

**“People my generation have come through quite a number of battles in order to be honest and open”**

## **Learning to construct our LGBT identities in mid to later life: lessons for older adult education**

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# Contexts for the study:

So actually the sheer social changes that have happened in the forty five years of my life is really kind of incredible ... You know we are the first generation that are living in this liberated time... **(Kevin, b. 1965)**

## **Contexts of the study:**

But she came to my civil partnership with her husband and she had said to me I had never thought in all the time that we worked together about the kind of stigma and prejudices, the issues that you dealt with on a day to day basis that were clearly just part of your life and you know, and coming to this has really made me reflect on that I didn't take that on board in the past.

**(Mary, b. 1954)**

## Contexts of the study:

I think it is still very important to focus on being gay and what that experience has meant for you and how that experience has moulded you and shaped your views politically, religiously and in other ways. And you know I struggle with the idea that there is some kind of suggestion that in the west we are now liberated as queer men and women and therefore it is no longer important to focus on that difference. ...

# Contexts of the study

And I tend to be with the black consciousness movement in that, em, you know it's right that black people should stress the oppression they have experienced over centuries because of their colour and remind other people that if we are not very careful that scenario can be repeated in so many ways, whether directly or indirectly. And I think its the same for gay people. If gay people are of the view in the west that they are free and liberated because of the very welcome legislation that's come in, I think that's a naïve view. Legislation doesnae change attitudes, all it does is drives discrimination underground. **(Billy, b.1960)**

# Research questions..:

**What is the nature of the LGBT identities adults develop across their lives?**

**What is the nature and impact of how, when and where LGBT adults learn to construct such identities across their lives?**

- Childhood and adolescence... into...
- Early adulthood to midlife...into...
- Post work and later life

## **3 main questions:**

What is the nature of the LGBT identities older adults construct in mid to later life?

What is unique and why, in the nature and impact of life-wide, informal and non-formal learning in which older LGBT adults engage?

What might be the challenges and possibilities for the development of inclusive intergenerational learning opportunities between younger and older LGBT adults?

# Participants: a rainbow spectrum

## Sample of 34:

- Highland Rainbow Folk (HRF)
- Our Story Scotland
- Prime Time
- Individuals



# Privileging narratives:

**Actively attentive to participants' voices:**

'as a matter of listening, recognition and engaged dialogue.' (McLeod 2011: 187)

**Insider researcher responsibility & accountability:**

Shared identification of being 'gay' -LGBT

Counter risk of overtaking or distorting narratives (Jones 2010; 2015)

# Narrative inquiry

## **Life histories and autobiographical approach:**

...think concertededly about who we write for and speak to, and how we do so... (Chase 2008)

## **Create a multi-dimensional picture to illuminate**

... life history, and of the subject called the learner, as well as the subject of learning

## **Critical perspective**

... who counts as a learner; what counts as knowledge; whose knowledge counts?

# Parameters for learning over a life-time

## *Life*long

... it was always a struggle to say there is much more to [lifelong learning] than trying to get somebody a job. Life is a word and it has got a meaning. **(Jessie b. 1946)**

# Parameters for learning over a lifetime

## ***Life-wide*** learning

[Gay] people my generation have come through quite a number of battles in order to be honest and open and that you know, that's being within a whole sphere of life, within a family setting, within a church setting, within an educational setting and within an employment setting. Just within a society setting really. So for me those battles have made me be stronger I think, more determined, still angry at the injustice of people having to pretend to be what they are not, because of the ridicule and oppression that is still around.

**(Billy, b.1960)**

# Parameters for learning over a life-time

## *Life*-deep...

What I have gone through in my life that has made me... (**Iain b. 1951**)

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 [for becoming older], 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. (**Mary b. 1954**)

# Forms of learning across the life course:

I think that part of what we do as gay people is define, we're defining all the time. **(Kevin, b. 1965)**

... there is constant learning about how we are in society - reinventing ourselves, finding our niche. That's a whole learning thing. It's possibly more prominent for LGBT people than maybe for others – it's still an issue – it's still a marginalised group. We are constantly learning the best way to interact with society. For me, as a lesbian what is the best way to do that...? **(Tina, b. 1966)**

# Forms of learning across life course:

## Informal learning

- processes in which the person acquires knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitude from daily living (Jarvis 1985)
- ‘emergent, contingent, opportunistic, tacit, contextualised and holistic’ (Hager 2012: 783)

# Forms of learning across the life course:

## Non-formal learning:

I really value the learning that I have got in less formal situations, like the Iona community, being in Tanzania as a volunteer, Gay Liberation Front, Trade Unions and so on. They have been like really important to me. **(Andrew b. 1945)**

I went to secondary in 1971 and left in 76 ... I was very into religion for a while. I spent a few years as a rabid Christian [Laughter]. When I was at school, the Scripture Union was where all the lesbians and gays hung out. So bizarre...why I know the religious stuff wasn't that important really ... [it] was about a place where people could go and have arguments and discuss stuff. **(Liz b. 1961)**



# Theory and lived experiences:

There is a danger when you go to university to do teaching or nursing or social work that your approach becomes very academic. The theory has to be shaped and formed by real life experience and I think all these personal kind of encounters you have with people help to do that...

# Learning to construct LGBT identities: theoretical lenses

Understanding nature of  
LGBT Identity formations as:



Construction of LGBT identities:  
**Nature and impact of:**

Authentic, rationale, self-  
knowing, unitary **v. and/or**

Fluid, fragmented, unstable,  
fractured, multiple, diverse,  
queer, shifting, non-  
essentialised and constantly in  
the making

Intersecting identities  
Multiple identifications:  
LGBTQI...

**Being... and becoming...**

**How learning happens:**

- Psychosocial accounts
- Experiential lifelong learning
- Critical learning
- Critically queer learning and knowledge

**When learning happens:**

- Cohort effects
- Queer temporal lens
- **Critical educational gerontology**  
– **older adult learners**

**Where:**

- Formal education
- Workplace
- **Other sites**

# Identity as shifting subjectivities:

Ways in which adults:

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

# Understanding and identifying ourselves: mid to later life

I mean I think everyone should walk around with a badge that says how dare you assume that I am heterosexual! Whether they are or they aren't it would be very good for us all really. *Laughter.* Let's start from a different place. **(Mary b. 1954)**

# Understanding and identifying ourselves: mid to later life:

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 b. 1938)

# Understanding and identifying ourselves: mid to later life

I was out to myself since I was about 12 and out to the world since I was about 24. And so once I came out I decided I would never go back in again. And that has not necessarily stood me in good stead. Being so, adamant, that because I am gay that I going to hide and I was determined that I wouldn't hide. ... Therefore different things that have happened throughout my life have made me who I am today. So if that makes me I am an old queen or whoever you want to call me.

# Understanding and identifying ourselves: mid to later life

... we [gay people] have a different culture  
... we really are different people ... we think  
differently ... we behave differently and that  
in our private lives we behave extraordinarily  
differently.... And we have different ideals,  
we have different ways in which we live our  
lives ... **(Ian, b. 1951)**

## Understanding ourselves: mid to later life

... growing old is shite is the easiest way I can put it. I think. If I die by the time I am 70 I won't be unhappy. Simply because and I am not saying this is the same for everybody but you are asking me so that is my feeling, I don't anybody who can grow old gracefully. Growing old is horrible. Growing up is great. Living your life through your useful and energetic years is fantastic and the rest of it is shite – laughter...mentally growing old is great because of the knowledge you are gaining throughout life is wonderful. I have to think of it that way. I was talking physically. It is crap growing old. But mentally it is fantastic. It is just fantastic having all this knowledge.



# Understanding and identifying ourselves: mid to later life

I never been someone who ever had a problem with ageing. I've never been someone who said "God I am going to be 40!" It is a huge hang up. I never saw it like that. I suppose I do see some difficulties in that when you are younger you see yourself as being kind of radical and its 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.

# Understanding and identifying ourselves: mid to later life

I suppose, at the moment, the first thing I think of is retired. *Laughter.* Because that is the big thing that has happened to me lately. I think of myself as a lesbian, although I still sometimes have trouble with that word as I grew up when lesbian was a bad word, reclaimed the word but still sometimes feel a discomfort underneath it, so I'll sometimes just automatically describe myself as a gay woman, though sometimes I feel I should reclaim the word properly. Anyway, gay woman, lesbian, a married gay woman/lesbian, happily married gay woman/lesbian and retired that I would add to that.

# Unique non-formal learning

... going to have learn how to describe [myself] 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. A big thing about that revolves around music and the choir and how much I have learned so far just by being part of the choir.

# Non-formal learning:

That feminist identity has resurfaced, as I say, a lot of these political things went under cover for a while and it wasn't until we'd had a few debates in the choir that the feminist side came out of me again.

That feminist streak. I think it is the same, we can't get complacent about anything, because women are still put down in the workplace. They are still held back. There is still this ceiling beyond which women can't climb, just in the same way that gays are still vulnerable in society. We just have to look beyond our own borders to see that.

# Non-formal learning: HRF

... really open dialogue...

it 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.

# Non-formal learning: HRF

I think that is what we give when we go out and give our presentations, people see that we are very comfortable with each other and we are very comfortable asking questions and having a dialogue which makes other people more comfortable to ask us quite difficult and sometimes intimate questions.

# Non-formal learning: HRF

...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.

# Non-formal learning: HRF

I have learnt about LGBT folk being within the group, seeing how we are all getting on, listening to stories. It was something that I was completely ignorant of until I joined the group and for me it has been an eye opener in some respects.



# Non-formal learning: HRF

We've learned that it's not just a social group it's a campaigning group.

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.

# Intergenerational learning:

## **Intergenerational practice:**

To bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities which promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contribute to building more cohesive communities. (Generations Working Together 2015)

# Intergenerational learning: lines of enquiry:

- who is involved in intergenerational learning and what their roles might be;
- how 'alternative lifestyles' shape the nature of the environment in which intergenerational learning takes place;
- what conditions may support or prevent intergenerational learning;
- what is transmitted in terms of knowledge, values or tradition and what might be the benefits and risks for participants.

# Possibilities of intergenerational learning

I would definitely want to keep a connection with the older generation of gay and lesbian people. And as for the younger ones I would just be humbled and delighted if anyone was interested in my story and it would be great if we could be mentors for a new generation.... Would just like nothing better to be supportive to the younger generation.

# Possibilities of intergenerational learning

I spent a lot of time in my 20s thinking that I shouldn't like men but actually I do. – [Laughter] – that sort of weird thing that was around at the time and lesbian discos and huge debates about should we allow men who cross dress into the disco ... why did we waste our breath? What did it actually fucking matter? **(Rachel b. 1954)**

We could perhaps have a bit more tolerance within in our community for each other. I think, that would be my main message ...to be very, very tolerant ...or be more tolerant than perhaps my generation was of the differences within the Lesbian and Gay community. **(Liz b. 1961)**

# Challenges of intergenerational learning

... we would love to play that role if the younger generation need it. But in the same way I am sure lots of them don't. Lots of them are defining themselves in completely different ways ... I am not sure if their needs are going to be the same as our needs.

# Challenges of intergenerational learning

... when I was younger, like when I was about 20, I wasn't interested in older LGBT people in their 60s. Like not at all. And I think it is difficult for some of them [younger LGBT people] because there is few opportunities for them to develop a political consciousness than there used to be.

# Possibilities for intergenerational learning: HRF approach

One of the things that has happened for me in this group, that I have learnt a lot, which I just didn't know about was specifically about transgendered people. But it has surprised me the ignorance I have felt and locally, the difference, we have several transgendered people whose attitudes to certain things are diametrically opposite... If we've got three trans women in the group you have got at least 9 opinions there! *Group laughter*

You can have one who describes herself as transgendered and another who describes herself as transsexual and you say well what is the difference? Mmm??? *Group laughter*



# Final reflections:

... we are not the same but we are human beings and we have lots of links in common and we should be valuing what those links are, as well as linking what the differences are. So I think, maybe it is part of a necessary process that you *have to* define yourself as different before you can also define yourself as part of a bigger group...

maybe that's what young people need as well, is to see that there are other ways of being, there are other ways of thinking and they are not frightening or shocking and certainly not immoral or illegal. ... And bearing in mind my experience with much younger people, adolescents I think they need role models, I think that they need to know that people are gay and not just gay when they are young and trendy but when they are in their 50s and 60s and that's there's a community that you belong to and that it is a kind of a flexible community that is not defined by geography, that is defined by sexuality and by thinking and by all kinds of things.

# Learning later develops:

Knowledge of becoming older and LGBT that is critical and empowering in locations where:

identities grow and change and it enables learners to challenge heterosexualising discourses and heteronormative ways of being, believing, desiring, acting, becoming and belonging. (Grace and Hill 2009, p.34)