



Reflecting on Life Then and Now: Interviews on the Life Courses of Older Lesbian Women and Gay Men in Australia

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Abstract

Introduction In Australia, there is a unique cohort of older (aged 60 and over) lesbian women and gay men who reached adolescence from as early as the 1940s up until the 1970s. Many have witnessed numerous social changes regarding the acceptance of lesbian and gay people in general society. Given the uniqueness of this cohort, it is important to have a comprehensive understanding of the histories of this group and how they perceive their lives today.

Methods This paper utilises the *Iridescent Life-Course Perspective* as a framework and draws on semi-structured interviews from 33 lesbian women and gay men aged 60 years and older residing in Australia to explore their reflections and perspectives on their lives from their younger years to today.

Results Participants recounted challenging coming out processes, relationship breakdowns, significant loss due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and experiences of discrimination. Despite this, participants on-the-whole expressed gratitude for the opportunity to age where they could reflect on their lives, as well as greater confidence and self-esteem.

Conclusions While older lesbian women and gay men experienced severe discrimination in their lives, they also demonstrated a degree of resilience, with many referring to gratitude and contentment in their lives.

Policy Implications Knowing the challenges as well as aspects of resilience is important for understanding how older lesbian and gay adults are experiencing life today. This is particularly important for policymakers and service providers in designing support programs that address challenges, build on strengths and seek to be fully inclusive and respectful of the diversity of the past and current life experiences of this population.

Keywords Ageing · Lesbian · Gay · Sexuality · Older · Resilience · Discrimination · Health

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The current cohort of older (aged 60 and over) lesbian women and gay men comprise a unique group. Many would have reached adolescence from as early as the 1940s up to the 1970s (de Vries, 2009). In Australia, like many other developed countries, this group lived through decades of immense social, political, economic and cultural change. Many spent a substantial part of their adult years during a time when homosexual behaviours were criminalised, when homosexuality was treated as a mental illness, and forced gay conversion therapy was commonly practiced as a 'cure' (Jones et al., 2018; see also Meanley et al., 2020). There was often a high level of risk in disclosing one's sexual orientation, such as family breakdown and/or rejection, loss of employment or becoming a victim of violence. Yet, this group has also witnessed a growing trend toward social acceptance and numerous positive and substantial achievements, such as the gay liberation movement, the women's

rights movement, decriminalisation of homosexuality and the introduction of same-sex marriage.

In Australia, homosexuality was illegal and not fully decriminalised until 1997, when Tasmania was the final state to enact decriminalisation (Jahshan, 2014). Only since 2015 have homosexuality offenses begun to be expunged from criminal records for eligible citizens in all states and territories (George, 2019). Same-sex marriage only came into effect in 2017, later than a range of other Global North countries such as the Netherlands (2001), Belgium (2003), Canada (2005), Norway (2009), Sweden (2009) and a few years after England, Wales and Scotland (2014), Ireland (2015) and the USA (2015) (Flaherty & Wilkinson, 2020). Forced conversion therapy still occurs in Australia, though legislative bans are being considered by various state governments (Jones et al., 2018). Moreover, homosexuality was not fully removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until the third iteration in 1980 (Drescher, 2015).

Thus, many older lesbian women and gay men in Australia have experienced enormous challenges and changes across much of their adult lives. It is possible that these experiences, including experiences of victimisation and trauma, continue to shape or give context to their lives today. Increasingly, health and social services are recognising the importance of providing culturally safe environments that are supportive and respectful of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse and intersex people (Kilicaslan & Petrakism, 2019). Older lesbian women and gay men are a unique population as they are more likely to experience a range of social and health-related disparities compared to older heterosexual men and women, such as disability, poorer mental health and substance use (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2013). This may be due to experiencing a long history of criminalisation and discrimination across their life course (Van Wagenen et al., 2013). Several systematic literature reviews have been conducted on the experiences of ageing among older lesbian women and gay men (e.g. Addis et al., 2009; Gabbay & Wahler, 2002; Fekl, 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2016; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Mahieu et al., 2019; McParland & Camic, 2016). Major findings include reflections on identity and how participants view themselves as they age, with studies noting positive self-representations and an overall challenge to the idea that older lesbian women and gay men are at greater risk of maladjustment to ageing than their heterosexual counterparts (Quam & Whitford, 1992; Van Wagenen et al., 2013).

Several qualitative studies have been conducted internationally in the USA, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. Scholarly work by Rosenfeld (1999, 2002, 2003, 2009a, 2009b, 2010); Pollner and Rosenfield (2000) and Rosenfeld et al. (2018) focused on identity, ageing and HIV and the life courses of older lesbian and gay people. Rosenfeld's

(1999) early work of lesbian and gay people aged 65 years and over (born in the 30 s and 40 s) highlighted two major discourses in which this cohort understands their sexual identities: homosexuality as stigma (1920s–1970s), which results in keeping their identities private and working to pass as heterosexual in mainstream society, and homosexuality as status (1970s–present), whereby individuals view their identities as both public and private, with greater emphasis on being open or visibly 'out' as lesbian or gay. Later work by Rosenfeld (2009a) noted that US participants in her study continued to engage in homonormative practices (i.e. monogamous relationships, getting married or having commitment ceremonies, raising children) and heteronormative assimilation techniques (i.e. 'passing' as 'straight') to survive in an otherwise hostile society, a finding also noted in Robinson's (2013) work. More recent works focusing on the experiences of older lesbian and bisexual women have found that such women are more likely to report increased confidence, personal growth, and self-mastery of their lives as they age (Jabson Tree et al., 2021). Robinson's (2016, 2017) research has explored the working lives of older gay men across Canada, Australia, England and New Zealand, as well as their concerns about ageing and retirement. In this work, stories from participants articulate contrasting narratives concerning being out at work (Robinson, 2017), as well as fears about homophobia in aged care services (Robinson, 2016).

In Australia, there has been an emerging area of research concerning older lesbian and gay people. Early work by Minichiello et al. (1997) noted that health practitioners need to be mindful of the histories of older gay men to better support this ageing population. Robinson and Geldens (2014) focused on the sexual identities of older gay men (those born in the 1940s and 1950s) who had been impacted by HIV. Their work found that older gay men across two generations shared similar experiences in terms of sexual identity development (i.e. choosing to become monogamous, ending casual sexual play) and the fear, vulnerability and stigma associated with HIV/AIDs. A study by Lyons et al. (2015) of gay men aged 50 years and over explored their experiences of growing older. Some key themes included greater acceptance of their sexual orientation both by themselves and by others as they grew older and greater confidence and self-esteem. Feeling a loss of gay community, lack of intergenerational understandings, loss of sexual attractiveness and ageism and HIV-related stigma also emerged as themes. Waite (2015) drew on a number of studies to highlight some of the major concerns for ageing among lesbian women in Australia through a historical approach, highlighting that older lesbian women continue to experience the triple invisibility of ageism, sexism and homophobia in

Australian society. Other qualitative studies have focused specifically on experiences and perceptions of community and residential care that include concerns regarding identity disclosure and the need for culturally safe and inclusive services (Barrett, 2008; Barrett et al., 2015; Cartwright et al., 2012; Chamberlain & Robinson, 2002; Cramer et al., 2015; Harrison, 1999; Hughes, 2007, 2008, 2009; Hughes et al., 2011; Lovelock, 2006; Minichiello et al., 1997; Waite, 1995), as well as pathways that some older lesbian women and gay men take to avoid the use of residential care (Waling et al., 2019).

Despite this work, further studies are needed, especially research that explores personal histories and gives participants opportunities to reflect more broadly on their lives then and now. There is limited information concerning the relationship between how older lesbian women and gay men have experienced life in Australia, and how that may have shaped or contributed to their current health and wellbeing. As such, it is important for service providers, policymakers and researchers to have a comprehensive understanding of the personal histories of this group and how they perceive and feel about their lives today. This can be valuable for optimising support programs and ensuring that decision-making is grounded in appropriate understanding. This includes understanding the harms and violence that older lesbian women and gay men may have endured over their life course due to broader systemic and structural discrimination (Cramer et al., 2015; Waite, 2015). Such experiences can and do impact how older lesbian women and gay men may choose (or choose not to) to engage with social and health services (Barrett, 2008; Barrett et al., 2015; Cartwright et al., 2012; Chamberlain & Robinson, 2002; Cramer et al., 2015; Harrison, 1999; Hughes, 2007, 2008, 2009; Hughes et al., 2011; Lovelock, 2006; Minichiello et al., 1997; Waite, 1995; Waling et al., 2019).

In this study, we conducted interviews with lesbian women and gay men in Australia aged 60 years and over and explored their life experiences both in the context of when they were much younger as well as today. We primarily focused on life experiences related to their sexual orientation and explored a range of topics such as their experiences of coming out, the impact of concealment and disclosure on their social and intimate lives, the pathways they took as they engaged in a process of self-acceptance and other challenges and barriers they may have experienced, as well as how these relate to some of the ways in which they view their lives today. Given the uniqueness of this age group, building a knowledge base of life then and now may be particularly useful not only for researchers, but also for health and social services and policymakers in developing a comprehensive understanding of the context in which this group currently experiences their lives to provide appropriate, effective and

culturally safe support (Clover, 2006; Kimmel, 2014; Lyons et al., 2015; Waite, 2015).

Method

Design

Qualitative interviews were chosen for this study to allow for deeper insights into the health and wellbeing of older lesbian women and gay men. These enable examination of the diversity of life experiences and how they may be dependent on multiple circumstances for older lesbian women and gay men, such as when individuals first disclosed their sexual orientation or ‘came out’, whether they engaged in heterosexual marriages, the choice or expectation to have children and other socio-cultural, economic and political factors (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2019). Such experiences can be understood by applying Fredriksen-Goldsen et al.’s (2019) *Iridescent Life Course Perspective*, which not only pays attention to the intersectionalities of sexuality, gender and other social positions, but also explores how these positions may work to shape opportunities and constraints across time and space. In doing so, this perspective acknowledges the fluidity in experiences of ageing and ageing lives and highlights psychological, behavioural, social and biological factors that may influence the ageing experiences of older lesbian and gay adults (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2021a, 2021b). We used this framework to guide the data collection and analysis procedures.

Data Collection

This research was conducted with approval from the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (S17-088). Participants provided informed written consent to participate in this study and to allow their deidentified data to appear in publications. The study involved qualitative interviews conducted from September 2017 to December 2017. Interviewees were selected from participants who completed a national survey of their health and well-being (e.g. Alba et al., 2021; Lyons et al., 2021a, 2021b; Waling et al., 2019). This survey ran from August 2017 until December 2017. See Waling et al. (2020) for an overview of ethical considerations of data collection during this time. Participants completed an additional form at the end of the survey to express interest in being interviewed. This form asked for their contact details as well as a few demographic details, including their age, sexual orientation, gender identity, assigned sex at birth, whether they were receiving in-home care and whether they had an intersex variation/s. For the sexual orientation

and gender identity questions, participants were given a list of common identity labels and asked to select which options described them, as well as options to write in a different term.

Over 261 gay men and 107 lesbian women elected to participate in qualitative interviews. For the purposes of this study, participants who expressed interest in being interviewed were assigned to groups based on their gender identity and sexual orientation to conduct random stratified sampling. To achieve this, participants in each group were assigned a number, and an online random number generator was used to select individuals to be contacted for an interview. This was done due to the overwhelming number of individuals who came forward to participate. The focus in this article is on the cisgender lesbian women and gay men groups. Other groups, such as trans and gender diverse participants and those who identify as bisexual, tend to have a range of different life trajectories and experiences that require a separate focus (see Waling, 2020b). Selected participants were then contacted by email and given further details about the interviews. Interview participants were asked to email a signed consent form prior to their interview. Interviews were conducted between September 2017 and December 2017.

Analysis

The transcribed and de-identified interviews were loaded into the software package NVivo. A primary analysis involving preliminary coding of the transcripts was undertaken by the second-named author. Thematic analysis was conducted using inductive thematic analysis techniques outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Fredriksen-Goldsen et al.'s (2019) *Iridescent Life Course Perspective* as an overall guiding framework to the analysis. This included paying particular attention to how earlier events in life can potentially shape perspectives and experiences of life today, considering the complexity of varying backgrounds (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2019). Transcripts were first read carefully with a summary of emerging thoughts, themes and ideas developed by the lead author (stage 1). A priori categories were developed for defining initial descriptive themes (stage 2). A codebook was developed by the lead author and checked by authors 2 and 3. The lead author then explored the descriptive themes in depth using an inductive approach (stage 3). These were checked periodically with the research team (stage 4). Subsequently, themes were defined to understand how older lesbian women and gay men reflect on their life experiences, and how such experiences may be shaping their current health and wellbeing (stage 5), and material was written using an emic approach (data-informed final themes) (stage 6).

Findings

In all, 33 interviews were conducted, involving 19 cisgender lesbian women and 14 cisgender gay men residing in

Table 1 Demographic characteristics ($N=33$)

Demographic characteristic	Number	Per cent
Age		
60–65	12	36%
66–70	12	36%
71–75	6	18%
76–80	2	6%
81 and older	1	3%
Current relationship status		
Single	11	33%
Partnered	22	67%
Have children		
Yes	14	42%
No	19	58%
State or territory of residence		
Australian Capital Territory	1	3%
New South Wales	7	21%
Queensland	7	21%
South Australia	2	6%
Tasmania	1	3%
Victoria	11	33%
Western Australia	2	6%
Unknown	2	6%
Residential area		
Urban	25	76%
Regional	4	12%
Rural	2	6%
Unknown	2	6%
Employment status		
Retired	21	64%
Disability/medical leave	1	3%
Working	10	30%
Student	1	3%
Education		
High school	9	27%
University	23	70%
Technical and Further Education (TAFE)*	1	3%
Realisation of sexuality/coming out		
Before age 30	9	28%
After age 30	24	72%
Previously married (heterosexual marriage)		
Yes	16	49%
No	17	51%

*In Australia, TAFE provides non-university vocational and skills training

Australia. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the demographic characteristics.

The majority were in a relationship (67%), retired (64%), residing in urban areas of Australia (76%) and did not have children (58%). Of the group, 28% reported that they came out when they were younger than 30 years of age, while 72% came out after the age of 30. 70% of the sample reported having a university education. A further 49% reported that they had previously been in a heterosexual marriage. Interviews were conducted by the second-named author via telephone, which allowed us to make the study available to participants across the country. Interviews were semi-structured, audio-recorded, between 45 and 60 min and transcribed by an external agency. Transcripts were verified and anonymised, and all the participants were assigned a pseudonym.

Based on the analysis, the findings are divided into two major thematic and sub thematic areas. These include (1) Life in the Early and Middle Years, with specific sub-themes of *concealment and coming out, relationship breakdowns with family, HIV/AIDS, and experiences of discrimination* and (2) Life Now, with specific sub-themes of *confidence and self-esteem, and contentedness*. Quotes are presented with the participants' pseudonym, age and sexual orientation.

Life in the Early and Middle Years

Personal stories and narratives are important, as they inform how older lesbian women and gay men navigated their lives in the past. Narratives tended to vary according to whether participants came out earlier in life, before the age of 30 (28%; $n=9$), or later in life, after the age of 30 (72%; $n=24$), but often had experiences that were similar despite these differences.

Coming out and Concealment A majority of participants who came out earlier, in their teens or in their 20 s, either had access to lesbian and gay networks or other environments that enabled them to engage readily with their lesbian and gay identities. For some, this included having gone to a university at a young age that had engaged in lesbian and gay activism, thus providing an environment that enabled them to understand their sexual orientation or providing supportive networks:

Finn (65, gay man): I went to university and it was really – so this is from 1969 to about 1974 at [UNIVERSITY] a very liberal in the best sense of the word liberal university I guess, full of protestors about the Vietnam War and you know reasonably out there, new university. There were some very openly gay people at

university, and so fairly common and gay activists... My sort of first capital C coming out I guess was I rang the gay and lesbian counselling service and the guy said come in and have a chat, so I did and that really, in some senses opened the floodgates. So gosh I got involved in establishing a fledgling gay and lesbian social group... and eventually became the male co-leader of that.

Percy (63, gay man): Okay... I came out in '72, at my first year at university, I mean I'd known all through high school that there was something different, but there, I didn't have a word for it and there wasn't discussed, it wasn't sort of part of the common dialogue, there wasn't any on TV or there wasn't any discussion at the dinner table about homosexuality, it wasn't even, I mean sexuality itself wasn't mentioned in our family so there was no way for me to work out why I was feeling different.

Others were fortunate to grow up in a gay-friendly environment, worked or resided in gay-friendly spaces or sought to create this environment for their family:

Jean (66, lesbian woman): I came out when I was 19. That was pretty simple and easy. I was living and later working at... a Women's Refuge and surrounded by lesbians basically... There was a woman who was attracted to me, I was attracted to her and so there you go... I was mucking about with girls when I was a younger teenager... I didn't think about it and I didn't really have an opinion about it one way or the other. It wasn't like I didn't want to be involved with them it was just something I fell into without really making a decision. It was later on when I discovered the ability to make choices and decisions that things actually got a lot easier.

Jackson (79, gay man): Well I would say that I understood it at a very, very early age, because I was very attracted to a young guy that lived next door, from about 5 years old and he was about 15 at the time, and things do happen, and so I knew then that that's where my attraction was, and I lived with that 'til I was 16, 17 and I told my parents that I was not interested in girls, marriage or anything like that, and the rest of it, and they thankfully, for me, accepted it.

This group also spoke more about awareness of, and acting upon, their same-sex attraction and associated secrecy with which they had to engage. This was often related more broadly to the criminalisation of homosexuality during the 1960s and 1970s, and being mindful of the potential to be arrested for engaging in same-sex activity:

Jackson (79, gay man): You had to be extremely careful, because the police used to have people, well police

officers, young police cadets and that, running around the toilets arresting people even though they were committing the crime first. It was a dreadful time, and the vice squad was so corrupt it wasn't funny.

Most of the participants (72%; $n = 24$), however, came out later in life, typically aged in their 30 s or 40 s. Many participants engaged in various heteronormative practices prior to coming out, such as getting married (49%; $n = 16$) and having children with a different gender partner, because they were either not aware of or ready to acknowledge their sexual orientation or felt that it was their only choice at the time. For them, a pathway to accepting a same-sex attraction identity occurred by either having same-sex sexual experiences prior to getting married in a heterosexual arrangement or having same-sex sexual experiences during or after the end of a heterosexual marriage:

Ramona (78, lesbian woman): I was married at 18 and I had 9 children and I divorced in 1980, went back to school when I found out that I had a brain because I'd been taught I didn't. My father was born in [early 1880s'] and my mother was born in [early 1900s'] so roles for girls were quite limited and so I wasn't allowed to have a secondary education but when I got to about 36/37, I started to get really restless and wanted to go back to school and that eventually broke up my marriage... It was when I was at TAFE [technical education] at the age of 38 and I met some wonderful people [lesbian women] there who are still my friends and it didn't occur to me at first but the more I was around these people the more I felt part of that group and then finally the penny dropped that this was why I'd been so unhappy all through my marriage and you know, I never really felt that I fit anywhere and suddenly I did.

Cody (66, gay man): I grew up in a small country town ... and I didn't really know much... I know in high school I was attracted to a couple of guys but I never, ever acted upon it. And it wasn't until I left home and moved to [NAME OF CITY] and was sharing an apartment with another guy about the same age as me that we actually got together, that was my first experience... I got married, met my wife...while we were married I was still, I had sex with other men and you know. And we finally ended up getting divorced, after about 15 years I think it was... And not long after... I came to [NAME OF CITY] and I met a guy who was...my first real love.

In the case of Ramona, changes in society, particularly shifts in gender role expectations, increased liberation for women and increased recognition of same-sex attraction enabled her to begin to think differently about her life and living situation. Cody, similar to other participants, noted a

number of same-sex sexual experiences both prior to getting married and having children and during his relationship with his wife, but highlighted that he felt compelled to get married and engage in a heterosexual lifestyle. In both cases, historical contexts of lesbian and gay invisibility and/or homophobic laws in their lives prevented them from engaging in same-sex relationships, instead engaging in heterosexual relationships that ultimately ended. Such changes could be the result of cultural shifts resulting in more information, visibility and acceptance of lesbian and gay people. These findings echo international studies that have noted that heterosexual relationships earlier in life is a common theme for older lesbian and gay people (Ortiz & Scott, 1994; Rust, 1993; Tasker, 2013).

Relationship Breakdowns with Family Coming out for many of our participants, whether at a younger or older age, often resulted in family upheaval. A number of the participants (both lesbian women and gay men) engaged in heterosexual marriages, and many had children prior to coming out, including both those who came out earlier and later in life. For lesbian women, in particular, this often resulted in traumatic experiences involving custody battles with former partners, or keeping quiet about their sexual orientation either to their former partner or to the family to avoid the possibility of losing custody:

Aileen (74, lesbian woman): And I ended up, unfortunately, getting married... It took me 13 years to get out of it, and knowing all the time that I shouldn't be in a heterosexual relationship, it just wasn't me, it didn't fit and I didn't want to be in it. So yes it was all very difficult. And then when I finally did get out of it, I still couldn't be out in the open because I knew if my ex-husband knew that I was a lesbian he would immediately take that to the Family Court. He was trying to get the children off me anyway – not because he really wanted them but because he just wanted, you know, just wanted to be difficult.

Danielle (64, lesbian woman): He [children's father] went to the Family Court and wanted full custody of the children because I was lesbian – so this must've been in the late 70s, or the early 80s, and at that time women lost their kids because they were lesbian, so I took the children to [NAME OF PLACE] and we lived there for 8 years.

Others noted upheavals in their families of origin such as rejection from parents or other family members, or hiding to avoid rejection:

Cameron (66, gay man): I came out when I was just turning 16, primarily because I had a lot of gay

friends and at one particular dinner, one particular family dinner my father turned around and came out with some comment about oh well and I don't want you hanging around with these poofter friends of yours any more, and so I thought the easiest way out of that was to turn around and say well you know if you're talking about them you're talking about me and that was my coming out. He never accepted it even right to his end.

Ramona (78, lesbian woman): All my children know, my sister disowned me for a time and wouldn't allow me to come to my mother's funeral because I'd come out... Some of them hold it against me that I "broke up the family". It took a long time for some of them to even talk to me and now some of them do and some of them don't. My siblings are the same, when I came out to, well it was originally supposed to be to my mother, but my sister read the letter and declared that I was not part of the family anymore. I've got a brother who would never talk to me.

Others noted hiding their identities for a period of time from family:

Reid (68, gay man): The challenge I guess was hiding it from family, when my parents would come up and visit we had to basically de-gay the house, you know we had to look as though we were sleeping – my partner and I were sleeping in separate bedrooms. When we went to visit mum and dad and stayed overnight we slept in separate bedrooms, so it was a challenge – the challenge was about being deceitful I guess to your family.

Lottie (70, lesbian woman): Oh I never said anything to my family, and I'd have to say I was in a partnership before I told them, and I'd shifted from [NAME OF COUNTRY] to Australia by then, and my father was dead I think, and my mother was very anti, very anti yeah. And my, I don't think I even told my brother, I've got two sisters, the younger of those two sisters was fine, and she was accepting, and my older sister sort of was like my mother and still is.

HIV/AIDS It is well established that the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s had a devastating effect on the gay and lesbian community (Herek, 1989, 1999). It had a particular impact on those who came out or started having sex with a same-sex partner earlier in their life, including being at greater risk for HIV infection for gay men and the loss of close family, friends and peers for both gay men and lesbian women. Some of the gay and lesbian participants lost several friends and/or partners to AIDS or were working on the front line to bring visibility and action needed to support those

whose lives and communities were most directly impacted by AIDS:

Percy (63, gay man): It basically became my life, 18 hours a day [working for an AIDS organisation], and during that process I lost probably 100 of my closest friends, and that's been, not a burden but a shadow that's been around ever since. We didn't have time to grieve back then, and we just had to move on to look after the next person who was sick and it was like a slow rolling thunder that just never stopped.

Chole (64, lesbian woman): Three of my friends died. We lost friends, we watched people be discriminated against. I had friends who worked actively...as carers. A lot of lesbians did work as carers for men with AIDS because nobody else would.

A number of the older gay men in particular spoke about the death and devastation that HIV/AIDS wrought, either on their coming out and engagement with the gay community or their choice to stay closeted or hidden:

Samuel (63, gay man): I was to the degree that, in a negative kind of way [not wanting to come out], because I remember going to Mardi Gras and being absolutely terrified I was going to get sprung, but also you know I lost about 12 friends in those days with AIDS, so there was that personal aspect to it, there was caring for them, but it was more on a personal level rather than organised. It was really frightening.

Cody (66, gay man): I've kind of thought to myself you know if I hadn't been married and I was living in [NAME OF CITY], I probably would be dead, because you know I was promiscuous...I was mainly a bottom when I was with other guys, so even if I had thought about it I wouldn't have sort of connected that with passing onto my wife sort of thing.

Reid (68, gay man): I guess I was fortunate that I came out at the time when AIDS had been discovered or realised, so I came out in a period when the Grim Reaper advertisement [a commercial in 1987 that aimed to raise public awareness about AIDS] and all that were hitting so I came out at a time when there was quite a lot of publicity around safe sex etc. I often think that if I came out earlier than that I may not be here today.

Experiences of Discrimination Most participants, whether they came out earlier or later, reported experiences of discrimination, abuse and violence. As stated earlier, some participants experienced this in the form of family upheaval. For others, experiences of discrimination occurred in the workplace:

Peggy (72, lesbian woman): When I was a teacher some of the kids used to chant “leso leso” if I walked around the corridors.

Drew (75, gay man): One of the consultants I worked for did like saying you know rude and off the cuff things about gay people and talked about Nancy boys and you know that sort of thing. Which was obviously, which obviously I was designed to overhear, so that his views were never said to me openly, but were sort of subtly, his attitude was subtly conveyed.

Rene (62, lesbian woman): I did have this happen once in a workplace where there was a manager who, and I can't remember exactly what it was, I know, it was around the time when we saw all the changes [marriage equality] were coming in...one day in the conversations she said something about you know “oh I feel like it devalues my relationship, same-sex marriage,” and we're all sort of a bit stunned and taken aback.

For others, this meant being barred from accessing financial support, housing and healthcare:

Pam (67, lesbian woman): One time when [NAME] had to go in hospital to have an operation, and I was there with her and I signed all the paperwork and said I was her next of kin, legal next of kin and all that sort of thing, and then she was meant to come home the day after and I rang the hospital that morning to ask what time to come and pick her up, and the nurse on the ward said to me “who are you?” and I said “I'm her partner,” and she said “well I'm sorry I can't give you any information, you're not family,” and I said “well I am, I am her family, she's my partner,” and I said “you'll see that I'm her next of kin on the form,” she said “yes but it's not a legal entity so I'm not giving you any information.” So I said “well just tell me am I coming to pick her up?” and she said “she hasn't had a good night,” and I said “well what's that supposed to mean?” and she said “I just told you I can't give you any information and I won't.” So I was really, really distressed.

Devon (69, gay man): In real estate when we moved to [NAME OF PLACE] for eighteen months and realised that was a big mistake. We had a lovely house on a canal and we didn't like it at all. We came back to [NAME OF PLACE] and we found a home we really wanted but I realised later he wouldn't sell it to us because we are two gay men. Even though we were offering the full asking price, cash. He had said “Oh right, okay”. Never heard from him. We waited another two days. He says “Oh no. I sold that to a couple from Sydney.” I feel we were discriminated against there.

For some, discrimination occurred in the form of street harassment, or the fear of street harassment, particularly for the gay men:

Reid (68, gay man): There was issues sometimes when you'd be walking down the street with a couple of your mates and I guess my friends and I are very straight up in people – we don't flit around wearing tutus or anything like that, but you know we have walked down the street early in the piece and some yahoos would drive past and call out “hey ya poofers” that sort of stuff.

Percy (63, gay man): The discrimination I feel is the fact that we have all these legal safeguards in place and we're about to get more with marriage equality, but I still can't walk down the street hand in hand with [NAME], so after being together for 34 years, I still don't feel safe physically or verbally from walking down the street.

Life Now

Despite participants having had their lives shaped by the impact of discrimination, such as family breakdowns and challenges coming out, many noted a number of positives to getting older. Such perceptions were linked to their past experiences of gay and lesbian discrimination, either outwardly or inwardly, where participants recounted feeling generally good about and grateful for the lives they have had despite these experiences.

Confidence and Self-Esteem Many of the older lesbian women and gay men recounted feeling much more confident as they aged. Some linked this to changes in hormonal and biological makeup, such as a few of the lesbian women who felt that losing oestrogen decreased their sense of emotional vulnerability:

Heather (65, lesbian woman): Yeah I think...there are benefits to ageing, one of them is I always think that [laughs] oestrogen was the shy hormone and once that's gone you kind of just, yeah re-emerges you know, exuberance ready to face the world kind of person. I don't know, post menopaually I felt a lot more confident, a lot more – yeah friends of mine describe it as you know you just stop giving a shit really, but it's – I am a lot, I was very shy when I was younger and I'm a lot less shy now, and I think that's just a product of being around for you know this long.

Many others, however, noted that as they aged, they were not as concerned with the opinions of others:

Chole (64, lesbian woman): Certainly, the positive is you don't give a shit what other people think. That

is a really nice place to be in the world. I recognise that it is not that easy for lots of other people but between [NAME] and I, I think we really do live a life that is very focused on what we care about and other people's opinions of us can go fly somewhere else.

Participants also noted a sense of greater relaxation and freedom. This was attributed to a number of things, including retirement and a greater acceptance of things that could not be in their control:

Patrick (69, gay man): I certainly like lying in bed on a rainy morning and hearing the traffic reports you know, you don't have to be out in that sort of thing. But that's basically the way I feel about it, that's one of the good benefits, just be free to do what you need or want, you know.

Whitney (69, lesbian woman): Well for me I notice that as I said before I'm not as precious, I'm a bit more relaxed about things I suppose.

A number of participants also spoke about gaining maturity as they aged, particularly in terms of how they handled their lives, and their emotional well-being:

Cameron (66, gay man): Maturity, I think I've matured a lot more in the last 15 years than I had in the previous 45. Being able to have the time and the space to actually think about your place in the world and your points of view, you can really gel them, you can – I suppose you can reassess how you feel about everything to a degree. I don't really see, well so far, I don't see any downside.

Jean (66, lesbian woman): Yes, experience. Yes, absolutely. Perspective. I know how mad I was in my twenties. I would love to have a twenty-year old body but I would need to have my experienced head on it as well. Yes, experience, perspective. I can be quite calm. I know age doesn't affect everybody like that but it has given me a lot of calm, once I got over menopause.

Contentment For some, living to an older age was seen as a privilege, something for which a number of participants felt a sense of contentment and gratitude. While this may be true of many older people regardless of their sexual orientation, this has special salience for older lesbian women and gay men in Australia who faced great challenges earlier in their lives:

Debbie (65, lesbian woman): Being in the middle of my 60s, I'm realising that time is running out, it gives you this joy of life, so I really appreciate everything you know.

Janet (70, lesbian woman): Well I was worried about because my family doesn't normally get too far – my dad did, he got to 82 – and my mum died at 69 – so I was really anxious about that, but now that I've made it to 70 I just think that I am lucky and that every day from now on is a bonus.

In particular, a number of participants who watched friends and family die, specifically those impacted by HIV and AIDS, were grateful for living as long as they have. This was common amongst both the gay men and lesbian women who had friends, or had worked in the HIV/AIDS sector:

Heather (65, lesbian woman): I've seen people die very young and I hold onto the fact that it's a real privilege to get older.

Drew (75, gay man): You know you're well aware that life's very uncertain and that although you can take as many steps as possible to make sure that you remain physically fit and capable of getting around, and capable of getting enjoyment out of life, you do always have at the back of your mind I suppose that the realisation that anything can happen any time and you know that you too could become sick and ill, or in some way physically impaired.

Participants were aware of the devastation that AIDS and HIV had on gay men's lives prior to the discovery of antiretroviral treatment, and in particular, the gay men referred to feeling lucky to have either not acquired HIV, or in the case of a couple of participants, had acquired it, but were on successful treatment for management.

Participants also spoke about being able to reflect on shifts and changes in society, something that ageing allowed them to do, or what one participant noted, having the 'long' perspective:

Heather (65, lesbian woman): And I love the fact that you get kind of that long perspective... I remember really vividly my grandmother in her 90s sitting down and telling me that she'd seen amazing things happen. You know she'd seen the introduction of electricity... and you know kind of trains and planes and telephones and radio and television, and everything like that. I kind of didn't understand what she was saying to me at the time, but now I realise, because you know I've seen the technological evolution that was probably equivalent to what she was talking about.

Others noted that their life experiences were pivotal to supporting younger age groups:

Reid (68, gay man): Oh yes I think you've got a life experience behind you, you can certainly mentor the younger gay people, the running group I am in for instance I am the oldest one in it and a lot of them

are in their 20's and 30's and quite often you'll find yourself having a discussion about issues they are dealing with or frustrations they are having and so you can pass on some of your life experiences for them. I think the getting older bit is the fact that you're retired and I am loving it, the old saying you wonder how you ever got time to go to work, it's a lot like that, yeah I think it's just the whole life experience thing that you are able to enjoy and pass that on to others.

Overall, participants noted feeling either grateful or content about their lives:

Jackson (79, gay man): So yeah no life is good, life is good, as I say the only time I regret is when I see something extremely handsome and I can't have it. But outside that, no, no worries, good life.

Dusty (72, gay man): I'm very happy with my life, I wouldn't have wanted to change it at all, it went in the direction that I didn't know it would go when I was young, but I've been very happy with the successes I've had, which are fairly good – no I don't want to change it at all.

Such contentedness was often linked to having experienced downs, such as previous experiences with poorer mental health and broader experiences of discrimination:

Patrick (69, gay man): Yeah pretty good. As I said I've been on antidepressants so I'm feeling better with those now, so I actually have a feeling I can get up and do things these days, whereas say, what would it be, 8 or 9 months ago it was nothing for me to spend all day or night laying in bed you know.

Ramona (78, lesbian woman): Well I've come this far and survived and still have some optimism in me. It could be a lot better but there's always something around the corner. People turn up in the funniest places. I never say die you know. It's just one of those things I'm always on the lookout for any new opportunities and new good feelings you know.

Others, while feeling good overall, nevertheless noted some concerns for their future, such as ongoing mental health issues, potential loss of a loved one and feeling as though they will have to go back into the closet if they need aged care (see Waling et al., 2019):

Aileen (74, lesbian woman): In general, I guess I'm back to feeling I wish it was different... I know there's a different world out there, and for much of my life it never seemed possible that I could access that world. But once you know, when you have a taste sort of thing, it's harder to go back to virtually being in the closet again [in reference to residential care].

Discussion

The aim of this study was to better understand the life experiences of older lesbian women and gay men in Australia, and how such experiences may shape their current health and wellbeing. The findings pointed to a range of historical challenges linked to often extreme levels of stigma and discrimination, some of which have also been documented in other studies (i.e. Rosenfeld, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Waite, 1995). However, the study further extends previous work by also highlighting aspects of resilience in the lives of older lesbian and gay adults today that appear to have been shaped by these histories.

More specifically, participants noted a diversity of experiences when reflecting on their lives then and now, having witnessed and been part of several political, cultural, economic and social changes. Such changes included the decriminalisation of homosexuality, gay liberation and the women's rights movement and removal of homosexuality from the DSM (Dentato et al., 2014; Weststrate & McLean, 2010). Such diversity was apparent in how they may have denied their sexual orientation, what enabled participants to come out and the challenges they experienced in their coming out process. Participants came out at many different life stages, some earlier (before the age of 30) and some later (after the age of 30). Some noted how cultural and social changes at different points in their lives, as well as that self-reflection, led them to no longer concealing their sexual orientations. A majority of those who came out earlier reported having had opportunities to gain access to lesbian and gay culture and community, such as through families already being accepting or going to university or TAFE where they could encounter lesbian and gay social justice groups. This group could be said to be a little more privileged, for example, having had access to educational opportunities that enabled them to participate in gay and lesbian communities. In contrast, a majority of those who came out later in life reported having been married and having had children, particularly the lesbian women, though may also have had access to educational opportunities that enabled them to seek lesbian and gay communities. Coming out for them was also linked to an increased visibility of lesbian and gay people and, for lesbian women, the impact of women's rights on their ability to engage with their autonomy and independent thinking.

Coming out, whether it was earlier in life or later, often resulted in family upheaval, rejection from family, concealing their sexual orientation from certain family members and custody battles over children. Both older gay men and lesbian women were engaged in supporting the community, including as carers during the HIV/AIDS

epidemic, which also adversely impacted on some of them. Some of the gay men lost friends and partners, though some of the lesbian women also lost friends. Discrimination was also experienced, particularly in the work and healthcare environments, as well as through street harassment. Participants focused primarily on their families and other aspects of their lives and spoke relatively little about their working lives apart from experiences of discrimination, and the benefits of retirement. However, despite all of this, many participants expressed a sense of contentment or gratitude for the lives they have and noted not only a privilege in living long, but also increased confidence and self-esteem as they aged.

Much has been written about the ageing experiences of the lesbian and gay population, particularly in terms of negative experiences, such as a loss of physical mobility and mental capacity, increased risk of chronic illnesses and diseases, loss of community and friendships and experiences of ageism and other forms of discrimination based on age (Van Wagenen et al., 2013). Kimmel's (1978, cited in McParland & Camic, 2016, p. 3418) theory of lesbian, gay and bisexual ageing, however, suggests "that reconciling sexual orientation earlier in life develops useful 'crisis competence' towards challenges of ageing". Indeed, experiencing challenges, such as coming out and discrimination, can potentially lend itself to greater resilience later in life when faced with the prospect of ageing (Kimmel, 1978). Similarly, Friend (1990) noted that ageing presents different challenges for lesbian women and gay men, particularly those who may access aged care services, as their sexual orientations may result in more flexible gender roles than their heterosexual counterparts. For example, both Van Wagenen et al. (2013) and Jabson Tree et al. (2021) have also found that some older lesbian, bisexual and gay adults have had positive experiences of ageing.

However, as Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. (2019) suggest with the *Iridescent Life Course Perspective*, concepts of ageing have been constructed within heteronormative frameworks, and thus do not currently account for the pleasures, diversity of experiences and positives and privileges in growing old, especially for stigmatised population groups such as lesbian women and gay men, while also keeping in mind challenges and difficulties that can impact positive health and well-being. Thus, a more nuanced understanding of the above in conjunction with the Health Equity Promotion Model (HEPM) (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014) is useful. The HEPM recognises that social positions, individual, structural and environmental contexts intersect with health promoting and adverse pathways which can influence the health and well-being outcomes of older lesbian and gay people. This is particularly salient for health and social care providers and policymakers who can utilise the diversity of lived experience of vulnerable

populations such as lesbian women and gay men to target service delivery appropriately.

It is important to recognise that resilience and positive experiences of ageing do not necessarily mean that this population group is without the need for support, and that there are nuances to understanding the lived experiences of these populations (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2016; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014). As plenty of literature has highlighted, despite some positive experiences of ageing, older lesbian women and gay men in Australia still hold major concerns and anxieties about the prospect of encountering discrimination when using aged care services, such as residential care (Barrett, 2008; Barrett et al., 2015; Cartwright et al., 2012; Chamberlain & Robinson, 2002; Crameri et al., 2015; Harrison, 1999; Hughes, 2009; Lovelock, 2006; Waite, 1995; Waling et al., 2019). This older group is noted as a 'people with special needs' in Australia regarding the provision of community and residential care services within the Aged Care Act, and as part of the Aged Care Diversity Framework developed in 2017 (Australian Government Department of Health, 2017). This not only means that services need to be culturally safe and inclusive of older lesbian women and gay men, but also that service providers need to be mindful of the complex and diverse experiences of ageing among these groups (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014).

This requires balancing recognition of the challenges that older lesbian and gay adults have experienced throughout their lives with respecting the positive viewpoints that some of them have about their lives today (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2019). Service providers and policymakers being mindful and understanding of these life experiences can support aged and healthcare delivery, including an understanding of both the trauma that older lesbian women and gay men have experienced and the resilience and gratefulness that some demonstrate in later life (Clover, 2006; Kimmel, 2014; Lyons et al., 2015; Waite, 2015). For example, to ensure cultural safety, this can include an understanding of older lesbian women and gay men's needs around social support and socialising with like-minded individuals, recognising and valuing intimate relationships and understanding and addressing power imbalances that may occur through diminished autonomy and independence (Crameri et al., 2015). Additionally, as our data suggest, many of these older people have worked or volunteered in their younger years to support important causes and social issues, such as gay and lesbian rights, issues related to HIV/AIDS and more recently, marriage equality. Services, programs and policy can benefit from the knowledge and wisdom of older lesbian women and gay men in creating safe spaces. Including them in the design and delivery of aged care and associated health services would ensure that services are culturally safe for this population group.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this work. This study focused specifically on the experiences of older lesbian women and gay men. Older bisexual people, trans and gender diverse people and people with an intersex variation/s are likely to have had a range of different life experiences, and potentially different perspectives on their lives today, which require examination. Although we had some participants over the age of 70, future research is also needed to explore the life course experiences of the oldest age groups. Most participants were of Anglo-Celtic background and middle class, so there is a need to explore experiences among lesbian and gay people of diverse cultural backgrounds, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as well as those from varying socio-economic and religious backgrounds. Additionally, the focus of this study was on health and well-being, which led to little discussion about working lives during their younger years. More focused research on experiences of work (e.g. Robinson, 2016) would be useful.

Conclusion

With an ageing population of lesbian women and gay men in Australia, it is important to preserve their stories of coming out and the impact their experiences have had on the way in which they perceive and experience their lives today. In this research, we found that while older lesbian women and gay men had at times experienced severe discrimination in their lives, they also demonstrated a degree of resilience, with many referring to feelings of gratitude and contentment in their lives currently. These findings are likely to be useful for health and other social services and policymakers in further understanding the contexts in which older lesbian and gay adults live their lives today to ensure support programs are developed and tailored in ways that are inclusive and respectful of the diversity of their life experiences.

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Data Availability Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This research was conducted with approval from the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (S17-088).

Consent to Participate Participants provided informed written consent to participate in this study.

Consent for Publication Participants provided informed written consent to allow their deidentified data to appear in publications.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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