

Integrating the needs of LGBT+ older adults into health and social care education

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Abstract

Introduction: Non-normative sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression at the intersection of old age, represent diverse risks of discrimination and social exclusion, and at the same time can include many negative consequences for a person's health and sense of security. In old age, the situation may worsen, as LGBT+ older adults are less likely to access various forms of support that could trigger coming out of the closet. Research shows that inequalities in health and social care of LGBT+ older adults persist due to the lack of inclusive services and cultural competence of health and social care practitioners.

Methods: The partners of the European project "Being Me" took up the challenges presented and explored good educational practices on the needs and specific living conditions of LGBT+ older adults using the innovative participatory method "World Café" (a method of group dialog). In 2018, two "World Cafés" were organized with a total of 78 stakeholders (LGBT+ older adults, practitioners, researchers, students, professors and teachers). An evaluation of both events was conducted using questionnaires. The project also included research into the national contexts of the participating partners and the publication of two systematic literature reviews on approaches to education on LGBT+ older adults and the impact of such education on health and social care staff. *Results:* In the first World Café, participants shared their personal experiences of care, highlighted the role of teachers in health and social care, and formulated initial ideas about the knowledge and skills that future practitioners should be equipped with to provide more inclusive and safe care. The second World Café was dedicated to researching specific methods and useful resources for delivering trainings and using them in education. A systematic review of the literature and both World Cafés led to the development of online learning materials and principles of good practice for all who educate in the field of health and social care.

The World Café method has proved to be an effective approach to linking the diverse views of participants and the participatory development of learning content, as evidenced in the evaluation findings. *Discussion and conclusions:* LGBT+ older adults represent one aspect of an increasingly diverse group of people whose need for health and social care services is growing in an aging society. In the future, staff training in these areas will need to address the needs of LGBT+ older adults, as providers of these services have a key role in delivering friendly and inclusive care to LGBT+ older adults.

Keywords: LGBT+ older adults, inclusive care, education, World Café

Introduction

The number of people aged 60 years or older is increasing exponentially (United Nations World Population Aging, 2019) and with it the needs for health and social services in both informal and formal support systems (United Nations Population Fund and HelpAge, 2012). At the same time, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other non-normative sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions (LGBT+) are becoming more visible but face various risks of discrimination and social exclusion at the intersection of old age.

There are numerous reports that LGBT+ older adults face specific social problems similar to their younger peers, including isolation, economic challenges, employment and housing discrimination (Boggs et al., 2017; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2017; Emlet, 2016; Equal Rights Center, 2014), and multiple health problems, such as higher risk of mental health issues, disability, and substance abuse (Yarns et al. 2016; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2013). Compared to the general population, they report poorer health and have worse experiences of care (Westwood et al., 2020). In addition, LGBT+ older adults are more likely to be estranged from their families, have no children, and live alone compared to their heterosexual and same-sex peers. Consequently, they have to rely on other support systems such as friends and other caregivers (Zelle and Arms, 2015; Knauer, 2016).

Studies have shown that LGBT+ older adults are often afraid to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to health and social care providers due to their personal histories of discrimination and social exclusion, and are reluctant to access existing services (Sharek et al., 2015; Almack, 2019; Burton et al., 2019). Westwood (2019) notes that in the case of organizational abuse, LGBT+ older adults may be potentially mistreated by both service providers and other residents. In addition, the fear of and actual occurrence of discrimination based on sexuality and gender identity, which often co-occurs with ageism, has been linked to a higher likelihood of depression and anxiety in LGBT+ older adults (Tinney et al., 2015).

In order to understand the specific needs that arise from the diverse life experiences and histories of LGBT+ older adults, both practicing and future

professionals must be educated to provide culturally competent and inclusive care (Dentato et al., 2014; Canon et al., 2017, Smith et al., 2019). A lack of cultural competency and knowledge about working with LGBT+ older adults is often observed among professionals (Portz et al., 2014; Simpson et al., 2018; Kortés-Miller et al., 2019) and is missing from curricula and textbooks (De Guzman et al., 2018)

Methods

Between 2018 and 2020, the partners of the European project “Being Me” (<https://beingme.eu/>) took up the challenges presented and explored good educational practices on the needs and specific living conditions of LGBT+ older adults. The innovative participatory method “World Café” (World Café Community Foundation, 2015), a group dialog method, was used to bring stakeholders (LGBT+ older adults, practitioners, researchers, students, professors and teachers) together to document their lived experiences, knowledge and resources. Two ‘World Cafés’ were organized in Amsterdam (June 2018) and Dublin (October 2018) with a total of 78 participants and both events were evaluated with a questionnaire (see Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2021). The project also included research into the national contexts of the participating partners and the publication of two systematic literature reviews on approaches to education on LGBT+ older adults and the impact of such education on health and social care staff (see Jurček et al., 2021; Higgins et al., 2019a).

Results

Use of World Café method

In the first World Café, participants shared their personal experiences of care, highlighted the role of educators in health and social care, and formulated initial ideas about the knowledge and skills that future professionals should be equipped with to provide more inclusive and safer care. A variety of approaches and methods were used during the event, including storytelling, mixed group discussions on relevant topics and arts-based sessions. The groups invariably included diverse stakeholders from different partner countries (UK, Ireland, Netherlands and Slovenia) and stakeholder groups. This led to more lively discussions and followed the principle of ‘nothing about us, without us’, meaning that discussions about the experiences and needs of LGBT+ older adults always included someone with personal experience. Smaller group discussions were later presented to the whole group and the results were documented and collated by members of the Being Me team.

The second World Café followed a few months later and was dedicated to exploring specific methods and useful resources that can be used in professional education and training. Participants, particularly researchers, policy makers, practitioners and educators, were asked to bring examples of good practice, which were then presented in smaller groups, evaluated and discussed with

other stakeholders. Again, input from all stakeholders, but particularly LGBT+ older adults, was crucial in identifying good practices, which were collected and later disseminated (see Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2019).

Evaluation and main results

The evaluation conducted in both sessions found that the World Café method was useful in achieving the event objectives and resulted in a high level of participant satisfaction. The majority of participants agreed that the climate within the group was conducive to open discussions and, with the help of the facilitators, everyone had the opportunity to express their thoughts in a safe environment. The different methods and approaches used during the event enabled the sharing of ideas and the creation of new resources that can be used in practical and educational settings. Key outcomes from the World Cafés led to the development of online learning materials (<https://beingme.eu/toolbox>) and principles of good practice for all who educate in the field of health and social care (Higgins et al., 2019b). The learning materials developed as part of the project cover six overarching themes: 1) Readiness to learn, which aims to prepare institutions and educators to include and address LGBT+ issues in their curricula; 2) Human Rights, which helps learners understand the meaning, origins, and relevance to LGBT+ older adults; 3) Identities and Intersectionality, which introduces relevant terminology and intersectionality critical to understanding different life stories and the interplay of people's identities; 4) Relationships, Families, and Intimacies, addresses the diversity of networks and relationships of LGBT+ older adults; 5) Life Stories, provides guidance to educators on using LGBT+ stories in their teaching; 6) Good Care, aims to provide knowledge about inclusive and LGBT+ friendly care.

Discussion

The World Café method proved to be an effective approach to linking the different views of participants and the participatory development of learning content, as shown by the evaluation findings. Project outputs were also informed by two systematic literature reviews. The first review synthesised literature describing the pedagogical principles, curriculum content and methods used to educate health and social care professionals in relation to the experiences and needs of LGBT+ older adults (Higgins et al., 2019a) and was used in the development of principles for good practice and learning materials. The findings of the review are congruent with the findings of the World Cafés and other reviews such as that of Lecompte et al. (2021), which emphasize the importance of educating practitioners by increasing their knowledge of LGBT+ issues, changing their attitudes and working proactively to take action at institutional and personal levels to provide safe and inclusive care. In addition to providing an overview of existing content and methods that can be used in educational settings, our review also indicates that there is a need for in-depth exploration of curricular principles, assessment strategies, and strategies to overcome barriers

to incorporating issues experienced by LGBT+ older adults into curricula (Higgins et al., 2019a). The second study in the Being Me project looked at the outcomes of interventions used to educate health and social care workforce on the experiences and needs of LGBT+ older adults, in particular what impact the interventions have on the knowledge, attitudes and skills of participants. The included studies showed some positive outcomes, such as an increase in knowledge among participants, but not necessarily a change in attitudes or newly acquired skills (Jurček et al., 2021), therefore more emphasis needs to be placed on the transfer of acquired knowledge into practice when delivering training targeted at professionals working with LGBT+ older adults in the future. The review has shown that longitudinal studies of the impact of educational interventions are needed and that diversification of intervention content, different methodologies and the involvement of the public (particularly LGBT+ individuals and organizations) at all stages of the design and delivery of educational interventions could lead to a more sustainable impact (Jurček et al., 2021).

Conclusions

LGBT+ older adults represent one aspect of an increasingly diverse group of people whose need for health and social care services is growing in an aging society. In the future, staff training in these areas will need to address the needs of LGBT+ older adults, as providers of these services have a key role to play in delivering friendly and inclusive care for LGBT+ older adults. The Being Me project addressed these issues using both participatory approaches to include personal experiences of LGBT+ older adults and reviewed existing literature with the intention of providing educators and practitioners with valuable resources to incorporate the needs of LGBT+ older adults into curricula and train practitioners in health and social care services.

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