

Abstracts

Session 1: 11am - 12.30pm Sex and intimacy in later life and the end of life

“The Death of Sex?: Exploring Affirmative Rejections of Sex Against Successful Ageing.”

Dr Giulia Nazzaro, Nika Looman and Professor Katrien De Graeve, Ghent University, Belgium

Mainstream discourse on old age is increasingly criticised for desexualising older people and denying their sexual desire. WHO guidelines emphasise that sex is a lifelong process and that sex is a prerequisite for a healthy and happy life. Research is also increasingly presenting sex as a human right to be protected, including for people in residential care and even in palliative care. These ‘sex-positive’ discourses have in turn been criticised for making sex and desire a duty and a terrain of performance. Asexuality activism and feminist critique of compulsory sexuality also reject a neoliberal ideology of ‘successful ageing’ and the opposite it produces, namely the ‘unsuccessful’ older person. It is argued that the narrative of compulsory sexuality erases asexuality and reinforces feelings of loss, failure and frustration in older people when sex is no longer part of the final stage of life. However, the current discussions leave no room for people later in life who reject sex as an affirmative act. Drawing on research conducted as part of the ERC-funded Later-in-Life Intimacy Project, this paper explores how women and non-binary people, who decided not to have sex later in life, make sense of this ending of sex, for example in the aftermath of the bereavement of partners, long-term illnesses, or disabilities. The narratives bear witness to their attempts to find fulfilment for the remaining time and, by rejecting sex, to create a space outside the overvaluation of sex in late capitalist culture and the heteronormative compulsory romanticism that has disappointed them.

“Supporting sex and intimacy until the end of life for older adults living with dementia”

Dr Alisa Grigorovich, Brock University and Dr Pia Kontos, University of Toronto, Canada

Sex and intimacy are increasingly being recognized as central to older people’s quality of life, with evidence that their positive expression (e.g., pleasurable and free of coercion, discrimination, and violence) can have beneficial effects for health and wellbeing. However, despite this promising trend, older persons living with dementia in residential care homes experience multiple barriers to sexual expression and formation of intimate relationships. This presentation will focus on findings of a qualitative study that drew on a human rights approach to explore the experiences of diverse professionals, family members, and persons living with dementia with explicit attention to the ways in which macro-level dynamics are influencing the support, or lack thereof, for sexual expression at the micro level in Ontario, Canada. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with 27 participants (e.g. diverse professionals, persons living with dementia, family members) and all the collected data were analyzed thematically. While professionals acknowledged the importance of sexual expression for the health and wellbeing of persons living with dementia, they felt professionally unprepared to support this in practice, and for the most part either ignored this or intervened to suppress this. This is concerning as persons living with dementia and family members expressed a desire for sexual expression to be better supported in care homes and wanted providers to facilitate this in practice by removing barriers and supporting opportunities to form intimate relationships. We conclude by outlining some recommendations based on our research for the development of education and policy in this area.

“Intergenerational conversations about LGBTQ+ needs at the end-of-life – persisting fears in a changing world, reflections from Sweden” Dr Max Kleijberg, Karolinska Institute, Sweden

Dying, death, loss, and care concerns everyone, old and young. However, LGBTQ+ people may have specific experiences, hopes, and fears regarding the end-of-life. Furthermore, in Sweden, there are few intergenerational LGBTQ+ spaces to exchange experiences and build community. Therefore, “DöBra rainbow cafés” are organized by and for LGBTQ+ people to discuss these end-of-life issues. (DöBra is a pun, literally meaning dying well, figuratively meaning awesome). These cafés are part of a research project aiming to investigate LGBTQ+ people’s perspectives on dying, death, loss and care at the end-of-life. Café-attendees are invited to participate in qualitative interviews after which they are thematically analyzed. Thus far, 15 interviews have been held with people from across the LGBTQ+ spectrum with ages ranging from 30’s-80’s. Preliminary findings indicate that older LGBTQ+ people commonly drew on past experiences (e.g., HIV/AIDS pandemic, being criminalized and pathologized) to explain hopes and fears for future end-of-life care. Younger LGBTQ+ research participants expressed concern about their own futures as they reflected on societal developments that increasingly question, threaten, and limit sexual and gender minority lives, identities, and rights. This appears to affect ways in which they think about their own aging, leading to similar concerns as some older participants expressed - will I be able to live authentically at the end-of-life and will healthcare staff treat me with respect? While findings indicate persisting fears in a changing world, forms of resilience were also found, e.g., creating support networks, advocating for one’s needs, and challenging heteronormative services.

Session 2: 1.15pm - 2.45pm LGBTQ+ people, close relationships, and loss

“Death and Dying in the Queer Family”
Polly Maxwell, University of Bath, UK

Bereavement and grief are experienced across all genders and sexual orientations, yet research and theories exploring partner bereavement have a predominant heteronormative focus. Studies have evidenced the resulting negative impact of this on bereaved individuals in the queer community. Using epistemology and methodology that affirm the queer experience, this study explored how queer intimacies and ways of relating might affect the partner bereavement process of individuals from this community. Interviews were conducted with seven participants identifying as LGBTQ+ and within the queer community, who had experienced the death of a partner. Resulting themes centred on the importance of building community around loss and point to a need for further research exploring queer ways of relating and ‘doing family’ in the context of death and dying. Examples of this include inherited friendships and the use of consensual non-monogamy (CNM) frameworks to navigate new relationships. The findings demonstrate how queer methodologies could expand current bereavement theory and literature, and how an understanding of queer intimacies may have implications for improving the bereavement experience of both queer and non-queer individuals suffering the loss of a partner.

“The Intersection of Homelessness, Climate Crisis, and Non-Normative Sexualities: A Risk to Life”
Dr Matthew Kearny, University of Liverpool, UK

The climate crisis is widely understood to disproportionately affect those with lower wealth, which correlates with global geographic location and with racial categories. Its impact by sexuality is understudied. A sexuality literature finds that people of non-normative sexuality (often abbreviated at LGBT+) face physical vulnerabilities at disproportionately high rates. This is especially the case for LGBT+ youth in both the global north and global south, who may face familial estrangement. In some countries they even face criminal prosecution. Higher rates of homelessness among LGBT+ youth compared to non-LGBT+ youth mean increased exposure to the elements and radical day-to-day instability. Meanwhile climate science shows risk from the elements that alarmingly exceed worst-case scenario projections. Temperatures greater than the human body can survive have already been observed in populated areas of India, and will likely become more widespread and frequent in the foreseeable future. Global heating from climate change is increasing strength of storms, rapidity and severity of wildfires, extent of flooding, and more. Putting together these two findings of increased exposure to the elements among LGBT+ youth and increased fatality from exposure to the elements yields a simple deduction: People with non-normative sexualities are at increased risk of death.

“Death, Intergenerationality and Sexuality Scholarship – Memory, Mentorship, Boundary Work and the Queer ‘Queer’ Legacy of Ken Plummer’s Writing” Dr Christian Klesse, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Ken Plummer, a pioneer of LGBTQ studies in the UK and Europe, died on 4 November 2022. His work has been influential in inspiring and making possible a critical engagement with non-heterosexual ways of life in a climate shaped by social and institutional homophobia, lesbophobia, and biphobia. He was a prolific author and splendid teacher and supervisor. Revisiting the period when Ken as my PhD supervisor and the subsequent years, I evaluate the impact of Ken’s work on my own research and scholarship. I am particularly interested in stressing the value of mentorship and the specific challenges of intergenerational cooperation. Acknowledging Ken’s consistent criticism of queer theory – which was largely due to his own firm commitment to symbolic interactionism and his interest in material, fleshy embodiment, I engage in a reading of Ken’s concept of intimate citizenship that focuses on ambivalence and teases out some truly ‘queer’ potential of his way of conceptualising the role of sexual bodies in the public sphere. The paper approaches death as a moment of knowledge creation, intergenerational exchanges, and collective memory work in sexuality scholarship.

Session 3: 3pm - 4.30pm Memorialization, identity, and the body

“Narrative Transgressions: Identity and bereavement in Latin American Cinema”
Dr Meiko Makita and Scott Morris, University of Dundee, UK

In this paper we present a comparative analysis of how the themes of identity and bereavement are portrayed in two acclaimed Latin American films, “Carmin Tropical” directed by Rigoberto Perezcano and “Una Mujer Fantastica” directed by Sebastian Lelio. These films offer poignant narratives that delve into the complexities of bereavement and the search for identity within the context of transgender lived experiences. In Una Mujer Fantástica, we analyse the interplay of identity and bereavement, as represented by Marina, a transgender woman confronted by grief and societal prejudice and discrimination. In Carmín Tropical, we also explore bereavement in the context of

Mabel, a Muxe who returns to her hometown to investigate the murder of her friend Daniela. Through a semiotic lens we explore the visual, auditory, and symbolic elements in both films. With such exploration we elucidate both Marina's complex journey of self-determination to mourn her late partner, Orlando, and Mabel's loss of her friend and the loss of her past identity. We also examine how societal and cultural contexts, in both Chile and Mexico, can shape interpretations of identity and grief, and how Marina's and Mabel's transgressions challenge heteronormative conventions and foster a powerful narrative of self-discovery, justice and human rights, acceptance and defiance. By conducting a comparative analysis of these films, this paper aims to provide the distinct yet complementary perspectives on the intersection of identity and bereavement, enriching our understanding of these complex and interconnected facets of the human experience within the context of transgender narratives.

"Bidding a Final Adieu in Darkness: The Saga of Hijaras (transgenders) in India"
Dr Veenat Arora, Post Graduate Government College for Girls, India

My presentation is based on an ethnographic study of the death rituals of the *Hijara* community in India. Through their narratives and ethnographic accounts, I will present their state of despair. Their conception of death is correlated to the cultural meanings associated with their birth and life—how they live in darkness and die in darkness. *Hijaras*, or the transgender community in India, have historically faced social stigma and been ostracised from the mainstream. For ages, they have lived in poverty, isolation, and suffering, deprived of education and dignified occupational opportunities. In April 2015, in a historic judgement by the Supreme Court of India, they were accorded the status of the 'third gender' in Indian law, a kind of dignified identity. However, a change in legislation doesn't ensure a value change. Their lives are full of suffering, and death is no exception. The majority of *Hijaras* identify themselves as Hindus and cremate their dead, but unlike as prescribed in Hinduism, their perception of death is not just about continuity and reincarnation but the end of the present life of curse. For them, the moment of death is an opportunity when they pray to the almighty for their deceased kin to not be reborn as a *hijara* in the next life.

"Tactile Intimacies of Death: Corpse Washers and Gendered Limits of Mourning in Turkey" Dr Asli Zengin, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, USA

Family, gender, and sexual difference play a significant role in the organization of Muslim rituals of death, practices of mourning, and discourses of grief in Turkey. In these ritual practices, the state, religious actors, and members of kin and family hold the obligations and rights to the deceased, such as washing, shrouding, burying and praying for the dead body, which I characterize as "care for the dead." The practices of care represent the deceased body in strictly gendered ways. For instance, the coffin design, the prayers at the mosque, the washing ritual prior to burial and the rites of inhumation are different for women and men. However, when the deceased is a trans person, their/her/his body may open an intimate social field for negotiating and contesting these practices of care. Focusing on Sunni Muslim trans people's funerals and burial practices in Turkey, this paper discusses the relationship between mourning, intimacy and gender/sex transgression through the lenses of care for the dead. Specifically, I examine the intimate role of touch that takes place while preparing the deceased body for a religious afterlife. Bringing together the accounts of two Sunni Muslim corpse washers who work for the Istanbul municipality, imams, those family members who denied to touch the sex/gender transgressive body of the deceased, I show the limits of gendered and sexual belonging in citizenship, the family and the practices and discourses of mourning and grief in Turkey.