Modern Italy
Vol. 17, No. 4, November 2012, 449–464

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Imagined communities: initiatives around LGBTQ ageing in Italy

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(*Received 17 October 2011; final version accepted 21 April 2012*)

LGBTQ ageing is an under-researched but vital issue, given the cultural invisibility of older LGBTQ individuals and Italy's ageing population. This article explores initiatives around LGBTQ ageing, considered in relation to the hypothesis that LGBTQ populations may develop effective strategies for 'successful ageing', by establishing queer cultural spaces and support networks. After a brief contextualisation of key issues the author focuses on a case study of a lesbian community in Bari which is planning a residential arrangement for 'older lesbians'. Drawing on interviews conducted in January 2011, the coping strategies or forms of 'resilience' developed by this community are identified and analysed. It is argued that while plans for a residential facility remain unrealised, this community demonstrates a degree of 'resilience across the life course', through reciprocal support, and socio-cultural and political innovation. However, interviews also reveal the difficulties of progressing from an 'imagined community' to its concrete realisation.

Keywords: community; lesbians; ageing; resilience; networks

Introduction

This article aims to stimulate debate on the under-researched question of LGBTQ ageing. Twenty per cent of the Italian population is aged over 65,[1] and while estimations of the LGBTQ population remain notoriously inaccurate, due to sexual fluidity and reluctance to declare one's sexuality in a homophobic context, researchers estimate that there are 900,000 LGBTQ individuals aged over 65 (Pietrantoni, Sommantico, and Graglia 2000, 2). However, little is known about the composition, needs, and experiences of this older LGBTQ population. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to remedy this. Instead, I explore issues of LGBTQ community building and planning for old age, and analyse how, in the absence of adequate state support, some LGBTQ communities are seeking to cater for their own needs.

I begin by summarising relevant scholarship, and contextualising two key issues: (1) LGBTQ communities, constructed and experienced as both political networks and alternative families; (2) the 'resilience' of LGBTQ populations in relation to ageing – that is, their ability to overcome challenges, through creative strategising, attaining resources, and developing competences and connectedness (Landau 2007).[2] Such resilience may derive from the transmission of LGBTQ culture, or from redefining 'queerly' the ageing process, challenging norms of sex, gender, sexuality and ageing. I discuss initiatives around

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ISSN 1353-2944 print/ISSN 1469-9877 online

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2012.706997
http://www.tandfonline.com

LGBTQ ageing in Italy, with a focus on Turin, before focusing on my case study, the project 'Lesbizio': a new coinage combining the words 'lesbica' (lesbian) and 'ospizio' (hospice). This initiative, which seeks to provide residential and cultural spaces for 'older' lesbians – an open qualifier broadly designating individuals aged over 40 – is being developed by the separatist lesbian association 'Desiderandae' in Bari. In January 2011 I interviewed 20 individuals and conducted social network analysis (SNA) on their support and communication networks.[3] Thus, while my contextualisation raises issues pertaining to LGBTQ communities and ageing in general, my case study examines a self-identified lesbian population.

Scholarship has interrogated the 'imagined' quality of LGBTQ communities, drawing on Benedict Anderson's work (1983). This article discusses 'imagined communities', although differently from Anderson. I explore strategies for 'reimagin[ing] an image to suit one's desire for difference' (De Vere Brody 2002, 91), but also analyse initiatives that remain 'imagined': projections of possible cohabitation arrangements, and alternative modalities of becoming 'older'. Indeed, the residential project Lesbizio remains unrealised, due to factors such as finance, contrasting approaches to logistical issues, and different perspectives on collective identification based on sexuality. However, I argue that my case study community demonstrates creative agency in planning for a self-determined older age. Moreover, it has already established sustainable intergenerational support networks that have impacted positively in terms of issues such as sexual health awareness, and which reveal a promising degree of resilience.

Communities, critical debates and resilient queer ageing

LGBTQ communities – face-to-face, virtual and 'imagined' – have been crucial for developing stronger identities and politics, and in combatting isolation (Stein 1997; Alexander 2002). Since they can rarely rely on external support, LGBTQ communities are often autonomous groups, which 'demonstrate the creativity and agency that results from living outside given supports and guidelines' (Heaphy, Yip, and Thompson 2003, 2). The LGBTQ population in Italy endures a precarious socio-cultural and legal status, due to the lack of civil partnership legislation, inadequate anti-discrimination laws, an absence of cultural visibility, and persistent homophobic discourses in the socio-political realm (Ross 2009). Consequently, coming out remains difficult, increasing the significance of community-building as a foundation for positive identity construction and activism. However, 'community' is a contested term, since it has been used to assert a form of gay ethnicity, grouping together and homogenising individuals who share a non-normative sexuality, whose specific differences may be erased through collective identification (Weston 1991, 122–24). Queer community-building can also be problematically conservative, aiming to assimilate LGBTQ individuals into normative culture, via 'nostalgic attempts to return to some fantasised moment of union' (Halberstam 2005, 153–54).

The notion of LGBTQ 'community' is as contested in Italy as elsewhere, described variously as non-existent (Ramina 2000), or a ghetto (Ibry 2007, 31). Yet for many it provides a vital alternative family: a 's-famiglia' (CLI 1997).[4] This new coinage subverts the heteronormative nuclear family unit and indicates the grouping of friends, ex-partners and others who constitute 'queer kinship networks' (Freeman 2008). 'S-famiglie' are characterised by in-fighting but also by shared experiences and supportive alliances

(CLI 1997). In Italy, the different, overlapping LGBTQ communities include: national activist associations, such as ArciGay and ArciLesbica, which run local groups;[5] cyber communities which may not have territorial roots; and local, social groups. There is also the 'invisible' majority of the LGBTQ population that does not participate in specific community life. Scholars argue that this older population may endure multiple forms of prejudice, from the socio-cultural devalorisation of older people to homophobia in care homes; they may have fewer biological descendants than heterosexual individuals, or strained relations with their families of origin and therefore have fewer family members who might care for them;[6] finally the lack of civil union legislation may result in their losing inheritance from a life-partner (Pietrantoni, Sommantico, and Graglia 2000, 9; Milletti 2009). Recently older gay men from the 'invisible' LGBTQ population in Italy have begun to become audible as researchers gather personal testimonies (Veneziani 2006). Issues arising in these narratives echo studies conducted in Northern Europe and North America, which identify anxieties relating to loneliness, illness and loss, aggravated by a precarious socio-legal status, and to the perception that some LGBTQ communities are youth-oriented, and therefore unwelcoming to older individuals (Heaphy, Yip, and Thompson 2003, 1; Veneziani 2006, 57, 91). More positively, scholars suggest that affirmation gained from participating in an LGBTQ community may enable 'successful aging' (Friend 1991). Indeed, due to the challenging situations they face (e.g. coming out), it is argued that LGBTQ individuals can develop 'creativity' or 'crisis competence', enabling them to cope better with ageing.[7] This resilience to potential age-related difficulties may derive from being less in thrall to normative ideals of gender and sexual attractiveness than heterosexuals, and therefore freer to adapt to and manage life changes (Hubbard and Rossington 1995/2001, 12–13).

Such adaptability is particularly significant today, when individuals who fought for gay liberation in the 1970s, in Italy as across Western Europe and North America, are ageing. Many have been able to live their sexuality relatively openly, some since their teens. On the one hand, this is a challenge, since there are few cultural models to follow (De Vries and Blando 2004, 21). However, as shown below, these generations have already redefined ageing and sexuality beyond the constraints, timetables and moralising categories of heteronormative reproductive time (Sandberg 2008, 135), creating and inhabiting 'queer time' and 'queer spaces' (Halberstam 2005), and pioneering new modalities of 'queer ageing' (Hughes 2006). Such experiences include developing relationships with younger queer subjects, through spending time in queer spaces, where norms of sex, gender and sexuality are challenged, and queer identities are validated.[8] Such sites facilitate the transmission of queer experience, increasing the meaning and 'integrity' of lived existence (Gorman and Nelson 2004, 87) and reinforcing those same communities and their spaces as archives of political and sexual histories and struggles. Queer intergenerational contact makes categories such as 'third age' seem artificially stratified; it seems more productive to consider the 'third age' as 'an extension of an earlier life course' (Cohler and Hostetler 2002, 137), which for LGBTQ individuals includes sustained contact with different generations, often very differently from the kind of grandparent–grandchild contact explored in much research on ageing.[9] The transmission of LGBTQ culture and life experience is vital to strengthen queer communities, and can also prevent older individuals from experiencing not only the cancelling out of sexuality to which all older people have historically been subjected (Herdt and de Vries 2004, 7), but also the erasure of a dissident socio-political, sexual identity (Gott 2005, 84).

Clearly some of these arguments contain implicit universalising claims about LGBTQ individuals' experiences of ageing, which is problematic since the little research that there is focuses on a narrow segment of the 'older' LGBTQ population; for example it privileges gay men over other groups (Barker 2004).[10] In my analysis of a lesbian community in Bari, I treat arguments about superior resilience and creativity as hypotheses, and explore the extent to which these capacities can be identified as functioning in a particular community.

Community initiatives around queer ageing

Before turning to the case study, I briefly summarise initiatives on LGBTQ ageing in Italy. At their 2010 National Conference, ArciGay noted the lack of research on this issue and pledged to develop and strengthen support networks, and to facilitate access to technologies for older people.[11] No concrete plans have followed as yet,[12] but independent initiatives already exist or are being developed across the peninsula with the potential to promote resilience and 'successful aging' by fostering a sense of strong identity, forging practical support networks, creating queer spaces and facilitating cultural transmission. These initiatives have developed from forms of co-habitation, which often begin when individuals are aged under 40. Building on women's experiences of communal living in the 1970s and 1980s, some lesbian communities have evolved, especially in Umbria. These range from holiday camps (for example 'Terradilei' [Herland][13]) to residential communities of lesbians living in close proximity (Milletti 2009, 8–9). Nerina Milletti describes these initiatives as motivated by the search for 'a place of our own' – evoking Virginia Woolf's argument in *A room of one's own*, that in order to write, women need financial independence and private space (Woolf 1989).[14] The initiatives she discusses (including Lesbizio), aim to facilitate self-determination in spaces that are, to differing degrees, autonomous from broader society.

Another significant initiative, which like Lesbizio remains unrealised, is the project 'Friendly Home', under development in Turin by former members of the activist association FUORI (Fronte unitario omosessuale rivoluzionario italiano/United Italian Homosexual Revolutionary Front) founded in 1971. 'Friendly Home' was launched in 2005 by 'Lambda mutuo soccorso', a group of 15 individuals and couples – gay men and single heterosexual women – aged 40 or over. It aims to establish a residential cohousing project that will prevent individuals from being isolated, provide health care through contracts with private service providers who are sensitised to their specific needs, and bolster a sense of community that is perceived to be lacking.[15] Enzo Cucco, a member of the group, told me that the roots of this initiative can be traced to three distinct traditions: Catholic 'Misericordia' or 'Mercy' associations, and other networks that emphasise our responsibility for others; the socialist tradition of the 'Società di mutuo soccorso' (Mutual Assistance Societies), established at the end of the 1800s in Piedmont, the Veneto and Emilia Romagna;[16] and the informal support networks that developed in and around gay male populations in the 1980s as a response to the AIDS crisis. Significantly, this genealogy ties together the LGBTQ community with other traditions that have not always been supportive of their lives and needs, placing these initiatives on a continuum. 'Friendly Home' remains an 'imagined community', due to various factors, such as disagreement about the right site, the death or illness of founder members, and a lack of funding from local, regional and national bodies. However, plans continue to develop and another

Turin-based association, 'Quore',[17] directly inspired by 'Friendly Home', is seeking to establish something similar: 'Friendly Piemonte' will be a residential home for younger and older LGBTQ individuals who need a safe and supportive place to stay, with a hostel attached to provide income, encouraging gay-friendly tourism and raising awareness of the LGBTQ population in Piedmont. While 'Friendly Home' began as a small-scale project between individuals who knew each other personally, seeking to cater for their own needs, 'Friendly Piemonte' proposes an intergenerational, gay-friendly community, with an international dimension, and an emphasis on queer cultural transmission. As 'Friendly Home' evolves, 'Lambda Mutuo Soccorso' plans to interface more directly with the broader LGBTQ population by following up some earlier attempts to publicise this initiative at national level, which led to numerous expressions of interest from older LGBTQ individuals living in isolated circumstances elsewhere in Italy, who were interested in moving to Turin to join this hypothetical community.

These imagined residential developments approach the construction of an LGBTQ 'community' in different ways, positing 'older' individuals either as the main beneficiaries of provision, or as members of a more variegated group. They are inspired by and draw together different genealogies of communal living and care. The types of 'community' that could result also differ in terms of local/national/international reach, degree of permanence for different residents, and their connections to the broader community. Both Cucco and Alessandro Battaglia from Quore maintain that that any community of this kind must remain connected to broader society – both mainstream society, and the LGBTQ population elsewhere in Italy and abroad – since this will allow a greater understanding of the needs of older LGBTQ individuals, and enable the national and intercultural transmission of queer history.[18] Although, like Lesbizio, these initiatives remain unrealised, they present clear examples of creative queer planning, as LGBTQ communities concerned about the lack of state-funded LGBTQ sensitised provision seek to provide for their present and future needs, locating themselves both as discrete from and in dialogue with local and international communities.

Case study: Lesbizio

Issues of cultural transmission, dialogue, space and intergenerationality also emerged as fundamental to my case study, Lesbizio, a community for 'older' lesbians planned by the association Desiderandae, based in Bari. This section introduces the association and its context, and the methodology employed. I discuss participants' responses regarding community and network structure, attitudes to ageing and health, and the Lesbizio project, in relation to resilient queer ageing.

Desiderandae

As a southern city, Bari has fewer LGBTQ and socio-cultural associations than northern cities such as Milan, Turin or Bologna, crucial centres of activism and socio-cultural life since the 1970s that have attracted significant LGBTQ migrant populations. Moreover, the Bari LGBTQ population is less visible than in these northern cities, since there are fewer dedicated bars and centres.[19] Significantly, in 2003 Bari hosted National Pride, a 50,000 strong demonstration supported by several openly LGT politicians including

Communist Refoundation deputies Nichi Vendola and Titti de Simone. It was proclaimed a success that would improve visibility and attitudes towards dissident sexualities (Zagaria 2003). However, eight years on, interviewees revealed a less positive picture: there is one LGBTQ bar, a few 'friendly' establishments and six social/activist associations,[20] but many interviewees emphasised that in their experience the city has not become significantly more accepting of LGBTQ residents. One remarked that 'even holding hands [with a woman] in public is difficult'.

Desiderandae, Bari's first lesbian network,[21] was founded in 1992 as a separatist organisation – one that sought to create autonomous, self-funded, lesbian spaces and projects in which lesbians could achieve self-realisation through collective association. In the 1990s, members of Desiderandae began to carve out 'lesbian spaces' against a predominantly heteronormative, often homophobic context, and distinct from gay male spaces. In 1995, the group began taking holidays together, renting the Masseria Santanna, 60 km from Bari, and inviting lesbians from elsewhere in Italy and abroad.[22] Inspired by this experience of communal living, they began planning a shared environment in which they might live together in the longer term. There were several specific motivating factors: (1) a concern, deriving from individual experiences, that state provision for older people was inadequate, heteronormative and would erase their identities as lesbians which they were consolidating through collective association;[23] (2) a desire to live together, support each other and enjoy each other's company, beyond homophobic, normative society; (3) a desire not to have to relinquish their possessions to the state, or to family members with whom they have strained relationships, but to be able to leave their goods to their 's-famiglia'; (4) a desire to establish a space for cultural transmission, to pass on experiences to younger generations of lesbians.[24] Their motivation was strengthened by learning of SAFIA (*Selbsthilfe alleinlebender Frauen im Alter*), a lesbian network in Germany with over 500 members, founded in 1986, and now a foundation to which individuals can bequeath their possessions.[25] SAFIA owns property, and provides social, political and emotional support for lesbians over 40. It has functioned as a model for Lesbizio.

Methodology

The 20 interviewees, aged 30 to 54, were recruited through email contact with Desiderandae, who circulated my invitation to take part in the research to other contacts and associations. Participants included founder and current members of Desiderandae, members of the feminist association 'Un Desiderio in comune' (A Shared Desire),[26] members of ArciLesbica, and women who are not members of these associations but who have personal contacts with others who are. This provided a range of perspectives on the developing project. The methodology employed was individual or group semi-structured interviews, according to preference. Questions focused on sexual identification, attitudes to ageing, community and the Lesbizio project itself. The Social Network Analysis maps the weekly contacts of 16 interviewees.[27]

Sexual identities, community and network structure

While most participants identified as lesbians, some also identified as bisexual (or as bisexual sometimes), one identified as queer, and two preferred not to identify themselves

using these labels. All participants now experience their sexuality positively, but they all also recounted instances of homophobia and discrimination (some still ongoing, in their families of origin or in the workplace), that they have had to endure and overcome. These ranged from family members being verbally abusive or refusing to acknowledge and accept the interviewee's sexuality and identity, to individuals feeling constrained to hide their sexuality for fear of repercussions, such as losing their jobs. For many, the self-acceptance they have achieved despite continuing hostility derives substantially from their participation in a supportive network of friends, partners and ex-partners.[28] With one exception, the individuals I spoke to had either been instrumental in creating such a network, or sought it as a crutch when first dealing with the challenge of developing and living an identity outside heteronormative frameworks, and it subsequently became a creative space in which to grow and exchange views. This network was described as 'fundamental', 'welcoming', as providing a crucial support and socio-political point of reference. 'I couldn't live without it', one participant noted. Another stated: 'I owe my acceptance of my sexuality to the group. I couldn't have done it on my own.' For those who had severed most/all of their relationships with their families of origin, this network has become their family.

In an era defined by multiple socio-cultural belongings, rather than a single network, we can identify multiple support networks, both overlapping and divergent. Social network analysis shows these different, coexisting networks of support in operation. Participants have both shared and individual networks of support with whom they are in contact on a weekly basis, visible in Figure 1; Figure 2 shows weekly contact between interviewees. These regular contacts included friends, family members, 's-famiglie' members, and socio-cultural and political associations.[29]

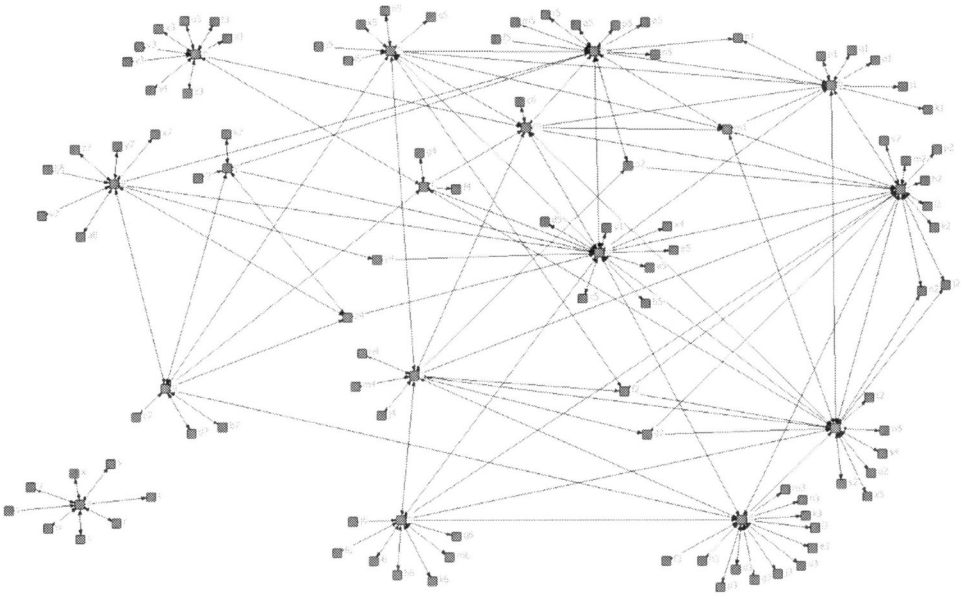

Figure 1. Weekly contacts between interviewees, and interviewees' individual regular contacts (which appear as clusters).

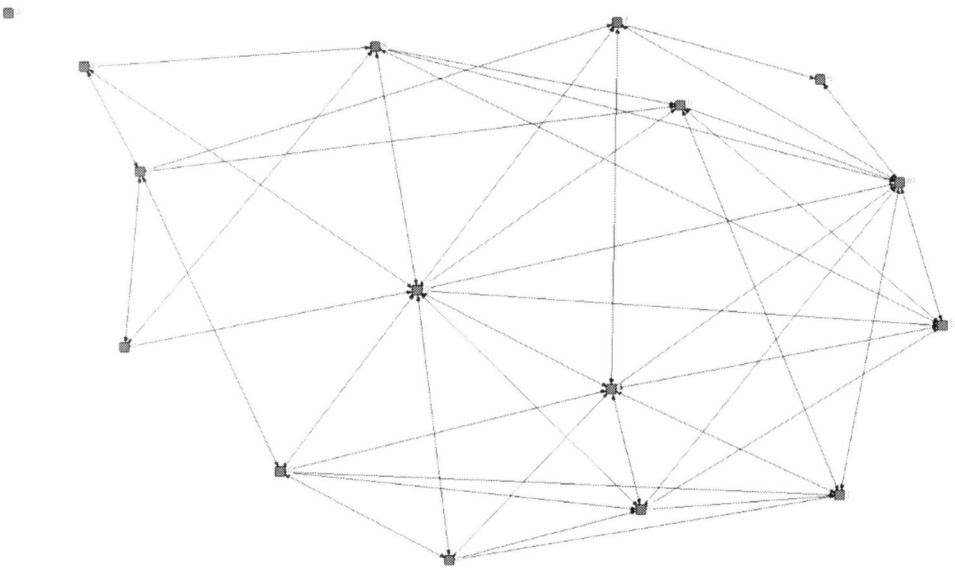

Figure 2. Weekly contact between interviewees.

Significantly, while the networks differ in appearance, they are similar in centrality: the degree to which contact relies on key individuals, who are fundamental to maintaining the network in place, and in whose absence it might disintegrate. Figure 2 has a centrality of 17%, while Figure 1 has a centrality of 16%. This means that both networks are relatively stable, with a resilience of approximately 83%. We can demonstrate this by removing two key figures involved in the establishment of the support networks: one founder member of the Desiderandae, and one current, longstanding member. If we remove these two figures, the centrality of the network increases by less than 1%, showing that there is a sufficient degree of connectedness amongst other members of the network for it to withstand the withdrawal of two historically key figures with little alteration to its resilience. In practice, this means that the network is not reliant on founder members or even the association Desiderandae, but has sufficient momentum to continue to offer support, thanks to the substantial involvement of several individuals who participate in maintaining the network. Indeed, the association was recently temporarily dissolved for a few years, due to a variety of tensions: a feeling that the project Lesbizio had stagnated; the desire of some members to experience different forms of collective association; members moving abroad; and personal issues. It was in the process of re-forming when I visited, due in part to my contact; and here I acknowledge the ways in which research can impact on the subjects of that research, a question to which I return. The key point here is that while this period of temporary dissolution had affected the Lesbizio project, it had not weakened the network. One participant commented: 'This community is open, because different groups come in and out of it. It is a strong network that is always there when it is needed . . . nobody is left alone. It is almost invisible, but it is multi-stranded'.

One reason for this flexible resilience is that the network is largely experienced as a 's-famiglia', a term privileged in interviews. 'S-famiglie' were characterised as positive, individually constructed support systems that provide a context for relaxation, enjoyment

and political activism. In contrast, national, activist communities were described as 'fragmented', marked by infighting, and therefore frustrating to participate in. Moreover, some respondents felt that larger activist communities tended to be normative, and hostile to new ideas. One respondent left ArciLesbica because 'there was no space for my ideas. There was a group that laid down the rules and you either had to agree or leave'.

However, most interviewees expressed positive views of the local networks that have developed around associations, which have opened up queer spaces and helped individuals to accept their sexuality more fully. When asked to consider the hypothesis that LGBTQ individuals may develop particular coping skills, some interviewees agreed, observing that they felt prepared to face challenges like ageing because they had become accustomed to coping on their own in their youth: 'I'm used to thinking about myself as an individual'. Others remarked that they felt able to face challenges thanks to the network of support which had effectively transformed their evolving identities from a condition requiring 'crisis management' into a creative, playful and stimulating experience: 'it gives you a creative capacity, so you're not discouraged by your own limitations'. In contrast, three interviewees had ambivalent views about the value of LGBTQ networks, recognising their potential benefits but finding them rather essentialist and limiting, since members primarily associate together because of a shared dissident sexuality, not necessarily for any other reason. This, in their view, can lead to homogenisation: 'you have to try and stay within certain logics or group mechanisms, or you're outside the group'. Yet while I certainly would not claim that this network does not demand some form of conformity, it has proved itself to be flexibly resilient, as noted above. It has allowed individuals to move from group to group, for associations to be suspended and for different perspectives to be expressed.

Ageing and health

Although I set about recruiting individuals involved in a project for 'older' lesbians, or who fell into the 'older' age bracket (over 40), four interviewees were in their thirties. I recognise the limitations of my data which do not represent the experiences of the broader lesbian population in Bari, especially since no participants were aged over 60 – a population on which research is urgently needed, particularly because very few LGBTQ individuals in this age bracket are involved in community activism and are therefore likely to experience some degree of isolation (Veneziani 2006, 19). The inclusion of younger women is relevant, however, since not only did members of the Desiderandae begin discussing Lesbizio when many of them were in their thirties, but the tightly-knit 's-famiglia' most closely associated with Lesbizio and members of the 'Desiderandae' is composed of individuals aged between 30 and 60, and includes couples with a 20-year age difference.

Several interviewees commented on the enriching quality of these relationships across different age brackets, which they believe are enabled at least in part by the freedom afforded by the lesbian spaces of the Masseria, as well as by the fact that most of them have not been constrained by the normative stages of reproductive family life (only one interviewee is a mother). Several of them noted that their heterosexual female friends and relatives, most of who are married with children, tend to associate with a more homogeneous age-group, and express frustration with their lives. This contrasts with

several interviewees' characterisation of their interactions as 'youthful', lively and playful. Participants commented insightfully on how they are dismantling normative models of gender and ageing: 'Some [heterosexual] women I know say they are too old to do certain things, but this is just not the case'; 'My lesbian friends... have not been conditioned by the heterosexual family model, and seem to have a lightness about them which is not superficiality but is the courage to dare to change, because there are fewer constraints [than for heterosexual women]'.

The age range within this community means that 'younger' lesbians are in close contact with 'older' lesbians. Interviewees in their fifties noted the absence of models of visible, older lesbians when they were in their thirties, and interviewees in their thirties were positive about what they could learn from 'older' lesbians, in relation to queer history, feminism, and strategies for achieving a positive lesbian identity. Several participants remarked positively on becoming aware that 'older' lesbians often enjoy very active sexual lives – an awareness that is certainly not promoted by mainstream media or socio-cultural discourses in Italy. One participant commented that her younger lesbian friends helped to dismantle ageist barriers erected by heteronormative relatives and society, and allowed her to retain a positive sense of self. Those in relationships where there was a significant chronological age difference further commented that this difference enabled them to experience an alternative 'third age' – a queerly redefined shared age.

In addition to these self-re-imaginings and reciprocal support, one crucial issue that has emerged from this interaction is a focus on lesbian sexual health, an issue that is chronically under-researched, often ignored by health practitioners and by lesbians themselves who may avoid gynaecological examinations as a result of adverse experiences.[30] Members of the group had organised an information campaign about lesbian sexual health and 'lesbian friendly' gynaecological examinations, which they reported on at a national ArciGay meeting. This is obviously relevant to women of all ages; with regard to more age-related health issues, interviewees in menopause recounted the physical and psychological challenges of this, and what it meant for them individually and as lesbians. Without associative spaces, centres and communities, these vital questions often remain undiscussed, which can have serious implications for the well-being of those affected.

Lesbizio

This project was conceived originally as a separatist space that would provide specifically for the needs of the lesbian community, not for the broader LGBTQ population. It was envisaged as facilitating cultural transmission, and providing health care, social and emotional support, as well as material help for those with limited economic means. Attitudes amongst interviewees varied, from those who envisioned it as a mythicised 'utopia', 'an idyll', to those who focused on the financial and legal obstacles to its realisation. In Italy, as elsewhere, women have lower income than men.[31] Five of the interviewees have an annual income of less than €10,000, or are currently unemployed, meaning that they would potentially benefit from a residential cohousing project, but are not able to contribute greatly to establishing one. However, six interviewees were home-owners and keen to contribute to a foundation such as that established by SAFIA in Germany; yet Italian law partially impedes this, since a percentage of all inheritance must be left to blood relations.[32] One way of avoiding this is to establish a trust fund based

outside Italy, which was the approach taken by 'Le Sciare' (The Witches), a group of women working towards a similar residential community who have designated a trustee based in the UK to manage their trust 'Nel nome della donna' (In Women's Name).[33] Members of Desiderandae are currently seeking advice to find solutions to these difficulties.

Plans for Lesbizio have also reached a stumbling block due to differences of opinion about the location, structure and scope of the project. Some interviewees worried it might feel claustrophobic and closed-off from the broader community. Some imagine a countryside residential complex, others would prefer the city. Some want a place of their own while others want to be integrated into a broader community. Some want it to be self-financing for reasons of separatist politics ('Maintaining financial independence is a form of resistance'; 'I am at war with the institutions in this country because they don't recognise me'), but others think that the state should help and that obtaining this help is itself a political act in which institutions are compelled to recognise and provide for a marginalised group. While originally conceived as a 'lesbian' space, most interviewees expressed a wish that it be open to other women – a category that was understood in a progressively queer manner, as demonstrated by the support and acceptance shown towards a member of the 's-famiglia' who at times identifies as transgender but prefers not to use identity labels. A couple of participants would even extend this invitation to gay and heterosexual men, allowing them to nurture stronger relationships with the broader community, seeing this form of lesbo-feminist 'contamination' as the best way to challenge homophobic attitudes.

Alongside financial and logistical challenges, these competing objectives and needs constitute stumbling blocks to the realisation of Lesbizio as a concrete project. If it is to be transposed from an 'imagined' community to a tangible residential facility, compromises will have to be made. One sceptical interviewee commented that those who want to live in Lesbizio should simply create it on a small scale: 'they should just buy some flats or houses together and get on with it' rather than nurturing an unrealisable 'dream'. Down-scaling the project would render it more achievable in the short term, and would potentially also eradicate some differences of opinion expressed above. Yet, as a member of Desiderandae explained, a crucial aim is to create a community that can welcome women in need from both within a tightly knit group of friends and *beyond*, from the Bari area and elsewhere in Italy. The goal is not to create an exclusive community but to provide for a need that is not being fulfilled by state services. One solution to these competing aims, which might also resolve participants' concerns about the potentially homogenising character of such a project, could be a multiplicity of small-scale initiatives, from a community centre that would provide a space for cultural activities or health initiatives, to small residential clusters based in different environments, linked through residents' flexible participation in the 'multi-stranded' broader network. This type of solution could cater for the variegated needs and desires of the multifaceted lesbian population (or even for a broader LGBTQ population), while avoiding imposing normative frameworks or group dynamics.

Conclusions

Nicole Brossard stated that 'a lesbian who does not reinvent the world is a lesbian in the process of disappearing' (1988, 136). Those involved in Lesbizio are seeking not only to

reinvent themselves – their identities and ways of ageing, loving and living together – but also to change attitudes in the world around them. My impact on their activities as a researcher was welcomed as a positive incentive to reflect critically on the project, stimulated by an external perspective. They have sought dialogue with other groups, including the broader lesbian population in Italy, through presenting the project at the '5 giornate lesbiche' (Five Lesbian Days) gathering in Rome (June 2010), and during holidays in the Masseria. They are also in contact with members of SAFIA. This willingness to engage in dialogue and to reflect on what they are seeking to create has several implications: it deflects criticism that Lesbizio will become a closed, problematically normative society; it also means that while they have yet to attain substantial material resources, the networks and 's-famiglie' who are contributing to this imagined community already have competences and connectedness that endows their network with a strong degree of resilience. Scholars have suggested that while older LGBTQ individuals may live in a creative, autonomous manner, 'this creativity is not so evenly demonstrated when it comes to *planning* for old age' (Heaphy, Yip, and Thompson 2003, 2). My research into this particular network in Bari reveals sustained, prescient planning. Although this may not yet have led to concrete results, the existing networks already function as a significant support and can be seen as a promising foundation for the future.

I am not seeking to claim that this network and these communities are more resilient than heterosexual ones, which is also a problematic, essentialising way to frame the question. Yet their experiences, and the construction of a variety of support networks which enable redefinition of self and critical reflection on one's place in the (heteronormative) socio-cultural context have contributed to the foundations of a queer intergenerational community that is already operating to provide support and enable a degree of 'resilience across the life course' (Herdt and De Vries 2004, xvii). Much more investigation is needed, both qualitative and quantitative, on older LGBTQ and heterosexual populations, to determine how/whether this type of networked resilience might benefit other populations. Research on socio-cultural resilience argues that 'next generation resilience relies on citizens and communities, not the institutions of state' (Edwards 2009). Given that the government in Italy has no concrete plans to improve the civil and human rights of LGBTQ citizens, these communities in Bari and Turin must keep developing autonomous plans, while striking a balance between self-reliance and connectedness. While these projects for residential facilities remain unrealised, the networks around them, which predate and surpass the projects themselves, are important examples of community-building beyond the reach and support structures of dominant society. My case study reveals how, through a desire to reimagine themselves differently, critical self-reflection, redefinitions of normative models of the life course, and sustainable networks of alternative kinship and support, a variegated lesbian community is beginning to forge a flexibly resilient foundation, as a first step towards achieving a self-determined form of 'successful [queer] ageing'.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks are due to the participants in this research for their generosity and support. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, and to Jane Traies, whose ground-breaking work inspired the author to tackle this subject

Notes

1. ISTAT 2010. This compares to 16% in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2011).
2. Lauren Andres and John Round of the University of Birmingham recently discussed 'resilience' in marginalised communities in their paper The Role of "Persistent Resilience" within Everyday Life: Communities Coping with Instability in Post-Crisis England', presented at the Max Planck Political Science conference 'Coping with Instability in Market Societies', 15–16 December 2011, Paris.
3. Financial and methodological support was provided by the University of Birmingham, for the project 'Persistence Resilience'.
4. In Italian, adding an 's' as a prefix usually gives the opposite meaning to the original term.
5. Arcigay is a non-profit association founded in 1985. See http://www.arcigay.it/who-we-are/. ArciLesbica was established as a separate association in 1996: http://www.arcilesbica.it/associazione.php.
6. In Italy, care for the elderly has traditionally been the responsibility of the family, not the state. This began to change in 1992 due to directive 502, 'Objective: Ageing Persons'. However, health care for the elderly remains inadequate, varies from region to region, and suffers from poor coordination between local and regional services (Salvioli 2007; Nesti et al. 2003, 11).
7. De Vries and Blando (2004, 19), discussing the work of Friend and Michael Kimmel; see also Heaphy, Yip and Thompson (2003, 8), and, on Italy, Veneziani (2006, 136).
8. Judith Butler discusses how recognition as a queer subject is fundamental to achieving 'personhood' (2004, 32–33). Lack of recognition, or the cancelling out of queer identities in heteronormative society, can have sustained, harmful effects on well-being.
9. See Meshal and McGlynn (2004). Much of this work assumes a heteronormative family life. This is not to imply that LGBTQ individuals do not have grandchildren since: (1) while artificial insemination for same-sex couples is not available in Italy, this procedure can be obtained abroad; (2) many women who identify as lesbians, and some gay men, have children from previous heterosexual relationships. See Danna and Bottino (2005) on queer parenting in Italy.
10. In a recent study of LGBT experiences in Turin, the sample included men aged 50–67 but no women aged over 49 (Saraceno et al. 2003, 254).
11. http://www.arcigay.it/odg-anziani-congresso2010
12. This view is based on information on the ArciGay website and personal conversations with ArciLesbica activists.
13. http://www.terradilei.it/.
14. My translation.
15. Interview with Enzo Cucco, a member of the group, January 2011. All further references are to this interview.
16. This association is now known as the Federazione Italiana della Mutualità Integrativa Volontaria (FIMIV) (Italian Federation of Integrative Voluntary Mutuality [FIMIV]). See http://www.fimiv.it/default.asp
17. A new coinage from the Italian word 'cuore' (heart) and the word 'queer'. See http://www.quore.org/
18. Source: personal interview with Battaglia, January 2011.
19. For discussion and statistics see Barbagli and Colombo (2001, 186–94).
20. For details see: http://www.arcilesbica.it/bari/bariarcobaleno/bariarcobaleno.htm
21. An ArciLesbica group was established in 2002.
22. http://www.desiderandae.it/masseria.htm
23. This view is confirmed by research; see Nesti et al. (2003); Salvioli (2007); Pietrantoni, Sommantico, and Graglia (2000).
24. Sources: website and interviews.
25. http://www.sappho-stiftung.de/index.html. See Milletti 2009, 6.
26. http://undesiderioincomune.blogspot.com/
27. Four interviewees preferred not to provide this information. Thanks to James Knight for his assistance in analysing the data. The software for the SNA analysis was Ucinet 6 for Windows Version 6.310 (Borgatti, Everett and Freeman 2002). The diagrams were produced in NetDraw 2.098 (Borgatti 2002).

28. Research in other contexts shows that this is a typical composition for a lesbian support network. See Barker (2004).
29. Contact was made by phone, email or in person.
30. See the Stonewall report on lesbian sexual health in the UK: http://www.stonewall.org.uk/at_home/health/2660.asp. There are no statistics available on the Italian context.
31. On women's precarious place in the Italian workplace see Sconvegno 2007.
32. See the 'Codice Civile', 'Libro II delle successioni', Art. 536 onwards. http://www.codice-civile.com/libro-secondo-delle-successioni.htm
33. http://www.nelnomedelladonna.org. See Milletti (2009, 8).

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Friendly Home Torino: http://laltrametadellamore.blogfree.net/?t=2573817
Nel nome della donna: http://www.nelnomedelladonna.org
Quore: http://www.quore.org/
SAFIA (*Selbsthilfe alleinlebender Frauen im Alter*): http://www.sappho-stiftung.de/index.html
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