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Older GLBT Family and Community Life: Contemporary Experiences, Realities, and Future Directions

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FOREWORD

Older GLBT Family and Community Life: Contemporary Experiences, Realities, and Future Directions

Gay male, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) elders are rarely portrayed in existing literature as deeply embedded within families and communities. Yet, we cannot fully understand aging if we do not consider the diversity of experience and the social context of elders' lives. First, we must reflect upon the historical period in which today's GLBT elders came of age. During times of severe repression and intolerance, today's GLBT elders sought to claim their identities and their rights to exist. Despite the cultural mores and assumptions that maintained their invisibility, GLBT elders resisted by creating their own realities, families, and communities.

With adversity resulting in resilience, existing research suggests that the majority of GLBT elders bring resourcefulness to aging and create gratifying lives for themselves and their families. At the same time, however, many GLBT elders and their families remain underserved and do not access health and other support services when needed. They remain rightfully concerned about their need to ensure control over their lives and often try to protect themselves and members of their extended family through silence; yet, such adaptations can result in contradictions and inadvertently maintain the lack of recognition of their family relationships.

Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, GLBT elders are most often not isolated, but rather are rooted within families of many types. The concept of building family is real, and GLBT elders speak of families of their own including partners, close friends, parents, children, grandchildren, grandparents, siblings, and others. Through the life course, as personal identities are negotiated and renegotiated, new and existing familial roles are navigated.

A life-course perspective that is responsive to GLBT elders must incorporate the important influences of age, cohort, generational differences, culture, and individual life experiences upon significant life transitions. Furthermore, we must consider how aging and identity among traditionally marginalized groups intersect with the larger sociopolitical context. Given the range of life experiences and varied developmental trajectories among GLBT elders, a single, uniform life course within these communities simply does not exist.

Rather, we need to consider how different developmental trajectories and life events are reflected in variations over the life course.

In the study of GLBT elders, we are quickly reminded of the critical importance of multiple identities and the context, meaning, and fluidity of sexual orientation and gender identity as well as the intersecting nature of such social constructs within both family and community. Only through applying a holistic analysis to aging can we begin to understand the psychosocial processes and structural influences impacting GLBT elders and their families as well as the range of experiences within and across these vital communities.

This special issue of the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* rightfully centers GLBT aging within the social context of both family and community. Propelling gerontology and family studies forward, the articles presented in this special issue illuminate how family and community life are at the heart of GLBT aging. The articles are woven together to creatively explore how identities and familial relations are interconnected and change over time. By examining GLBT aging, this special issue highlights cross-generational influences and the changing nature of family and community.

It is time to understand the lives of GLBT elders and the needs and experiences of their families and communities. Understanding aging within a family and community context through the lived experience of GLBT elders will expand our knowledge of the diversity of aging, creating both insights and new possibilities.

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