

Article

Connecting Participatory Methods in a Study of Older Lesbian and Gay Citizens in Rural Areas

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Abstract

The aim in this paper is to present a discussion of the participatory research methods employed to explore intersectionality between sexuality, rurality and age through consideration of a research project investigating how older lesbian and gay citizens in rural southwest England and Wales interact with their local community. The aim of the project is to explore how older lesbian and gay citizens adjust to and connect with their rural environment, exploring the notion of a “rural idyll” for groups who may be seen as different. Discussion of the different methods used to explore themes surrounding connectivity, place, space and identity will be offered. These include a core biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM), a visual ethnographic method, and an overarching participatory methodology. This methodological approach is reviewed using the six principles for working with disempowered groups identified by Whitmore and McGee (2001).

Keywords: sexuality, rurality, age, connectivity, participatory methodologies, biographic narrative interpretive method, visual ethnography, performative social science

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present a discussion of the different strands of qualitative participatory methodology used in an ongoing project focused on connectivity, aging, and sexuality, and to offer a preliminary review of them. Connectivity can be understood as the ways in which individuals identify and connect themselves with other, and the ways in which this might be filtered by aspects of their age and sexuality. The project is entitled *Gay and Pleasant Land? (GPL)* and is a study about positioning, aging, and gay life in rural South West England and Wales. The current research project is taking place as part of the *New Dynamics of Ageing Programme* in the South West of England and Wales, and represents a unique collaboration between five U.K. research councils: The Economic and Social Research Council; the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, the Medical Research Council, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It is the largest and most ambitious research program on aging ever mounted in the United Kingdom, and is broadly aimed at exploring how older people living in rural areas interact with their local communities. The aim of this paper is to discuss how an overarching participatory approach can employ a range of novel research methods to explore the social and economic connections that older people have in rural communities. A central task of the research project is to develop a meaningful engagement with sexual minority older people and their user organizations, such as Age Concern and agencies working with older sexual minorities, and to develop an understanding of the effects of personality, personal history, health, gender, sexuality, support networks, marital status, and ethnic and cultural differences on perceptions of and attitudes toward aging and sexuality in rural areas. This highlights the interesting dilemmas involved in conducting the research with minority and low visibility groups, and to illustrate some of these challenges the methodological approach is reviewed using the six principles for working with disempowered groups identified by Whitmore and McGee (2001), which offers a useful checklist for researchers hoping to work in an empowering way with marginalized groups.

Aims of the project

A key aim of the GPL project is to develop a partnership with older lesbians and gay men, developing an approach that embraces “both anti-oppressive practice and the value of diversity” (Pugh, 2005, p. 217). To develop an inclusive and antioppressive stance, it was important to use a methodological approach that would empower members of this minority group of older people who might be marginalized and oppressed, giving a voice to those who are silenced by agism, heterosexism, and homophobia (LeCompte, 1993). In the project, therefore, we used a series of participatory methods to encourage those who might be isolated in rural communities to describe their experiences. A key value that informed the project and developing participatory methodology was a commitment that older lesbians and gay men, as underrepresented group, should be encouraged to participate in inquiry and research processes. This permeated different levels of the project.

Identity and the ways in which older lesbians and gay men choose to disclose their sexuality as part of their identity is a central concept within the research project. This encompasses the ways in which individuals make connections within the wider community. A focus on identity and the ways in which individuals negotiate their identities was informed by earlier research which highlighted the importance of “coming out” narratives as a way of negotiating identity over the life course. The Gay and Grey project took place between 2003 and 2006 in southwest England (Fenge, 2010; Gay and Grey Report, 2006). The interviews suggested that although people realized they were gay when they were young, “in many cases it was something they felt unable to disclose to others until later in life” (Gay and Grey Report, 2006, p. 58). The participants’ coming out stories seemed to be a device employed in negotiating social inclusion. Learning more about how this is accomplished over time seemed an important area for further investigation. The Gay and Grey project highlighted the need to learn more about identity issues for older lesbians and gay men, particularly in rural areas where this might be complicated by the intersection of sexuality, age, and geographical space.

The insights gained from the Gay and Grey project, helped to develop the focus for the Gay and Pleasant Land project which develops identity and coming out narratives by embracing a performative social science perspective (Gay and Grey, 2006 ; Fenge, 2010), utilizing a core biographic narrative interpretive method (BNIM; Jones, 2001, 2004; Wengraf 2001). This approach can elicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration of the subject’s life, and through this it is hoped to gain an understanding of the ways in which identity can change across time and space. The aim is to explore how older gay and lesbian citizens might use their coming out stories to support identity and the connections they make with others in rural communities. It develops a participatory methodology to access the perspectives and experiences of older lesbians and gays in rural areas, which have been previously ignored or overlooked in research and policy (Beard & Hissam, 2002; Boulden, 2001; D’Augelli & Grossman, 2001; McCarthy, 2000).

The ultimate aim of the project is to produce research material that will inform the production of a fictionalized film. The research aims to demonstrate, through the production of a short film, the significant contribution that the arts and humanities can make towards the understanding and enrichment of older people’s lives by its representation/narration of aging experiences, changes, and mobility and key factors shaping them.

Background literature

In the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia older lesbian and gay people have been largely invisible within research (Harrison, 2001; Price, 2005; Shankle, Maxwell, Katzman, & Landes, 2003). Heteronormative assumptions have dominated both theory and practice concerning old age (Cronin, 2006), and it is only recently that aging policy and practice has begun to focus on the diversity of experience within the ageing population of the United Kingdom (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2006). The needs and experiences of older lesbians and gay citizens have started to become more visible within social policy research within the United Kingdom (Heaphy, Yip, & Thompson, 2004; Pugh, 2005). Diversity of experience within lesbian and gay aging is evident (Musingarimi, 2008), and this includes difference based on gender, generation, and life-course experience as well as geographical location and space. However, there has tended to be a bias toward urban samples within research on older lesbians and gay men, with most research focusing on towns or suburban environments (Addis, Davies, Greene, MacBride-Stewart, & Shepherd, 2009). As a result, less is known about the experience of living in a rural community as an older lesbian or gay citizen. The focus on identity and how this might be mediated by sexuality, aging, and living in a rural community is central to the GPL project and will contribute new understanding within this underresearched area.

Individual sexuality will intersect with the experience of location and rural life, in ways that are likely to influence identity and relationships with others. Although research suggests that older lesbians and gay men might have learned to manage stigma and develop skills of self-reliance at an earlier age (Friend, 1980; Kehoe, 1988), the impact of geography and location can exert a major influence on these earlier positive experiences. For example, isolation related to the lack of local gay resources in rural communities has been reported in the literature (Comerford, Henson-Stroud, Sionainn, & Wheeler 2004; Gay and Grey, 2006; McCarthy, 2000). Other research undertaken in the Netherlands has suggested that loneliness among older lesbian and gay people might be explained by a number of key factors. These might include weaker levels of social connections and feeling of being part of a community, and a lack of certain social relationships and a lack of desired intimacy, alongside minority stress which results in individuals concealing part of their real personality because of fear of discrimination (Fokkemer & Kuyper, 2009).

Fear of discrimination and oppression is likely to influence whether an individual decides to “come out” within their local community (Edwards, 2005; Jensen, 1995; Musingarimi, 2008). Within rural communities, negative attitudes and intolerance of same-sex relationships might have a major influence on individual self-image and sense of well-being. As a result, identity becomes hidden or undisclosed, possibly leading to higher levels of personal, social, and geographic isolation (D’Augelli & Grossman, 2001; Beard & Hissam, 2002; Boulden, 2001; McCarthy, 2000). Such experiences influence the identity of those older lesbians and gay men living in rural communities because of concerns about visibility and invisibility within rural life and the social support they are able to access. The importance of social support as a predictor of psychological and physical well-being has been cited in the American literature (Masini & Barrett, 2008), and, therefore, the experience of isolation in rural settings might influence the well-being of older lesbian and gay people living in rural areas. Similarly, the importance of local community experiences, including the impact of geographic location, have been highlighted as being important in determining the experience of support among older lesbians and gay people (Heaphy et al., 2004). The experience of aging as a lesbian or gay man is compounded by the impact of agism and might result in reduced visibility within society and a lack of “voice” (Heaphy et al., 2004; Langley, 2001).

The connection that individuals have with their rural community and the impact of age, sexuality, and location involve not only nuances regarding individual identity but also a critique of the “rural idyll” (Newby, 1980), and a more critical appreciation of the experience of marginal groups within rural life. The rural idyll can be described as a consequence of a normalizing concept that defines who belongs and who is seen as different within rural communities (Watkins & Jaccoby, 2007). For individuals who might be seen as “different,” the impact of the rural idyll is that it can contribute to stigma and stress for certain individuals. Research suggests that life in the countryside might not be idyllic for all sections of the population, and older people in general might be disadvantaged by living in rural locations, which offer limited access to health and social care support and which can be characterized by high levels of poverty (Commission for Rural Communities, 2009; Wenger, 2001).

Methodological basis of Gay and Pleasant Land? study

To engage the voices of older lesbians and gay men who are not typically captured in traditional research, a range of qualitative methods were bridged within the study to explore the intersectionality between sexuality, rurality, and age. The project incorporates a strong participative research element throughout (Bradbury & Reason, 2003), and this is facilitated at various levels within the project through an number of mechanisms: (a) an Advisory Committee made up of a mix of older gay people and service providers who are central in the development

and overview of the project; (b) focus group meetings with older gay people to elicit their narratives about rural life; (c) citizen panels which involved a group analyses of interview data; and, finally, (d) the inclusion of older gay people in a theatrical improvisation workshop, which contributes to the development of the performative element within the project.

The various elements of the methodology underpinning the project will be discussed first. As this project is involved with researching the lives of a marginalized group of older people, the methodological focus will then be reviewed using the principles for working with disempowered groups identified by Whitmore and McGee (2001), an approach that has been used previously to evaluate research with older lesbians and gay men (Fenge, 2010). These principles highlight good practice for working with groups who might be marginalized and silenced by more traditional methods, and offer a useful checklist to practitioners in terms of the inclusivity of their chosen method.

Biographic narrative interpretive method

The turn to narrative inquiry shifts the very presence of the researcher from knowledge-privileged investigator to a reflective position of passive participant/audience member in the storytelling process. The interviewer as writer/storyteller then emerges later in the process through her/his retelling of the story as a weaver of tales, a collage-maker, or a narrator of the narrations. Recent times have seen the development of myriad methods of narrative, including biographic methods. The biographic narrative interpretive method (Jones, 2001, 2004; Wengraf, 2001) uses an interview technique in the form of a single, initial narrative-inducing question (minimalist-passive), for example, "Tell me the story of your life," to elicit an extensive, uninterrupted narration. This shift encompasses willingness on the part of the researcher to cede "control" of the interview scene to the interviewee and assume the posture of active listener/audience participant. A follow-up sub-session can then be used to ask additional questions but based only on what the interviewee has said in the first interview and using her/his words and phrases in the same order, thus maintaining the narrator's gestalt.

In typical usage of the method, microanalysis of the narrative of the reconstructed life follows the interview stage, involving a reflective team approach to the data, facilitating the introduction of multiple voices, unsettling and creating a mix of meaning and encouraging communication and collective means of deliberation (Gergen, 2000, p. 4). In brief, The Lived Life, or chronological chain of events as narrated, is constructed then analyzed sequentially and separately. The Told Story, or thematic ordering of the narration, is then analyzed using thematic field analysis, involving reconstructing the participants' system of knowledge, their interpretations of their lives, and their classification of experiences into thematic fields (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 61). Rosenthal defined the thematic field as: "the sum of events or situations presented in connection with the themes that form the background or horizon against which the theme stands out as the central focus" (p. 64). The process typically begins by recruiting team participants (two, three, or more per team) from varying backgrounds (professionally as well as demographically) to join reflecting teams who will be immersed in the transcript, at times "line by line" and hypothesize at each new revelation of dialogic material. This process is coordinated by one of the researchers in consultation with the advisory committee. Finally, through hypothesizing how the lived life informs the told story, the case history is then constructed from these two separate threads. One of the joys of working with the biographic narrative interpretive method is its collaborative nature, first with participants in the interview process and, second, in the assemblage of reflecting teams to respond to the stories of narrators.

By thinking “performatively,” we are able to consider the interview in Denzin’s (2001) terms: “not as a method of gathering information, but as a vehicle for producing performance texts and performance ethnographies about self and society” (p. 24) where “text and audience come together and inform one another (p. 26) in a relational way. In Law and Urry’s (2004) thinking, research methods in the social sciences do not simply describe the world as it is, but also enact it (p. 391). They are performative; they have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover (pp. 392–393). Indeed, “to the extent social science conceals its performativity from itself it is pretending to an innocence that it cannot have” (p. 404). This leads us to a consideration of a performative social science.

Performative, in the widest sense of the word, has become a “working title” for the efforts of social science researchers who are exploring the use of tools from the arts in research itself and/or using them to enhance, or move beyond, PowerPoint conference presentations or traditional journal submissions in their dissemination efforts (Guiney Yallop, Lopez de Vallejo, & Wright, 2008). Those engaging in this new performative social science are often shifting existing boundaries or transforming them through relational processes. Performative social science moves beyond ethnodrama or putting on a play. It includes using tools from the arts and humanities to expand and enrich social science research and its dissemination. Performative social science is based within a relational aesthetic (Bourriaud, 2002) which proposes that artworks are judged based upon the interhuman relations that they represent, produce, or prompt.

The principles of Bourriaud’s (2002) relational aesthetics offer a theoretical grounding for the entire *Gay and Pleasant Land?* project. Relational Art is located in human interactions and their social contexts. Central to its principles are intersubjectivity, being-together, the encounter, and the collective elaboration of meaning, based in models of sociability, meetings, events, collaborations, games, festivals, and places of conviviality. Bourriaud believes that art is made of the same material as social exchanges. The process of human research is a social exchange. If social exchanges are the same as art, how can we portray them?

Visual ethnography

In addition to exploring research participants’ life stories through these biographic narrative techniques, the project required further methods that could reveal aspects of experience which are often unspoken, embodied, and sensual. Nonetheless, attention was paid to nonverbal evidence in the biographic interviews as well as in ethnographic site visits. These areas were particularly important in the light of the ultimate aim of the project: to produce research material which could inform the production of a fictionalized film. Visual ethnographic approaches have long been recognized for their potential to generate insights into the bodily, sensual aspects of human experience, through the illumination of gesture, movement, facial expressions, unspoken but visible emotions, people’s relationships to places and objects and a range of other non-verbal areas of experience. Grimshaw (2005) sees the visual ethnographic sensibility as rooted in “sense-based ways of knowing” (p. 27), or what might also be described as tactile epistemologies (Harris et al., 2000). Underpinned by such an epistemological basis, visual ethnography seemed particularly well suited to our focus on capturing everyday, routine, embodied experience of rural place, and its relationship to sexual identity among older people. The challenge was then to design a visual ethnographic method that captured this kind of data, but that was also genuinely participatory.

The visual ethnographic method that was eventually developed was in two stages. In the first stage, participants (who have already been fully briefed about the project) were asked to select 5 to 10 images that characterize aspects of their experience of living in (or having lived in) a rural

area as well as how they feel about their relative visibility or invisibility as gay men or lesbian women in that rural area. In selecting the images, they are asked to consider these experiences in as full a sense as possible (positive aspects as well as forms of discrimination, isolation, or “invisibility” that they might have experienced). The type of images to be produced is deliberately kept broad to allow for as wide a range of visual sensibilities as possible. They can be photographs made specifically to address this question, images already held in personal collections, or images produced by others (relatives, artists, photographers, images found in advertising, and so forth).

This selection of the images was followed by a minimum of one meeting between the participant and the researcher. Ideally, this meeting took place at the participant’s home or an appropriate venue close to where they live. The purpose of the informal interview was to elicit the reasons behind the selection of the 5 to 10 images and what they mean to the participant. Their explanations reveal important data relating to the key research questions. Furthermore, as the participants begins to explain the context of these images and thus some more general contours of their lives and personal experiences, the researcher pays particular attention to visual imagery and metaphors present in their language and choice of words as well as their gestures and facial expressions, and so forth. Thus the dialogue of the informal interview, as well as the selected images, provides an important source of visual data to be gathered. Some further, less detailed, biographical information about the research participant was also gathered (e.g., age, socioeconomic background, professional and educational background, family context).

At this meeting, consent was sought for the researcher to conduct participant observation of the participant’s daily life and the context in which they live. Exactly what form this takes is ethically negotiated with each participant according to what they are comfortable with. This might include being shown around their home and surrounding areas on a walk; meeting friends, family, partners, or neighbors; and/or accompanying the participant in regular, everyday activities they engage in within the context of rural life (shopping, hobbies, visiting acquaintances, going to particular social venues, and so forth). With the participant’s consent, the researcher might use photography and/or film to record some aspects of these observations. This two-stage method offers a framework that allows for varying degrees of negotiation, participation, and collaboration between researcher and research participants. Thus research participants have a relatively high degree of control over the initial 5 to 10 images selected in terms of content and visual genre as well as the extent to which they are disseminated. That is, participants’ consent is sought on whether the images are shown only to the researcher during the interview, shown to other colleagues in the research team, or made available for more public forms of dissemination at conferences, on websites, and so forth. At the second stage, research participants are actively invited to collaborate with the researcher in the production of still images and video footage about the everyday activities they agree may be represented. Thus participants have the opportunity to use the researcher’s equipment or their own, if they wish.

As with all ethnographic approaches, this method requires a high degree of openness to being researched on the part of the research participant. They need to be happy not only to take part in an interview but also with the researcher’s presence in their daily lives, if only for a limited period. As the data collection progressed, it become evident to the research team that this methodological strategy could be considered unappealing to older lesbian and gay people in rural areas who view their sexuality as a private matter, particularly those who are not out to all of their friends, family, or neighbors in their rural setting. Although potential participants’ unwillingness to participate is a problem often encountered in qualitative research and therefore not specific to our project, our aim was to uncover precisely why it is that older lesbians and gays living in rural

areas might feel that openness about their sexuality is problematic. This is an issue with which the project grapples, on both the micro and macro levels. It is our aim to at least begin to understand this phenomenon and even, perhaps, offer some solutions at the project's conclusion.

Performative element

Gathered narrated biographies will eventually form the basis of “composite characters” for a short film, produced by a professional filmmaker in collaboration with the research project's investigators. In addition to the collected biographies, the visual ethnographic data and data from the focus groups have enriched the location, age range, and activities of the research population. In collaboration with the filmmaker this analysis will contribute to the development of the film's script. The professional level, broadcast quality film itself will be totally grounded in the data, both in the life story interviews and the visual anthropological data gleaned from observation in the study's rural communities. As the project continues, it is envisaged that older lesbian and gay people will be involved in the performative “film” element through theatrical improvisation of the research data. A theatrical improvisation workshop will provide participants with the possibility of contributing to the script for the project's final output, which will be a professional short film. There will be a strong participatory flavor within the workshop as participants will be encouraged to experiment with new ways of interpreting qualitative research data. This involves participants being reflexive about the discursive forms that life story narratives take and how these present a version of a life through identity construction in action (Hicks, 2006).

Discussion of the project using Whitmore and McGee's principles for working with disempowered groups

Mutual trust and genuine respect

From the outset the need to work with the expertise of both individuals and agencies was a central aim, and the role of the advisory committee was an important mechanism to achieve this. The advisory committee is made up of older lesbian and gay people as well as those who work with older people. The committee meets every 3 months to discuss the context and development of the project, initially providing input regarding sampling strategies and later exploring the wider plan for development and dissemination strategies. Advisory committee members act as a key resource and “expert advisers” to the overall project. The participation of such experts and volunteers was felt to be an important theme within the project as participatory methodologies have been used effectively with other marginalized groups to promote social justice for groups within society who experienced exclusion, stigma and discrimination (Cahill, 2007; Etowa, Bernard, Oyinson, & Clow, 2007). The involvement of such experts also challenges the notion of the term *researcher* within the context of this project as it applies equally to “local actors and those people who contribute specialized skills, knowledge, and/or resources” (McIntyre, Chatzopoulos, Politi, & Roz, 2007, p. 749). This can equally be applied to the members of the advisory committee as well as the citizen panels that are central within the biographic narrative interpretive method's data analysis process. However involving volunteers in ways which are other than tokenistic requires commitment and time (Fenge, 2010), and it is important that funding is available to develop the project sufficiently which includes staff time, travels costs for volunteers/ participants, and refreshments.

The advisory committee provided contacts for a number of potential participants for both the biographic interviews and the visual ethnography. A snowball sample methodology was used to identify individuals who would not be readily identifiable by other means. Snowball sampling is a

useful method when no other sampling frame exists and when the target population is dispersed (Gilbert, 1993), and is useful in identifying older lesbian and gay people for research purposes (Warner, Wright, Blanchard, & King, 2003). As individuals identify themselves through snowball sampling techniques, this approach may be seen to respect individual privacy and autonomy in the decision to take part in the project. However, individuals may not reveal their sexuality due to concerns of discrimination, and there may always be a “silent” minority that remains hidden from research. It is therefore important to remember that only those volunteers/ participants who are out and/or are willing to discuss their sexuality will therefore come forward. This raises questions about whose voice is represented and whether this is representative of a wider range of experience of age, rural life, and sexuality. It is important that the research team remain vigilant to the ways in which certain individuals may be silenced through the research process. For this reason, close attention was paid to the more universal experiences and memories that lie beneath the surface of class, gender, and/or political positioning.

Solidarity, mutuality, and equality

These operate at various levels through the project in terms of the role of the advisory committee, the role of the citizen panels involved in data analysis, and the input of participants at the focus group meetings and visual ethnographic component. For example, all data emerging from the BNIM interviews were interpreted by means of reflective teams and developed by them. The reflective teams were made up of older people, research students, and academic staff who expressed an interest in becoming involved in this aspect of the research project. The reflective teams were recruited through snowballing techniques via the advisory committee and through the university. Instead of a sole researcher constructing hypotheses against the gathered data, two groups of participants for each case or interview participated in a hypothesizing process as prescribed in the BNIM (Wengraf, 2001). Most reflective teams involve six participants who look at two different aspects of the interviewees’ biographies: the Lived Life and the Told Story

A key element of mutuality and equality is the recognition that everyone’s interests are important within the project. The advisory committee is central in overseeing the whole project and the diverse representation on both the advisory committee and reflective teams creates a rich and multilayered project. The commitment of individuals to these parts of the project ultimately contributes to the success of the project.

A focus on process

As a number of different methodological approaches are used within the project, it is important for both the advisory committee and lead researcher to keep an overview of the various strands of activity. The advisory committee meets on a 3 monthly basis, whereas the citizen panels took place over 6 months, with 12 panel meetings in total during this time. Previous research of volunteer narratives has highlighted the tensions involved in sustaining volunteer interest over a 3-year project (Fenge, Fannin, Hicks, Armstrong, & Taylor, 2009). With this in mind, the researchers decided that advisory meetings should take place every 3 months to minimize the time commitment for volunteers but to sustain their interest in the project.

Language as an expression of culture and power

The use of narrative and the language contained within the life stories are central within the BNIM approach. Such narratives are rich sources of understanding and consist of “recollections of the past and imaginings of the future, both of which can become reference points for present

understanding” (Miczo, 2003, p. 472). By using life stories and narratives, the researcher aims to develop composite characters that will form the basis of a short film. The language and self-representation that arise through older lesbian and gay life stories, and the ways in which individuals define and position themselves within their own cultural environment will therefore inform the dialogue and character development within the performative element of the project.

The film will take advantage of the “suspended disbelief” inherent in theater and film productions, encouraging the wider largely heterosexual community’s empathy and recognition of this potentially disconnected and invisible rural minority. It is planned that the film will be shown to those living within rural communities, as well as health and social care practitioners working within rural communities. Through stories, like when an anticipating audience is ushered into the hush of a darkened theatre, disbelief is mutually suspended and the possibility of shared comprehension is embraced (Jones, 2003). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817, coined the phrase, “willing suspension of disbelief” to justify the use of fantastic or nonrealistic elements in literature. In a wider sense and in terms of the film, this approach produces possibilities for the reduction of the interpersonal distance by the development of sensibility for the intuitive, emotive, and associative aspects of communication. Scholarship is backgrounded to foreground the more immediate experience of being a member of an audience embracing suspended disbelief. The film’s narrative will raise issues of inclusion/exclusion of older gay people in/from rural community and civic life and/or act as an impetus to a reconsideration of the quality of life and/or social connectivity of these particular older people. The social aspects of gay life in rural communities and participants’ self-representation/narration will contribute to the changing patterns of experience and behavior associated with the larger ageing community, demonstrating through the use of film how this can be communicated broadly. Through this the film will provide a critical human ecology tool that has the power to manifest these policies into social realities.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed how a range of participatory methods are being used to explore themes surrounding connectivity, place, space, and identity, and enable engagement with the previously silenced voices of older minority groups. Such methods can be used in a variety of ways to promote greater “insider” knowledge, which can enrich and challenge our understanding of rurality, aging and sexuality. This has the potential to empower marginalized older people, but it is important to remember that those willing to share their sexuality and “coming out” stories might not be representative of the wider group, many of whom continue to lead hidden and secret lives.

The development of a film contributes a dramatic interpretation of the narrated biographies and everyday life experiences of the participants’ stories, and thus will raise public consciousness, particularly among this group’s peers and service providers. The ultimate aim of the project is to change minds, change attitudes, and help to build communities where tolerance and understanding are keys to connectivity in the future. Such creative and performative methodologies communicate deeper awareness and understanding of the issues of living in rural communities as an older lesbian or gay citizen, thus can be said to promote social justice.

By the use of these participatory methods of nonintrusive investigation, based on concepts of how people create meaning in their everyday lives and develop their own ideas of their lives, we hope to begin to represent the lives of older lesbian and gay citizens in rural southwest England and Wales through visual storytelling. Meaning is expressed through actions. Narrated stories are seen as representations close to those actions. Everyday events become powerful in that they reflect

individual meanings of whole lives. Thus, this exploration of the quotidian provides opportunities to reflect on lived lives that are rich with powerful thematic material. The universality of the drama of the ordinary is revealed through the use of these narrative methods.

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