

The Needs of Older Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender People

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‘[T]here is a desire that the aged should conform to the image that society has formed of them. They are required to dress themselves in a certain way and to respect outward appearances. More than any other, it is in the sexual aspect of life that this repression makes itself felt.’ [Beauvoir 1977: 246.]

In autumn 2002 Chris Chamberlain and I offered to analyse interviews that the ALSO Foundation, Melbourne had collected from 52 people over the age of 50 and to investigate their needs as older gay, lesbian, and transgender people. Thirty-two of the interviewees were in their fifties, 15 were in their sixties, and five were aged 70 or more. The youngest respondent was 50 and the oldest 75. The sample comprised 26 gay men, 21 lesbians, and five transgender people [For details of the respondents, please see: Chamberlain and Robinson 2002, copies of which are available on-line from the web sites of the Centre for Applied Social Science, RMIT University, Melbourne and ALSO Foundation].

In the course of our work we looked at the argument that Jackie Langley and others have developed, which is that non-heterosexual people have special needs in old age because ‘oppression is central to their lived experience’ [Langley 2001: 920]. When Jackie Langley speaks of oppression she is referring to homophobia. As Chris Chamberlain and I understood it, homophobia leads to discrimination against non-heterosexual people because it assumes that their sexual orientation is either illegitimate or inferior.

Heterosexism, on the other hand, we understood to be a weaker form of discrimination. It operates from the assumption that everybody is heterosexual. One consequence of it is that people from minority groups can feel uncomfortable when it is assumed that everyone is heterosexual. In practice, we believe that ‘discrimination’ is best understood as a continuum between homophobia and heterosexism.

Very briefly, what we found from our analysis of the ALSO interviews is that it is difficult to make blanket recommendations of the needs of old and older gay and lesbian and transgender people because of the diversity of their lived experience and the varied circumstances that they find themselves enjoying or enduring in old age [See Chamberlain & Robinson 2002]. For example, some who are materially well off require minimum services because they can buy in what they need, they are self-sufficient. A number of gay and lesbian respondents said that they had made a point of ensuring their self-sufficiency so that they would not have to ask the government for anything.

There were others, however, who were materially well off but who were fearful. We detected a link between their fearfulness and experiences they had had of homophobia or heterosexism earlier in their life and an associated belief that came with that, which is that they would be vulnerable to the same sort of homophobia or heterosexism when they were in care or in need of care, that is, when they were dependant.

But not everyone is fearful of old age because of their experience of discrimination. Moreover, as Andrew Boxer and Bertram Cohler argue in their discussion of the life course of gays and lesbians, it is often impossible to know how an individual will respond to hardship or to discrimination. They write:

Little is known of the manner in which persons create a narrative that renders adversity coherent in terms of life history.... For some persons, the experience of adverse life events may be used as an explanation for the failure to realize personal goals. For others, this misfortune becomes the impetus for increased effort in order to attain these goals. [Boxer and Cohler 1989: 319-320.]

To further complicate the matter, Dana Rosenfeld argues that, in the sample of 20 older lesbians and 17 gay men that she examined in Los Angeles, there were two distinct identity discourses. She found that how her interviewees saw themselves and how they viewed the world depended on whether they identified with the pre-Stonewall discourse of homosexuality, which was of a stigmatised, shameful identity, or whether they identified

with the post-Stonewall discourse of gay liberation, which, she writes, '[b]ecause it constitutes the individual's essential self, it neither can nor should be enacted in silence lest the essential self be denied; on the contrary, it can and should be ... discussed, and enacted in both public and private areas.' [Rosenfeld 1999: 124.]

One final note here: all the members of Rosenfeld's sample reached sexual maturity before the Stonewall riot in 1969; that is, the views of her respondents were not determined by when they were born but whether or not they wished to take up an identity based on the public discourse of homosexuality as shameful and stigmatised or reject it and adopt the identity that was based on the discourse of gay liberation.

We divided our sample—that comprised 26 gay men, 21 lesbians, and five transgender people—into three groups according to how well they reported that they were 'travelling' in their own lives. We took into account their material situation, the character of their social relationships, and their sense of optimism or pessimism about the future. We drew attention in our report that 'class position' has a significant effect on the lives of non-heterosexual people, but that it does not determine everything.

Better off

Twenty-two of our respondents were identified as travelling well. A minority of this group believed strongly in individual initiative and also thought about the world in largely individualistic terms.

George, 64, retired a couple of years ago and lives with his partner of 22 years. He describes himself as having 'tons of money' and says 'I can look after myself in every way'. For the last 30 years, he has travelled overseas at least once a year. When he was asked about the needs of older gay, lesbian and transgender people, he commented: 'I am in the happy situation of not having to worry about myself. We older gay men don't usually need help. We are usually OK money wise. I think there are many things for people to do. It's up to each person.' George had no sense that non-heterosexual people might have special needs. He never referred to 'discrimination' or 'homophobia' in the interview.

Rose, 56, has also had a successful career and is thinking of retiring at 60. She says that 'most people are not concerned about gays or lesbians these days. We are accepted in the broader community'. However, when she talked about the breakdown of her long-term relationship, she alluded to heterosexism: 'I found that when we had the property settlement it was easier to do business with a lesbian solicitor. I felt much more at ease. It might have been difficult with a heterosexual solicitor.'

Other people were certain that discrimination occurs. According to Jacob, 'Gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people have been horrendously discriminated against. It can ruin people's whole lives'.

Transgender

There were five transgender respondents in the sample. One was categorised as travelling well and four were in the intermediate category. They all thought that the broader community did not accept transgender people. According to Paul, 57, 'most people treat us as though we were a disease'. They were also uncertain about the gay and lesbian community. According to Gina, 'Well as far as gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people are concerned, I really don't ally myself with them'.

The transgender respondents were acutely aware of discrimination in the broader community, and some recounted stories of discrimination in the gay sub-culture. They thought their group had special needs.

In the middle

There were 16 individuals who identified as gay or lesbian in the intermediate group. There was variation in whether or not people recognised homophobia and heterosexism.

Louise, 69, is in a long-term relationship, but her health is failing. She pointed out that the needs of older lesbians vary, depending on whether they are single or partnered: 'It strikes me that one of the things that you will discover is that most people who are in a settled relationship will feel reasonably secure about their future. Those who are not in a steady relationship will regard the future with much more trepidation.'

Karen, 57, held similar views:

Quite a lot of older gay men and lesbians have no family. When they get too old to live in their own home, they want to live in an environment here they can be with their own people, or with gay and lesbian friends. There should be nursing homes and retirement villages for gays and lesbians.

A number of respondents were worried about heterosexism. They had a sense that older gay men and lesbians might be discriminated against in a conventional nursing home where there were mainly heterosexual residents. It was often said they would feel 'more comfortable' in services where there were other gays and lesbians around. They had a clear sense that older non-heterosexual people have special needs.

On the outside.

Ten gay men were 'doing it tough'. Of the eight who were of working age, three were unemployed, three were on disability support pensions, one had a part-time job, and one had full-time work.

Yuri, 54, has lost many friends from AIDS and he has been HIV positive for the last 12 years. He is on a disability support pension and he is acutely aware of discrimination: 'In the last 10 years I have been hit left, right and centre with antagonism because I am HIV positive. I have lost three jobs. I can no longer work. I feel that I am of no value to my society, or to the gay community.' He also experiences discrimination within the gay community:

We in the gay community have remarkable opportunities to unite and make it ourselves. I mean we've done it for 25 years. As an older gay man I'm really sad that this unity has dissipated. I watch the kids party. I watch them turn their backs on their elders. The younger generation have become very cruel, very ageist.

Mal, 61, is disabled. He is active in the disability rights movement and he is also involved in community radio. He recounts how he 'came out' to a friend in a community based organization some years ago. 'That was it. She didn't want to know me'. He also feels that older people are discriminated against in the gay community, especially if they have a disability.

Many of the gay men who were doing it tough saw discrimination within the wider society. A lot mentioned homophobia and most were worried about heterosexism. However, eight out of the 10 working class men also complained about discrimination within the gay sub-culture, because of 'ageism'.

Services for older people.

More than one quarter of our respondents recommended that outreach services should be provided for older gay men and lesbians. Phil, 54, thought that the elderly were likely to experience isolation and loneliness if their partner dies and 'there will be a need to maintain contact [in the form of home care] with these people'. There was widespread agreement that these services must be provided by people who accept the lifestyle choices of non-heterosexual people. Some suggested that outreach services for the elderly could be provided from within the gay community.

Just under half of our respondents made comments regarding nursing homes or retirement villages for non-heterosexual people. Kathleen, 68, recognises that she will have to leave her home when she is too old to look after herself: 'if there's no lesbian village then I'll probably end up in some other retirement place, which I won't be very happy about'. She would like:

[T]o see a lesbian retirement complex with independent houses and units and then a hostel and then a nursing home and the whole works. It would be really nice. I'd also like to see a lot of greenery around it. It would be nice to have things like a lesbian centre. It could have a library complex and other things that the rest of the community might come and use. It would be nice to be looked after by younger lesbians, rather than straight people. In fact, it's highly preferable.

Kathleen's dream is of a community where the old and the young would be in touch with one another, by making use of the facilities provided under one roof. We found widespread support for nursing homes and retirement villages for older non-heterosexual people.

About one-third of our respondents wanted community organisations to provide more social activities for ageing non-heterosexual people. Many women were active in community organisations for older lesbians. Most were positive about these organizations, and many spent a lot of time in the lesbian social community. Heloise belongs to four organisations:

I am part of a circus group called Performing Older Women, which is open to women over 40. We have a show coming up at the end of the month, so that's happening. I am also a member of Matrix, as well as the Jewish Lesbian Group. I am also a member of the Archives.

Catherine, 64, is single. She has an active social life in the lesbian community: 'I think that as a single, older woman, you are better off being a lesbian than a heterosexual. There are dances and balls. They are very inclusive of older people ... Our community organises its own activities. The lesbian community has given me a really good life in the last few years.

Lesbian respondents were less concerned than gay men about the shortage of social venues and meeting places. Lesbians seem to have been better at forging community organizations that are inclusive of older people.

In the major capital cities, the centre of social life for gay men is the 'commercial scene'. This consists of bars, nightclubs, and commercial saunas. It is a world primarily oriented towards younger men, where there is a high premium on 'good looks', physical attractiveness, and wearing the latest fashions. Ridge, Minichello and Plummer (1997) carried out a study in Melbourne that involved interviewing 24 young men between the ages of 19 and 36 who were on 'the scene'. Their research revealed weak social networks and quite widespread 'alienation'. They also point out that 'youth' is highly valued in the scene, and older men are often marginalised.

Earlier, we saw that most of the older working class men reported either that they felt uncomfortable in the gay subculture or that they had experienced discrimination. A minority of upper and middle class men drew attention to this as well. According to Harold, 60:

Most of the venues in the city are for the younger generation, such as pubs, dance venues and so forth. In fact, I went to a dance venue not so long ago and was told I couldn't get in because I was too old. I was extraordinarily upset about that.

Many respondents pointed out that they wanted social venues of a different kind. As James put it: 'I want the companionship of people of my own age in a range of social settings. I don't want to go to every party like a 20-year-old.'

Our respondents saw different solutions to the problems of isolation and loneliness, but most wanted clubs and social activities where older people could get together.

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The findings point towards the need for outreach services for older people who wish to remain in their own home, but need various types of support to remain independent (housework, shopping, social visits etc.). There is already a network of home care for people living with HIV-AIDS that has done excellent work. These

organisational arrangements could be extended to support elderly non-heterosexual people who need assistance to remain at home.

We found a widespread sense among people in all classes that there is need for nursing homes and retirement villages for older non-heterosexual people. People were worried about homophobia and heterosexism in mainstream services. Building accommodation for older non-heterosexual people is a formidable challenge. It would require long-term planning, substantial funds, and a body of experts overseeing the project.

Finally, there is the issue of social groups and social spaces for older people. Our evidence indicates that the lesbian community is more inclusive of older people, and that many gay men are isolated and lacking in social support groups. For gay men the experience of ageism is embedded in the dominant character of social relations in the commercial scene, and many gay men feel that they have nowhere else to go. The experience of isolation and loneliness is felt most by single, working class men, although single men in other classes also experience ageism in the gay sub-culture.

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