

Jane Watts*

'DISTRACTIONS': CULTURAL INFLUENCES, INCLUSION, AND LEARNING IN LATER LIFE; STORIES OF WOMEN'S LIVES

My motivation to write this paper and, the research on which it is based, comes from my own and some of my contemporaries' experience. This work is grounded in feminism; that is, both personal and political, chronicling and reflecting on lived experience. The paper emerged from my work on mid-life career reviews and mid-life learning and the dilemmas which arose while working on the Mid-Life Career Review pilot projects (NIACE 2015; Watts 2014; 2015). I had doubts about the UK government's views of the economy's needs in relation to later life working, and the quality of employment opportunities for older people. There appeared to be no challenge to the notion to the new orthodoxy of 'fuller working lives' (DWP 2014) and little awareness of later life poverty, which might particularly affect women and little link to the stories of women's lives as they are lived. There is nothing wrong with continuing to work in later life; indeed I have campaigned for the right to do so, but the tendency to make later life working 'compulsory', however, raises concerns and may not be the only or best method for addressing inequalities which lead to poverty in later life. This paper emerges from research on lesbians and ageing (Knight, Watts forthcoming) and a new exploration of the role of life story in learning after retirement.

There were two further motivators for this research. The first was the relative absence of discussion on diversity in general or women and lesbians in particular within educational gerontology and the second was the current UK context as it affects women working longer and the effect of raising the state pension age¹.

Gender inequality and ageing

Social gerontologists in areas such as healthcare have paid considerable attention to inclusion and diversity, but only rarely has that lens been applied within educational

* **Jane Watts**, PhD – self-employed researcher, evaluator and facilitator. Senior Associate at the Learning and Work Institute UK (formerly NIACE) and a member of the Association for Education and Ageing, England; e-mail: jane.watts@phonecoop.coop.

¹ The increases in State Pension age (SPa) for women in the UK. Since 2010 it has been gradually increasing from 60 years of age, rising to 65 by November 2018, at which point it will be equal to men's SPa. After this point, SPa for all individuals will increase to 66 by October 2020 and to 67 by 2028, under the schedule established by the Pensions Act 2014.

gerontology. However, social gerontology often does not include lifelong learning, for example, the International Longevity Centre's website does not mention education and nor does their recent report (ILC 2016).

Franz Kolland (2016) suggested that educational gerontologists were not always 'very good at' diversity; he was referring to gender, but perhaps this is also true of other inclusion and diversity issues, including ethnicity, sexuality and other identity signifiers or areas of potential discrimination. At the risk of stating the obvious, but remembering that unless we do it will be forgotten, older people are not homogenous. Older women's life stories are also different from each other, with differing experiences of life, education and work.

The absence of diversity inclusion is surprising, as lifelong learning practice traditionally addresses inequalities and confronts educational exclusion (Tuckett 2007). Diversity and multicultural projects in lifelong learning have, however, often excluded ageing. This paper considers the impact on women's, and particularly lesbian, lives in the UK in the aftermath of recent changes to retirement and state pension ages and consider any lessons for community educators.

If women are relatively invisible in educational gerontology, even more so are lesbians, and yet lesbians are differently affected by ageing, work and pension issues, which are likely to remain hidden unless deliberately highlighted. Much progress has been made on equalities legislation, particularly in recent times in the UK, but there remains continuing opposition, hostility and doubt. Lesbians' ability to be 'out', in some workplaces or educational settings, remains difficult. Stonewall² (2016) report that only 23% of lesbians feel comfortable to be open with everyone at their workplace. Qualitative research by Stonewall suggests that many gay people remain very concerned about their sexuality in relation to their employers and workplace (Guasp, Balfour 2008).

Intersecting inequalities

Given that issues of identity and background are known to create an impact on equality of either opportunity or outcome, it is vital to look at how different aspects of identity and/or inequality might intersect; for example, age and race or in relation to gender. Though feminist researchers and educators raised issues of our many identities in the past (Benn et al. 1988) as just one example), they rarely addressed ageing. When it comes to issues of sexuality, it is even more the case that there is little mention within the literature on ageing. Robertson's (2014) report attempts to cover this diversity in a minor way as does a report for local government (LGA 2014). As Age UK³ (2016) and

² Stonewall is the leading campaigning organisation in the UK for LGBT rights.

³ Age UK is the leading third sector organisation in the UK on ageing.

Ward et al. (2012) show, older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are under-researched. The older LGBT community is not easily defined, not one homogenous group and the existence of older non-heterosexuals is rarely acknowledged in the literature or more widely. 'Coming out' is an on-going, dynamic process; every unfamiliar person and place demands yet another decision about whether or not to disclose one's sexuality and one's life story. 13% of older lesbians want 'to be more visible as a lesbian than (they are) now' (Age UK 2016). Older lesbians are likely to live longer than (gay) men, to be less well off in later life and to make greater use of health and social care services. Age UK suggests that older LGBT people are more likely to live alone in old age, with fewer links with younger generations, thereby increasing their risk of isolation (2016).

There are likely to be differences in the stories of heterosexual women and lesbians in the midlife and retirement life phases. I think this is particularly relevant to women of fifty and over who identify as lesbian (regardless of how they identified earlier in their lives). These women have mainly lived their lives without the benefits of equalities legislation relating to sexuality⁴, but did benefit from earlier legislation around women's rights and equal pay.

Women, work and retirement

This paper mainly focuses on the 50-65/70 age group⁵ as it considers women staying in work and making the transition into 'retirement'. In the UK the unemployment rate amongst the 50-64 age group remains high relative to the level it was before the financial crisis of 2008. Employment challenges persist for this group (BITC 2014).

In countries with developed economies, retirement can be understood as being when you choose to or must leave your main paid occupation. This may include being in receipt of a pension, from the employer/private insurance, the state or both. Some countries have a fixed age at which all must 'retire'. Others merely have a state pension age at which state pensions can be taken but this does not mean that everyone will stop doing paid work at that point. In other countries, the concept of retirement is more or less developed depending on economic circumstances and life expectancy. In the west/economic north women historically earn less than men and have therefore amassed lower pension contributions and had earlier state pension/retirement ages than men. Women have slightly longer life expectancy, which may lead to women's pensions being offered at lower amounts. In the UK there is currently an equalisation of eligible age process for state pensions.

⁴ The Equality and Human Rights Act 2010.

⁵ In contrast to the quartiles proposed by Watson and Schuller (2009).

The policy messages around pensions, retirement and ageing are confused and contentious. The workforce is being encouraged to stay in work for longer – and a ‘common sense’ interpretation would suggest that this is logical given that there is a bulge in the older population and fewer younger people. However, there are two fallacies in the argument; – the first is that the labour market is a zero sum; and the second is the belief that younger people’s employment opportunities would be improved if older people retired. The latter is well-researched and shown to be incorrect; removing older workers from the job market means that there are fewer jobs and younger people do not benefit (Banks et al. 2008). A further concern is that people have insufficient savings or pension entitlements to cover the costs of living in older age.

Women are particularly affected by low pensions as they have been by low wages. The pay gap continues despite long term legislation and many women’s lives are characterised by ‘incomplete’ employment records, due to, for example, caring for children or other care responsibilities. Women are still more likely to undertake caring work, driven in part by sexist assumptions, gender discrimination and the fact that a male partner is still likely to earn the higher wage.

Smeaton et al. (2009) outline some key considerations about later life working:

[...] a class and gender based imbalance of power and control later in life prevails, with men and more advantaged occupational groups better prepared financially to exercise choice. Implications arise in terms of the long-term health of older people who may be ‘forced’ to continue working to avoid poverty. [...] The policy impetus towards extended working lives and delayed retirement may therefore be associated with quite distinct consequences for different socio-economic groups. [...] (xiii).

However, the labour market for women is also characterised by women returners to paid employment, who have been looking after children and, for at least some of these women, it is likely that they can, for the first time achieve ambitions, gain their highest paid employment or carry out full-time work for the first time since their youth in the 50+ life phase.

Lesbians in mid-life may experience some aspects of the workplace differently from heterosexual women but this is under-researched. Stonewall has published little on the labour market and lesbians, and even less on lesbians in mid-life, though one report drew attention to the ‘double-glazed glass ceiling’ affecting lesbian women’s progression at work (Miles 2008). Although some lesbians have children, others are less likely to have had a career affected by childcare. Other caring responsibilities are just as likely to have been demanded of lesbians, especially in mid-life. As lesbians are often deemed to be ‘single’, regardless of their relationship status, there is a pattern of parents being cared for by ‘single’ daughters, some of whom were/are lesbian. Some lesbians, however, are

excluded from their families of origin or even their children. Lesbians also need and want to care for each other; their partners or close friends – 'chosen family'.

The main characteristic of lesbians in the labour market is the fact that lesbians are aware from early in life that they/we will have to make their own way in the world. No-one is primed to be their 'breadwinner'. However, lesbians may have been discriminated against in the workplace (Miles 2008). Since equalities legislation there have perhaps been some improvements for lesbians at work but to a fairly large extent their invisibility in the job market pertains; this may be how lesbians survive in work.

Women's learning at 50+

In the UK, one in five people aged over 50 perceive themselves to be learners (McNair 2012). He found that there was 'relatively little difference [in participation] between older women and men (14)'. Class background continues to have a more significant impact than gender on participation in learning, as it does on life chances. Despite this, women's participation in adult learning in the UK continues to outstrip that of men throughout life (L&W 2015; NOLG 2015). Data on lesbians and learning in older age are not available as the participation surveys do not report on sexuality.

Some gender-related research in adult education in the UK has focused recently on men's lack of participation (Golding et al. 2014; McGivney 1999). Feminist projects focused on women's poor access to education (Taking Liberties Collective 1989; Thompson 1983), which was revisited, drawing attention to the ways in which progress towards equality had not succeeded (Benn et al. 1998; McGivney 1993; Thompson 2007a and b). However, these writers rarely mentioned ageing. More recently, Withnall specifically addressed issues of gender and later life learning (2010) and Hafford-Letchfield and Lambert (2014) drew attention to older 'solo women'. Interestingly, texts on education and ageing from the 1980's and 1990's paid more attention to gender (for example, Carlton and Soulsby 1999).

Driven, perhaps, by the need to stay in work for longer there is a renewed interest in encouraging women's participation in later life learning but, in the UK, once the pension age equalises with men, men too will need to seek to stay in the workforce for longer; it is therefore probable that issues currently affecting women will also affect men. There is nevertheless a case for looking at women's learning in mid-life; workplace discrimination on the grounds of age, gender and sexuality persist. We are yet to see what the effect people working longer will be on participation in lifelong learning.

Some later life inequalities affect women and men differently; women in the 'west' have longer lives, though the age gap is reducing. Women have generally earned less and/or been in the workforce for less time, which affects their later life income levels,

leaving women at greater risk of later life poverty than men (DWP 2016; Turner 2016). These factors need an educational response, but there is little funding for learning in later life; it is assumed that people will pay for provision or take up learning through peer supported learning groups. It seems that there is little educational provision which can be accessed, regardless of ability to pay⁶.

Women's life stories and learning

Feminists have debated in the past as to whether there is a 'women's way of knowing' (Belenky et al. 1986). Might it therefore follow that there is a women's way of learning and might reflective life-story exemplify part of that culture? Belenky's theories have become slightly discredited as this somewhat 'essentialist' position has become less popular but there is benefit from revisiting them. There is a continued relationship between what is knowable and considered useful knowledge; the construction of that knowledge by the powerful would be important to deconstruct in the light of women's and, specifically, lesbians' experiences and life stories.

In lesbian feminism, the deep interrelationship between the political and the personal, the importance of honesty is paramount (Rich 1979). Narrative and biography are vital in this truth-telling. Telling the story allows women to reclaim lost space and to politicise the personal without diminishing its importance. However, it also allows women the freedom to discuss the distractions and details of their lives, which form the substance – the weave – of their lives. These processes formed the basis of consciousness raising groups in second wave feminism:

The consciousness raising process was central to the women's movement of the 1970s and also to those approaches to adult education which claim to be emancipatory: that process of praxis whereby the bringing of a critical analysis to bear on one's experience enables the deconstruction and reconstruction of experience out of which grows the creation of new knowledge (Mansfield 2005, p. 115).

The importance of biography in feminism can be applied to work on the theme of 'transitions' in later life. The term transitions has become important in both policy and practice, but recent workshop evidence suggests that these transition points are interpreted quite differently by women and men and used to create a narrative of life-course, important in determining later life learning, particularly informal learning⁷. This approach can be emancipatory – for both participant and practitioner. The practice

⁶ Incidentally, evidence of availability is hard to demonstrate. No learning provider publicising courses in the UK will declare their unavailability to older people as age discrimination is illegal but a range of factors can deter participants. Part-time 'mature' student participation in both HE especially and in FE are declining.

⁷ AEA Conference April 2016.

helps to illustrate current policies, such as the inequalities of the current position for women in mid-life:

The biographies of adult students highlight the problems that they experience as a result of government policy. Specifically, biographies powerfully reveal the contradictions within narrow, vocationally driven lifelong learning policies: those without economic power continue to be excluded from access to learning, perpetuating class inequalities (Merrill 2005, p. 139).

However, there are challenges for the practitioner in taking a biographical approach, as Mansfield (2005) asserts:

The nature of my present research into the discourses to be found in community education practice [...] demands a high level of critical reflexivity on my part and I have come to realise how inextricably it, as well as my previous work, has been linked to my own developing autobiography. [...] our biographies are fluid and self-created, that we create them by the lives we lead and the sense we make of our experiences, the meanings we take from them and the way we conceptualise those meanings (p. 110-111).

And in both practice and participant terms, this exercise should have collective as well as individual approaches in order to move it towards change and social justice.

Guided autobiography and life story writing are other biography-based practices used within lifelong learning. Memoir and autobiography are found frequently in later life writing; Athill (2008) and Lively (2013) provide two useful examples. I choose to reference these two authors partly because they are widely acclaimed as representing positive images of ageing. In popular philosophy, Klein (2014) reflects on his experience of ageing and makes the important point of challenging society's tendency to encourage us to pretend that ageing should be avoided or 'air-brushed' out. However, these authors are well-known and financially secure. The tradition of adult learning has been to address the lives and needs of those with less advantages. Personal story is a vital ingredient in community learning practice; and provides a method for the positive inclusion of older women (NIACE 2006).

My own work on 'Life CVs' (Schultheiss et al. 2011) concerned a different group of people experiencing exclusion – refugees in the UK. Again the importance of story, of telling, of recounting and making sense through that telling was of paramount importance.

A different illustration of personal story can be found in a book on older lesbian's lives, produced alongside the development of a documentary for Channel 4 Television in 1992. This showed the importance of personal story for older lesbians whose story, or even existence, was not usually acknowledged. The book contained brief life stories and experiences of older age for some lesbians who were largely born in the first half of the twentieth century, much of whose youth, and sometimes whole life, had been spent 'in the closet', not publicly acknowledging their lesbian identities (Neild and

Pearson 1992). The importance of giving meaning to lives here is similar to the Life CV concept. In order to explore this topic further I am engaged in a small piece of field research and include a few initial results here.

The project

In the absence of sufficient previous research, I embarked on a small project, perhaps to pave the way for a larger project in future. The basis was to explore a small number of personal stories, based on a tradition of biography in both feminist and ageing research (Roberts 2002) and to seek implications for lifelong learning, perhaps including active campaigning, and at least increased awareness of the issues. As Merrill (2005) said: 'A key question is how the values and processes underpinning biographical approaches can move research into a popular education perspective and practice (p. 139)'.

Because I was/am confused about my own feelings about retirement, and in the interests of creating an equal dialogue, true to my feminist roots, I gathered a small peer group of lesbians all 50+ and all at different stages of thinking about retirement transitions. Some of us were in mid-career and others fully retired from paid work. I asked them to take part in some participant research in a small discussion group. The oldest participant was 66 and the youngest 50. Those still doing paid work in whatever way were affected by the rise in the state pension age and could only contemplate early retirement if they could take an occupational pension.

The group met three times. The discussions were free-ranging and members could raise anything that concerned them within the overall heading of midlife and retirement. Topics included changes to pensions, expectations of working lives, what retirement means now, what we do in retirement, what ideas people have for the future, how women/lesbians respond to changes in expectations around ageing. Looking to the future, particular attention was paid to concerns about housing and care needs in later life.

Those in the group with career consistency in the public sector were faring much better under historically more generous pension systems. The main difference between lesbians and heterosexual women in this context is potentially due to not having any relationship which can provide a pension in the way that heterosexual women who are in a marriage with a man can also expect some provision from the man's usually higher pension, especially in the event of his death. Due to changes in legislation for marriage or civil partnership, it is now possible for some lesbian couples to benefit from each others' pensions in the same way. Single women regardless of sexuality expect to have to provide for themselves.

Some women in the group had always had more income through higher status jobs; contributed to by previous higher educational experience and class background and family circumstances all contributing. But while we were all still working, income inequalities were somehow less stark between us; we anticipated that this could change as the group will have different income levels in later life.

This group illustrated the importance of sharing stories, reflecting critically and moving towards solutions, including taking action both individually and collectively. Further work is planned to include groups of lesbians who are trying to explore and address issues of ageing.

Conclusion

Despite reminders that older people are not homogenous, some social gerontology appears to remain 'diversity neutral', inevitably therefore reflecting the white, male perspective, and, in the field of education and ageing we appear sometimes to write and behave as though we are unaware of diversity amongst older people. We can change this. Lesbian lives and women's lives can become invisible unless action is taken; the considered use of reflective biography offers one route to inclusion.

Women's lives are often subject to distractions which interrupt or become part of our stories; not, as is 'sexistly' supposed by our being 'distracted' but by the distractions imposed on us. Women in later life bear the brunt of caring for elderly people. Women approaching retirement may also support older children still at home. It is in the stories of women's lives as all feminists know that the political and the impact of policy is truly revealed. Distractions, as Solnit (2006) suggests, are what make thinking and story telling possible – and powerful. However, if we introduce biographical practice, it is important not to focus only on the individual experience but also to stress the collective (Merrill 2005). We may also hope to seek pathways to social change/ social justice as a result.

Adult educators can take steps to support everyone inclusively into the new expectations of later life learning, working, earning and living in our multicultural and ageing society.

There is a role of specific age-focused learning, but also in informal learning for active citizenship where educators might make the biggest difference. Enabling people to come together to work out their best ways forward, for them to become included in whatever ways they see fit. There is a role for new approaches to pre-retirement learning which reflect a wider range of experiences, including those of lesbian women (NOLG 2015).

Community education has a role to play in raising awareness about ageing and middle-age. We live in a society which is keen to pretend that ageing does not matter – and on one level it should not – but, age discrimination both exists and does matter. Using our creativity and ensuring that stories are shared is a crucial task for enabling a more equal society in relation to women, lesbians and ageing.

References

- Age UK (2016), *Later Life in the United Kingdom August 2016*, http://www.ageuk.org.uk/documents/en-gb/factsheets/later_life_uk_factsheet.pdf?dtrk=true, accessed 4/10/16.
- Athill D. (2008), *Somewhere towards the end*, Granta, London.
- Banks J., Blundell R., Bozio A., Emmerson C. (2008), *Releasing jobs for the young? Early retirement and young unemployment in the UK*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, London.
- Belenky M.F., Clinchy B.M., Goldberger N.R., Tarule J.M. (1986), *Women's ways of knowing: the development of self, voice and mind*, Basic Books, New York.
- Benn R., Elliott J., Whately P. (eds) (1998), *Educating Rita and her sisters*, NIACE, Leicester.
- BITC: Business in the Community (2014), *The Missing Million*, BITC/ILC.
- Carlton S., Soulsby J. (1999), *Learning to grow older and bolder*, NIACE, Leicester.
- DWP (2014), *Fuller Working Lives: a framework for action*, HM Government, London, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/319872/fuller-working-lives.pdf, accessed 14/9/16.
- DWP (2016), *Households Below Average Income 2014/15*, Table 6.5bd.
- Golding B., Mark R. and Foley A. (eds) (2014), *Men Learning through Life*, NIACE, Leicester.
- Guasp A., Balfour J. (2008), *Peak Performance; gay people and productivity*, Stonewall, London.
- Hafford-Letchfield T., Lambert N. (2014), *Solo Women in later life: Learning, education needs and experiences*, Paper given at 'Innovations in older adult learning' Fifth Conference ELOA 2014 University of Malta.
- ILC (2016), *Still not ready for ageing 2016. Still not ready for ageing*, http://www.ilcuk.org.uk/index.php/publications/publication_details/still_not_ready_for_ageing, accessed 4/10/16.
- JRF (2012), *Perspectives on ageing: lesbians, gay men and bisexuals*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.
- Klein D. (2014), *Travels with Epicurus – Meditation from a Greek Island on the Pleasures of Old Age*, Oneworld, London.
- Knight C. and Watts J. (in press), *Lesbians and Ageing*.
- Kolland F. (2016), *Education and identity in super-ageing societies*, Keynote speech at International Conference on Learning in Later Life: Theory, Policy and Practice, April 2016, AEA.
- L&W Learning and Work Institute (2015), <http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/our-resources/promoting-learning-and-skills/2015-adult-participation-learning-survey>, accessed 4/10/16.
- LGA (2014), *Ageing: the silver lining*, Local Government Association, London.
- Lively P. (2013), *Ammonites and leaping fish*, Penguin, London.
- McGivney V. (1993), *Women in education and training*, NIACE, Leicester.
- McGivney V. (1999), *Excluded Men*, NIACE, Leicester.
- McNair S. (2012), *Older people's learning in 2012 – a survey*, NIACE, Leicester.

- Mansfield S. (2005), *Researching women's auto/biography as emancipatory practice*, in: *Popular education: engaging the academy*, J. Crowther, V. Galloway, I. Martin (eds), NIACE, Leicester, pp. 110-122.
- Merrill B. (2005), *Biographical research; reasserting collective experience*, in: *Popular education: engaging the academy*, J. Crowther, V. Galloway, I. Martin (eds), NIACE, Leicester, pp. 135-144.
- Miles N. (2008), *The double-glazed glass ceiling: lesbians in the workplace*, Stonewall, London.
- Neild S., Pearson R. (1992), *Women Like Us*, The Women's Press, London.
- NIACE (2006), *Between Women; Learners' Voices 1*, NIACE, Leicester.
- NIACE (2015), *Mid Life Career Review; final report*.
- NOLG = National Older Learners Group/NIACE (2015), *A Better Future for us all*, NIACE, Leicester.
- http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/sites/niace_en/files/resources/MLCR%20Final%20Report.pdf, accessed 14/9/16.
- Rich A. (1979), *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, Norton, New York.
- Roberts B (2002), *Biographical research Milton Keynes*, Open University Press.
- Robertson G. (2014), *Transitions in Later Life*, Positive Ageing Associates/Gulbenkian Foundation, London.
- Schultheiss D., Watts J., Sterland L., O'Neill M. (2011), *Career, migration and the life CV: a relational cultural analysis*, "Journal of Vocational Behavior", Vol. 78, pp. 334-341.
- Smeaton D., Vegeris S., Sahin-Dikmen M. (2009), *Older workers: employment preferences, barriers and solutions*, EHRC 43, London.
- Solnit R. (2006), *A field guide to getting lost*, Canongate, Edinburgh.
- Stonewall (2016), *Top 100 employers 2016; the definitive guide to the most inclusive employers in Britain*, Stonewall, London.
- Taking Liberties Collective (1989), *Learning the Hard Way*, Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Thompson J. (1983), *Learning Liberation*, Croom Helm, Beckenham.
- Thompson J. (2007a), *Time to use the F word again*, in: *Participation and the pursuit of equality*, A. Tuckett (ed.), NIACE, Leicester, pp. 33-47.
- Thompson J. (2007b), *More words in edgeways*, NIACE, Leicester.
- Tuckett A. (ed.) (2007), *Participation and the pursuit of equality*, NIACE, Leicester.
- Turner C. (2016), *The forgotten women: the gender pay gap and middle age*. Centre for Ageing Better, <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/news/forgotten-women-gender-pay-gap-middle-age/>, 22.09.2016.
- Ward R., Rivers I., Sutherland M. (2012), *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Ageing*, London, Jessica Kingsley.
- Watson D. and Schuller T. (2009), *Learning through life; an inquiry into the future of lifelong learning*, NIACE, Leicester.
- Watts J. (2014), *Careering towards retirement?*, Paper given at ELOA conference 2014, Malta.
- Watts J. (2015), *What next? Learning in the 'age of no retirement'*, Keynote speech at ELOA Conference October 2015, University of Jonköping.
- Withnall A. (2010), *Exploring the gender agenda in later life learning*, Frank Glendenning Memorial Lecture 2010, Association for Education and Ageing, London.

'DISTRACTIONS': CULTURAL INFLUENCES, INCLUSION, AND LEARNING IN LATER LIFE; STORIES OF WOMEN'S LIVES

SUMMARY: Social gerontologists have paid attention to inclusion and diversity, but only rarely has that lens been applied within education. This is surprising as lifelong learning practice has a long tradition of addressing inequalities and confronting exclusion. Diversity projects have often not included ageing. This paper considers the impact of women's, and particularly lesbian, lives in the UK in the aftermath of recent changes to retirement and state pension ages and considers lessons for educators. In the field of education and ageing, we sometimes write as though women's stories are unimportant. Recent projects and research about older women are complemented by analysis of literature in gerontology and education. Examples of later life learning are considered in the light of inclusion and diversity and show how life-story exemplifies the culture of women's learning. The importance of biography in feminism can be applied to work on the theme of later life 'transitions'. These transition points are interpreted differently by women and men and used to create a narrative of life-course, important in determining later life learning. Evidence is taken from small scale research with a peer group of lesbians, considering the impact of working longer. The paper seeks conclusions to inform educational practice in supporting women into the new expectations of later life learning, working, earning and living in our multicultural and ageing society.

KEYWORDS: lifelong learning, women/lesbians and ageing, diversity, community education, story.

„ZAKŁÓCENIA”: WPŁYWY KULTUROWE, INTEGRACJA I UCZENIE SIĘ W PÓŻNEJ DOROSŁOŚCI. HISTORIE ŻYCIA KOBIEC

STRESZCZENIE: Gerontolodzy społeczni zwracają przede wszystkim uwagę na włączanie i różnorodność osób starszych, ale rzadko łączą to z edukacją. Jest to zaskakujące, gdyż praktyka uczenia się przez całe życie ma długą tradycję w kontekście znoszenia nierówności i konfrontacji z wykluczeniem. Projekty, które dotyczyły nierówności, rzadko obejmowały osoby starsze. Niniejszy artykuł uwzględnia wpływ kobiet, a szczególnie lesbijek mieszkających w Wielkiej Brytanii, na zachodzące w ostatnim czasie zmiany dotyczące emerytury oraz ma na uwadze pewne rozważania dla edukatorów. Analizując obszar edukacji i starzenia się, często odnosi się wrażenie, że historie kobiet są niezauważalne. Ostatnie projekty i badania dotyczące starszych kobiet uzupełniane są analizą literatury z dziedziny gerontologii i edukacji. W świetle włączania i różnorodności, historie życia kobiet są ważnymi przykładami uczenia się w późnej dorosłości. Ważność biografii w feminizmie można wykorzystać także w kontekście rozważań nad zmianami, „przejściami” widocznymi w późnej dorosłości. Te punkty przejścia i zmiany są inaczej interpretowane przez kobiety, a inaczej przez mężczyzn. Opowiadając o swoim życiu, osoby starsze mogą wskazać na istotne aspekty, pomocne dla uczenia się w późnej dorosłości. Dowody potwierdzające powyższe stwierdzenie, przedstawione w niniejszym artykule, pochodzą z badań przeprowadzonych na małej próbie badawczej kobiet, lesbijek. W artykule przedstawiono wnioski dotyczące praktyki edukacyjnej i wspierania kobiet w obliczu nowych oczekiwań wobec uczenia się w późnej dorosłości, pracy, zarobkowania oraz w kontekście wielokulturowego i starzejącego się społeczeństwa.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: całożyciowe uczenie się, kobiety/lesbijki, starzenie się, różnorodność, uczenie się społeczności, historia życia.