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Midlife sexuality: Beyond heteronormativity

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I'm a student at the La Trobe Rural Health School in Bendigo, in Central Victoria, 160 k from Melbourne. There are 4000 students on campus, and a pod of wild kangaroos.

I'm up to the data analysis stage of my PhD, and have been enrolled three years. I've been teaching part time at La Trobe in Education and Health for 10 years.

Overview

- Definitions
- What is not new – historical context
- Social scripts
 - Locating myself in relationship research; my study
 - Sexual fluidity – Yvette, Thelma and Abe
 - Relationship configuration diversity
 - Why this matters

Definitions. Heteronormativity and mononormativity

- Heteronormativity – assumption that being heterosexual is the default position
 - reinforces cultural, hierarchical bias (Rubin 1984)
- Mononormativity – assumption that a person has, and only will have one partner (Barker & Langridge 2010)
- Change from following conventional social scripts

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This talk's title should have included relationships beyond heteronormativity, as well as beyond mononormativity.

By heteronormativity I mean an assumption that being heterosexual, or attracted to the opposite sex, is the default position. This makes someone who is not exclusively opposite sex attracted the outsider, or different one, and reinforces cultural, hierarchical bias. It also assumes a binary, both in physical sex, and sexuality. Mononormativity refers to the expectation you will have only one partner, and the assumption that you and your sole partner WILL be known as a couple. Anything that deviates from these expectations is seen as 'other' or outside the normal and expected.

What I want to present in this paper is data from my research with baby boomers observing a change from conventional social scripts to people pushing boundaries around relationship types and sexual expression.

It's not new

- 40 years since start of the gay pride movement in Melbourne (Hurley 2011).
- *Hair* the musical, King's Cross 1969
- '...two-way mirrors, naked slave stuff, flagellation, parties and multiple orgies, not to mention the homosexuality...; these are the symptoms of decadence and decay'.
Geoffrey Wilmot, 1963, in *The Bulletin* quoted in Buongiorno 2012, p. 223.



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As a sexuality educator and researcher, who is open and broad-minded, I take diversity and variety in sexuality and relationships for granted, but every so often I am reminded that is not the general attitude. Yet I want to avoid an approach that suggests that diversity in relationships is new - it is very common for people to think they invented something when they encounter it for the first time. It is 40 years since the start of gay rights movement in Victoria (Hurley, 2011) and an openness to awareness of same sex relationships. The photo is from a march in Adelaide, not Melbourne, but it is the same year.

Hair the musical in the Metro Theatre, Kings Cross in 1969 combined the anti-Vietnam war protest with the exploration of free love and public nudity. I attended that production three times in 1970, as a 14 year old, catching the train by myself from Melbourne to Sydney, washing my hair every day for a week beforehand to make sure it was frizzy and wild enough.

Frank Bongiorno in *The Sex Lives of Australians* argues that in the 1950s and earlier many ideas of the sexual revolution were being championed. Also sexology had been noting the pursuit of sexual pleasure, new contraceptive techniques, and agitation for the rights of sexual minorities over many decades (p. 222). While I love the sensationalism of this quote, from conservative magazine *The Bulletin*, I don't think it reflects mainstream society. However, it is useful in that it shows that diverse sexuality was happening and being discussed in mainstream media.

A fish out of water at IARR 2012

How we approach relationship research matters

- Heterosexual monogamy the gold standard ?
- Face sheet variables (Silverman, 2007)
- Stereotypes reinforced
- I did not ask my participants to categorise relationships or sexuality beyond inclusion criteria.



Photo: Chicago by night

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Gender socialisation and mainstream media still promote heterosexual monogamy as the expectation, and social scripts develop from this. I presented at the International Association for Relationship Research conference in Chicago this year, and felt like a fish out of water. The focus of the papers at that conference emphasised long term, monogamous, heterosexual relationships as the gold standard and anything deviant from that was relegated to an unpopular time slot or put in a session with a title such as *Nontraditional/ Unconventional relationships*.

I was trying to make sense of how out of place my research seemed, and, I felt. Then I read sociologist David Silverman's work (2007), showing how important it is to plan research from an open minded perspective. He says we view people as puppets of social structures, and what they do is defined by society. 'In practice, this reduces to the level of explaining people's behaviour as certain "face sheet" variables (like social class, gender or ethnicity)' p.88. Putting people into little boxes, or categories. So when social scientist researchers try to find answers to questions about behaviour, e.g., why do individuals engage in unsafe sex? their answers are partly justified or categorised by those face sheet variables. It means that things outside those categories are not included, or people misrepresent themselves because they don't have a box to tick that does describe them. This means assumptions and stereotypes are reinforced.

I acknowledge that this phenomenological-type bracketing is not entirely possible, but in my study, aside from the inclusion criteria of baby boomer, and living outside a capital city, people were not asked to categorise themselves.

Now I will describe my study, and report on findings from my preliminary data analysis that relate to diversity, or non mainstream aspects, of sexuality, and relationship configuration.

The study's web page, fwbresearch.wordpress.com



- What is the experience of rural baby boomers in friends-with-benefits relationships (FWBR)?
- Definition: People are friends, have an ongoing or repeated sexual relationship, do not consider themselves to be a couple
- Qualitative research, using in-depth interviews
- 'Tell me about your friends with benefits relationship'

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I'm not expecting you to be able to read the text on this; but it is a screenshot of my research page showing how pretty it looks.

My research question is 'What is the experience of rural baby boomers in friends-with-benefits relationships?'. I am exploring the impact of friends with benefits relationships on the health and wellbeing of rural baby boomers.

I'm defining a friends with benefits relationship as a relationship as one where people have a primary friendship, and a repeated sexual relationship, but do not consider themselves to be a couple. I use this definition, and in addition do not make assumptions about the depth of friendship or their activities (other than the occurrence of sexual activity), exclusivity, emotional connection, sexual orientation, gender, or the sex of the people involved.

The purpose of the study is to gather empirical data about FWBR, and about baby boomer sexuality. I'm using in depth interviews, without a question schedule. I'm inviting people to tell me about their FWBR, and focus on what is important to them. So far I've interviewed 13 women and 7 men.

Shifting attitudes, shifting sexuality

- Re early influences, Ray: Many of those (science fiction) writers were trying to implement their idea of where sexuality would go in these alternate things...so I developed an early understanding of maybe there's all sorts of ways people could live sexually, ...was part of the times
- Abe: my confidence and experience has built up (over the last 10 years)
- Yvette: It's improved a lot but they... think you're a freak. I mean you don't go to somebody and say "Hello my name is so and so and I sleep with men".
- Goldie: It had passed my mind a few times, and I thought, no I enjoy male company and that, you know, I guess the heterosexual sex that that involves.

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Hair the musical was probably one influence on this generation, but science fiction was another. Ray identifies as polyamorous, and attributes his early open-mindedness to relationship diversity to reading science fiction, where writers explored different relationship options as well as other galaxies. (Polyamory is defined as a relationship where people can have more than one partner, in respectful, consensual non-monogamy. It is not having affairs or cheating

Abe has always been open to relationship and sexuality diversity, but only in the last 10 years has he been confident to engage in sexual play with other men at swinging events.

Yvette points out that we still assume heterosexuality until otherwise stated. She notes that things have improved, but still wasn't confident to declare her own same sex interest, when her church was having an anti-homosexual discussion.

Goldie had considered a same sex relationship as an option, but decided it wasn't for her. Her action of mentally trying out the idea of a same sex relationship shows the positive attitude to same sex relationships as a legitimate choice.

Shifting sexuality

- Thelma: I was being hit on by males and females, it was quite an incredible experience for me
- Thelma: I'm more experimental with my sexuality, and it certainly is something I am considering. But I've hit on, I've hit on a few women and they've *rejected* me!
- Yvette: I was ...questioning my sexuality with women, you know, I really wanted an experience with women but I didn't get the chance so I was very confused
- Yvette: I want to have a relationship with a woman if possible

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Both Thelma and Yvette are interested in and open to a same-sex relationship. Thelma is more confident about trying to initiate something, and Yvette has been to events for women questioning sexuality, but didn't find someone who was right for her. Yvette was wistful about a friendship when she was 19, and wished that she had had the understanding now she'd had then to have acted on the sexual energy she felt at that time.

Variety of relationship types – not following conventional social scripts

- Short term opportunistic sex
- Long term FWBR – several months or many years
- Living apart together (LAT)
- Polyamorous: Multiple partners, no primary; Primary partner and FWB others
- One long term FWB, exclusive
- FWB after couple relationship ended



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My participants describe a wide variety of relationship types within the inclusion criteria. (go through slide list)

I interviewed a conservative looking sheep farmer from an isolated community who told me about her high libido after her husband died, meeting the needs of local elderly farmers whose wives had stopped doing what she saw as their duty, having five men on the go at once, and having to keep them apart. The proliferation of white utes meant they were not so easy to identify as different people coming and going to the farm.

Some people identified as polyamorous, or if they didn't use the term, what they described seemed to me to be a poly style situation, but in different configurations; some within a committed partnership with additional FWB partners, others determined to be seen as single, but drawing strength and contentment from a long term FWBR while open to additional pairings. Some people were quite content, indeed insistent, that they only wanted the one, exclusive partner. Another participant began a FWBR when their living together relationship ended, and the main positive aspect of their relationship had been the sex, which they retained.

Why does this matter? Coming up from underground.

- Come out from underground, free to explore again.
- Relationships, in their many configurations, are related to life stage.

- Assuming heterosexuality or monogamy is bad for people who do not fit that mould
- It is also bad for those who think they should – trying to be 'normal' (Barker 2011)
- Implications for aged care (de Vries, B., Mason, A. M., Quam, J., & Acquaviva, K. (2009).

- Everyday, ordinary people are pushing the boundaries, with positive outcomes
- Systems and structures need to reflect the reality of peoples' lives
- Assume nothing, promote good communication skills and sexual safety.

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Why does this matter? And why now?

Thelma said, 'People have been underground, bringing up kids, had a couple of failed relationships'. This was her justification for why people who might have been adventurous regarding relationships and sexuality in the sixties and seventies are only now coming above ground again and trying something different with renewed freedom. How we manage our intimate relationships is related to life stage and what is right for our particular circumstances.

Assuming heterosexuality or monogamy is bad for people who do not fit that mould. It is also bad for those inside the mould who see what happens to those outside and are not sure how to exactly conform, or where the boundaries are or who want to be different but are not confident about it. It has implications for planning and practice in aged care.

I'm so immersed in my data and am learning about the diversity of human sexual expression that I don't view these findings as unusual. But they are. What makes them significant is that my participants are everyday people; generous people who will give their time to a researcher, and talk openly and candidly about their relationships, mistakes, personal growth journeys: and share their secrets. But if you met them at a party or saw them in the supermarket queue they do not appear remarkable or different. Their confidence and curiosity to push the boundaries of how they organise a relationship outside stereotypical social scripts reflects a positive approach to diversity. It matters that their sexual health and wellbeing be reflected in policy and practice.

I'd like all people, especially health workers and those who work or engage with other humans, to assume nothing, and be respectful of difference; and for health professionals to promote good communication skills and sexual safety.

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Thank you

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