THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Internet Dating, Sexual Intimacy and Older People

OPEN ACCESS

Chapter 10

Internet Dating, Sexual Intimacy and Older People

Chris Beasley (Politics, and the Fay Gale Centre for Research on Gender, University of Adelaide), and Mary Holmes (Sociology, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh)

Introduction

Why does sexuality matter in discussions of older people? Focusing here on heterosexuality, we argue that it matters because social interconnection involves sexuality in the form of embodied intimacies. It matters because a failure to include sexuality in discussions of social interconnection has some highly problematic consequences. The link between sexual health and well-being is now well established. *The Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviours,* which involved a large sample of men and women[1] aged 40-80 from 29 countries, found that over three quarters of participants agreed that 'satisfactory sex' was essential to maintenance of relationships and was associated with an overall sense of health and well-being (see for example, Laumann et al. 2005). A wide range of studies reiterate that sexual expression is by no means an optional extra but appears to be 'an essential aspect of our lives' (Barrett 2011, 32; see also Planned Parenthood Federation of America 2003) that is predictive of a heightened quality of life (Weeks 2002). Thus attention is needed to desire for sexual intimacy amongst older people, as well as disabled people, and many others (Seymour and Lupton 2004). As Barrett notes:

> [t]here is a significant body of evidence linking sexual health to emotional well-being of older people. Despite this, few health or human service organisations have programs to promote the sexual health of older clients. (Barrett 2011: 31)

If given the opportunity, older people themselves express the importance of sexuality in living well. As a woman participant in a study by Sue Malta said: 'I can hardly walk, but there is nothing like a romp in bed to make me feel alive' (cited in Cooper 2008). Yet older dependent people in institutional care are typically offered no privacy, no shared beds, no opportunities for pleasure, flirting, dating, romance, sex. The lack of attention to older people's sexuality is also evident in that information they receive typically ignores it. For example the National Stroke Foundation (Australia's) audit (2010: 32) on whether patients were given information about the impact on sexuality after a stroke found that only 12 per cent were given any information on this issue.

Despite the importance of sexuality to well-being, the sexually embodied intimacies of older people are frequently ignored. For example, care theorists do put social connection *and* embodiment on the socio-political agenda, whether they focus upon micro one-to-one caring

---

[1] It appears that the respondents were not asked about whether their sexual partners were same or different sex.

relationships or care as a macro social practice with institutional and governance implications. Yet, even these thinkers tend to deal only with quite specific aspects of embodiment—typically those to do with bodily maintenance and nurturance, such as elder and child care (Beasley and Bacchi 2012). As Davina Cooper (2009) has also noted, care is conceived in a distinctly desexualised way. Understandings of social interconnection, in our view, demand a more expansive understanding of embodied intersubjectivity. We wish to look for a more substantive way of gripping together the corporeal, emotional and the socio-political—of grasping simultaneously the sociality of flesh and physicality of social life. This includes integrating sexuality into our conceptions of social connection.

The desexualised framing of social connection and intimacy amongst older people suggests that new approaches and terminologies are necessary. In previous work (for example Beasley and Bacchi 2012) our inclination has been to consider new vocabularies (the language of 'social flesh') that are more robustly attentive to sexuality, and also enable consideration of emotional reflexivity. The language of social flesh foregrounds that close relationships involve interdependence and this is constituted by a set of often highly emotional practices which rest upon intimacy and interconnection (Holmes 2010). However, whatever the frameworks we employ to consider social connection, the central point remains that sexuality must be included in our deliberations.

If social interconnection includes embodied intimacies such as sexuality, then this recognition has two important ramifications. Firstly it means a requirement to develop new directions in our research, and secondly it means asking, what might the most useful means be for exploring such possibilities and developments? In this chapter we consider the question of such new research directions. We examine how older people's sexuality is usually discussed, suggest how instead we might link elder sexual practice to social change, and finally explore how internet dating amongst older people might provide some illustrations of ways in which they might escape sexual convention.

Internet dating as a central focus

In this chapter we consider the issue of sexuality as it relates to intimacy within the specific context of internet dating among older people. Sexuality in this analysis includes not merely sexual acts, practices and experiences but also a conglomerate of institutions, identities, social assumptions and customs, as well as resources and labour (Beasley et al. 2012; Jackson 1999). Intimacy, on the other hand, is employed to refer to a more diffuse arena than sexuality, concerned with a sense of close, embodied and particularised personal connection (Budgeon 2008; Jamieson 1999; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). This is typically not only about the individuals that experience it but also embedded in relationalities beyond it (Smart 2007). Sexuality and intimacy overlap though they are not reducible to each other. In this chapter we are interested in this overlap.

Looking at internet dating assists us in considerations of how we might adequately attend to sexuality in thinking about older people's connections to others and their contribution to social change. Internet dating may be described as a 'purposeful form of meeting new people

through specifically designed internet sites' (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008: 149). It is a relatively new phenomenon, with 'the net' becoming established in the 1990s and commercial dating sites soon following. These sites make use of new technology and vary in how they operate but broadly speaking follow similar principles to previous newspaper 'personal ads' and other existing forms of matchmaking (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2009; Hardey 2002; Whitty et al. 2008). On the other hand, this new and expanding form may also offer some new possibilities.

Internet dating is an increasingly popular means of undertaking a form of social interconnection involving the aim of sexuality/intimacy for all age groups and sexual preferences (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008: 150; Couch and Liamputtong 2008; Hillier and Harrison 2007; Whitty 2008). Users over 55 may still be less likely to visit internet dating sites than younger users, at least in America (Smith and Duggan 2013: 13), but the proportion is likely to rise as the numbers of older people that are making use of the internet is increasing in many countries, including Australia and the UK (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011; Office of National Statistics UK 2013; Scottish Government 2013). There appears to be worldwide increased use of internet dating as the means for older people to undertake intimate/sexual relationships (Malta cited in Cooper 2008; see also Malta 2013). While definitions of 'older' vary (Tarrant 2010), the use of internet dating amongst older people is of increasing social significance, given that by 2051 it is predicted that 25 per cent of the Australian population will be aged over 65 (Malta 2007: 85) and similarly for the UK (MacInnes and Pérez Díaz 2009). Moreover, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) the 'greying' of the world's population is global (WHO 2002: 6-7) and the growing number of older people—including the rising number of single older adults—will be accompanied by a parallel increase in life expectancy (Malta 2013). These older people will not necessarily be dependent and may well continue to live active lives (Spijker and MacInnes 2013). In this context, despite the growing significance of internet dating, specifically in relation to older people (Hogan, Dutton and Li 2011), literature on this topic is limited. The literature that exists also tends to be dominated by psychological/therapeutic, demographic or health risk orientations. By contrast, our aim is to provide some insight into the practice and meanings of internet dating amongst older people while linking this back to considerations of social connection and to better understand ageing sexualities in the internet age.

In the first instance research on sexuality and older people has largely reflected widespread ageism and heterosexism, (DeLamater and Sill 2005; Gott et al. 2004; Osbourne et al. 2002) by assuming that older people are not sexual, that queer older people do not exist, or even that any sexual expression amongst older people is problematic, strange or unseemly (Barrett et al. 2008; Brown 2009). Denmark (2002: 17) notes that 'one of the most pervasive myths in our society is the belief that a decrease in sexual interest and a diminished capacity for sexual behaviour are an intrinsic part of the aging process' (see also Adams et al. 2003: 405; Malta 2007: 84). Rather than older age being inevitably constituted as sexless, as noted earlier sexuality remains important to older people (see for example DeLamater and Sill 2005). Australian singles over 51, however they meet, 'are the most likely age group to have sex on

the first date' (Noone 2012). Internet dating similarly facilitates sexual intimacies, and Malta's study (2007) suggests that older participants (between the ages of 60-92) in internet dating were actually relatively quick to become sexually intimate with those they met.

Secondly, ageism is also reflected in the ongoing assumption that older people are technophobic 'digital immigrants' and have little knowledge, skill or interest in new technologies (M. N. Cooper 2000; Fong et al. 2001; Prensky 2001; Philbeck 1997; Adler 1996). Yet it would seem, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and other sources, that the number of older people accessing the internet is steadily rising and once the shift to online technology is made these users are as engaged as younger people (ABS 2011; Fox 2004, Malta 2007).

Thirdly, ageist perspectives regarding sexuality and use of technology combine to produce a focus in internet dating studies on the young (see for example, Hillier et al. 2012; Hillier and Harrison 2007; Clark 1998). Research on older people, sexuality and internet usage is in its infancy. An emphasis on older people is rare in the literature on internet dating, and there is little in the way of research outside of the USA. There is a very occasional paper considering how older people use the internet in ways that enhance their sexuality (Adams et al. 2010; Malta 2007; Malta and Farquharson 2014), but often little is said about sexuality or the focus is upon health risks such as increasing vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases (for example Noone 2012; Bateson et al. 2011; McWilliams and Barrett 2012, see also National Institute on Aging, US Department of Health and Human Services). In other words, there is restricted focus on interactive social meanings and positive social directions.

Relatedly, scholarship attending to internet dating and older people is limited in terms of qualitative work or analysis of values and practices. This restricted attention to qualitative interpretive investigation is in many ways reflective of rather narrow concerns in the internet literature generally. The underdeveloped character of qualitative interpretive investigation in the field means that it is difficult to assess whether internet dating for older people involves any innovations in attitudes and practices concerning, for example, equity around gender and sexuality (although see McWilliams and Barrett 2012). Consequently, there is limited thinking about whether internet dating might herald new directions in intimacy for a group that has grown up with the expectation that undertaking sexual relationships begins with face-to-face encounters often arising through existing social networks. The issue of the extent to which internet dating represents the possibility of sexual and social innovations or the continuation of existing modes of meeting/matchmaking has been raised in the literature (Finkel et al. 2012; Heino et al. 2010: 428; Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008: 149; McWilliams and Barrett 2012) but this is often considered in the narrow sense of new technical options such as expanding choices in partners or enhanced ability to seek matching partner characteristics available as a result of the technology. There is also some limited debate about the advantages and disadvantages of internet meetings compared with traditional off-line meetings. Such considerations include the possibility of encountering people beyond existing social circles, increased safety, less emphasis upon bodies and appearance, and enhanced personal control. These are usually weighed against issues such as

the problematic marketisation of the self and opportunities for deception (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2008).

However, this debate is typically pitched at the level of descriptions of individual interactions with only some consideration about how, for example, increased safety or alternatively greater risk might generate or repress opportunities for new forms of social interconnection and associated power relations including new forms of gendered sexual relations between heterosexual men and women. Yet this is surely a highly significant issue in terms of understanding potential directions for social change, as well for the future development of facilities and services for older people.

Heterodox directions in Ageing (Hetero)sexualities

We have said so far that putting together social interconnection and sexuality requires new research directions and that our focus on sexuality, internet dating and heterosexual older people reveals two gaps in the existing literature: a gap around attention to older people and around directions for social change.

In this setting we aim to consider heterosexuality by looking at internet dating and older people through the particular lens of attending to heterodox (non-normative) hetero-sexualities. Rather than simply looking at the question of whether older people undertaking internet dating are engaged in 'new' or supposedly more individually advantageous activities (in technological or social terms), we are interested in whether innovations in social interconnection and power relations arise, whether the emergence of internet dating has produced directions for progressive social change around hetero gendered sexualities.

In this approach we draw on our previous work concerning innovations in heterosexuality and hetero-masculinity with attention to emerging innovative modes of sexual intimacy (Beasley et al. 2012). In this case we intend to concentrate upon older heterosexual people seeking sexual intimacy through internet dating. As noted in that earlier work, we suggest that it is necessary to challenge the orthodoxy that heterosexuality is homogeneous and synonymous with heteronormativity (the institutionalised dominance of the idea that heterosexuality is *the* natural, normal and best form of sexuality,see Warner 1999). If heterosexuality is *simply* equated with heteronormativity, the hegemonic coherence of heteronormativity is ironically upheld. Furthermore, social change is then conceived as arising only at the margins. In contrast, our concern is to 'undo' heterosexuality, to undo the illusory homogeneity and authority of the heteronorm, in similar fashion to Butler's 'undoing' or 'troubling' of gender (Butler 2004, 1990), as well as opening up space for considerations of social change.

Instead of heterosexuality looking like a homogenous monolith, in Figure 10.1 it is possible to visualise a framework for considering the diverse range of the non-normative. At its

normative core, 'cissexuality'[2] describes a space where heterosexuality is indeed to be equated with heteronormativity and where sexed body, gender, sexual orientation, desire, sexual practice and inter-relationality align neatly with what is deemed to be the hegemonic (Harrison 2013: 12-13). Beyond this, there are comfortable and unthinking normative options which are perhaps less strictly aligned with the hegemonic but are nevertheless hegemonically satisfactory. However, from this point onwards, the Figure describes a potentially non-normative terrain. With regard to hetero-masculinity, the non-normative stretches from 'divergence' through to the entirely 'heretical.' Moving out from the norm, we first encounter divergence. To diverge involves staying connected to the norm but to behave in ways that challenge its boundaries. For example, a wife may constantly demand sex from her husband, to the extent that this upsets normative notions of wifely sexual passivity, but it is contained within the limits of heterosexual marriage. To transgress means wandering from the straight and narrow path, but not usually deliberately. A man, for example, may occasionally enjoy being fucked by his wife wearing a dildo, without either of them permanently altering their normatively gendered relationship in other ways. Subversion more consciously undermines the norm reflexively, if not necessarily radically. For example, committed couples who do not cohabit, question in an ongoing way whether heterosexual relationships have to be the centre of life and whether fulfilling heterosexual experiences are limited to penises penetrating vaginas. Dissidence is both intentional and more radical in its departure from the norm. A dissident heterosexual is likely to question boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual and/or might include practices such as group sex and polyamory (for more detail see Beasley et al. 2015, forthcoming). Questions about how or why people might travel out or back between these different levels await further research, but it is clear that this model might help us consider sexuality in more fluid ways, both within heterosexual practices and across boundaries with same-sex experience.

Figure 10.1: Locating Heterodox Heterosexualities—from normative to heretical

---

[2] This terminology is still emerging and there are several meanings attached to it. Nevertheless, it is typically located as the antonym of 'transsexual' and in our usage combines 'cisgender' (alignment of sex designated at birth with gender identification) and 'straight'—that is, we use it as a shorthand for clear-cut alignment with heteronormative heterosexuality. See also *Urban Dictionary*, Definition of cissexual and *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Definition of cisgender.

HERESY
DISSIDENCE
SUBVERSION
TRANSGRESSION
DIVERGENCE
NORMATIVITY
CISSEXUAL
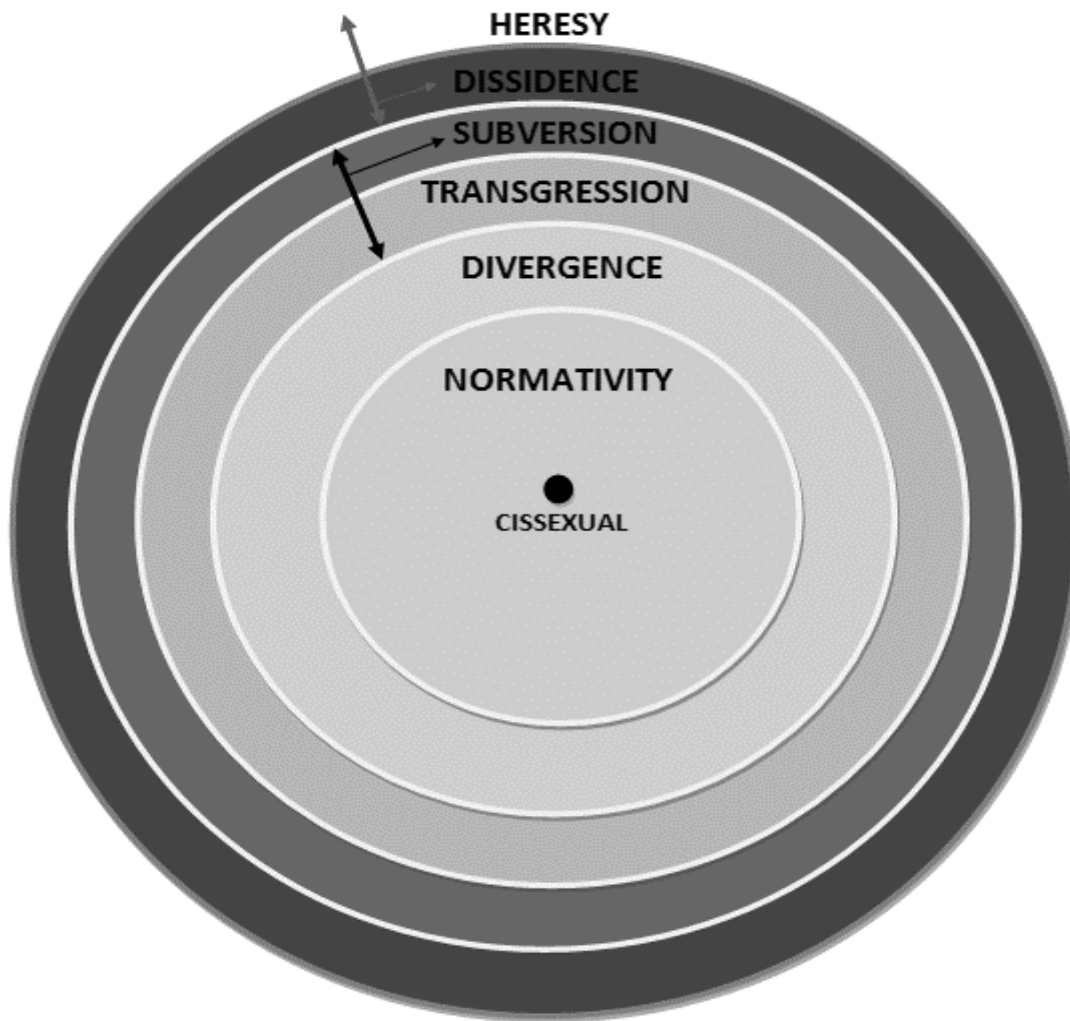
We note that our attention to older people and the non-normative in this chapter provides precisely a new research direction that we suggested was necessarily associated with exploring sexuality as a site of social interconnection. Attending to the non-normative in heterosexuality offers a new research frame for analysis of sexuality (and internet dating more specifically) as a form of social connection and intimacy amongst older people.

Possible directions for exploring older people, internet dating and sexuality

We want to flesh out some of the possibilities for non-normative directions by making use of publically available online material discussing internet dating, particularly internet dating involving those who self-designate as heterosexual. The value and challenges of using online sources as social science data has been strongly set out by David Beer and Roger Burrows (2007), but care must be taken to use them ethically (Holmes and Burrows 2012: 109-10; Baker and Whitty 2008: 43-5). None of the material cited in this chapter involves entering member-only areas or registering for internet dating sites, all could be accessed by any member of the public with internet access, and individuals are only identified if writing blogs and thus clearly aiming for a public audience. The material employed in our discussion was

searched via search engines using search terms such as 'seniors internet dating' or 'internet dating discussion forums'. While it does not constitute a systematic exploration of online sources, it does provide illustrative suggestions and highlights the need for further qualitative research focusing upon non-normative opportunities.

It may be of course that internet dating is not necessarily a site for such possibilities. Technological innovation may not necessarily be associated with social innovation. Indeed there are signs that what Sara Ahmed (2004: 11, 60, 89-95) describes as 'sticky' affects—that is, intransigent attachments to 'traditional' social interactions, in this case traditional conceptions of romantic 'meeting up'—may still be in play (see for example Whitty 2008). In this context, one blog by a participant in online dating notes:

> [y]ou might think online dating would create some much-needed "fairness" between the sexes. In the realm of hetero courtship, tradition still reigns supreme. The Internet could be the great democratizer, the great playing field-leveler. …
>
> Maybe in this environment where we are safely sequestered behind screens, we can get past some of the lingering gender-based "rules".... Wouldn't that be nice?
>
> But it seems quite clear to me that we're not there yet. I'm partly to blame, and you probably are too. I'm a feminist, sex-positive 21st century lady whose photos include me posing in a Rosie the Riveter Halloween costume. I write about gender on the Internet for crying out loud! But every day, when I log into the dating site of my choice, I play the passive role, the receiver of attention, the awaiter of messages...
>
> It's not behavior I'm particularly proud of either. Why don't I write messages first?... Why do I not respond politely to every message, even the ones I'm not interested in? ....Because it's just so easy (Moss 2013)

Moss notes the continued reign of traditional gender expectations within her internet dating practices, even though she is a 'sex-positive feminist' who believes that heterosexual women can enjoy sex (Beasley et al. 2012: 20-21). Online dating has not yet brought freedom from gender rules and norms and she finds herself passively awaiting messages, as do many women internet daters (Frohlick and Migliardi 2011: 79-81; Smaill 2004: 94-6). It is not at all clear that internet dating undermines, let alone challenges established gender norms (McWilliams and Barrett 2012).

Indeed, the advice older users of internet sites are given may actively reinforce normative ideas about gender difference. For example, a blog attached to a UK 'older dating' site reflects some of those norms, as can be seen in an entry by Sarah Hussey (2014):

> [m]eet intelligent senior singles on Older Dating Online who are interesting and appreciate the difference between the sexes. Ever since Cinderella women have enjoyed the allure of shoes.

Similarly the blog intones that for 'fifty plus senior single men gadgets are a form of bonding'. This is hardly a radical interruption of gender stereotypes and relations. On the

other hand, when we add concern with sexuality and internet dating to the new research agenda of attending to older people, there are some possible signs in favour of heterodox innovation.

Some of these innovations may be divergent in offering a gentle challenge to notions that older people are asexual. As Tarrant (2010), Calasanti (2009), Sandberg (2009) and Hearn and Sandberg (2009), among others, have noted in relation to older menolder people should not be ignored in social research as they may provide unexpected examples of social innovation. While older people are frequently viewed in de-sexualised ways, they appear in some of the scholarship on internet dating to challenge this. For example, Frohlick and Migliardi (2011: 79-80) tell of 63 year old heterosexual Jen who may not want to 'show her boobs' in her picture but whose profile says 'seeking sexy senior' and who explains that she would be happy to date younger men. She may be looking for a long term relationship, rather than casual sex, but is keen to avoid 'boring widowers' (see also McWilliams and Barrett 2012: 426). Other over-50 heterosexual women in Frohlick and Migliardi's study (2011: 83) report that they have enjoyed the opportunities internet dating has provided to have casual sex. Moreover, though older heterosexuals are differently socially situated, they may find more common ground than when they were younger as they negotiate intimate/sexual social bonds.

The social status and experiences of heterosexual men and women may converge somewhat as they age. Older heterosexual men are less clearly in a comparatively privileged position over time as they are increasingly located in paradoxical relations of power with regard to sexism and ageism. They lose the power attached to occupational status once they retire and struggle to present themselves as sexually powerful as age brings with it a loss in erectile enthusiasm (Calasanti 2009; 2004; Hughes 2011; Pain and Hopkins 2010: 79; Tarrant 2010: 1581). Older women over time become even more disadvantaged with regard to a confluent marginalisation around gender and age. They lose the youthful attractiveness that gives women sexual and social prestige. However, they may gain independence and a sense of enhanced agency after being divorced or widowed (McWilliams and Barrett 2012). As these older men and women both find themselves shifting social status (including loss of status related to hetero-gendered notions of embodied capacity and attractiveness), and hence to a degree sharing rather more ground than they might have in their youth (Hughes 2011; Bennett 2007; Hearn 2007; Rhohlinger 2002), does this produce innovative heterodox forms of heterosexual intimacy? The novel terrain of internet dating may provide a place in which such potential non-normative innovations are required and may even flourish.

A blog attached to an Australian dating website for older people might provide some indication of internet dating as having innovative possibilities in the form of divergence for its apparently heterosexual users. As Bruce MacDonald asks, 'Can older dating help you face change?':

> [o]lder dating with other senior singles in Brisbane can provide you with a support network of friends and a special senior single partner to help you through these changes, support can be really essential when your life is in a state of flux and within

the senior single community of Older Dating Online Australia you are bound to find others like you who have 'been there and done that'. The very nature of older dating means that the majority of senior single members have faced major change!

Of course, this contribution to the blog is not an account of older heterosexuals' experiences with internet dating but a way of promoting the site and encouraging people to join. Yet it claims that older people do not necessarily face 'fewer major life changes' as they get older and that internet dating may be a positive factor in adapting to those changes. The posting does not mention sex specifically, but elsewhere in the blog there are indications that sex may be involved in older people facing and embracing change.

While few might venture toward the more heretical, or 'queer' end of heterodox innovations, age may interact with new technologies to enable more possibilities for less sensational, perhaps more common, but nonetheless significant innovations that transgress or subvert norms around ageing and sexuality. These innovations might be more easily found amongst the young-old (60-74) than the old-old (75 and older). One analysis of heterosexuals' online personal advertisements found the young-old more likely to mention adventure, romance, sexual interests, and seeking a soul mate and less likely to mention health (Alterovitza and Mendelsohn 2013). Moreover, internet dating may for example enable what might be described as 'mundane polyamory.' Dating several people at once is a comparatively easy possibility, available to both older heterosexual women and men. While it is not a simple matter to have the energy, time or opportunity to develop connections with more than one person off-line, this is relatively simply done online. Indeed the online dating sites are set up on the basis that site members will browse a range of profiles and very likely interact with several on and off site. This will occur as a necessary part of the 'sorting' through of different dating possibilities, but enables such connections to continue, resulting in more than one relationship. In addition, at least some internet daters may have multiple profiles over more than one site, which may also facilitate conducting more than one relationship simultaneously (Frohlick and Migliardi 2011: 78; Smaill 2004: 102).

At a less dramatic, transgressive level, episodic multiple dating as a mode of mundane polyamory is common within internet dating, which is more difficult in off-line contexts. There are regular comments by internet dating users indicating that they can and do talk and meet with several potential partners for varying periods of time as they 'sort' through their options. Indeed internet dating sites are precisely set up for such episodic multiple connections to arise. It is not yet clear whether older people are also using internet dating to facilitate ongoing and intentional polyamory.

Other subversive options such as inter-generational sex and beat-style casual stranger-sex are possible for older heterosexual women (see Malta 2007; Frohlick and Migliardi 2011: 83). Establishing the extent of such activity and the kinds of experiences involved requires further research but there are some tantalising indications of it occurring. For example, an entry in a

UK based 'Casual Encounters Blog' (2011), which is accompanied by a photo of a topless 'older' woman says:

> [d]ating in a modern world can be scary for those that are older or over the hill. If you are over 40 or 50, then phrases like "internet dating" and "casual nsa [no strings attached] encounters" might seem a little foreign to you. There are ways for people to date at every age. It doesn't matter what you are looking for, your age, your race, or your gender. We each have a group of our peers who are looking for the very same thing.

The claim here is that there are older people who might be looking for casual sexual encounters, and this direct appeal to them via an online site suggests there is some expectation that they may look for those encounters online. In contrast to some of the myths about asexual older people, this and other online sources contain some expectation that older people might want to engage in sexual activity and not just within traditional relationships. Similar claims are made, although not verified, by a poster (using a pseudonym identifying him as male) on the 'Very Naughty' discussion forum. He suggests that 'older' women want to engage in casual, non-monogomous heterosex and use the internet to achieve this:

> [o]lder women are still up for a bit of 'Hanky Panky' and [if] they are smart they hook up with partners on internet dating sites. This is fantastic route to getting laid for millions of older women who want to keep their dating low key – out of the eyes of snooping friends and family.

This description then drifts towards fantasy and contains a far from radical or egalitarian vision of older heterosexual women's experiences of online dating. All the same, it does challenge the notion that older women are asexual. Yet there is little academic research available about older women's experiences and to what extent they might use internet dating sites in the ways this poster suggests As already noted (see Frohlick and Migliardi 2011: 83) older women could use internet dating to 'get laid' in casual sexual encounters, and may do so to keep their sexual activity separate from friends and families (see Stephens 1976). If significant numbers of older women are pairing with younger men, this also upsets the usual gender hierarchies in which older men select younger sexual partners who are traditionally deemed more attractive than older counterparts. This has some potential to challenge sexual hierarchies which assume that men will be the older, more experienced and more dominant partner in sex. However, the term 'older' is relative and may not mean very old. One of the two comments responding to this posting on the Very Naughty discussion forum thinks it '[s]ounds like interesting, but some good looking older women that visits gym' would have to be offering herself. As noted earlier, sexual activity amongst older adults is thought to require a youthful appearance (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991; McWilliams and Barrett 2012), and the constructions of gender and sexuality on this internet forum appear to support this argument.

Thus, while these non-normative possibilities are usually temporary and contingent, they may promote or invoke modes of sexual intimacy in sexual practices and relationships that have

political meaning and are of interest in terms of social change. And, if so, very likely there are policy, institutional and service implications.

Conclusion

Sexuality is frequently unrecognised and under-theorised as a mode of ageing social interconnection. Yet this failure to fully integrate sexuality into considering older people's lives cannot be sustained in the face of its well evidenced links with health and wellbeing. This has implications for the adequacy of policy, and health and service provision. However, to include sexuality, and in particular sexuality and older people, in our understanding of intimate arrangements requires new research directions. We focus upon the instance of older people and internet dating as a means to consider sexuality and social connection, and find that there is a significant research gap not merely in relation to older people but also in terms of considerations of social change.

In order to flesh out research directions that attend to sexuality, older people and change we consider hetero-sexuality not as a synonym for heteronormativity but rather as a site for heterodox (non-normative) possibilities in the realm of the dominant. This contribution draws on a theoretical model of heterosexualities as diverse and as ranging from cissexual normative forms to divergent, transgressive and subversive forms which may challenge sexual norms even if they are not entirely heretical. While it is possible that such a framework will demonstrate much that remains normative, the focus upon older people and new technologies in relation to sexual intimacy may reveal heterodox innovations which are politically significant. Some possibilities have been sketched out, including how internet dating may offer divergence in challenging conceptions of older people as asexual and how it might facilitate transgressions such as mundane forms of polyamory, or subversions such as casual sexual encounters. This new research terrain offers a means to seeking out developments in sexuality and associated possibilities for social change, which are relevant to the future development of facilities/services for older people. Such a terrain demands further empirical research, which we aim to undertake shortly.

By examining heterodox forms of heterosexuality amongst older people as seen via internet dating, we are able to consider the advantages and limits of the growth of cyber social interconnectedness and sexual intimacy amongst an ever growing older population. This might help legitimise a concern with sexuality and with the almost taboo subject of older people's sexual practices and relationships. We argue that terms like 'social flesh' (Beasley and Bacchi 2012) will assist us in such tasks by conceptually foregrounding the sexual in social connection, This in turn promises an account of older people's lives as ones in which they can be seen not simply as passive recipients of care but as often sharing their bodies with each other in socially connecting sexual practices that can challenge and contribute to changing social norms. .

References

Adams, M., Oye, J. and Parker, T. (2003) 'Sexuality of older adults and the Internet: From sex education to cybersex' *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 18(3): 405-15.

Adler, R.P. (1996) *Older Adults and Computers: Report of a National Survey*. SeniorNet: San Francisco, CA. Accessed May 2014 at: http://www.seniornet.org/php/ default.php?Page ID=5476.

Ahmed, S. (2004) *The cultural politics of emotion*. London: Routledge.

Alterovitza, S.S.R and Mendelsohn, G.A. (2013) 'Relationship goals of middle-aged, young-old, and old-old internet daters: An analysis of online personal ads' *Journal of Aging Studies* 27(2): 159-165.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2011) 'Personal internet use' Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2010-11, Cat. No. 8146.0. Accessed February 2014 at http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8146.0.

Baker, A. J. and Whitty, M. T. (2008) 'Researching romance and sexuality online: Issues for new and current researchers' pp 34-49 in S. Holland (ed) *Remote Relationships in a Small World,* New York: Peter Lang.

Barraket, J. and Henry-Waring, M. S. (2008) 'Getting it on(line): Sociological perspectives on e-dating' *Journal of Sociology* 44(2): 149-165.

Barrett, C. (2011) 'Auditing organisational capacity to promote the sexual health of older people' *Electronic Journal of Applied Psychology*, 7(1): 31-36.

Barrett, C., Harrison, J., & Kent, J. (2008). 'Permission to speak. Towards the development of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex friendly aged care services'. Accessed May 2014 at www.matrixguildvic.org.au/publications.htm.

Bateson, D. L., Weisberg, E., McCaffery, K. J. and Luscombe, G. M. (2011) 'When online becomes offline: attitudes to safer sex practices in older and younger women using an Australian internet dating service' *Sexual Health* 9(2) 152-159.

Beasley, C. and Bacchi, C. (2012) 'Making Politics Fleshly: The ethic of social flesh', in A. Bletsas and C. Beasley (eds) *Engaging with Carol Bacchi: Strategic Interventions and Exchanges.* Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.

Beasley, C., Brook, H. and Holmes, M. (2015, forthcoming), special issue of *Sexualities* (guest editors, M. Mulloholland, C. Beasley, H. Brook and M. Holmes).

Beasley, C., Brook, H. and Holmes. M. (2012) *Heterosexuality in Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.

Beer, D. and Burrows, R. (2007) 'Sociology and, of and in web 2.0: Some initial considerations' *Sociological Research Online* 12(5): http://www.socresonline.org.uk/112/5/17.html

Bennett, K. M. (2007) '"No Sissy Stuff": towards a theory of masculinity and emotional expression in older widowed men' *Journal of Aging Studies* 21: 347-356.

Brown, M.T. (2009) 'LGBT aging and Rhetorical silence' *Sexuality Research and Social Policy Journal of NSRC* 6(2): 65-78.

Butler, J. (2004) *Undoing Gender*. London: Routledge.

Calasanti, T. (2004) 'Feminist gerontology and old men' *Journal of Gerontology* 59B(6): 305-314.

Calasanti, T. (2009) 'Aging bodies, constructions of masculinities, and the anti-aging industry, in J. Hearn (ed.) *GEXcel Work in Progress Report, Volume V. Proceedings from GEXcel Theme 2: Deconstructing the hegemony of men and masculinities*. Linköping, Sweden: Linköping University: 27-40. Accessed May 2014 at http://www.genderexcel.org/webfm_send/51.

Casual Encounters blog (2011) 'Dating for older people' Casual Encounters Blog: All the information you need on casual sexual encounters, 24 March. Accessed February 2014 at http://www.casualencountersblog.co.uk/dating-for-older-people/

Clark, L. S. (1998) 'Dating on the net: Teens and the rise of "pure" relationships' pp. 159-183 in S. G. Jones (ed.) *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting computer-mediated communication and community*. Thousand Oaks and London: Sage.

Couch, D. and Liamputtong, P. (2008) 'Online dating and mating: The use of the internet to meet sexual partners' *Qualitative Health Research* 18(2): 268-279.

Cooper, Dani (2008) 'Golden Oldies discover love at first byte', ABC News in Science, Friday, 24 October. Accessed May 20014 at http://www.abc.net.au/science/articles/2008/10/24/2397187.htm

Cooper, Davina (2009) 'Caring for Sex: The power of attentive action in forging feminist space' *Signs* 35(1): 105-130

Cooper, M. N. (2000) *Disconnected, Disadvantaged and Disenfranchised: Explorations in the Digital Divide.* Washington DC: Consumer Federation of America and Consumers Union Joint Report, October 11.

DeLamater, J. and Sill, M. (2005) 'Sexual Desire in Later Life' *Journal of Sex Research*, 42(2): 138-149. Accessed in May 2014 at http://melaniedavisphd.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/DeLamater_Sexual-Desire-in-Later-Life.pdf.

Denmark F. L. (2002) 'Myths of aging'. Psi Chi (The National Honor Society in Psychology): Distinguished Lectures/Special Topics, 7 (1): 14-21.

Featherstone, M. and Hepworth, M. (1991) 'The mask of ageing and the postmodern life course' pp 371- 389 in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth and B. Turner (eds) *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*. London: Sage.

Finkel, E., Eastwick, P., Karney, B., Reis, H. and Sprecher, S. (2012) 'Online Dating: A critical analysis from the perspective of Pyschological Science' Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 13(1), January: 3-66

Fong, E., Wellman, B., Kew, M. and Wilkes, R. (2001) *Correlates of the Digital Divide: Individual, Household, and Spatial Variation*. Report to Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources and Development Canada, June.

Fox, S. (2004) *Older Americans and the Internet*. Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 25. Washington, DC.

Frohlick, S. and Migliardi, P. (2011) 'Heterosexual profiling: Online dating and 'becoming' heterosexualities for women aged thirty and older in the digital era' *Australian Feminist Studies* 26: 73-88.

Gott, M., Hinchliff, S., and Galena, E. (2004) 'General practitioner attitudes to discussing sexual health issues with older people' *Social Science & Medicine*, 58: 2093–2103.

Hardey, M. (2002) 'Life Beyond the Screen: Embodiment and Identity through the Internet', *Sociological Review* 50(4): 570–85.

Harrison, K. (2013) *Sexual Deceit: The Ethics of Passing*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.

Hearn, J. (2007) 'Men, ageing and power: can men's ageing challenge patriarchy?' Östersund: Mittuniversitetet Mid Sweden University. Accessed May 2014 at http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1653/FULLTEXT01.pdf#page=73.

Hearn, J. and Sandberg, L. (2009) 'Older men, ageing and power: masculinities theory and alternative spatialised theoretical perspectives' S*extant: revue du Groupe interdisciplinaire d'etudes sur les femmes et le genre*, 27: 147-163.

Heino, R., Ellison, N. and Gibbs J. (2010). 'Relationshopping: Investigating the market metaphor in online dating' *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27: 427–447.

Hillier, L. and Harrison, L. (2007) 'Building realities less limited than their own: Young people practising same-sex attraction on the Internet' *Sexualities* 10(1): 82–100.

Hillier, L., Mitchell, K.J. and Ybarra, M.L. (2012) 'The Internet As a Safety Net: Findings From a Series of Online Focus Groups With LGB and Non-LGB Young People in the United States' *Journal of LGBT Youth* 9(3): 225-246.

Hogan, B., Dutton, W. and Li, N. (2011) *A Global Shift in the Social Relationships of Networked Individuals: Meeting and Dating Online Comes of Age*, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, February 14 (part of the 'Me, My Spouse and the Internet Project'). Accessed at May 2014 at file:///C:/Users/a1065991/Downloads/Me-MySpouse_GlobalReport.pdf.

Holmes, M. (2010) 'The Emotionalization of Reflexivity' *Sociology* 4(1): 139-154

Holmes, M. and Burrows, R. (2012) 'Ping pong poms: emotional reflexivity in return migration from Australia to the UK' *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 47(1): 105-123.

Hughes, J. (2011) 'Are older men taking sexuality as prescribed? *Australian Feminist Studies* 26(67): 89-102.

Hussey, S. (2014) 'Why senior single woman need more shoes and senior single men like gadgets' OlderDatingOnline.co.uk: Blog, 28 January 2014. Accessed 14 February 2014 at http://www.olderdatingonline.co.uk/blog/.

Lauman, E., Nicolosi, A., Glasser, D., Paik, A. Gingell, C. Moreira, E. and Wang, T. (2005), 'Sexual problems among women and men aged 40-80 years: prevalence and correlates identified in the global study of sexual attitudes and behaviours' *International Journal of Impotence Research*, 17: 39-57.

MacInnes, J. and Pérez Díaz, J. (2009) 'The reproductive revolution' *The Sociological Review*, 57(2): 262-284.

McWilliams, S. and Barrett. A.E. (2012) 'Online dating in middle and later life: Gendered expectations and experiences' *Journal of Family Issues* 35(3): 411-436.

Malta, S. (2007) 'Love Actually! Older Adults and their Romantic Internet Relationships' *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society* 5(2): 84-102.

Malta, S. (2013) 'Why go online? Older adults' reasons for online dating'. *Reflections, Intersections and Aspirations, 50 years of Australian Sociology*, The Australian Sociological Association (TASA), Refereed Conference Proceedings. Accessed May 2014 at file:///C:/Users/a1065991/Downloads/Older%20people%20&%20online%20dating%20Malta.%202013.%20Why%20go%20o. Incorrect – Chris please find or use below

Malta, S. and Farquharson, K. (2014) 'The initiation and progression of late-life romantic relationships' *Journal of Sociology* 50(3): 237-251.

Moss, E.H. (2013) 'Online dating sucks for men because of women like me', *Mamamia*, 4 March. Accessed June 2013 at http://www.mamamia.com.au/relationships/online-dating/.

National Institute on Aging, US Dept of Health and Human Services, Health and Ageing,

 'HIV, AIDS, and Older People', Accessed May 2014 at
http://www.nia.nih.gov/health/publication/hiv-aids-and-older-people.

National Stroke Foundation (Australia) (2010) *National Stroke Audit Rehabilitation Services 2010*. Accessed May 2014 at
http://strokefoundation.com.au/site/media/National_stroke_audit_rehabilitation_servic es_2010.pdf

Noone, Y. (2012) 'Safe sex campaign for seniors',
http://www.australianageingagenda.com.au/2012/09/27/safe-sex-campaign-for-seniors/

Office of National Statistics (2013) 'Age' Statistical bulletin: Internet Access Quarterly Update, Q3 2013. Accessed 14 February 2014 at
http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access-quarterly-update/q3-2013/stb-ia-q3-2013.html#tab-Age.

Osborne, D., Barrett, C., Hetzel, C., Nankervis, J., and Smith, R. (2002). *The Wellness project: promoting older people's sexual health*, The National Ageing Research Institute. Accessed May 2014 at
www.mednwh.unimelb.edu.au/publications/pub02.htm.

Oxford English Dictionary Online, Definition of cisgender. Accessed July 2013 at
http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cisgender.

Pain, R. and Hopkins, P. (2010) 'Social Geographies of Age and Ageism' pp.78-98 in S. J. Smith, R. Pain, S. A. Marston and J. P. Jones III (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Social Geographies*. London & Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage.

Philbeck, J. (1997) 'Seniors and the Internet' *Cybersociology*, 2, August.

Planned Parenthood Federation of America (2003) White Paper*: The health benefits of sexual expression*. Accessed May 2014 at
http://www.plannedparenthood.org/files/PPFA/BenSex_07-07.pdf.

Prensky, M. (2001) 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1' *On the Horizon*, 9 (5): 1 – 6.

Rholinger. D. A. (2002) 'Eroticizing men: cultural influences on advertising and male objectification' *Sex Roles* 46(3/4): 61-74.

Sandberg, L. (2009) 'Getting intimate: Old age, masculinity and new (?) heterosexual morphologies'. G*excel Work in Progress Report Volume V*. *Proceedings from GEXcel Theme 2: Deconstructing the Hegemony of Men and Masculinities*: Linköping, Sweden: Linköping University: 61-78.. Accessed May 2014 at
http://www.genderexcel.org/webfm_send/51.

Scottish Government (2013) '9 Internet' Scotland's People Annual Report: Results from 2012 Scottish Household Survey. Accessed 14 February 2014 at http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/08/6973/9.

Seymour, W. and Lupton, D. (2004) 'Holding the line online: Exploring online relationships for people with disabilities' *Disability & Society* 19(4): 291-305.

Smaill, B. (2004) 'Online personals and narratives of the self: Australia's RSVP' *Convergence* 10(1): 93-10.

Smith, A. and Duggan, M. (2013) Online Dating and Relationships. Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. Accessed 28 February 2014 at http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/10/21/online-dating-relationships/.

Spijker, J. and MacInnes, J. (2013), 'Population ageing: the timebomb that isn't?' *British Medical Journal* 347: f6598.

Stephens, J. (1976) *Loners, losers, and lovers: Elderly tenants in a slum hotel*. Oxford, UK: University of Washington Press.

Tarrant, A. (2010) '"Maturing" a Sub-discipline: The Intersectional Geographies of Masculinities and Old Age', Geography Compass 4(10): 1580-1591

Urban Dictionary, 'Definition of cissexual'. Accessed July 2013 at http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cissexual.

Weeks, D. (2002) 'Sex for the mature adult: Health, self-esteem and countering ageist stereotypes' *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 17(3): 231-240.

Whitty, M. T. (2008) 'Liberating or debilitating? An examination of romantic relationships, sexual relationships and friendships on the net' *Computers in Human Behavior* 24(5): 1837–1850.

Whitty, M.T., Baker, A.J. and Inman, J.A. (eds) (2008) *Online Matchmaking*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

WHO (World Health Organization) (2002) *Active Ageing: A Policy Framework*. WHO, Europe.