

Negotiating Belonging Across Place, Identity, and the Life Course

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Introduction

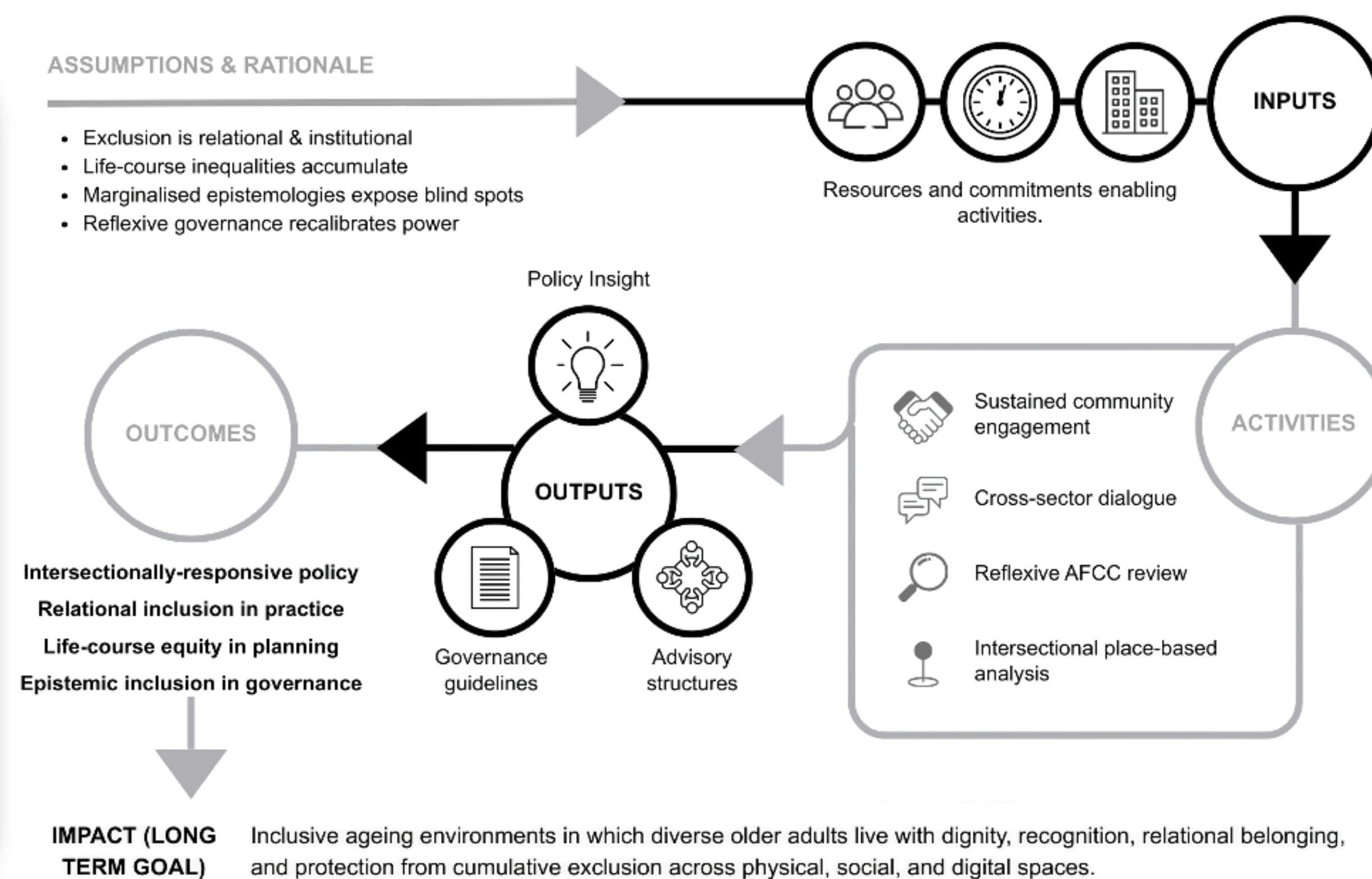
- Global populations are ageing rapidly, demanding new approaches to urban inclusion
- WHO's AFCC framework (1,400+ cities, 51 countries) prioritises functional accessibility over the **relational and intersectional dimensions of belonging**
- AFCC treats older adults as **relatively homogeneous**, overlooking how age intersects with disability, sexuality, and gender across the life-course
- People with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) and older LGBT+ people bear the greatest cost, shaped by cumulative histories of stigma and institutionalisation
- Theoretical framework: Intersectionality, Place, Life Course and Ageing in Place
- **This study examines how mid-older adults with ID and LGBT+ identities negotiate belonging across place, calling for a more relational and intersectional approach to age-friendly urbanism**

Methods

- **Design:** Qualitative, community-engaged study guided by CBPR principles and the IPP
- **Participants:** 153 interviews with adults aged 40+ (n = 77 ID; n = 76 LGBT+)
- **Settings:** Urban, suburban, and rural contexts across Great Britain
- **Recruitment:** Partnership with community organisations using purposive and snowball sampling
- **Analysis:** Reflexive thematic co-analysis informed by IPP; ID and LGBT+ datasets analysed separately then compared to identify cross-cutting patterns
- **Ethics:** Approved by the Universities of Dundee, Hertfordshire, and Liverpool John Moores; ongoing accessible consent procedures with GDPR compliance throughout

Theory of Change

- It clarifies how participatory research translates into structural change in age-friendly planning
- It recalibrates the AFCC lens toward intersectionality and life-course sensitivity
- Evaluation shifts from monitoring service indicators to assessing how policies redistribute power and sustain belonging over time

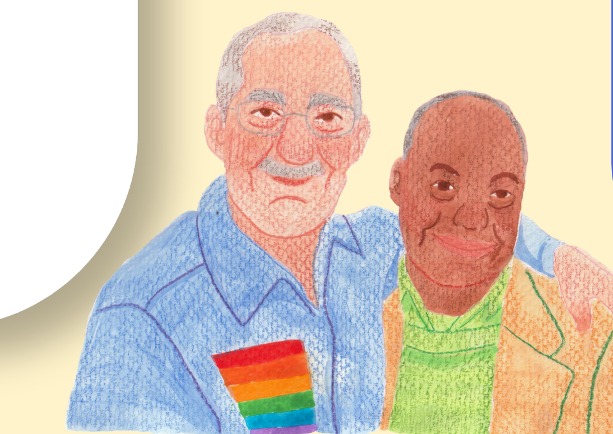


Everyday Spaces, Micro-Interactions, and the Making of Belonging

- Belonging emerged through everyday spaces sustained by **familiarity, recognition, and relational care**, not formal infrastructure
- Homes, neighbourhoods, and community venues became meaningful because they allowed participants to **exist without fear or scrutiny**
- Small, repeated **micro-interactions** accumulated over time to communicate **safety, respect, or exclusion**
- For LGBT+ participants, **bodily comfort and identity affirmation** shaped confidence in spatial mobility
- For ID participants, belonging was anchored in **long-standing relationships** and **being greeted, listened to, and treated as an equal**

"I didn't advertise my sexuality in college ... especially not midwifery, because I overheard someone being very anti lesbian in a conversation in the ladies toilets one day in college... That's the story of my life, in and out of the closet...in and out." (Magpie, LGBT+)

"The gyms were a massive part of my life and to be able to go back there and be greeted the way I was, exactly the same... I feel safe, I feel comfortable." (Bob, ID)



Agency, Resistance, and Claiming Space

- Agency emerged through **emotionally costly, everyday efforts** to negotiate exclusion and assert belonging, not formal activism alone
- For LGBT+ participants, this included **symbolic acts of resistance, strategic disclosure decisions**, and later-life **policy engagement**
- Exclusion was experienced even within ostensibly inclusive LGBT+ spaces, revealing **internal hierarchies** within communities
- For ID participants, agency was expressed through **collective self-advocacy** and resistance to institutional paternalism
- Involvement in self-advocacy organisations rebuilt **confidence** and reclaimed **civic presence** over time

"... I wear that badge saying, still bisexual you know 40, married 40 years thank you very much and it hasn't changed my sexuality believe it or not um cause why would it." (Ralph, LGBT+)

"We stood up for ourselves and said, 'Enough is enough, we want out' and er, er, where we should have got the right care to support to actually move." (Martin, ID)

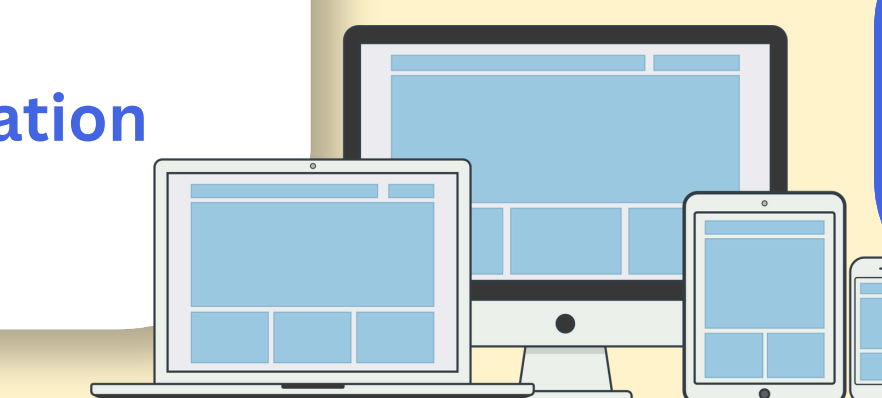


Digital Spaces as Sites of Connection, Exposure, and Mistrust

- Digital spaces were ambivalent sites of **connection, protection, and risk**
- For LGBT+ participants, online environments enabled **identity affirmation** and **community formation**, particularly during periods of vulnerability
- Yet algorithmic reinforcement also amplified misinformation and stigma, producing **new forms of exposure**
- For ID participants, digital engagement was uneven, shaped by **literacy, affordability**, and reliance on **support networks**
- Across both groups, digital participation remained an **ongoing negotiation** rather than a universal pathway to inclusion

"I joined ... a Facebook group called Late Bloomers which is specifically for women including trans women who've come out later in life... Being then deluged by huge numbers of women... being supportive and saying... how connected they felt." (Jules, LGBT+)

"...I find it difficult online cause ... you don't know who to talk to do ya, online I'd rather speak face to face really." (Hermione, ID).



Conclusion

- Belonging is continually negotiated through everyday spaces and micro-interactions
- Cumulative histories of stigma and institutionalisation shape how ID and LGBT+ older adults navigate spaces in later life
- Resilience is a socially produced capacity, embedded in community networks and relationships over time
- Co-produced knowledge surfaces dimensions of exclusion that conventional frameworks routinely overlook
- Extending AFCC requires moving from technocratic compliance toward reflexive, intersectionally-informed planning

References



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