

New threads in later life: supporting LGBTQ older adults in their care

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Program of research

- My research looks at the experiences of aging lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (hereafter LGBTQ) people in Canada today.
- Key questions include: From where do older LGBTQ Ontarians obtain care? How do they conceive of what is desirable in terms of health care and living arrangements? How can their needs and desires be understood along a longer life-course trajectory and within the current political and economic moment in Canada?
- It is qualitative and ethnographic: daily lives > the broader political, social, and economic moment
- Life course focused: understanding circumstances along an individual's life course
- Historically situated: current circumstances situated within transforming historical conditions

Aims and roadmap

- 1. “New threads in later life”: to present you with examples from lived experience the challenges and opportunities of aging and new beginnings of LGBTQ older adults.
- 2. “Supporting LGBTQ older adults in their care”: to consider how we can better provide person-centered care to LGBTQ older adults by accounting for historical context and focusing on their own experiences of and desires for “care”
- Vignettes> Discussion> Recommendations

Ethnographic Vignette #1

- Bob
- Key terms and points:
 - Family of origin and family of choice
 - Mixture of formal and informal networks of care
 - The role of employment in economic security
 - Some people are recognized as subjects worthy of support extended by state, community, and kin. Others are not.

Ethnographic Vignette #2

- Ella
- Key terms and points:
 - Formal support and care for transgender individuals has not existed until very recently.
 - Given heteronormative and homophobic societal norms and structures, many people have not been able to express their gender.

Language: Understanding our terms

- 1. To be sure we are all on the same page- what is “LGBTQ”, anyway??
- 2. The use of language is very important to members of queer communities- having the background to understand the terms by which people self-identify and describe themselves and their communities is crucial to promoting safe environments and encounters.
- 3. To stress the great diversity of identifications and experiences within what we by shorthand call LGBTQ communities- while often conceived of as a population, people have widely varied stories, experiences, needs and desires.

“The 519’s Equity Glossary of Terms” is available at <http://www.cfcollaborative.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/The-519s-Equity-Glossary-of-Terms-Oct-21-11.pdf>.

Understanding our terms

Terms Related to Sexual Orientation, Sexuality and Queer Cultures:

- **Sexual Orientation:** The emotional, romantic and sexual attraction to another person(s). It can be fluid over time. The identity a person uses to describe their sexual orientation, ie, straight, may not reflect their sexual behaviours. (Sexual orientation is not to be confused with a person's gender identity.)
- **Lesbian:** A female identified person who has romantic or sexual attractions primarily to people of the same gender or sex.
- **Gay:** A person who has romantic and/or sexual attractions primarily to people of the same gender or sex.
- **Bisexual:** A person who may have romantic or sexual attractions to people of any gender or sex.
- **Heterosexual:** A person who has romantic or sexual attractions to people of another sex or gender.

Understanding our terms

Terms Related to Sexual Orientation, Sexuality and Queer Cultures, cont.:

- **Asexual:** A person who has no sexual attractions to others.
- **Pansexual:** A person who has romantic or sexual attractions to people of any gender or sex.
- **Out:** When a person lives openly as gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans.
- **Polyamory:** The practice, state or ability of having more than one sexual loving relationship at the same time, with the full knowledge and consent of all partners involved.
- **Queer:** An umbrella term used proudly by some people to defy gender or sexual restrictions. This is also one way some people identify themselves as members of the lesbian, gay, bi, and/or trans communities or cultures. The term is not reclaimed by everyone and may be hurtful for some.

Understanding our terms

Terms Related to Gender:

- **Gender/Gender Identity:** This is how we perceive our identity as male, female, both, or neither, regardless of our physical bodies. It is separate from “biological sex”.
- **Sex (biological sex):** A label we are given at birth to describe our physical bodies and reproductive capacity. Characteristics of the body used to determine biological sex may include genitals, gonads, hormones, chromosomes, and secondary sex characteristics.
- **Gender Binary:** This is the classification of sex and gender into two distinct and disconnected states of masculine and feminine. It describes a social boundary that discourages people from crossing or mixing gender roles.
- **Gender Role:** The oppressive culturally-specific expectations and restrictions that are placed on a person based on whether they are perceived as male or female.
- **Gender Expression:** The demonstration of one's gender identity, often shown through clothing, behaviours, interests and/or chosen names.

Understanding our terms

Terms Related to Gender, cont.:

- **Trans:** An umbrella term for a person whose gender identity does not match society's expectations of someone with their physical sex characteristics.
- **Trans Man (FTM):** A female-to-male trans person.
- **Trans Woman (MTF):** A male-to-female trans person.
- **Transition:** The process trans people go through to overcome physical, legal and social barriers so they can express their self-identified gender.
- **Cisgender/Cissexual:** A person who is not trans: whose gender identity, behaviours and appearance are in harmony with what their culture expects from a person with their external sex characteristics.
- **Genderqueer/Gender non-conforming:** An umbrella term used proudly by some people to defy gender restrictions and/or to deconstruct gender norms.
- **Passing:** This is the privilege given to a person who is believed to be a member of a dominant group (i.e., non-trans, cisgender, white, non-disabled). When a trans woman is passing, (i.e., believed to be a cisgender woman) she has an easier time accessing women's services.
- **Stealth:** When a trans person is not "out" about being trans in their social circles (friends, employers, colleagues).

“New Threads in Later Life”

- Building on research to date.
- Historically situated the needs and concerns around aging and caregiving that older LGBTQ persons today may have.

(timeline adapted from: CBC News, Timeline: Same-sex rights in Canada)

“New Threads in Later Life”

- Focus of studies to date have been geared towards:
 - people’s perceptions of and concerns about receiving care and long-term care and project hopes and fears for the future.
 - Participants have been predominant lesbian and gay identified people residing in urban areas, university educated and middle to upper class, and white.
- Notable gaps in research include:
 - attention to LGBTQ people of colour
 - attention to LGBTQ people living in poverty, or with less socio-economic resources
 - LGBTQ aging in rural areas
 - informal caregiving arrangements
 - people’s lived experiences receiving care.

“New Threads in Later Life” :

Historical Context

- 1969: Homosexuality is decriminalized in Canada.
- 1969: The Stonewall Riots took place in New York City. This is recognized as a major catalyst in the gay rights movement.
- 1973: The Board of Directors for the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a mental disorder from the DSM.
- 1978: Canada gets a new Immigration Act. Under the act, homosexuals are removed from the list of inadmissible classes.
- 1980: Bill C-242, an act to prohibit discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, gets its first reading in the House of Commons. The bill, which would have inserted "sexual orientation" into the Canadian Human Rights Act, doesn't pass.
- 1981: More than 300 men are arrested following police raids at four gay bath houses in Toronto. The next night, about 3,000 people march in downtown Toronto to protest the arrests. This is considered to be Canada's 'Stonewall.'

“New Threads in Later Life” :

Historical Context

- 1980s & 90s: Height of AIDS epidemic in North America. Many lives are lost. 1992: The federal court lifts the country's ban on homosexuals in the military, allowing gays and lesbians to serve in the armed forces.
- 1995: An Ontario Court judge finds that the Child and Family Services Act of Ontario infringes Section 15 of the Charter by not allowing same-sex couples to bring a joint application for adoption. He rules that four lesbians have the right to adopt their partners' children. Ontario becomes the first province to make it legal for same-sex couples to adopt.
- 1996: The federal government passes Bill C-33 which adds "sexual orientation" to the Canadian Human Rights Act.
- 2003: British Columbia and Ontario begin marrying same-sex couples.
- 2005: Canada becomes the fourth country to officially sanction gay marriage nationwide.
- Gender dysphoria remains a psychiatric condition in DSM V. This is a source of contestation among many in trans* communities.

Historical Context: Implications

These historical conditions have a number of implications for LGBTQ people as they age and come to have increased care needs. These include:

- **Fear:** Experiences of the pathologization and criminalization of homosexuality in North America can result in fears of experiencing further erasure and discrimination in healthcare settings.
- **Continued discrimination:** Older LGBTQ adults continue to experience discrimination and hostility in a variety of settings and on numerous levels of interaction (cite).
- **Economic insecurity:** Given the hostile environment older LGBTQ adults may have experienced employment discrimination over their lifetime, translating into their current economic situation.
- **Social support:** Lesbians and gay men frequently have lacked access to many primary sources of support, typically that provided by spouses, family and relatives. Social support remains problematic for this group because historically homophobia has disrupted gay men's and lesbians' connections to their natal families and discouraged biological reproduction resulting in families (Barker et.al. 2006: 1, 2).

Historical Context: Implications

This also has implications for people's new beginnings:

- This is the first cohort of LGBTQ aging openly. As such, in many ways they can be understood as pioneers creating their own cultural script throughout life and into old age.
- Transitioning later in life
- Coming out later in life
- As other older adults, aging presents many challenging transitions and opportunities for new experiences.

“Supporting LGBTQ older adults in their care”

- Given the diversity of people’s identifications, experiences, and desires, and the historical circumstances outlined, how can we care, better?
- These recommendations could be grouped broadly under “check your assumptions” and “create safer spaces”.

Recommendations

Regardless of living arrangement and care needs, three keys are language, respect and validation, and education.

- Language: One can, for example, address people with pronouns of choice. Written forms and assessments should not assume heterosexuality (LGBT Tool Kit 2008:20).
- Respect and validation: be open to learning from people and respecting their personal boundaries when it comes to disclosure.
- Education: Continuing to educate yourself with LGBTQ issues and culture and promoting this in your workplace.

Recommendations

Aging in the community:

- Recognizing kin
- Inclusive programming
- Further research and knowledge sharing

Recommendations

Care in congregate living facilities:

- **Paid Staff Mandated to Address the Needs of LGBT Older Adults in Community Organizations:** having a paid staff member mandated to advocate for and provide services for LGBT seniors (Sussman et al. 2012: 23).
- **Fostering Internal Leadership:** “the importance of having ‘champions of the cause’ in facilities, and suggested that these champions are often either self-identified as LGBT or have a family member or friend who is part of the LGBT community. Such internal leadership should be encouraged and promoted. Hiring policies should be welcoming and encouraging of LGBT applicants and effective anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies should be in place....” (Sussman et al. 2012:23).
- **Creating an LGBT welcoming environment:** In the physical environment, there can be evidence of positive signs and symbols. This could include graphic materials and signage that are inclusive of LGBT people in the living facility, as well as having LGBT literature and materials in common areas (LGBT Tool Kit 2008: 19).
- **Governance and administrative processes:** including the review and assessment of all policies, guidelines and practices to determine if they contain any systemic barriers to inclusion. Diversity and LGBT inclusion can become part of the strategic plan (LGBT Tool Kit 2008: 17,18).

Recommendations

- Equity & citizenship

Concluding remarks

“You and I are not different, because we’re lesbian. We’re lesbian. And the same way every person has a different set of needs, we have a different set of needs, in some areas.”

Thank you.

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Brotman, Shari

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SAGE

2010 Improving the Lives of LGBT Older Adults.

<http://www.sageusa.org/files/Improving%20the%20Lives%20of%20LGBT%20Older%20Adults%20-%20Snapshot%20report.pdf>

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1997 Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Additional Resources & Contact Points:

- SAGE resources (Services & Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders; U.S. based):
<http://www.sageusa.org/resources/index.cfm>
- National Resource Center on LGBT Aging resources (U.S. based): <http://www.lgbtagingcenter.org/resources/index.cfm>
- The Toronto LGBT End-of-Life Resource Inventory:
<https://www.sfu.ca/lgbteol/Resources.html>
- The 519 Older LGBTQ programs and services:
<http://www.the519.org/programs/category/older-lgbtq>
- Senior Pride Network: <http://www.seniorpridenetwork.com/>
- “Gen Silent”, a film and popular educational resource on LGBTQ aging. <http://gensilent.com/>