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## Older lesbian and gay men's perceptions on lesbian and gay youth in Australia

Andrea Waling<sup>a</sup> , Anthony Lyons<sup>a</sup> , Beatrice Alba<sup>a</sup> , Victor Minichiello<sup>a,b</sup> , Mark Hughes<sup>c</sup>, Catherine Barrett<sup>d</sup> , Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen<sup>e</sup> and Samantha Edmonds<sup>f</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; <sup>b</sup>School of Justice, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia; <sup>c</sup>School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia; <sup>d</sup>Alice's Garage, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; <sup>e</sup>School of Social Work, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA; <sup>f</sup>The National LGBTI Health Alliance, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

### ABSTRACT

Older lesbian and gay people are increasingly open about their sexuality but have also experienced a lifetime of discrimination. These groups have experienced a long history of changes to lesbian and gay rights, and many were also at the forefront of activist movements during the latter half of the 20th century. A deeper knowledge is needed of the life experiences of these groups, including how they view their lives in relation to younger lesbian and gay people. This would assist agencies working with older lesbian and gay people, such as health and support services, to provide more informed engagement, support, understanding, and culturally safe services. Drawing on 33 qualitative interviews with older (60+ years) lesbian and gay people, we explored their experiences during their younger years and their perspectives on how these experiences compare with those of younger lesbian and gay people today. Our findings note that older lesbian and gay people feel life is, in some ways, easier, and in others, still challenging for young lesbian and gay people, and they articulate a need for mutual respect across age groups.

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## Introduction

Australia has a large group of ageing lesbian and gay people (Alba et al. 2019a, 2019b; Lyons et al. 2019) who are increasingly open about their sexual orientation. This is a unique group, having lived through immense social, cultural, and legislative change, including decriminalisation of homosexuality, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and marriage equality. The challenges and experiences of their younger years were likely to have differed in many ways compared to the experiences of lesbian and gay youth of today. Their reflections on their younger years and the youth of today, as well as their relationship with younger lesbian and gay people, can therefore

offer insight into how this group feels about their own lives today. This insight can be important for health and social service providers, as well as other support workers, in adding to their cultural understanding and therefore assist in supporting older lesbian and gay people in culturally safe ways (Cramer et al. 2015).

For the purposes of this paper, we refer to 'older' as aged 60 years and over and 'younger' as aged under 30 years. In recent years, growing awareness of the social and material needs of older lesbian and gay people in Australia and internationally has commanded a greater focus on experiences of ageing (Lyons et al. 2015; Lovelock 2006), physical and mental health and well-being (Barrett et al. 2015; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. 2014), access to health, aged, and palliative care services (Alba et al. 2019b; Waling et al. 2019; Hughes 2004, 2008, 2009; Cramer et al. 2015), end-of-life planning (Cartwright, Hughes, and Lienert 2012; Hughes and Cartwright 2014), and housing and financial security (Kim and Fredriksen-Goldsen 2016; Alba et al. 2019a). Older lesbian and gay people who came of age between the 1940s and the 1970s spent the bulk of their adolescence and early adulthood with homosexuality considered an illness, a sin and a crime, alongside having experienced the gay liberation and women's movements, and the HIV epidemic (McGovern and Vinjamuri 2016; Dentato et al. 2014; Vaccaro 2009; Robson et al. 2018). The pathologisation of homosexuality by the American Psychiatric Association's Third Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) contributed to anti-gay legislation resulting in many lesbian and gay individuals losing their jobs and families, as well as experiencing violence (Weststrate and McLean 2010; Dentato et al. 2014). In 1997, Tasmania was the last state in Australia to decriminalise homosexuality and it is only in recent years that state and territory governments have started to expunge gay's mens' earlier convictions for homosexual crimes.

In Australia and internationally, older lesbian and gay people's reflections on their own and other age groups, including younger lesbian and gay people, have attracted relatively little investigation (Bohan and Russell 2005, Goltz 2009; 2014; McGovern and Vinjamuri 2016; Vaccaro 2009; Robson et al. 2018). A recurring belief is that older and younger groups of particular groups, such as lesbian and gay people, do not understand each other. Such beliefs are premised on notions that older lesbian and gay people do not listen to, respect or value the experiences and opinions of younger lesbian and gay people, with detrimental consequences for younger lesbian and gay people's health and well-being (Bohan, Russell, and Montgomery 2003). The silencing and invisibility of older lesbian and gay people in these discussions, while recognised more broadly (Brown 2009), has not been addressed in academic research exploring different age-group perspectives, which have tended to focus on youth experiences.

Of concern is that rapid social change experienced since the 1970s, when the gay liberation movement became established (Bohan and Russell 2005), may have resulted in divides between older and younger lesbian and gay people, in terms of a lack of understanding of lived experiences regarding gender and sexuality. Scholars note that these divisions may lie in the history of discrimination and violence that older lesbian and gay people faced, the separate spaces where lesbian and gay people might meet, and the overt sexualisation of lesbian and gay identity that has led to beliefs that older gay and lesbian people are sexual predators looking to recruit young people to

their cause (Bohan, Russell, and Montgomery 2003; Bohan and Russell 2005; Goltz 2009; Goltz 2014). As such, Bohan and Russell (2005) claim that these divides have resulted in older and younger lesbian and gay people having few or no organic opportunities to interact with each other. Others have noted that the promotion of ideals of beauty and youth in queer culture has led to ageism that excludes older lesbian and gay people where different age groups may interact (Vanderbeck 2007).

Lessons can be learned from these perspectives. Bohan and Russell (2005) argue that lesbian and gay adults sometimes engage with younger lesbian and gay youth in problematic ways, including the possibility that:

- Adults may over-identify with youth, failing to see the distinctiveness of youths' experiences.
- Based on their own adolescent experiences, adults may focus on suffering and isolation, missing the changed contexts of today's youth.
- In efforts to call attention to the problems generated by homophobia, adults may disregard the joyous elements of their own and youths' lives.
- Adults may dismiss youths' ability to identify relevant issues with clarity by virtue of youths' status in this pre-figurative time (Bohan and Russell 2005, 5).

For lesbian and gay youth, there may be little awareness of the challenges that older lesbian and gay people face, such as elder abuse (Robson et al. 2018). They may not understand older lesbian and gay people's history of vulnerability, oppression and marginalisation, particularly in the context of the ageing body and access to health services.

This paper addresses this gap in understanding by exploring older lesbian women<sup>1</sup> and gay men's perspective of younger lesbian and gay people in Australia and their reflections on how this compares with their own youth and histories. Drawing on 33 interviews with older (60 years and over) lesbian and gay people, we explored their experiences in relation to their own younger (under 30) years and their perspective on how these experiences compare with younger lesbian and gay people. This paper aims to extend knowledge of the personal histories of older lesbian and gay people.

## Methods

The study was approved by the La Trobe University Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited as part of a national survey on their health and well-being. A total of 33 qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 cisgender lesbian women and 15 cisgender gay men. Most were aged 60–70 years (73%), partnered (67%), residing in urban areas (76%), and retired (64%). Just under half had children (48%). Most lived in the states of Victoria (33%), Queensland (21%) and New South Wales (21%).

## Data collection

Participants self-selected to take part in an interview after completing the national survey. This survey was available both online and in hardcopy form, and was promoted

through various means, including Facebook advertisements, radio broadcasts and community organisation mailing lists and events. At the end of the survey, participants could elect to supply contact details if they wanted to participate in an interview. At this point they were also requested for information regarding their age, sexual identity, gender identity, assigned sex, intersex variation/s, and whether or not they were receiving home-care services.

Stratified sampling was used to group potential interview participants according to whether they were a cisgender lesbian woman ( $n=107$ ) or cisgender gay man ( $n=261$ ). An online random number generator was used to select participants from each of the two groups, who were then invited via email for interview. Those who agreed to be interviewed were provided with further details about the study and a consent form to sign and return via email. While the study focussed on older lesbian and gay people's experiences of ageing and aged care services in Australia (Alba et al. 2019a, 2019b; Lyons et al. 2019; Waling et al. 2019), we also explored personal histories of growing up in Australia as lesbian or gay, and their perspectives on how life has altered or changed for them over time. Participants were asked their thoughts about younger lesbian and gay people in Australia to assist them in reflecting on what has changed regarding lesbian and gay visibility and acceptance in Australian society. Additional questions included whether or not they felt that lesbian and gay youth faced fewer challenges than they did in their youth, and whether or not they felt lesbian and gay youth had a different experience of life in comparison to when they were growing up as lesbian or gay.

Interviews took 45–60 min and were conducted by the first-named author via telephone to allow participation from urban and rural areas across the country. The interviews were semi-structured to enable the development of organic conversation and reach data saturation (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006), Audio recordings were transcribed by an external transcription agency. The first named author verified the transcripts by reviewing them while listening to the recordings. Transcripts were also anonymised and participants given a pseudonym. All participants declined the offer to review their transcript. Research diaries providing a summary of the interviews were completed by the first named author, highlighting preliminary thoughts and ideas.

## **Analysis**

We employed a thematic analysis procedure involving six stages, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). During the first stage (familiarity with the data), the first author familiarised themselves with the transcripts through the process of transcript verification, as well as rereading their written research diaries. *A priori* categories from the interview schedule were used to outline semantic themes to assist the coding process before initial codes were developed (stage 2: generate initial codes). The interview guide was only used to initially help organise the data prior to analysis, and interview questions did not constitute thematic categories themselves. Transcripts were coded using NVivo to generate the initial descriptive themes. The third-named author reviewed a random sample of transcripts to ensure agreement regarding the semantic categories. The first author then examined the parent code 'experiences of lesbian,

gay, queer community' to explore emerging themes regarding how older lesbian women and gay men related to, engaged with and understood the contemporary lesbian and gay community (stage 3: search for themes). This required an examination of how older lesbian and gay people understood and related to the lesbian and gay community as they aged. Initial themes that arose from this analysis included commentary on younger lesbian and gay people, the focus of this paper. This code was based on interview participants often using language such as 'gay' and 'queer' to generally refer to community, as well as younger lesbian and gay people. Themes were reviewed with other members of the research team to ensure applicability to the research question (stage 4: review themes). Themes were then defined and reorganised into main and sub-themes (stage 5: define themes), followed by the writing up of the material (stage 6: write-up).

## Findings

Findings from the national survey (Alba et al. 2019a, 2019b; Lyons et al. 2019) noted that 87.6% of older lesbian women and gay men felt that things are better for today's younger lesbian and gay people than when they were their age. Table 1 provides a breakdown of this finding, noting a relatively equal spread across older lesbian women (86%,  $n = 208$ ) and gay men (88.5%,  $n = 452$ ) who felt things were better.

However, qualitative interviews with the 33 participants suggested a much more complex picture. Three major themes emerged about how lesbian and gay older people reflect on and understand the lived experiences of younger lesbian and gay people: (1) that older lesbian and gay people felt things had changed for the better, or were easier for younger lesbian and gay people; (2) that older lesbian and gay people recognised that younger lesbian and gay people still experienced similar, as well as new challenges; and (3) a desire for mutual awareness and respect across the groups.

The 33 participants in this qualitative study ranged in age from 60 to 86 years. This meant that participants would have been entering adolescence, the time at which many begin to experience sexual and romantic desires and when many older lesbian and gay people first realise their same-sex attraction (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000), as early as the late 1940s up until the early 1970s. As noted earlier, these participants have encountered a range of significant moments in lesbian and gay history and their own personal histories in Australia, including women's rights, sexual liberation, gay and lesbian rights liberation, the HIV epidemic, the decriminalisation of

**Table 1.** Do you think things are better, about the same, or worse for today's younger generation of LGBTI people compared to when you were their age?

	Male $n = 511$		Female $n = 242$		Total $n = 753$	
	$n$	%	$n$	%	$n$	%
Better	452	88.5	208	86.0	660	87.6
About the same	37	7.2	27	11.2	65	8.5
Worse	22	4.3	7	2.9	29	3.9

homosexuality, the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the criminalisation of gay conversion therapy in some jurisdictions. They may have also experienced discrimination and violence both on systemic, as well as everyday levels, and witnessed the rapid digital and technological revolution.

### ***It's 'easier'***

Reflecting on their lived experiences and histories, participants felt that in some ways lesbian and gay youth have it easier in terms of coming out and being accepted in Australian society. Such perceptions were premised on a number of notions, including access to community, knowledge and language; that there was an increasing sense of acceptance, comfort and safety; and that there was more visibility, awareness, and recognition of lesbian and gay people now than there had been when they were young. This contrasts with Bohan and Russell (2005)'s argument that older lesbian and gay people focus on suffering, isolation and homophobia and are unable to see or reflect on the contexts and changes that youth might be experiencing.

### ***Community, knowledge, language***

Some, like Cody, noted that lesbian and gay youth had greater access to knowledge and language regarding lesbian and gay identity than they did growing up:

I think they have it a lot easier, particularly in the city, I'm not sure about the country these days, but I think they would because like I said you know they have access to the internet and stuff like that where they can access that, I mean I had nothing growing up apart from the Encyclopaedia Britannica which didn't say much about being gay anyway. Cody (gay man, 66)

Cody reflected on his own experience of growing up, the lack of resources concerning sexuality, and in particular what it might mean to identify as a gay man or have same-sex desires. Cody highlighted that the advent of technology has made accessing knowledge much easier for youth. This was echoed by Phoebe:

There is a myriad, there's huge amounts of information out there that you can access. When I was coming out there was not. Phoebe (lesbian woman, 66).

Others, like Drew, felt that lesbian and gay youth had more access to community:

I know from looking at my great nieces and nephews that there are still young people growing up in homes and environments and church cultures that if they found themselves to be gay, transgender, lesbian, that they would have, not perhaps quite the same problems as I had, because they can look at the wider community. Drew (gay man, 75).

Drew highlighted that while young lesbian and gay people still face challenges, they have access to community and support systems that he did not have growing up.

### ***Visibility, recognition, awareness***

Participants noted that there was much more visibility, recognition, and awareness of lesbian and gay people in Australian society now than in the past. Some spoke about this in terms of visibility in mainstream media:

I think the visibility is there, I think the kind of whole you know LGBTI visibility stuff is there and it can be front and centre you know, that's got to do with the technology and media and there's you know, a queer or a lesbian or male homosexual person on almost everything that you watch on television these days. Heather (lesbian woman, 65).

Others described the increased visibility of lesbian and gay people, contrasting with the invisibility that was prevalent when they were growing up:

Well yeah, back in the 50s it's certainly different to what it is now, things are more open about it, it's spoken about more, the whole – back in the 50s gays weren't talked about much at all, or if they were, they were put down. And it's a lot more open now, a lot more talked about, and I suppose I see lots of flags around that people are putting up. Dylan (gay man, 66).

Both Dylan and Heather highlighted how lesbian and gay issues are widely discussed, as well as more visibility regarding lesbian and gay rights. Some, like Patrick, noted how the advent of technology has contributed to increased visibility:

You see those, on YouTube the coming out stories of the young people you know, and they're coming out so much younger now too, they're coming out at 12 and 13 and 14 and they know what they want. Patrick (gay man, 69).

### *Acceptance, comfort, safety*

Many participants reported increased feelings of acceptance, comfort and safety in Australian society. Participants noted this was not perfect and much was still to be done. Nevertheless, they reported acceptance as a major shift in their own experiences. Some highlighted this at the political or legislative level:

When the legislation [marriage equality] came through – I was amazed at how many young people were there and comfortable and excited and that was a really good feeling for me, just to see this comfort and this excitement. Whitney (lesbian woman, 69).

The fact that they're not legally discriminated against for instance is a big thing, you know they can't be discriminated in the workplace for being gay, they could when I was a kid, they can't be arrested for being gay, could when I was, so the fact that they've got the law on their side is a big plus than what we had, I could get arrested for walking down the street holding hands, my god you walk through the city now you see girls and girls and guys and guys holding hands everything and no one cares much about it anymore. Reid (gay man, 68).

These examples highlight the way time has transformed Whitney's and Reid's perceptions of safety as lesbian and gay people in Australia. Legal changes have provided new opportunities for themselves and younger people that were not available during their own youth. While both note broader acceptance, it is the legislative changes, such as the reform of the Sex Discrimination Act and the legalisation of same-sex marriage, that they link to greater comfort and safety. For others, greater acceptance was noted in the everyday experiences of life in Australia:

People under 30 these days they don't care what sexuality people are, and it's much more integrated, and you see that when you go out, if you ever venture out to a nightclub, the young lesbians they're all there with their straight friends and their gay mates, they're all integrated, it's diversity and they like it and they celebrate it. It's quite different from people [of] my generation. Debbie (lesbian woman, 65).

Debbie highlighted that acceptance of sexuality appears to be more common compared to her own experience of being out as a lesbian. She reported that for herself and members of her age group the ability to celebrate their sexuality and being accepted is relatively new.

Participants also noted that acceptance meant the ability to be more open about distress and trauma:

I think that there's so many young people today who are actually going through some form of trauma or distress about the fact that they can't come out or that they won't be accepted. But I also see part of it is probably that we're more connected now. I mean in the 1960s and the 1970s we had no social media so you had your immediate group of friends, then you had your group of acquaintances and the people you socialised with. Cameron (gay man, 66).

As Cameron highlighted, the ability to discuss fears and anxieties about being gay or lesbian was not necessarily a possibility when he was young. He notes that social media helps more lesbian and gay people connect with each other, and this may enable young people to share with each other experiences of pain and trauma, as well as find community and support. In some ways, participants felt that youth may have it 'easier' than they did, and this was accompanied by an overall sense of joy and hope for younger groups. In contrast to Bohan and Russell's (2005) point that some older lesbian and gay people can have difficulty in seeing the joys of changed contexts, these participants felt that things were changing for the better. This may indicate that older lesbian women and gay men have more diverse views on life for lesbian and gay people today than was previously thought. Although speculative, it is possible that recent legislative changes, such as marriage equality, have prompted shifts in the views about the rate of progress, although this would need to be examined in further research.

### ***It's different***

Bohan and Russell (2005) note that some older lesbian and gay people may attempt to over-identify with youth and therefore be unable to recognise unique experiences. While participants did feel that lesbian and gay youth had it easier in some ways, they were nevertheless aware of newer challenges. As such, participants did not think that, on the whole, lesbian and gay youth had it easier, but rather, that there were still many contemporary challenges facing younger groups, some long-standing, and some new.

### ***Homophobia, intolerance, discrimination***

Some participants noted that while young people may have more access to family and other support systems, as well as benefit from legal recognition in terms of marriage equality, they nevertheless still face challenges regarding religious and political belief systems that promote homophobia:

In a lot of ways it appears easier, because you know they have a lot more rights than we had, they have like you know equality in a lot of areas, apart from marriage. But there are still hard core conservatives who show their hate really you know – and it's

still used as a, you know at school when they go you're a fag or something like that, you know, that sort of thing, they still use it. Kacy (lesbian woman, 73).

When you look at the suicide rates of young gay people particularly in the country and that concerns me. Not on a personal level but on a general level it concerns me that they still have these issues. Vaughn (gay man, 66).

Kacy indicated that while more lesbian and gay youth have family and support systems, there continue to be political and religious issues. Her comment reflects broader contemporary debates about lesbian and gay rights in Australia, such as those concerning religiously motivated conversion therapy (Jones et al. 2018). Vaughn expressed concerns that young lesbian and gay people still have high rates of suicidal ideation and completion despite increased acceptance in Australian society, with recent statistics showing lesbian and gay young people are six times more likely to engage in suicidal ideation than their heterosexual counterparts (National LGBTI Health Alliance 2016)

### ***Bullying, community, technology***

Participants also reported that the Internet and social media, while allowing for greater connectivity, awareness and access to knowledge, also made experiences of discrimination and bullying more instantaneous and ever-present:

They're different, they are so different now, and do they have it easier, in some respects they do, but it's so different, I mean the social media stuff being instantaneous you know harassment, the 24/7, you know that's really, that makes it really different. You know and I remember someone talking about schoolyard bullying, which is well used to be, it happened in the schoolyard and you'd go home and nothing would happen, or you'd talk to your friends overnight, but schoolyard bullying happens now and it's instantaneous, it goes through on social media. Danielle (lesbian woman, 64).

As Danielle noted, experiences of bullying have moved beyond school boundaries into areas where it can become ever-present, and therefore serves as a new challenge for young people, one that she did not have to face when she was younger. This trend has also been reported in studies on bullying and social media (Cohen-Almagor 2018).

Others expressed concerns about online communities and integrated spaces, in particular relating to social isolation:

They're [young people] just quite happy to mix in their groups and they don't feel the need for specifically identified groups, some of them because they don't specifically identify as like lesbian or whatever. But what they lose, well the first thing that's lost is that those who are more isolated, whether it's because of geography or whatever the reason is, it still happens that there's plenty of people who feel like they're the only gay in the village so to speak, and it's very hard for them to find other people, other women, members of the community. Rene (lesbian woman, 62).

Oh it's much less communal, much, much less communal. And for logical evolutionary reasons, I think there's two things that have driven that, one is substantially increasing acceptance of a range of sexuality and at high school level a lot more, and the second is the internet and the web and communicating through the web, and then sex apps like Grindr and that sort of stuff. Samuel (gay man, 63).

Rene and Samuel both sensed the loss of in-person community with the advent of technology, online spaces, and integration into mainstream society. They nevertheless

recognised the benefits of technology, such as providing easier ways for lesbian and gay youth to connect with others (see Lucassen et al. 2018), but worried about what that means for community connection, or for people who may be struggling to connect with others if residing in more isolated areas or lacked access to technology. Thus, Danielle, Rene and Samuel observed the advantage of 24/7 access to knowledge and information, but this was juxtaposed with the problems it can create through the potential for easy, widespread use of negative communication and bullying. For these participants, community was often experienced in physical, rather than digital spaces. Young lesbian and gay people configure community differently with the rise of digital technology (Cover 2019), and this community, while recognisable to older lesbian and gay men in Australia, was nevertheless perceived as a loss.

### *Fluidity, diversity, change*

Other participants reflected on changes in how gender and sexuality are being understood and wondered about the challenges this presents for both older and younger lesbian and gay people. One participant referred to potential pressure for younger people to identify in specific ways:

I feel incredibly sorry for them [younger generations of lesbian women]. Particularly for the butch girls because there is such a lot of pressure on them to transition to male as if transgender was the only issue in town. I have watched a couple of my young friends go through that and it is gruesome. Chloe (lesbian woman, 64).

Chloe worried about the increased pressure for younger lesbians who may engage with a more butch representation, culture or identity having to negotiate not only their sexuality, but also their gender presentation. By 'butch', Chloe was referring to the practice of 'appropriating signs of masculinity' (Levitt et al. 2012). She felt that there was less acceptance of young lesbian women who present in this way. Such concerns echo research exploring lesbian and butch identity, in which scholars have noted that 'butch' as an identity and as a queer culture has been perceived by some to be disregarded, silenced or made invisible in the wake of the emergence of transgender and genderqueer identities (see Mackay 2019 for a critical and nuanced exploration of these arguments).

For others, gender and sexuality have become, in some ways, blurred boundaries for younger people and that this has contributed to a perception of a divide within subcultures and age groups:

It's interesting, the gym I go to there's a young guy, 26 year old guy who's [part of a Bear club], so he's what we call a young bear, he doesn't particularly look like the 70s characterisation of a bear, but we had a really interesting discussion the other day about what contemporary bears represent, and in his mind and some of his younger colleagues it's much more about gender than sexuality, and blurred gender boundaries and things like that – and he's finding that the older bears, which are generally speaking large hairy men, are finding it difficult to adjust to that. Finn (gay man, 65).

Finn's comments here refer to traditional images of bears (i.e. hairy, chunky, larger, older) as a sexual orientation. Contemporary connotations associate bear with a performance of gender rather than a sexual orientation. It often includes a diverse range of bodies, gender identities, and ages (Quidley-Rodriguez and De Santis 2019).

In these examples, participants were not necessarily subscribing to an over-identification with lesbian and gay youth, nor dismissive of them in terms of their ability to engage with relevant issues, as Bohan and Russell (2005) suggest. Rather, participants appeared cognisant of the new challenges that lesbian and gay youth face and saw both the positives and negatives of new ways of connecting and belonging as a lesbian and gay person, young or old.

### ***Mutual awareness and respect***

In discussing lesbian and gay youth and life differences, participants noted the need for mutual awareness of lesbian and gay history. Some participants thought that lesbian and gay youth lacked an understanding of the struggles that older groups of lesbian and gay people had gone through in Australian society:

They don't know how lucky they are. It was a struggle, it was a real struggle. You couldn't say anything at work. That would have been, there would have been no promotion. You would have never got a promotion if people knew. I could see that where I worked before I started my own business what was being said. It was very, very difficult indeed. In the early (19)70s and late (19)60s you just couldn't. Devon (gay man, 69).

Referencing personal experience, Devon perceived a lack of awareness by younger groups about how much has changed in terms of visibility and acceptance. His view was echoed by Danielle:

It does piss me off when it's so, the struggles and younger people in this decade or last are [treated like] first time struggles... Where's the recognition of the struggles and the achievements of the people who've gone before? Danielle (lesbian woman, 64).

Similar to Devon, Danielle expressed frustration about what she feels is the forgotten history of lesbian and gay struggles. While participants were generally positive about younger lesbian and gay people and recognised the challenges they faced, they nevertheless felt frustrated by what they assumed to be a lack of respect, or even recognition, of the trauma associated with lesbian and gay history:

I think they've got their own challenges, and you know I understand that and acknowledge it completely, but I just wish they'd stop and listen a bit to us elders... I mean all those people dying those horrible deaths and putting up those fights that we had to fight, was done so that they could have the life that they've got now... So there's a bit of resentment there I suppose that we're not being listened to... We've still got some stories to tell. And the other part of that too is we still need to listen as well, this isn't a one way process... I mean those young kids don't know what we went through, but we by the same token don't know what they're going through on a daily basis either and what their fears are for the future and what they're worried about and maybe there's something that we can learn from them. Percy (gay man, 63).

Percy stressed the need for more mutual respect and awareness from older and younger age groups. Percy also referenced the HIV epidemic of the late 1970s and early 1980s, something that many of the participants in the study experienced throughout their lives and whom lost friends and partners, alongside other associated experiences of trauma and shifts in acceptance of lesbian and gay people. Percy, however, noted that this is not one-sided, and thus felt that it is equally important for the

older group to also engage with, and listen to, the younger group, echoing Bohan and Russell (2005) and Goltz's (2009, 2014) contentions that dialogues between age groups should be fostered.

## Discussion

Participants in this study illustrated a number of changes that they have experienced throughout their lives in growing older as lesbian and gay people. In thinking about the current group of lesbian and gay youth, participants articulated a number of positive changes that have enabled more freedom, acceptance, and visibility of lesbian and gay people than when they were growing up between the late 1940s and early 1970s. Participants also noted new and different challenges faced by lesbian and gay youth, including continued experiences of homophobia and discrimination, more opportunities for bullying due to shifts in technology, and more challenges regarding identity related to increased recognition of diversity and fluidity of sexuality and gender, and the interaction of the two within lesbian and gay communities. Participants articulated a need for mutual awareness and respect, highlighting that both younger and older groups need to work to foster better dialogues.

Findings from this research signify the importance of engaging with older lesbian and gay people to better understand their needs. As Robson et al. (2018) note in their work, it is vital that other age groups of lesbian and gay people are aware of the cultural, social and political contexts that older lesbian and gay people have experienced, as some of them may become the carers for these older groups. The findings also challenge current conceptions that older lesbian and gay people are unable to relate to lesbian and gay youth. Older participants were not disparaging towards the young, but rather highlighted the importance of understanding and respecting the long history of older Australian lesbian and gay people, in particular in respect to HIV, and long-term experiences of discrimination. Unlike Bohan and Russell (2005), who contend that older lesbian and gay people are unable to understand the specific challenges and joys that lesbian and gay youth experience, participants in this study were mindful of differences in lived experiences, as well as some of the similar and distinct challenges experienced by both older and younger groups.

Findings from this study further reflect Halberstam's (2005) and Marshall et al.'s (2019) points of engaging with older lesbian and gay histories to better understand the present. However, some participants expressed what they perceived was the silencing of their own histories and stories. It has been argued that many younger lesbian and gay people find value in sharing their stories and narratives, which contributes to positive health and well-being (Bohan, Russell, and Montgomery 2003; Bohan and Russell 2005; Goltz 2009). Such opportunities should also be provided to older lesbian and gay people to enable them to feel more valued and respected, especially as many were involved as pioneers for significant political, social, and cultural change, and to address the issue of silencing (Brown 2009).

On a further note, Halberstam (2005), Vanderbeck (2007) and Marshall et al. (2019) have called for a queering of work involving older and younger lesbian and gay people in order to dismantle binaries and understand differences between them. This

involves not using generational categories as such, but rather, articulating the manner in which queer identity, such as being gay or lesbian, can transcend heteronormative assumptions of youth and adulthood. In this case, the study findings highlight how older and younger lesbian and gay people may in fact have much more in common than in difference while continuing to acknowledge diversity within these groups. With regard to diversity, it is worth noting that challenges faced by both older and younger lesbian and gay people are likely compounded by varying factors, including cultural and religious community, disability and health, rurality and regionality, and economic class among others. Indeed, the histories of older lesbian and gay adults are likely to have been shaped profoundly by many aspects of their sociocultural backgrounds.

Having a better understanding of how older lesbian and gay adults perceive gay and lesbian youth today provides an opportunity to gain greater understanding about how they perceive lesbian and gay community, as well as the context of their own lives more generally, as revealed in this study. A greater cultural understanding of this group can be used by service providers, such as social workers, clinicians, counsellors, and aged care workers, to refine approaches toward providing sensitive and culturally safe environments, to devise appropriate opportunities to interact with young people, and to gain further awareness of potential needs such as recognition for the stories they have to share, thus helping inform approaches to policy and practice (Cramer *et al.* 2015).

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this work. First, as scholars such as Bohan and Russell (2005) suggest, there is a need to continue to explore the perspectives and experiences of lesbian and gay youth and how they view older age groups. It is important to provide a space in which these voices are heard. Second, research also needs to be conducted with other older groups, including trans men and trans women, non-binary gender people, non-monosexual people (e.g. bisexual, pansexual etc.) and people with intersex variations. Such research should also involve a focus on older and younger lesbian and gay people of multicultural and diverse communities. Third, the group of lesbian and gay adults aged 60 years and older covers a relatively broad age range. Those aged in their 80s for example, may have a range of different life experiences related to their sexuality than those aged in their 60s. It is suggested that future studies recruit a wider range of participants to explore differences and similarities across the age spectrum within the older group. Finally, more work needs to be done exploring various age group perspectives in tandem, such as in the work of Goltz (2014) and Robson *et al.* (2018) and could involve participatory approaches such as research that enables younger and older people to participate in the research process.

### **Conclusion**

As this group of older lesbian and gay people continues to age, it is important to document and preserve their experiences, and gain an understanding of how

their lives growing up have differed from those of today's lesbian and gay youth in Australia. By so doing, service providers, especially in the health, social and aged care sectors, can be better informed about the unique needs of this population, including ensuring cultural safety in service delivery and the creation of safe spaces for older lesbian and gay people. As Brown (2009) suggests, the rhetorical silencing of older lesbian and gay people is quite harmful, and more needs to be done to ensure that their voices and experiences are heard.

## Note

1. We use the terms 'lesbian women' and 'gay men' to disentangle gender identity from sexual orientation, as many people of diverse genders may use the terms 'lesbian' or 'gay' to describe their sexual orientations. Additionally, lesbian women participants in this study observed that the use of just the term 'lesbian' was alienating, as it rendered invisible their gender identity, whereas the term gay men is more commonly used.

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## ORCID

Andrea Waling  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1370-5600>

Anthony Lyons  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9569-6909>

Beatrice Alba  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2247-2119>

Victor Minichiello  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4613-881X>

Catherine Barrett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2692-4194>

Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7846-349X>

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