Introduction: Ageing and sexualities interdisciplinary perspectives

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Additional Information:

- This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Ageing and Sexualities: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on 6th January 2016, available online: http://www.routledge.com/9781472432155.

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/22311

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: © Routledge

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Introduction

Ageing and Sexualities

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Until quite recently, older age has been associated with asexuality. However, there is a growing interest in moving beyond the stereotype of older people as asexual (Gott, 2005) and developing a critical research agenda for ageing and sexuality (Marshall, 2011). Recent research has shown that sexuality remains relevant in older age (Carpenter and DeLamater, 2012) with many older people continue to have fulfilling and meaningful sexual lives in later life (Lindau and Gavrilova, 2010), albeit understood through the much-critiqued lens of ‘successful ageing’ (e.g., Katz and Marshall, 2003).

This collection of original essays explores ageing sexualities from a range of social science disciplines and theoretical perspectives, located across several spatial and geographical contexts. It fills a gap in the burgeoning literature on ageing and sexuality by incorporating scholarship on, and interrogating, both lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and heterosexual ageing. It seeks to locate ageing and sexuality in their normative frameworks, with the purpose of identifying and interrogating those frameworks and the norms upon which they are based. With contributions from leading authors in the field, the collection supports the interrogation of the discursive production of sexuality and the spatial and temporal contingencies of sexuality performance, within the context of age and ageing. In doing so it complicates and innovates conceptualisations of ageing sexualities. In this introductory chapter, we firstly locate this collected volume in the context of existing research, then introduce each of the subsequent chapters, before identifying linking themes and a framework for the future research agenda in this field.

While the growing recognition that it is possible to be both older and sexually active has been lauded as an example of a decline in ageism, others have argued that it only serves to further marginalise the very old, the frail, the infirm, who are unable to keep up with these new ‘sexy oldie’ stereotypes and thus ‘fail’ to age successfully (Gilleard and Higgs, 2010). Ageing

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1 We would like to thank Sue Westwood for her contribution to this introduction.
sexualities are not only nuanced by age itself, but also their intersection with other social and cultural locations, including ethnicity, class, and disability. Moreover, ageing is spatially located: the same spaces may be differently experienced, and different spaces occupied, according to age. As Paul Simpson (2012, 2013) has recently shown, for example, some middle aged gay men may choose to reject the commercial gay scene in preference for leisure spaces more commonly occupied by heterosexuals, where they can be free from the ‘ageist gay gaze’ (Simpson, 2012, p.1) while still at the same time negotiating a heteronormative one. Heteronormativity is the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm; its counterpart, heterosexism, is the privileging of heterosexuality.

Lesbian gay and bisexual ageing has been under-represented in authorship on both ageing (Cronin, 2006), sexuality in general (DeLamater, 2012) and LGB sexualities in particular (Pugh, 2002). However, there is now a growing body of work in this area (e.g., Herdt and De Vries, 2004; Ward, Rivers and Sutherland, 2012). While research on ageing heterosexuality has primarily focused on sex – desire, functioning, satisfaction, performance, health (Carpenter and DeLamater, 2012) – research on LGB sexualities has taken a wider approach, perhaps to compensate, in part, for the default heteronormativity of much of gerontology. Such research has addressed the lived experience of ageing sexualities (e.g., Kimmel, 2014), particularly among different generations and cohorts (De Vries, 2014); kinship formations, social networks and informal social support (Fokemma and Kuyper, 2009), mental and physical health and well-being (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013), and inequalities in regulatory contexts (Knauer, 2009). There is a particularly significant body of research on older lesbians and gay men’s anxieties and concerns about older age care and accommodation (e.g., Hughes, 2009; Stein et al., 2010), which is perceived as a site of ‘ignorance at least, homophobia at worst’ (Guasp, 2011, p.22), of disconnection from lesbian and gay support networks, and where many older lesbians and gay men may feel the need to (re-)conceal their sexual identities (Harrison and Riggs, 2006).

Most recently, there has been emergent interest in the temporal and spatial contingencies of the discursive and performative production of sexualities in general (Butler, 2008) and ageing sexualities more specifically (Binnie and Kleese, 2013). This body of work has tended to under-address issues of gender, older lesbians’ experience (e.g., Averett, 2014), and also bisexuality (e.g., Dworkin, 2006). It has also not, as yet, been integrated into mainstream
With increasing recognition of LGB identities in law and society (Harding, 2011) and a new wave of openly visible LGB people now reaching older age, it is now time for their inclusion in discourse about ageing populations in general and ageing sexualities in particular. Doing so not only offers insights into the particularities and complexities of LGB ageing (Cronin and King, 2010), it can also serve to shine a light on heterosexual ageing and associated norms and normativities. In other words, how heterosexuality itself shapes the construction and experiences of ageing, and how heteronormativity can inform ageing policies (Heaphy and Yip, 2006) and provision (Ward, Pugh and Price, 2011) and who is privileged, and who is marginalised, in that process (Westwood, 2013). Moreover, it encourages us to move away from binary notions of sexuality and develop more complex, subtle and nuanced understandings of sexuality, including in ageing contexts.

The central argument at the core of this collection is that sexuality informs lived experiences of, and processes of recognition and resourcing to, gendered ageing. In the findings of a UK survey of over 1,000 older LGB individuals and 1,000 older heterosexual individuals, for example, it was found that many older LGB and older heterosexual individuals shared similar concerns about ageing, relating to: needing care; independence; mobility; health; housing and mental health (Guasp, 2011 p.7). However, the older LGB individuals were ‘consistently more anxious’ than their heterosexual peers about needing formal care provision (Guasp 2011, p.3). They were worried, in addition to the concerns shared with older heterosexual people, about sexuality-specific issues relating to lack of recognition and/or prejudice and discrimination. Because their social support networks are less likely to be intergenerational (due to the historical denial of access to parenthood for many older lesbians and gay men, see Hicks, 2005), older LGB individuals are also likely to be early and disproportionate users of those services about which they are so concerned (Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2004). In this way, we can see how sexuality can exacerbate ageing issues. Moreover, as women live longer than men, and single childless women in particular are most likely to spend their final years in residential care, this also disproportionately affects older lesbians compared with both older gay men and older heterosexual women (Westwood, 2014).
This edited collection showcases developments in theory, research and practice regarding sexuality and ageing. It considers the differences and similarities between and among ageing heterosexual and LGB older people. The collection addresses a significant gap in the burgeoning ageing sexualities field, and in so doing, identifies the key questions that will underpin social science research into the interactions of ageing and sexuality in the years to come. It includes authors from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (including social gerontology, sociology, cultural studies, medicine and health care, psychology and socio-legal studies) and different geographical (the UK, Australasia, Africa) contexts. The collection explores the importance of different forms of sexualities, particularly at their intersection with gender, and the significance of spatial-relational contexts, ranging from the individual, to residential care spaces to virtual spaces (i.e., internet dating). Several chapters compare and contrast heterosexual and same-gender experiences, others distinguish between experiences under the ‘LGB/T ageing’ umbrella, emphasising both shared and varied experiences in later life. By bringing together cutting-edge scholarship from these diverse veins of social science work on sexuality and ageing, this edited collection provides a coherent, integrated and comprehensive overview of the conceptual and practical challenges of understanding the complex interplay of ageing and sexuality in the twenty-first century.

Chapter Outlines

The chapters share, and yet are at the same time differentiated by, a number of central themes. Firstly: the representation and cultural constructions of ageing sexualities, still invisible in some spatial and cultural contexts, increasingly visible in others, with expanding diversification of that visibility. Secondly: the regulation of ageing sexualities, in political and socio-legal contexts. Thirdly, the diversifying spatial contexts of ageing sexualities: in public, private and virtual space. And, lastly, the embodied nature of ageing sexualities: embodied in the sense of experiencing an ageing body; embodied in the sense of being perceived as an ageing individual through embodied signs of ageing; embodied in relation to resistance to those markers of ageing, in various forms; and embodied because of the morbidity and mortality with which ageing, and very old age, are implicated. We shall now briefly outline each chapter in turn, tracing each of the themes through.
In Chapter One, Ageing and Sexuality in Western Societies: Changing Perspectives on Sexual Activity, Sexual Expression and the ‘Sexy’ Older Body, Sharron Hinchliff and Merryn Gott chart the growing recognition of sexuality among older people in recent decades. From being regarded as asexual in Western cultures, older people have come under increasing pressure to age well, and part of that ageing well involves remaining sexually active. This is, of course, in the context of prevailing heteronormativity and heterosexism, primarily being heterosexually active. The majority of research on sexuality among older people has been conducted with heterosexual older people, sometimes explicitly, but more often unquestioningly. Hinchliff and Gott provide an informed, succinct and fluent overview of the current state of research. They caution that the ‘sexy oldie’ could become a new stereotype of ageing, one that will marginalise those who do not or cannot live up to its ideals.

In Chapter Two Ageing Sexualities in UK Regulatory Contexts, Sue Westwood takes a socio-legal approach to consider ageing sexualities in the contemporary UK regulatory context. She argues that law and social policy privileges ageing heterosexual sexualities and marginalises ageing lesbian and gay sexualities and kinship forms. Using the concepts of nodes and flows, Westwood suggests that there is a four-tier privileging of relationship norms and forms in UK law and social policy affecting older people, which prioritises the conjugal couple, nuclear and biological family, over other relationship forms, particularly friendship. Westwood argues that this is both implicated in under-recognition and in relation to rights and entitlements, which in turn leads to uneven access to resources in later life. She concludes that ageing cannot only iterate sexuality inequalities but also exacerbate them, materially and socially.

In contrast to this narrative of emerging visibility of ageing sexualities in Chapter Three, Inclusion and Representation of Older People and Sexual Health in sub-Saharan Africa within Contemporary Population Health Research, Gloria Chepngen-Langat and Victoria Hosegood consider the under-representation of ageing sexualities in an African health research context. In their comprehensive review of the literature, they show how sexuality among older people has not been addressed in sub-Saharan African public health strategies. This is of particular concern given the number of older people who are ageing with HIV. The focus on HIV prevention in public health strategies means that sex among older people can be constructed as ‘dangerous’ and something to be discouraged, rather than taking a broader,
non-pathologising sexual safety approach, among people of all ages, including older people. Chepngeno-Langat and Hosegood argue that it is ‘imperative’ to understanding the sexual and health needs of older people in sub-Saharan Africa so that those needs can be better addressed.

The issue of lack of recognition is also central to Chapter Four, *Becoming Visible: Demarginalising older lesbians in LGBT ageing discourse*, in which Jane Traies explores the lack of visibility of older lesbians. Traies argues that older lesbians are multiply marginalised by ageism, sexism and heteronormativity. Traies draws upon her recent research with over 400 older lesbians in the UK, to shine a light on their lives. In doing so she demonstrates how older women maintain, renew, discover and/or rediscover love and sexual intimacy with other women in later life. She highlights the close ties between older lesbians beyond those of sexual intimacy and friendship and how those ties sustain and support older lesbians in later life, and at the end of life. However, Traies also argues that a lack of visibility of the lives and relationships of older lesbians means that their particular needs and issues are less likely to be recognised and supported. As a result, older lesbians lives need to be made more visible.

In Chapter Five, *Sexual Identity Labels and their Implications in Later Life: The Case of Bisexuality*, Rebecca Jones explores how sexuality/sexual identity labels are understood and socially (re-)produced from the perspective of bisexuality. She considers the implications for understanding the later life sexuality and retrospective sexual/relational history by analysing a vignette involving an older woman who has previously been in committed relationships with women and men. Jones’ analysis highlights the potential problems inherent in the normative binary approach to sexuality classification, and the challenges that stem from seeking constancy in labelling/categorising an individual’s sexuality/sexual identity. In older age, those who have more fluid sexual histories may find they are not only marginalised through ageism, but through this binarism which seeks to categorise an individual as either heterosexual or lesbian/gay. The risk is that this approach further marginalises those whose lives do not fit neatly into such simple categorisation leading to misrecognition and vulnerability.

Ageing is an embodied process, is experienced at an embodied level, and is perceived by others in an embodied way (i.e., the visual signalling of ageing). It is also an emplaced
process, particularly when ageing bodies require high levels of personal care (often medicalised) and when that care takes place in residential care contexts for older people. In Chapter Six, Older People and Sexuality in Residential Aged Care: Reconstructing Normality, Michael Bauer, Linda McAuliffe and Deirdre Fetherstonhaugh consider how ageing sexualities are constructed and managed in formal care contexts. Their chapter provides an overview of current research, and the key issues relating to ageing sexualities in residential care. Primarily focusing on heterosexual sexualities, they highlight the tensions between care cultures, organisational cultures, individual, family and staff norms values, and how this can lead to conflict about what is and what is not perceived as acceptable behaviour in residential care spaces. They highlight that these conflicting interests may place constraints on the personal rights and freedoms of an ageing, sexual, individual in residential care spaces.

The issues of both cultural visibility and value are addressed in Chapter Seven, “I am Getting Old and That Takes Some Getting Used To”: Dimensions of Body Image for Older Men. Here, Allan Tyler, Nuno Nodin, Elizabeth Peel and Ian Rivers report on a recent UK study which included experiences of and attitudes to health and wellbeing of in LGBT and heterosexual people. Drawing on original questionnaire data exploring older men’s perceptions of body image and embodied ageing, they explore how (hegemonic) masculinity and heteronormative gender roles inform how some men view themselves in later life and how they experience themselves as being regarded by others. Their chapter highlights the significance of the body as sexed, active, and medicalised in older age. Their analysis demonstrates the continued influence of heteronormative gender roles and expectations of hegemonic masculinities, as well as the youth-orientation of the traditional gay ‘scene’, in shaping how men see themselves in older age.

Developing the theme of recognition and context further, in Chapter Eight, Troubling Identities? Examining Older Lesbian, Gay and/or Bisexual People’s Membership Categorisation Work and its Significance, Andrew King takes a queer approach to the discursive (re-)production of sexuality. King explores how sexuality categories are reproduced in individual narratives and in interpersonal contexts. Drawing upon analysis of particular pieces of conversation, he argues that sexuality is negotiated, navigated and defined through and against normative heterosexuality. In other words ageing non-heterosexuality is understood as precisely that by lesbians and gay men, i.e. in terms of how, and in what
way(s), an older lesbian or gay individual does not comply and/or conform to age-defined and/or heterosexist norms. King argues that in identifying the ‘mechanisms by which these discourses are called upon and locked into place’ it is then possible to make visible the normative assumptions upon which they are based and through and against which they are mobilised.

In Chapter Nine, Towards the Inquiry into Aged Care and Beyond: The promise of new era in LGBTI ageing, Mark Hughes addresses issues of rights and freedoms in older age care spaces in Australian contexts, with respect to LGB sexualities especially. Hughes traces the development of progressive new legislation which accords particular rights to older LGB individuals as a ‘special needs’ group, and shows how being assigned these rights then cascades down into service provision and delivery, as well as funding for training to improve older age-related services. Hughes emphasises in particular the diversity of the ageing LGBT population and the importance of including the broadest spectrum of special interest groups in consultation processes of service design and delivery, to avoid the risk of homogenised notions of older LGB people which might then lead to a under-recognition of the complexities of individuals lives, needs and interests.

Finally, in Chapter 10, Internet Dating, Sexual Intimacy and Older People Chris Beasley and Mary Holmes introduce a new way of conceptualising heterosexuality, heterodox heterosexuality, in the context of internet dating. Beasley and Holmes suggest that social media creates new spaces for later life (hetero-)sexual exploration and creativity which has potential to open up new opportunities for older women to express their sexual selves. Such new avenues, they argue, produce opportunities for different ways of being and doing heterosexuality away from and in contrast to heteronormative ways of living and being. They argue that heterodox heterosexualities offers space for divergent, transgressive and subversive sexual behaviours that do not fit with heteronormative understandings of gendered ageing.

In terms of inter-connecting themes, issues of representation and cultural construction of sexualities are present in each of the chapters. How we name sexualities, through and against which norms and normativities sexualities are discursively produced, how this in turn informs
recognition and access to resources, particularly health and social care support, all speak to cultural visibility. As Jane Traies and Allan Tyler and colleagues have shown such cultural visibility is profoundly gendered. This cultural visibility is situated and contingent, interpersonally, discursively and in relation to a range of different regulatory contexts, such as, in the context of this edited collection, Africa, Australia and the UK. This is also in relation to different spaces: the wide space of public health, the narrower space of interpersonal discourse, the imagined space with the observing other, the virtual space of the internet. Yes across these spaces, including virtual spaces, there are issues of embodiment: how the sexed, gendered, ageing body is experienced, perceived and socially constructed; how ageist norms and normativities in relation to ageing sexualities are navigated, complied with and/or resisted; how ageing sexual bodies are subject to disciplining and normative control in residential care contexts. The chapters, separately and together, demonstrate the range, complexity and contingency of (ageing) sexuality performance, recognition, and social and cultural construction.

Setting a New Critical Research Agenda

The contents of this collection identify many of the key questions that will be the focus of future research into ageing and sexuality. At its heart will be the critical interrogation of the constructs of ageing and sexuality themselves, and of gender, with which they are inevitably interwoven and implicated. As Sharron Hinchliff and Merryn Gott highlight, the notion of the sexy older person itself requires ongoing critique, particularly in relation to who is marginalised in that new ageing stereotype. Increasingly, ageing sexualities research will, if it is to reflect the real world, release its traditional heteronormativity and address ageing sexuality diversity. Similarly, research which is only about heterosexual ageing will need to identify itself as such and whatever generalisations it makes will need to be articulated as generalisations about ageing heterosexual women and men, not all ageing women and men.

Equally, research about lesbian, gay and bisexual ageing, will hopefully widen to more fully encompass bisexuality as well as other non-normative lives, e.g., those of older individuals who are asexual, intentionally chaste, single and sexual, queer and/or polyamorous (e.g., Barker and Langdridge, 2010), reducing the over-representation of ‘sanitised’ LGB lives and the marginalisation of the ‘queer unwanted’ (Casey, 2007). It remains to be seen to what
extent women’s voices are equally represented in future research, and, as Jane Traies argues, to what extent they remain marginalised.

As Mark Hughes points out, the representation of older lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer individuals’ concerns by advocacy and pressure groups requires further critical interrogation, particularly in relation to whose voices are being well-represented and whose are not (Westwood, 2015b). So too does the representation of the voices of older people in residential care contexts for older people, in relation to sexuality expression (as highlighted by Michael Bauer and his colleagues) and in terms of ensuring there is a range and choice of provision for older people across the sexuality spectrum.

The significance of spatiality, socio-cultural and regulatory contexts for the recognition and resourcing of ageing sexualities, as highlighted by Gloria Chepngen-Langat and Victoria Hosegood and several other authors, is an area which warrants further investigation. In particular, how age informs spatial engagements and normative reproductions is an area which has considerable potential in the development of new knowledge and insights. So too does the area of ageing inequalities in the spatial contexts of domiciliary and residential care provision and, more broadly, in relation to social and cultural recognition Chepngen-Langat and Hosegood also flag the need for greater attention to be given to sexual health, and we would suggest this is not only in relation to physical, but also psychological, sexual health and well-being. There is still a great deal of work to be done in addressing cultural representations of ageing sexualities, and ensuring that commissioners and providers of ageing services are better informed about, and more attuned and responsive to, ageing sexuality diversity. As the following chapters will show, the growing field of ageing sexualities offers rich opportunities to develop insights into the (re-)productive powers of the intersection of ageing, gender and sexuality in later life.

References


