Older People’s Understandings of Sexuality (OPUS)

‘We’ve Had Our Sex Life Way Back’: Older Care Home Residents & Sexual/Intimate Citizenship

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Why?

• Neglected
  – Sex, intimacy & sexuality designed out of policy & everyday practice concerning older people – silenced, sidelined, especially LGB&T service users (Hafford-Letchfield 2008).
  – Idea: ‘...rare, astonishing and ridiculous’ (Hodson and Skeen, 1994: 223)

• Need to address older people’s exclusion from ‘sexual citizenship’ (Bauer et al, 2014; Gott, 2005)
  – Some challenge to stereotypes (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000) **BUT** still coy about sex & intimacy - reinforces ageist erotophobia

• Sexuality a human rights issue
  – but eclipsed by concern with bio-medical & psychological functioning (Bauer et al, 2014). If acknowledged often heteronormative (Willis et al, 2013)
Context: older people in UK

- **How many?**
  - 10.3 million people aged 65 or over in the UK - 4.5% in care homes (ONS, 2011).
  - Still just over 500,000 individuals!

- **Mainly women**
  - Ratio of men to women aged 65+ in UK, 2010 was 100:154 (ONS, 2011a)
  - Among 85+, women outnumber men by a factor of 2:1 (ONS, 2011b)
  - Can be exacerbated by inequalities of longevity shaped by class and race.

- **Two-thirds have a dementia** (ONS, 2011b)
How were accounts generated?

**Research design:** consultative, participatory & feasibility study underpinned by 2 main research questions:

- how significant is this work
- if important, how should it be done?
Sample & data collection

1. **Semi-structured interviews** in 2 care homes in NW England
   - 3 residents (1 woman; 2 men)
   - three spouses (all female)
   - Gender-matched & used scenarios & images of intimacy & affection (opposite and same-sex).
   - All white, British and none identified as LGBT from their accounts

2. **Focus groups** 2 in 2 homes in the Northwest
   - used scenarios & images
   - 1 group of ten, 1 group of six (N = 16)
   - Included managers, dementia specialists, care & reception staff.

   **Study participants N = 22**

3. **Consultative conference** of 40+ academics and professional carers, including members of the Care Homes Research Group to test interim findings/narratives
Data analysis

• Narrative data uploaded into NVivo10 to organize into key themes.

• Overall coding frame derived inductively via two passes through data and checked by research team. Re-coding into broader themes and identifying sub-codes.

• Narrative analysis – content and assembly.

• Choice of narratives for foreground based on frequency, commonality, (including overlap from distinct perspectives) AND key ‘minority’ reports e.g. spousal loss of control over care.
Residents as post-sexual/post-intimate?

Paul: What do you think sexuality means to residents?

William (78): Negative… Nobody talks about it… Nobody practices it. We just live as we are… That’s it. We’ve had our sex life way back… Have you had a look around here at some of these [people]? They’re that bloody old, they’ve got cobwebs on ‘em… [Later] I think you should leave it alone. It’s people’s personal life.
Intimacy reclaimed: a human need & mark of longevity

Olivia: Well it’s just togetherness... If you’ve been married for a long, long time they need each other, even if it’s to hold hands and have a cuddle... It’s just support isn’t it; it’s just knowing that somebody’s there for you... It’s a very private thing... Honour somebody’s privacy, if their door’s shut; is it shut for a reason... I know in this home there are double rooms but there’s not many. We can’t even have a cuddle lying down... Do you still have appetites, John, with your Parkinson’s?

John (62): Do bears shit in the woods?
Contradictory stories: ‘past it’ but never say never

Maria: What does sexuality mean to residents?

Emily (80): Not a lot... with older people that they might’ve forgotten what it were like or can’t be bothered... I suppose if you became friendly with someone, things might change [our emphasis]... You’ve got to remember this generation... you had your husband and you stopped. For our generation, it [sex] was like taboo... They’ve got children and grandchildren; they’ve got enough on their plate... Some women are glad when it’s finished; other women aren’t...
Partners’ stories: intimacy a human need & normalizing changed relationships

• Cuddling, touching and kissing is very important. For me it is anyhow... just so he knows that I still love him. As for sex itself, I don’t think that’s important. Well; not to us because my husband could not participate... I couldn’t express enough to you what it means for these patients to be hugged (Mavis)

• ...To me, it’s just a way of showing my husband that I still love him and I still want to hold his hand and kiss him (Joan)

• N.B. Mavis concerned with whether displays of affection were ‘right’. Also, sex subordinate to quality, individualized care.
Care staff: safeguarding dilemmas

There used to be a resident... who had been known to ring up prostitutes... That could be a bit tricky... Because you might be encouraging somebody to break the law (Carer, focus group 1)

...they’ve obviously got that need and want to express it but can’t because of the capacity and does that lady know what he’s doing? Does she actually want him to do that? It’s mind-boggling, really (Carer, focus group 2)
Take-home messages: different perspectives

1. Residents’ responses vary:
   - post-sexual and too personal
   - Intimacy much more important than sex, which needs to be placed in context of other needs & wishes
   - Enabling choices is vital

2. Spouses:
   - stressed importance of intimacy in and its ability to legitimate/normalize relationships
   - some assertive about intimacy and others felt constrained about expressing it front of others
Take-home messages: different perspectives

3. Care staff:
   - More enthusiastic - important subject neglected

   - need for policies, training, support and & guidance that recognise complexities & enable meeting sexuality/intimacy needs

   - environmental & cultural changes needed esp. re safeguarding
Thank you for your attention...

We welcome your questions and comments

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