



## Sex and the (older) single girl: Experiences of sex and dating in later life



Bianca Fileborn<sup>a,\*</sup>, Rachel Thorpe<sup>a</sup>, Gail Hawkes<sup>b</sup>, Victor Minichiello<sup>a</sup>, Marian Pitts<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne Australia

<sup>b</sup> School of Behavioural and Cognitive Sciences, University of New England, Armidale Australia

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 14 October 2014

Received in revised form 13 February 2015

Accepted 13 February 2015

Available online 24 March 2015

#### Keywords:

Older women

Single

Sex

Desire

Pleasure

Affirmative sexuality

Ageing

### ABSTRACT

This study explored the sexual subjectivities of older Australian women. In this article we present findings from 15 qualitative interviews with Australian women aged 55–81 who were single at the time of interview. The majority of these women were single following divorce or separation, with a smaller number of women who were widowed or never in a long-term relationship. We found that these women's sexual desire and sexual activity were fluid and diverse across their life course. Although some participants desired a romantic or sexual relationship, they were also protective of their independence and reluctant to re-enter into a relationship in later life. Our findings indicate that these women's sexual subjectivities were shaped by dominant norms of ageing, sex, and gender. At the same time, older women are challenging and resisting these norms, and beginning to renegotiate sexuality in later life.

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### Introduction

It is something of an understatement to note that the past half-century has borne witness to rapid social and cultural change in relationship norms across Western societies. The availability of no-fault divorce, in conjunction with longer life expectancy, and the rise of second-wave feminism have, amongst other factors, contributed towards changing relationship structures and sexual mores in later life (Carr, 2004; Dickson, Hughes, & Walker, 2005; Huyck, 2001; Lodge & Umberson, 2012). For instance, there is an arguably greater prevalence of casual relationships and dating in later life in comparison to previous generations (Sears-Roberts Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2011). Likewise, the development of internet-based dating sites has created new opportunities for forming

casual or ongoing relationships in later life (Calasanti & Kiecolt, 2007; Carr, 2004; Malta, 2007; Malta & Farquharson, 2014; McWilliams & Barrett, 2014; Sears-Roberts Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2011). This raises the question of how older, single women are negotiating and experiencing sex, desire, and relationships.

In this article we explore older, single women's sexual desire, embodied sexual experiences, and negotiation of relationships. Our participants are of particular interest in this regard given that they are predominantly of the Baby Boomer generation. This cohort played a significant role in shifting sexual mores during the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s in Australia and elsewhere in the Western world (Carpenter, Nathanson, & Kim, 2006; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2009; Rowntree, 2014; Yee, 2010). This is signified through the title of our paper, which makes reference to Helen Gurley-Brown's best-selling book *Sex and the Single Girl*, first published in 1962. This book formed a tome of advice and guidance on sex before marriage to members of our participants' cohort as young single women. Often labelled the first generation of women to

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [B.Fileborn@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:B.Fileborn@latrobe.edu.au) (B. Fileborn).

have openly engaged in casual sexual relationships outside of marriage – and to have challenged longstanding social norms about sex – we were curious to know how they were approaching the issue of sex and relationships as they come in to older age.

Here, we present findings from a qualitative Australian study that explored the sexual subjectivity and body image of women aged 55–81. Our reasons for focusing exclusively on the experiences of our participants who were not in relationships are two-fold. First, we have selected this sub-group of participants because of the lack of research and discussion on their experiences (Carpenter et al., 2006; Watson & Stelle, 2011). Secondly, we have presented findings based on the experiences of our partnered participants elsewhere (Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello, & Pitts, 2015), and the discussion here acts as something of a ‘sister article’ to this earlier work. We locate our research within the theoretical framework of affirmative ageing developed by Sandberg (2013). In discussing the experiences of our single participants we seek to challenge and move beyond stereotypical understandings of older women – as, for example, grieving widows (Carr, 2004; Davidson, 2002), sad, lonely, or asexual – to present a more complex and nuanced account of these women's lives.

#### *Sex in later life: the invisibility of older single women*

There is a small but growing body of literature documenting the sexual desire and experiences of older women. These contributions to the field have made considerable headway in challenging stereotypical views of older women as asexual, and depictions of older age as a gradual sexual decline; as well as the deceptively positive stereotype of the ‘sexy oldie’ (Drummond et al., 2013; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Kleinplatz, Menard, Paradis, Campbell, & Dalgleish, 2013; Marshall, 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Trudel, Turgeon, & Piche, 2010). What is instead emerging is the apparent complexity and diversity of older women's sexual subjectivity and sexual desire (Fileborn et al., 2015; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2009; Rowntree, 2014). Women's sexual subjectivity and desire can be viewed as situational and context dependent, as well as being influenced by the physiological and physical changes associated with ageing (Bitzer, Platano, Tschudin, & Alder, 2008; Drummond et al., 2013; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Lodge & Umberson, 2012; Trudel et al., 2010). Our own work in this area indicates that women's sexual desire and engagement in sexual activity was dependent upon a range of (often intersecting) factors, such as their relationship status, physical health, responsibilities towards others, and the attitudes and health of partners (Fileborn et al., 2015). Broader cultural norms and attitudes that position older individuals as ‘asexual’ can also influence the decision of older people to take part in sexual activity, or to acknowledge any sexual desire that they do experience (DeLamater, 2012; Gray & Garcia, 2012; Syme, 2014; Trudel et al., 2010).

For some women sexual desire and activity increases as they enter older age (or, perhaps, the opportunities for engaging in sex increase), and this sits in stark contrast with the ‘decline’ model of sexuality in later life (Fileborn et al., 2015). Similarly, older women interviewed by Sandberg found mid-to-later life to be ‘a phase of self-discovery and renewed or awakened interest in sexuality’ in the absence of caregiving and

other duties commonly left to the responsibility of younger women (2013: 30; see also Kleinplatz et al., 2013). Older individuals who participated in Malta's (2007) research on online relationships reported engaging in ‘cyber-sex’ and online flirtation, suggesting that the Internet has opened up a world of sexual possibility for older people despite ageist stereotypes that position the ageing as computer illiterate (see also McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

That said many older individuals do experience a decline or downward shift in their sexual activity and desire as they age (Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011; Skultety, 2007; Yee, 2010). Women may experience profound physiological changes post-menopause that negatively affect both desire and sexual function, although others have challenged the role of menopause in this regard (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008; Magon, Chauhan, Malik, & Shah, 2012). This is not to say that older individuals do not desire any sexual activity or intimacy, or that they do not engage in sexual activity (Langer-Most & Langer, 2010). Likewise, a loss of sexual desire can be attributed to many other factors outside of ageing itself (Carpenter et al., 2006; Hinchliff & Gott, 2008). In old age, the specific types of sexual activity desired or engaged in may change or need to be adapted in order to accommodate for the physical realities of older bodies (Fileborn et al., 2015; Helmes & Chapman, 2012; Kingsberg, 2000; McCarthy, Farr, & McDonald, 2013; Sandberg, 2013; Syme, 2014; Willert & Semans, 2000) – opening up opportunities for new forms of intimacy (Sandberg, 2013). It is important to note that these shifts in sexual activity do not necessarily, or automatically, equate to a reduction in sexual pleasure (Kleinplatz et al., 2013).

Within this nascent field of research and discussion on elder sexuality there is a notable absence regarding the specific experiences of single older women (Malta & Farquharson, 2014). This is somewhat surprising given that women aged 60 and over are less likely to have ‘a permanent sexual partner’ in comparison to men (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2009: 52; see also, McFarland, Uecker, & Regnerus, 2011; Syme, 2014), and relationship status is predictive of frequency of sexual activity and sexual satisfaction in later life (Bergstrom-Walan & Nielsen, 1990; Carpenter et al., 2006; DeLamater, 2012; Ringa, Diter, Laborde, & Bajos, 2013; Skultety, 2007; Thompson et al., 2011). For older women in relationships, sex can be important in terms of ‘bonding and “cementing” the relationship’ (Hinchliff & Gott, 2008: 73), while partnered older women purportedly enjoy better mental health in comparison to their single counterparts (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 2009). In the absence of a long- or short-term relationship, what importance is placed on, or meaning assigned to, sexual desire and pleasure by un-partnered women? In what ways are single, older women's sexual desires and embodied sexual experiences shaped by norms of ageing, sex and relationship status? How might older single women challenge and negotiate such norms?

#### *Playing the field: dating in later-life*

Comparatively more attention has been paid to the dating experiences of older women than their sexual experiences and desires. Brown and Shinohara (2013) note that many of the single women in their study on dating in later life remained single by choice, although other factors such as health and

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