

Pink, lavender and grey: Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex ageing in Australian gerontology

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Abstract

Issues concerning sexual and gender identity have been almost completely neglected in Australian research and action around ageing. This is reflected in textual discourse, clinical and service practices, training and education, research approaches and policy development. The present research investigated whether lessons might be drawn from the experience of activists in the United States of America (USA) and then applied to Australian gerontology with regard to the recognition of GLBTI ageing. The research aimed to provide guideposts for a process of change in Australia, by the investigation of the factors involved in collective action. Qualitative research was conducted in Australia and the State of California in the USA. The research findings revealed: a previously under-recognised personal dimension of action; the importance of self-determinist approaches in the USA; and the status of the Australian situation. The findings raise important implications for those who conduct research and undertake clinical or service related practice in aged care, as well as for the Australian GLBTI community.

Introduction: Heteronormativity in Australian Gerontology

The field of Australian gerontology encompasses the study of ageing and the practical application of this knowledge. It incorporates all aspects of research, education, policy development and practitioner intervention in aged care. Such practitioner intervention includes the ageing or aged care related work of professionals from a wide variety of fields including the areas of psychology, occupational therapy, medicine, physiotherapy, psychology, nursing and social work. Gerontology also includes advocacy work and activism which relates to ageing issues or aged care concerns. The present research investigated the virtual invisibility of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) issues and experiences in gerontology research, education, services, and policy development in Australia. It examined whether lessons might be drawn from the experience of activists in California and applied to Australian gerontology.

The concept of heteronormativity refers to a general perspective which sees heterosexual experience as the only or central view of the world (Johnson, 2002). Such heteronormativity underpins the absence of recognition of diversity around sexual and gender identity in aged care in Australia today (Harrison, 1999). Despite the occurrence of a wave of wide-ranging reforms challenging heteronormativity within the Australian socio-political domain over the past twenty years, this change has had a minimal impact on gerontology. Gerontology literature is heteronormative particularly where the literature discusses notions of family, the nature of caring relationships, household composition, gender, taxation and superannuation arrangements and special needs groups (Harrison, 2001;2004). Other than in Victoria, Australian State and Territory governments do not include GLBTI issues in aged care policy or discussion documents (Harrison, 2002; McNair & Harrison, 2002).

Australian and overseas perspectives on GLBTI ageing

Australian gerontology, by virtue of its heteronormativity, does not currently create an environment in which individual older people who are not heterosexual would be prepared to declare readily, to anyone attempting to assist them, their sexual or gender identity, life history, or needs. This assumption of heterosexuality, which underpins the current Australian gerontological perspective, results in the cyclical perpetuation of absence of GLBTI ageing concerns. This cycle of invisibility operates through a process in which consumers' fears of persecution are reinforced by practitioners' lack of understanding of the significance of sexual orientation and gender identity in gerontology.

The cycle of invisibility is evident in the lack of published Australian research addressing GLBTI ageing. Certainly, Australian research which is currently in progress or recently reported will contribute significantly to the growing picture of GLBTI ageing (e.g., Chamberlain & Robinson, 2002; Sharpe, 1997). However, there is a particular absence of Australian research or other sources which focus on the needs of bisexual, transgender or intersex older people, although Noble (2001) refers to general issues associated with intersex experience in Australia.

In contrast with the lack of Australian literature specifically examining GLBTI ageing issues, the past two decades have seen a proliferation of published research concerning the experience of ageing as gay or lesbian in the USA and, to a lesser extent, Canada and the United Kingdom (Cook-Daniels, 2000; Nystrom & Jones, 2003; Quam, 1997; Raphael & Meyer, 1988). Literature that combines an examination of GLBTI social movement activism, or processes of collective action, with concerns related to ageing could not be located.

The Research Framework and Approach

A deliberative stance shaped the present research as characterised by the promotion of a stated goal around informing the creation of change through overtly political, activist research (Ladwig & Gore, 1994) In particular, the research approach was informed by new social movement theory and the role of activism. Seeking to bridge the gap between the structural and cultural social movement paradigms, a number of writers have attempted to synthesise work across these alternate domains (Fisher & Kling, 1994; Kling, 1995; Tarrow, 1994). Authors writing on the gay and lesbian movement overseas (Adam, 1995) and in Australia (Johnston, 1984; Willett, 2000) has attempted to build on a synthesis of theoretical approaches, as this research does.

The Phases of Data Collection and analysis

In this research, the phenomenon of collective action in gerontology was the focus of interest. Triangulation of methods and data sources was employed in order to develop a complex picture of the phenomenon being studied (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). The fieldwork proceeded in three phases. In all phases participants were selected through purposive sampling using a snowballing approach (Patton, 1990). Phase one involved the administration of an open-ended format questionnaire, mailed to individuals with a history of activism in Australia. Twenty-two participants responded to questions about the concepts: allies; targets; strategies; barriers to change; success and failure; turning points; and frames of meaning. They also applied their experience to a question about action around gay and lesbian ageing.

Phase two involved the analysis of overseas archival documents relating to the process being investigated. Phase two also involved semi-structured, open-ended interviews with nine activists involved in raising the profile of GLBTI ageing in California, in the USA. In phase three, semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted with six Australian GLBTI activists close to or over 60 years of age. A written Interview Guide was adapted to the circumstances and specific

situation of each activist, as was the case in phase two. Each phase of the research was influenced by the outcomes of the preceding phase. The three phases were encompassed by a process which involved the researcher documenting a log of relevant Australian action related to GLBTI ageing as the research was in progress. While not constituting a specific phase of the fieldwork, the log involved continuous documentation of incidents of action with which the researcher was involved, as well as action which occurred independently of the researcher. The results reported here focus predominantly on data collected in phases two and three, where the analysis of data drew on the content analysis conducted on the phase one data.

Overseas Findings

The Californian data revealed the establishment of three influential organisations: The National Association of Lesbian and Gay Gerontology (NALGG); Old Lesbians Organising for Change (OLOC); and the Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network of the American Society on Aging, (LGAIN). The Californian process of change was a complex one involving struggle, courage, interpersonal connections, conflict and devotion to the cause. In particular, it involved a period of difficult struggle between NALGG and the American Society on Aging (ASA), when ASA decided to set up a new network and wanted to bring NALGG into the new constituency group, effectively absorbing it. NALGG was an organisation with a long history of grassroots advocacy and action while the ASA is the largest aged care organisation for professionals in the USA. The struggle which took place was fraught with conflict. Due to the personal histories of those involved and despite the personal hurt involved, the younger activists (those under 60 years of age) recognised the importance of older people managing the process of change themselves.

On this issue, Sharon Raphael has written

I also happened to be a gerontologist and never imagined that when I turned my attention to the topic of old lesbians that eventually it would then become my turn to be considered an exploitative outsider. Being a lesbian was not an instant passport into the world of old lesbians, even though, if I live long enough, I will some day be old myself (1995, p. 2).

As an outcome of the struggle, the ASA brought older people onto the Leadership Council of its new constituency group, the Lesbian and Gay Aging Issues Network. The notion of self-determination, involving older GLBTI people leading the process of change, can be linked to the way this concept has been applied to action for change by Indigenous people in Australia (Harrison, 1997). The emergent themes from the phase two interview data were: allies; strategies and tactics; obstacles and enablers; turning points; successes; frames of meaning – visibility, rights, ageism and self-determination; special people; biographies; and devotion to the cause. A very small selection of pertinent direct quotes from the phase two and phase three interview participants are presented here.

Two lesbian activists, Sharon Raphael and Mina Meyer said

You've got to start with the old lesbians. I mean ours just took off and took over and they did everything...It was painful for us but it was wonderful. It was also liberating and correct. You can't always be doing things for other people, even if you know you're going to become one of those older people.

Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon emphasised the importance of adopting a self-determinist approach and conveying its meaning to activists who were not themselves old, so that the process of change could succeed. They referred to Shevy Healey, a founder of OLOC, who was particularly adamant that older lesbians be in control of the process which aimed to improve their situation

The first old lesbian celebration was here [San Francisco]...that first, Shevy was very much involved. So were Mina and Sharon but they weren't old enough to be in it. They did a lot of the work and then they weren't permitted to attend. This was very important to the women who started it. 60 and up became – you were old at 60 and they meant old. Not older but old. They had a little slogan about 'We are starting it on our own turf and getting it together'.

In relation to the theme Frames of Meaning: Visibility, a gay activist, who chose to remain anonymous, put it

Spectrum, GLOE and Lavender Seniors of the East Bay have a co-operative program to create friendly visiting programs for isolated gay and lesbian seniors. Creating a speakers' bureau of gay and lesbian seniors headed by a professional person is a powerful tool, to be a component of in-service training at every kind of senior organisation from home delivered meals, to nursing care in nursing homes, everything in between, every range of services. It's an excellent way for people to see, be public, about ageing, about gay and lesbian ageing. When they hear it from people, it's no longer a dehumanised topic. It's a very real one.

Lisa Hamburger conveyed the personal attachment and devotion to the struggle as well as the emotional costs involved

There was a collision between the two, OLOC and NALGG and it was painful for everyone. They [OLOC] would express grief over it if we talked now, I think. I definitely would. We didn't know how to bring them in. ASA is a professional organisation as opposed to a grassroots movement. A lot of energy was needed. Part of the dilemma was NALGG lost members to AIDS.

Australian Findings

The Australian data revealed that there was knowledge of action in many realms and evidence of interest in GLBTI ageing issues. The analysis of the questionnaire data revealed a personal dimension to action which was unexpected. The Australian interview data revealed that there had been important instances of action and some successes around GLBTI ageing. However, there was no evidence of a broad, co-ordinated, collective process of change, as had been the case in the USA. The themes from the Australian interview data fell into two broad clusters: Issues of Concern and Taking Action. Matters around visibility, isolation, networks of support, homophobic services, policy and law reform, training of staff, ageism and activism, were all raised by the interview participants.

One gay activist, referring to the AIDS Council of New South Wales project, the Sydney group Mature Age Gays (MAG) said

I know from MAG that practically every member has suffered in one way or another from the invisibility syndrome – you may live in a retirement village and don't admit to being gay because you would either be ostracised or possibly even expelled under some other pretext, and that's the fear of our members – some are in nursing homes too and I don't know of a single one that is out.

The interviews with Australians were held during the height of media publicity about the stock exchange crash of the Satellite Corporation, Australia's first 'pink company', which had a stated interest in developing GLBTI retirement facilities. The crash and the unreleased market research commissioned by the company, were raised by all of the Australians.

On the market research, a lesbian activist said

I was involved in that market research...He was just absolutely blown out by the interview with the four of us, because what he was asking, well there were three who would call ourselves radical lesbians...The question he put to us was would we as political lesbians be willing to share a facility with gay men, just gay men, not political gay men, just gay men...and we really explored that and you know it was very tricky, very difficult, I mean as we know there are some really stunning gay men, really lovely blokes...but I know a couple, and when they're not, god they're awful. I wouldn't want to be living with them. I wouldn't want to be in the same dining room as them... So we finished up talking ghettos...it was really shocking to us to be thinking that way, it brought up visions of all kinds of discriminatory practices...here we were talking about ourselves, in the context of recognising that the older we get the less empowered you feel to make decisions about your life, but it was awful...My guess is that what they came up with is that people basically don't want to be in accommodation.

In relation to the theme Issues of Concern: Invisibility, Discrimination and Abuse, one lesbian activist said

I think from the church point of view – and it has to be the lever that's used on them – Catholic Church or Baptist or whatever...you are supposed to be providing quality care across the board...one of them has to be the psychological comfort of your residents and no discrimination, if you're talking quality care...In terms of an 80-year-old dyke in a nursing home - what really matters to this woman, what really matters to her? For a lot of older people the health and food thing really matters, the really basic ordinary things matter 'cause that's where you're at. The fact you're incontinent, you can't eat whatever. So you think to yourself on a personal day level, what does this woman need, what's she missing, what's good for her? It's 'do I have a picture of my girlfriend up on the wall, what do I say to "Who is that" –'Oh that's my sister'...Well that's part of the lie. With dementia therapy it's – 'What did I tell them last time'?

In connection with the theme Taking Action: Education and Training, one lesbian described an attempt to obtain funding to develop a training program for staff in aged residential care settings

A lot of it [the funding submission] was education of staff, wasn't it? One of the things that struck us about this issue was that, particularly in the short term, the education of staff was absolutely vital, and this was in the days too when they seemed to have – the staffing was ramshackle, untrained.

In combination with the interview data, the log of action demonstrated the wide-ranging concerns of GLBTI older people. The log provided evidence that older activists had confronted ageism and heterosexism in the public domain.

Research Implications: The Personal Dimension, Self-Determination, and the Australian Situation

Aspects of the change process in the State of California, involving personal style, individual biography and devotion to the cause, formed a vital personal dimension of collective action. This dimension has received limited attention in social movement literature (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2001; Kling, 1995). An awareness of the significance of this personal dimension may assist Australia to avoid conflict and hasten reform. A dialogue amongst activists, key players in the aged care industry and GLBTI organisations in Australia in relation to the notion of self-determination may also assist the development of a locally appropriate process of change. The life histories of GLBTI older people served to inform the younger USA activists' awareness that, while some older activists might be prepared to be visible, vocal, and in positions of leadership, most would not. Thus, the onus was often placed on service providers, clinicians and

gerontologists to provide non-threatening programs that addressed and challenged homophobia and heteronormativity, regardless of a lack of evidence of a problem. Younger activists recognised that adopting roles of facilitation and education, rather than decision-making, would enhance progress towards the achievement of change.

To date, action in Australia has been almost completely undertaken by activists and others with access to minimal or no resources. The findings presented here demonstrated that there is potential for a co-ordinated approach to develop, as well as indicating that interest in GLBTI ageing issues is apparent in the local context.

Looking Towards the Future

This research investigated a process of change in one overseas site and projected potential lessons arising from the outcomes of this inquiry onto the local tableau. The research findings point to the need for further research into many areas including: the experiences of older GLBTI people themselves; the attitudes of clinicians and service providers; models for intervention and education; policy and legal reform; mechanisms for providing advocacy; and the potential development of participatory action research which generates change.

During the period of the research, the prevailing Australian neo-liberal political and economic climate yielded considerable speculation and discussion about how the future of Australia might be coloured by the impact of a rapidly ageing population (Marris, 2003). This research may contribute towards the development of an aged care industry in which diversity would be a cause for celebration and service providers would ensure that all older people are valued, regardless of sexuality or gender identity. In such a setting, GLBTI older people would be encouraged to be open, honest and proud.

Author Note

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