

Executive Summary

Introduction

1. This thesis explored how ageing, gender and sexuality intersect to influence equality in later life, in relation to older lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals and non-labelling individuals in same-gender relationships (LGBN). It comprised an analysis of UK law and social policy ('regulatory context') and empirical research which involved interviews with 60 older LGBN individuals in the UK and 20 activists working in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia.

Regulatory Context

2. UK law and social policy was analysed in two ways: that which related to older people was analysed in terms of sexuality/sexual identity and that which related to sexuality/sexual identity was analysed in terms of older age. A four-tier relationship recognition system was identified, with the conjugal couple, nuclear, and extended family at the top (i.e. most often recognised, rewarded, and regulated), and friendship at the bottom (i.e. least often recognised, rewarded, and regulated). The design of health and social care policy and provision for older people did not take into account the needs of older LGBN individuals.

Findings

3. Findings related to: ageing lives; ageing kinship; anticipated care needs; and activism.

3.1. Ageing lives

- 3.1.1. In order to capture the diversity of older LGBN individuals' experiences, a new cohort model was proposed. This sought to capture how participants described their sexualities/sexual identities and also where they fitted into the participants' lifecourse. The cohort are: 'Out Early'; 'Breaking Out'; 'Finding Out'; 'Late Performance'; 'Lesbian by Choice.' A further cluster ('Voices on the Margins') was also identified, which refers to those voices of non-participants partially heard through the narratives of the participants.
 - Cohort One, 'Out Early', comprises lesbians and gay men who use an 'I always knew I was lesbian/gay' identity-based narrative and describe always having had exclusively same-gender sexual relationships.
 - Cohort Two, 'Breaking Out', comprises lesbians and gay men who use an 'I always knew I was lesbian/gay' identity-based narrative involving an initial awareness of, and struggle with, same-gender desires, before eventually reaching a resolution.
 - Cohort Three, 'Finding Out', involves narratives about a retrospective, realised, lesbian, gay or bisexual identity, discovered - post-heterosexual identification and performance - through same-gender sexual performance.
 - Cohort Four, 'Late Performance,' involves the accounts of individuals (five women aged between 64 and 69) who have identified and performed as heterosexual for the majority of their lives and

then, in later life, have formed same-gender sexual relationships. They either do not identify as lesbian/bisexual/gay, locating their sexualities in depoliticised performative discourse (e.g. 'I am just in love with my best friend'), and/or are ambivalent about mobilising a sexual identity discourse.

- Cohort Five, 'Lesbian by Choice,' involved the narratives of women who had chosen to 'give up' men and assume a lesbian identity in pursuit of their radical feminist goals of resistance to patriarchy.
- 'Voices on the Margins.' This category is not a cohort as such, describing, as it does, absent or only partially glimpsed experiences of non-participants whose hidden lives are alluded to in participants' narratives. This includes: older married men who engaged in sexual relationships with the gay men participants; older LGBN friends of participants who are concealing their sexual identities/sexualities in sheltered housing and/or care accommodation; and those women living lives of compulsory heterosexuality, who might,

3.1.2. The women participants had more complex, plural, fluid, and varied stories about their sexual identity/sexuality performance and these stories were much more relational, i.e. based as a response to significant intimacies in their lives. The men's sexuality stories were much more central to a sense of a core, unchanging, sexuality. While ageing was experienced in the context of sexuality for the men participants, it was understood by women participants to be a matter of both gender *and* sexuality.

3.1.3. There was a strong theme among all participants of a sense of cultural devaluation and invisibilisation associated with ageing, especially among single women.

3.2. Ageing kinship

3.2.1. Individuals described a wide range of kinship networks, some of which were biological family focussed, some of which were 'friends as family' focussed, some of which were a mixture of both. There were also accounts of blended families, i.e. families involving ex-lovers, ex-partners, and ex- heterosexual husbands and wives.

3.2.2. Despite the significance of friendship to many, there was apparently little appetite among participants for increased recognition and regulation of friendship in law. Those individuals with predominantly friendship-focussed kinship networks who wished their friends to receive their assets upon death, used their Wills to do so.

3.2.3. Participants prioritised, and approved of, increasing couple recognition in law. A small number of women were wary of state control of relationships in law. The participants were split on the issue of civil partnership/same gender marriage, with some women participants voicing particular concerns about hetero-patriarchal norms. Lesbians felt their identities were marginalised by 'compulsory grandmotherhood', i.e. the assumption that as older women they must be grandmothers, and that, as grandmothers they must be heterosexual.

3.2.4. Access to intergenerational informal social support was understood to be crucial in later life (because friends/family of similar ages might all develop care needs at the same time, and so support from younger people is important), and participants distinguished themselves and their access to resources, in terms of whether or not they had access to this support.

3.3. Anticipated care needs

3.3.1. Participants had significance concerns about future care needs, particularly among those with limited informal social support networks. In considering their possible care futures, participants were most concerned about the spaces in which those futures would be lived out, and about who might co-occupy and co-produce those spaces with them.

3.3.2. Formal older age care spaces were perceived as poor, with little control of the dying process, and as sites which privileged heterosexual older people, and marginalised older LGBN individuals. There were concerns about: lack of recognition (being assumed to be heterosexual); risky recognition (being exposed to prejudice and discrimination); and the associated need to conceal. There were also concerns about being separated from personal communities in older age care spaces and being (unwilling) forced to co-occupy mixed gender care spaces.

3.3.3. The majority of men expressed a preference for 'LGBT friendly' mainstream provision. The majority of women expressed a preference for women-only/lesbian only provision. The least popular option of all was mixed LGBT provision. There was a consistently expressed view that there should be a range of choice of provision.

3.3.4. A fifth of participants had plans to end their lives at a time and manner of their own choosing and felt strongly that it should be made legal that they could be assisted in doing so.

3.4. Activism

3.4.1. Activism in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada, is informed by different socio-political and funding structures. There is a growing number of specialist projects in these countries and (more recently) in Europe. This includes specialist housing, although there is none in the UK at present.

3.4.2. Specialist projects can make a significant difference to the lives of older LGB individuals. Many are reliant on short-term funding, especially in the UK, and their existence can be precarious.

3.4.3. In the need to appeal to 'conservative' funders and to mainstream organisations, there is a possibility that older LGB(T) activism projects a generic image of the respectable older LGB(T) individual, obscuring diversity (especially gender diversity) among older LGB(T) individuals. The voices of older lesbians, older bisexual women and men, and of non-labelling individuals are less well represented in activism.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Ageing, gender and sexuality intersect to produce uneven outcomes in later life.

4.2. There is a need for a range of social policy improvements, for a national forum representing the needs, views and wishes of older LGB individuals, and for more research in this area.