine how it is going to be is how healthy you can stay. Yes it might be something to do with your sexual orientation but probably not, probably not. (Jean, b. 1965)

These compare with findings from research conducted by Stonewall (2011) that surveyed a sample of 1,050 heterosexual and 1,036 lesbian, gay and bisexual people over the age of 55 across Britain. The survey asked about their experiences and expectations of getting older and examined their personal support structures, family connections and living

arrangements. It also asked about how they felt about getting older, the help they expect to need, and what they would like to be available from health and social care services. Results indicated that LGBT people shared many worries about ageing with heterosexual peers. However responses further indicated that they were consistently more anxious about future care needs, independence and mobility, health including mental health and housing. The report thus has implications for questions of understanding identity development and adjustment to the ageing process for older LGBT adults, suggesting continued, enriching identity development and its full and free expression would be dramatically diminished or thwarted. Of particular relevance to identity in later life, half of the Stonewall participants felt their sexual orientation has, or will have, a negative effect on getting older: ‘many have experienced discrimination earlier in their lives – at work, from families or from authority figures – and this leaves them doubtful about the future’ (Stonewall, 2011, p. 2).

*Becoming older and LGBT: a basis for productive ageing?*

Other participants articulated possibilities for productive ageing in becoming older and being LGBT. Educational researchers and gerontologists have promoted the third age (50 years+) as an important life-stage, characterised by retirement that brings freedom from work responsibilities, with new opportunities for learning (Phillipson, 1998). Learning in this frame is largely viewed as contributing to active, productive and successful ageing (Duay & Bryan, 2006). The participants’ biographies build a bigger picture of the particular realities and forms of successful and productive ageing as mediated by LGBT identity and its intersections with becoming older.

Questions of what may constitute productive or successful ageing emerged in discussions with Highland Rainbow Folk (HRF). HRF is an independent group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender volunteers, working to raise awareness of issues facing older LGBT people in the North of Scotland. They give presentations to health and social care staff, and to older people’s groups. One of the members, Tina, refers to older retired adults with whom she works as volunteers who commonly express concerns that without work they now “cease to contribute”. Edward (b. 1931) a volunteer in HRF, spoke of the difficulties of retirement as related to boredom and a sense of displacement after a life time of working in the hotel trade. However he feels that his involvement in HRF “keeps him going”. Overall HRF has provided Edward a purpose for a number of recent years. He is particularly engaged as one of the main ‘story tellers’ in the awareness-raising sessions the group conduct across the Highlands with health and social care providers on LGBT issues. He explained:

I am proud of being a member, it has been great for opening out to the gay community and for the old aged like myself. ... the Rainbow group it can help people to come out, the people that’s in it, even if they are older and be honest about it...

In his retirement then, Edward, as with many other members of this group, engages in an enthusiastically productive form of ageing in which his gay identity still energises and gives him purpose and which he is keen to talk about through the story-telling model HRF adopts.

June (b.1954) questions her self-identity now in the early stages of retirement from full-time work that has heavily defined who she has been: “... who would I be, what would I be?” Several participants who have reached this stage of the life course ask similar questions concerning post work identities. Much of ‘who’ June had been to this

point in her life had been constructed through working as a nurse over a 40-year period, latterly as a Nurse Practitioner with significant responsibility for patient health and wellbeing. Entering into the post work phase of her life initially raised unsettling questions about getting older and her identity. However she reflects an increasing sense of ease and prospects for engagement in the forms of active and healthy ageing as promoted by proponents of an emancipated and creative third age:

I think retiral will help with that because [a] I am going to get more physically active because I have the time to it now and I'll just start to do the things that I enjoy ... we have got in the seat outside in the garden. 'Grow old with me the best is yet to be'. ... sometimes we sit there and I think I am coming to terms with that [a] I am getting older and [b] I am not defined by my professional life any more. It maybe take a wee while longer to get there but it is coming quite easily I have to say...

However this point has come after struggling with fears about the reality of ageing and becoming "a fat frumpy old woman". However, again there is positivity where she has come to recognise that she is now: "... going to have learn how to describe [herself] again... The retired bit is good as now I am actually thinking I can start learning things that I didn't have time to learn before."

Part of this positivity and changing view on what will replace her professional identity and lead to a productive retirement is influenced by June's changing sense of being lesbian. Her involvement in the Loud and Proud Gay Choir has re-politicised her, 'reawakening the feminist streak' that had become less important as she "nested" building a career and home in the previous 20 years or so.

Mary recounts similar difficulties in relation to what she describes as the "strange business" of retirement. This was from a very "stressful and pressurised" job as a local authority Educational Adviser that dominated her life and from which she needed "recovery time... a shell that was dropping away from me, in terms of the stress and realising how many layers of stress that were on me". While she recognises the fortunate position in which she now finds herself, it has been nonetheless daunting to be "completely free to define my life in a way that I have never had before... [to] have define your life a lot more". She has come to a point when she is thinking about how she can be productive. She describes a long, sometimes fulfilling, sometimes extremely challenging career fighting for greater educational equality in schools. She has also had to learn, step by step, experientially and reflectively how to be a lesbian in interaction with being a mother. Her work and life experiences directly influence her view on how she could now be productive and what possibilities for continued learning exist. Though she had not decided on the specific direction of this, Mary sees her sexuality as playing a guiding role:

... if I could find something that was identified with my sexuality as well as other aspects of what I was interested in doing and contributing to, both things, then that would be great. But I haven't found anything like that so far.... But I am coming back to a point now where I would like to have some involvement. It's definitely around equalities issues for me. I don't really think I don't know where I would go with it to be honest.

Experiences of retirement and views on the intersections between ageing and transgender identities also arose: "It [getting older] is like cheeses. Some are mellow, some are mature, some are extra mature, some are seriously strong and some are rancid! *Laughter*"

Vera's (b.1938) humorous comment on ageing came from a lively group discussion with members of HRF that considered how becoming older impacted on our LGBT identities. Vera has experienced retirement in wholly positive ways. She refers enthusiastically to the improved quality of life she now has: "just having the time to

yourself just to do things, to choose where to go, when to go, without having to get permission”, particularly where, for her, a pension (“it’s brilliant”) and other older age concessions have brought a new freedom with greater material security than she has had in her previous life. She had a particularly unsettled twenty-year period leading to retirement of low paid, temporary work. Vera’s humour also belies the difficult experiences over her life she had encountered in becoming a transgendered woman. She could only make the transition from living as a man when she was 60 years of age. As such, she provides a unique, subversive portrayal of retirement that paradoxically, accords with the optimistic vision of the third age. However its proponents have contributed to a homogenous and hetero-normalising picture of successful later life.

I am transgendered. It happened very much later in life because when I was young there was no public knowledge about it because when I was young all I knew about it was that I hated being a boy and wished I’d been born a girl. I never got the chance to be who I wanted to be. I made my first attempt at transition when I was around 40 but it was that much hassle and trouble then that I lost my bottle, gave up and spent the next 15 years wishing I had been able to go through with it and then finally deciding that if I ever make another attempt I am going to have to try and get accepted... never had the money of trying to go private, so I just turned 60 when I finally got as far as the op. And the op that was 13 years ago and I have never looked back since...

Vera’s later life transition to finally becoming a woman thus destabilises heteronormative notions of what retirement should entail. However, in a similar way to Edward, HRF has provided another source for Vera to engage in particular forms of productive and active ageing because she is a transgendered woman with an important life story to impart. Her contribution to HRF’s activities is commented on as particularly significant by other members of the group: she tells her story through a profoundly “moving and very comical” poem which is a really important part of the presentation they do for health and social care providers on LGBT issues. For Vera, her sense of actively and productively contributing to HRF is strengthened as she has “learned that it’s not just a social group it’s a campaigning group”, through which she can creatively and openly share her lived, transgendered experience, while still challenging misinterpretations and prejudice in constructive ways:

... a lot of people outside the LGBT community just generally are totally unaware about all the sort of restrictions that we were under in times past, before there was a more liberal attitude in society.

From her research on appropriate methodologies for older adult learning Gaskell (1999, p. 273) identifies the need to harness the positive aspects of ageing: ‘the ability to develop a critical reflectivity that can comprehend stability within change,’ from the perspective of ‘a long and unique life’. I would suggest that intersectional analysis of Vera, and the other participants’ biographies provide insight on how they have harnessed critical reflectivity and found stability in unique forms of productive and successful ageing, born out of their development of diverse LGBT identities. The uniqueness of participants’ lives as a consequence of being LGBT may also account for the ways in which they are resilient.

#### *Intersectional analysis: a developmental tool for CEG?*

This use of intersectional interrogation to understand the nature and lived realities of participants’ ageing and LGBT identities begins the construction of ‘a complex map of

sexual identifications ... as they (dis) connect across time and place, reconstituted through, against and in relation to class, disability... to name but a few focal points' (Taylor, 2011, p. 4). I suggest that such a map can effectively underpin the development of more inclusive and responsive sites of CEG and later life learning for older LGBT participants. This was illustrated in the learning opportunities afforded the study's participants in groups like HRF, an LGBT life-histories group and an older gay men's project in Glasgow. In these contexts there is an explicit focus on the intersections of being LGBT and ageing, that positively altered participants' understanding of their own and others, older LGBT identity formations.

From the group discussion with HRF it was immediately evident that it provides a sustaining social network for older LGBT adults in which they have space to explore the complexities, concerns and opportunities related to their ageing and LGBT identities. Such intersectional exploration is encouraged through adoption of a storytelling approach which Helen (b. 1950s) explained as: "monologues... [they are] presented to healthcare professionals and social workers and produce resources to try and raise awareness". Helen is one of the six presenters who tells her story. She feels "we have been lucky enough to have two transgendered people". The story telling approach, though in monologue form, is also dialogical as Helen's and other participants' stories of gay, lesbian and transgender experience are interwoven, and seek to bring legislation and policy into real life contexts:

...we provide snippets of our own stories. Some of them are funny, some of them are quite heart rending so we try to mix it and quite a lot of legislation. They follow in and out of each from light to a bit heavy and legislation to whatever is appropriate.

Helen's story has learning at the centre of it and she very much emphasises that HRF provides her with "hugely rich learning". This is informed by intersectional perspectives, particularly because of their exploration of the "mixture of LGBT" and what brings them together in terms of experience, but also allowing them to share what is unique to others:

The thing that has been amazing for me in the learning is the mixture of LGBT. Because as a bisexual person, I used to think, nobody wants to listen to me about being bisexual because it doesn't exist as far as just everybody is concerned.

Tina explained the underlying ethos and principles that have informed HRF's approach. There is an in-built openness to constantly review and develop the sessions they deliver "we do have questions throughout the sessions and we are learning as we go along". For Tina their work,

... is not about being aggressively out. It's about, and this is why I like the work of HRF, because we don't assume that anybody's homophobic or bi phobic or trans phobic. We just are thinking there is just not enough information out there and people are wanting to understand. So if we do it in that nice soft gentle way that's the way we'll change attitudes. In my opinion we don't change attitudes by banging people over the head. And telling them they are wrong. We change attitudes by trying to help people understand where we are coming from.

Tina further explained that they were always adamant from its inception that HRF was always going to be inclusive and enable as full understanding as possible to the intersectional nature of diverse "LGB and T" and ageing identities. This was underpinned by choice and "really open dialogue" and awareness that some transgendered groups feel they would not gain from LGB input. However HRF has ensured people could get involved and from an intersectional standpoint allow exploration of what "were similar

issues around growing older, discrimination and past experiences of discrimination”. For Tina intersectional exploration of the lived realities of ageing and being LGBT opens up dialogue from which they can raise awareness and interact with diverse constituencies of health and social care professionals in meaningful ways.

### Conclusion and future research directions for empowering CEG

This paper shows that by employing productive forms of intersectional interrogation that focus on the lived realities of ageing and LGBT identities, CEG can construct meaningful and inclusive later life learning environments with older LGBT adults. In particular, CEG can learn from older LGBT adults’ articulation of their intersecting LGBT and ageing identities that reveals particular sources of social identification that are rich and diverse, and afford possibilities for building their personal and social agency. The promise of such intersectional perspectives as one means with which to develop more responsive CEG can be seen in several community groups in Scotland. They seek to redress discrimination through their utilisation of intersectional perspectives as a centrally organising concept and principle. These organisations also have an educational focus, particularly attentive to understanding the lived realities and intersectional experiences of complex LGBT identity formations and how they interconnect with other aspects of identity related to race and disability (Cowen, Stella, Magahy, Strauss & Morton, 2011; Equalities Network, 2015). They therefore also respond to current theoretical deliberations, and calls for empirical research and on-the-ground developments that open up understanding of the lived realities of intersectional identities and the complex needs these may create for individuals and groups (Taylor, 2010). HRF represent one such group who have been able to do so. It has created strong and meaningful coalitions between lesbians, gay men, transgendered, transitioning and bisexual women. It engenders a self-reflexivity in participants, affording them new insights into what it means for them personally and collectively, to be LGBT, as mediated by becoming older, in more meaningful and inclusive learning environments.

In terms of future research directions, this study points to the potential of a longitudinal, intersectional study that engages with a wider range of providers of education for older LGBT adults in the UK and Europe. This could explore in more in-depth and purposeful ways what may constitute empowering CEG, particularly the pedagogic practices through which older LGBT adults are enabled to counter ever-shifting forms of heteronormativity as well as strengthen their participative voice to contribute to evolving social and legal reform.

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