

# Ageing in a non-heterosexual context

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## **ABSTRACT**

There is increasing recognition of the importance of social and cultural differences in shaping the diversity of the ageing experience in contemporary Britain. Various social and cultural factors, such as those associated with class, ethnicity, gender and disability, influence people's living circumstances and sources of support in later life. While they have been the subject of considerable speculation, ageing in a non-heterosexual context remains remarkably under-studied. This paper examines the difference that being non-heterosexual makes to how people experience ageing and later life. It draws on quantitative and qualitative data gathered for a British study of the living circumstances of non-heterosexuals aged between the fifties and the eighties. Previous work has overwhelmingly emphasised how individuals manage their sexual identities, but this paper focuses on the factors that shape the non-heterosexual experience of ageing and later life. Particular attention is paid to the relational and community contexts in which non-heterosexuals negotiate personal ageing. This not only provides insights into the specific challenges that ageing presents for non-heterosexuals, but also offers insights into the challenges faced by ageing non-heterosexuals *and* heterosexuals in 'detraditionalised' settings.

**KEY WORDS** – non-heterosexual, lesbian, gay, ageing, ageism, identity, relationship, community, family, friendship.

## **Introduction**

Recent literature on the contemporary experience of ageing and old age demonstrates an increasing recognition of the changing living circumstances of the older population (*e.g.* Bernard and Phillips 1998; Phillipson *et al.* 1999; Minichiello, Browne and Kendig 2000), as well as the diversity of the ageing experience (*e.g.* Blakemore and Boneham 1994; Arber and Ginn 1995; Bernard and Phillips 2000; Harper 2000). Overall, the

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literature establishes the importance of examining socio-cultural differences and social change in understanding the complexity of ageing and the plurality of old age experience in contemporary Britain. Various social and cultural factors, such as class, ethnicity, gender and disability, impact significantly on how ageing is experienced and negotiated. These influence living circumstances and sources of support in later life, and are essential for understanding the potential for marginalisation and social exclusion in old age. They also interact with age to shape the variable capacity to respond to and negotiate the consequences of social change (*cf.* Bauman 2001). But while diversity is commonly recognised in discussions of the ageing experience, non-heterosexual forms (*e.g.* lesbian, gay and bisexual) are rarely mentioned or studied.

Older lesbians and gay men have been described as ‘the unseen minority’ of the 20th century (Brown *et al.* 1997). To date, this population remains ‘invisible’ in political, policy and advocacy discourses on ageing and old age. Some have argued that the older age groups are neglected in non-heterosexual community life itself (Jacobs, Rasmussen and Hohann 1999; Cahill, South and Spade 2000; Pugh 2002). There are no substantive British studies of this population, and the applicability of existing North American studies (*e.g.* Kehoe and Herdt 1989; Berger 1996) to Britain is at best limited (we shall return to this later). Further, the growing research on lesbian and gay lifestyles is predominantly concerned with youthful experience. Consequently, the roles of non-heterosexual identities and lifestyles in shaping the experience of ageing and old age have been overlooked, and similarly the contribution that insights into non-heterosexuals adjustment to later life can make to our understanding of the consequences of social change has been little explored (*cf.* Giddens 1991; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001).

This paper discusses selected findings from a research project on British non-heterosexual ageing. It aimed both to specify the features of non-heterosexual ageing and to develop broader insights into the challenges facing both non-heterosexuals *and* heterosexuals who are ageing in increasingly non-traditional social contexts. The paper begins with an account of the study and the sample, and then moves to the key question: What difference does being non-heterosexual make to how people experience ageing and later life? In addressing this question, North American writing has placed overwhelming emphasis on how individuals manage their sexual identities, but our view is that for a fuller understanding of the issues, it is valuable to move beyond ‘identity’. Several factors combine to shape how non-heterosexuals experience ageing and later life. Important among these are the relational and community contexts in which individuals age.

## The study and participants

The study explored three broad questions: What are the life circumstances in which non-heterosexuals negotiate ageing? How does this population plan for old age, and negotiate and experience ageing? What light does non-heterosexual ageing throw on the challenges that social policy and practice face in responding to contemporary 'experiments in living'? The fieldwork for the study was undertaken during 2001 and 2002 and included a postal questionnaire survey of 266 (102 women and 164 men) self-identified non-heterosexuals (lesbians, gay men and bisexuals). Qualitative data were collected at eight focus groups (with 16 women and 14 men, some of who also completed the questionnaires), and through semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of 10 women and 10 men. The participants lived throughout mainland Britain and were aged between the fifties and the eighties. A representative sample is impossible in a study of this kind because the non-heterosexual population is hidden. The research had therefore to rely on self-selection (Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan 1998). Sampling was principally through formal and informal networks, publications (*e.g.* newsletters and the Internet), national and local user groups, and by snowballing. The data should therefore be treated as exploratory and generalisation is discouraged. Nevertheless, it is believed that the data offer important insights into various aspects of non-heterosexual ageing in particular, and ageing in the de-traditionalised world in general.

As to gender, 102 (38.3%) of the sample were women and 164 (61.7%) were men. Men were well represented in three age groups: 66 were aged 50-59 years, 56 were 60-69 years, and 42 were aged 70 or more years, but the representation of women was uneven (there were 79, 20 and three respectively in the three age groups). Women aged 60 or more years were however more evenly represented in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The different age distributions reflect the gendered nature of the opportunities (and perhaps eagerness) to access formal non-heterosexual groups and networks. Many of the men aged 60 or more years were recruited through various user groups, newsletters and Internet-based networks organised for and by older gay men, but there are few similar networks for older lesbians. The focus group discussions suggested that women are also likely to rely more on informal, local and 'hidden' support networks, and that they have more reservations about 'going public' about their identities.

The sample was overwhelmingly 'white' (259 or 97.4%), and was generally well-educated (51.9% of the women and 45.1% of the men had an undergraduate degree). One-third (33.5%) had an annual income of over £20,000 (37.3% of women and 31.1% of men), while 16.2 percent earned

less than £10,000 (14.7% of women and 17.1% of men). Fifty-one women (50.0%) and 110 men (67.1%) classified themselves as financially secure. Most owned or owned jointly with a partner their homes (83 women or 81.4%; 125 men or 76.2%). Despite the bias towards those who are reasonably well-off, the sample had had more experience of material and financial insecurity than the subjects of much previous research on non-heterosexual lives, who have tended overwhelmingly to be well-educated and well-off (Heaphy, Weeks and Donovan 1998; Weston 1991).

### **Sexuality and ageing**

The North American research has strongly emphasised how well non-heterosexuals manage ageing and old age (*see* Kehoe and Herdt 1989; Deevey 1990; Quam and Whitford 1992; Berger 1996; Harrison 1996; Brown *et al.* 1997). It has even been argued that, compared to their heterosexual counterparts, older non-heterosexuals find ageing less problematic, because living with their stigmatised sexual identities has given them experience of 'crisis competence' and the 'mastery of crisis' (*e.g.* Kimmel 1978; Reid 1995; Berger 1996; Harrison 1996; Ellis 2001). There are several reasons to be sceptical of these predominantly positive stories (Lee 1990; Friend 1990). First and foremost, much of the research has been based on small and young samples, most often aged in the forties and fifties (Quam and Whitford 1992; Cahill, South and Spade 2000). Secondly, it has insufficiently recognised the diversity of either non-heterosexuals' negotiation of ageing or their ways of life in old age. Thirdly, too much emphasis has been placed on the individuals' coping mechanisms as the primary determinant of 'success' in ageing. This negates the influence of economic, material, physical, social and cultural factors on how individuals experience ageing and negotiate their lives in old age.

At the outset, it is imperative to explore how ideas of 'being older' and 'old age' are constructed and given meaning in a non-heterosexual context. Many previous studies have implied that non-heterosexuals aged 50 or more years are inclined to label themselves as 'old'. Our quantitative data show markedly different findings, for around 45 per cent of the sample (50 women and 68 men) defined 'old age' as being in the seventies or older, while 23.3 per cent (16 women and 46 men) nominated the sixties and older. Participants of all ages tended to describe themselves as 'older' when referring to their sexual identities and lifestyles, which reflects the influence of age on how one sees oneself (and is seen by others) as a lesbian, gay man or bisexual. It also indicates that the meaning of 'old age' for non-heterosexuals is as fluid and context-dependent as it is in the broader

TABLE I. *Impact of age on sexuality, Great Britain 2001–02*

Assertion	Those who 'strongly agree' or 'agree'		
	All	Women	Men
'Age makes a difference to how I see myself as a lesbian, gay man or bisexual'	115 (43.2%)	43 (42.2%)	72 (43.9%)
'Age makes a difference to how I live as a lesbian, gay man or bisexual'	125 (47.0%)	40 (39.2%)	85 (51.8%)
'Age makes a difference to how I socialise as a lesbian, gay man or bisexual'	143 (53.8%)	52 (60.0%)	91 (55.5%)
Sample size	266	102	164

*Source:* Authors' postal questionnaire survey. For details see text.

culture, where personal interpretations of old age are becoming increasingly elastic (Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Blaikie 1999). Some participants asserted that being non-heterosexual meant they were less aware of the ageing process, as in the following quotations:

I've not had the signposts that maybe married men have ... so in that sense you might sort of stay young. You don't see yourself getting old. (Mike, aged 72)

I think in the lesbian community ... things like age and various things like this matter far less than they do in the heterosexual world. (Jane, aged 68 years)

On the other hand, many men (but few women) indicated that youth-oriented non-heterosexual cultures made them particularly conscious of their age (*see also* Kimmel and Sang 1995; Berger 1996; Pugh 2002). The numbers of women and men who agreed that age had changed the way that they viewed themselves or lived their lives are given in Table 1. That being non-heterosexual can influence most aspects of an individual's life is indisputable, but the impacts are variable. For instance, although 80.4 per cent of women and 62.2 per cent of men said that their sexuality had enriched their life, 20.6 per cent of women and 34.8 per cent of men said that they experienced loneliness and isolation when they thought about their sexual identity. Further, while the majority did not feel that their sexuality had had a negative consequence on their wellbeing, tellingly 29.4 per cent of women and 27.4 per cent of men felt the opposite. Previous research has insufficiently acknowledged the interplay of sexuality with material, relational, cultural and other factors in shaping the uneven choices and possibilities open to non-heterosexuals. One important factor is the historical context in which individuals became aware of their sexuality. For example, while Blasius (1994: 191) has argued that lesbians and gay men 'must create a self out of (or despite) the heterosexual self that is given to them', this is particularly the case for individuals currently in or

approaching old age. The older the individual, the more likely she or he was to emphasise the lack of role models and resources by which they could make sense of their identities, and the more resilient were the internalised sanctions against homosexuality likely to be. As one participant pointed out:

We didn't have any choices ... You just accepted that fact that you were gay, if you could and you got on with it ... you know we were the twilight men then ... we didn't talk about it. (Bob, aged 72 years)

How older non-heterosexuals experience, negotiate and manage their sexual identities is more than an individual matter. The possibilities have changed historically and according to the relational and community contexts that individuals inhabit – with all the support systems they offer and the limitations they impose. These have the potential to empower or constrain an individual's attempt to construct a meaningful identity and lifestyle. It is to these contexts that we now turn.

### **Negotiating relationships**

Harper (2000) argued that we need to take into account the increasing diversity of household and family structures when examining the contemporary experience of ageing and old age. This is crucial for understanding the consequences of social change for the resources, support and care systems available to people in later life.

#### *Couple relationships and solo living*

Almost 60 per cent of women in the sample were in couple relationships (all same-sex), compared with approximately 40 per cent of men (9 of 61 were in cross-sex relationships). This is consistent with other research, which has found that 40 to 80 per cent of lesbians and from 40 to 60 per cent of gay men are in couple relationships (Cahill, South and Spade 2000). In general, the younger the participant, the more likely that she or he was in a relationship. Some North American research has reported a greater sense of wellbeing amongst coupled than single non-heterosexuals but the evidence is inconclusive (Hostetler and Bertram 1997). Some non-heterosexuals are highly critical of the 'obsessively couple-oriented culture', and reject coupledness as the keystone of heterosexist ideology (Cahill, South and Spade 2000; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). Despite this, couple relationships were highly valued by the sample, and 56.9 per cent of women and 68.9 per cent of men thought that they had become increasingly important as they aged. There was broad agreement amongst the sample that, with increasing age, it was increasingly difficult to meet a

partner. While the greater percentage of women in couple relationships may be related to the greater value that women attach to long-term partnerships, this presumption may be false. The qualitative data reveal the difficulty and risk that some men perceived in forming partnerships, particularly with younger men, as in the following quotations:

I think it's difficult making relationships [after a bereavement], definitely at that age because, who would want you as a partner? You would tend to want someone who was maybe younger. (John, aged 58 years)

You tend with age to be a little bit wary ... There are a lot of guys who like older men, and so many of them are dubious, they want an easy life rather than a sharing sort of life. (George, aged 56 years)

The qualitative data show that same-sex couples had many views about the ways in which living outside the heterosexual norm structured their relationships. On the one hand, many of the participants – particularly women with politicised feminist identities – placed strong emphasis on the greater opportunities offered in same-sex relationships for emotional fulfilment and role negotiation. Friendship was viewed by many as the *sine qua non* of a quality relationship. One participant put it like this:

Apart from being my partner, [she] is also the most important person in my life. I mean she's also my best friend. (Jane, aged 55 years)

Jane's expression echoes a recurring theme in the discussion of non-heterosexual couples' lives, that same-sex relationships place a particularly high value on reciprocity and operate by an 'egalitarian ideal' or 'friendship model' (Dunne 1997; Yip 1997; Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks 1999). Giddens (1992) suggested more contentiously that same-sex relationships operate on 'the basis of equality', and exemplify an experience that is becoming increasingly common for contemporary heterosexual relationships. This view has been much debated, and Jamieson (1998) has argued that research findings on the equality of same-sex relationships are inconclusive even though they show considerable self-consciousness in same-sex relationships about the negotiation of traditionally gendered roles, and frequent self-conscious challenges to traditional models of 'doing' relationships. This raises the question of whether generational differences strongly influence how relationships are structured. It is clear that some older non-heterosexuals – mostly men – draw on the dominant (*viz.* gendered and heterosexual) models to manage their relationships, as the following exchange demonstrated:

Simon: Someone once said to me, well you're a leader because you've been a father and a husband, so you will always take that role and I think I do ... (aged 58 years)

John: The trouser wearer ... Here you are, three couples [represented in the focus group] where partnerships have worked and admitting that one is the [more] dominant personality than the other (aged 72 years).

Despite this, there remains a strong sense that 'gender sameness' does mean that couples must to some degree negotiate roles and domestic tasks. A dynamic that links inextricably to such negotiation is revealed in the strong emphasis that many non-heterosexuals place on independence, whether they are in a relationship or otherwise, as the following quotations demonstrated:

I've never understood how I could possibly survive without working for a living ... I've had partners and we've shared things, but I've never been financially dependent on anybody else, so it doesn't occur to me that would be a possibility. (Gloria, aged 54 years)

I'd brought up husband, kids, and then found myself in another relationship [with a woman], and said 'Hang on, I'm a glorified housekeeper'. ... [Having finished the relationship] I've finally had a few years, I can have my own life. (Joyce, aged 51 years)

The emphasis on independence raised the issue of solo living. Individuals are increasingly willing to live alone, irrespective of their relationship, and the trend is expected to continue (Phillipson *et al.* 1999). Between the 1960s and 1980s, the percentage of older men living alone rose from 11 to 20, and of women from 30 to 40 (Ginn and Arber 1998). The trend has continued during the last 20 years (Peace and Johnson 1998). A large proportion of the sample lived alone (41.2% of women and 65.2% of men), and the percentage slightly increased with age. While those in relationships tended to live with their partners, this was more likely among women (48.0%) than men (26.8%). There are several reasons why a couple may not live together: the relationship may not be viewed as sufficiently long-term or committed; those who have been bereaved may be less inclined to live with a new partner; and some feel that living with a partner will compromise other relationships (with family, children and neighbours) by making obvious their homosexuality. The high percentage of solo living raises important questions about family and support networks, and has important implications for social care when it is required (Harper 2000).

### *Family of origin*

Several studies have suggested that because of their sexuality, non-heterosexuals (particularly older ones) are likely to have strained relationships with, or even be estranged from, their families of origin. In this study, 34.3 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men reported that their sexuality had distanced them from their families of origin, but the majority



(62.9%) felt that their relationships with family members were important. Also, 68.6 per cent of the sample said they were open about their sexuality to at least some relatives, more often siblings than parents. In short, their relationships with their families of origin appear to be more important than has been suggested in the literature.

Relationships with children were significant to many of the participants. While Weinstock (2000) has suggested that there is less emphasis on child-rearing and reproduction amongst lesbians aged between 40 and 65 years than among those who are younger, in our study 42.2 per cent of women and 24.2 per cent of men were parents. The importance of family of origin and children, and the degree to which regular contact is maintained, is likely to depend heavily on the quality of the relationship (*cf.* Finch and Mason 1993; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). While some women and men had forsaken an open non-heterosexual life for the sake of maintaining relationships with family and children, others had accepted that a consequence of living their 'own' lives was the loss of close family relationships, and still others had developed and negotiated close bonds.

### *Friendships*

The importance of friendship in older age has been widely documented. The literature also suggests that non-heterosexuals consider friendship as equally important to – or even more important than – relationships with partners or relatives of origin (Weston 1991; Nardi 1992; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). Among our participants, no less than 96.1 per cent of women and 93.9 per cent of men considered friendships 'important' or 'very important'. Furthermore, 74.5 per cent of women and 67.1 per cent of men lived close to friends. In comparison, only 34.3 per cent of women and 34.8 per cent of men lived close to a relative. A large majority (75.5% of women and 83.5% of men) also felt that friendships had become more important as they became older. The qualitative data also showed that many participants described their friends as 'the most important people' in their lives, as in the following exchange and single quotation:

John: [The most important people in my life are] friends of longstanding [who are] I would say mostly gay, but not all. (aged 64 years)

Jim: Yes, yes, I would agree with that, I think the older you get the more important friends are, and true friends. As far as I'm concerned that can mean gay and heterosexual people. (aged 71 years)

Matthew: I'll go along with both of those [views]. (aged 60 years)

My support networks come from people I count as friends ... and those definitely before my birth family, my straight family, if you like, definitely. (Jane, aged 50 years)

Pahl (2000) described friendships as the intimate relationships of the 21st century. The significance of friendship to our participants is evident in that 52.9 per cent of the women and 48.8 per cent of the men agreed with the statement that 'my friends are my family'. As one participant succinctly put it: 'So my family in the classic gay phrase are my friends ... so I do have a network which I rely on' (Sandra, aged 51 years). In a North American study, Dorfman *et al.* (1995) found that the most significant difference between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals aged over 60 years was that the latter relied more on 'friendship families' for support. The former relied more on family of origin. Other studies have also found that 'friends as family' played a crucial role in care-giving and social support for older lesbians and gay men (*e.g.* Kosberg and Kaye 1997; Weinstock 2000).

Weston (1991) and Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) drew an important distinction between 'chosen families' and 'surrogate' or 'replacement' families. Chosen families are likely to be made up of friends, partners, ex-partners *and* accepting family members of origin. These can be understood as 'flexible but often strong and supportive networks of friends, lovers and even family of origin which provide the framework for the development of mutual care, responsibility and commitment for many lesbians and gay men' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 1999: 44). In short, 'chosen families' can be viewed as the most radical form of the development described by Finch and Mason (1993), that family relations, responsibilities and obligations are increasingly open to negotiation (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). Given the significance of friendships *and* some family relationships to many of our participants, we argue that these conceptions of 'chosen' and 'negotiated' families are also highly relevant to the understanding of the relational contexts in which non-heterosexuals age.

### *Care and support in times of need*

Given the high degree of solo living and negotiated support relationships, what are the implications for day-to-day support and care at times of crisis or in old age? If a financial crisis arose, the respondents said that they would first turn to partners (32.0%), friends (30.8%) or family (25.2%), indicating that the expectations of material support from the three groups were broadly similar. Friends came into their own, however, when emotional support was required, for 58.6 per cent of the sample identified friends as the first to be turned to, 33.8 per cent partners, and only nine per cent relatives of origin.

A majority of the sample (more especially women) said that their partner was the person most likely to care for them if they became chronically ill.

Few expected their siblings, children, other relatives or friends to assume this responsibility. In terms of care in old age, 50 per cent of women and 29.9 per cent of men thought that if they needed care, their partner would be most likely to offer help, and once again very few expected family members or friends to play this role. The qualitative data showed an overwhelming consensus that children should not be relied on for care. As Mary (aged 51 years) put it, 'I wouldn't want her to be living her life around caring for her ageing mum'. Some participants felt that to expect friends to care for them in times of chronic illness was 'beyond the call of duty', as friendships emphasise independence, and even those in couple relationships recognised that the issue of care needs to be carefully negotiated, as the following quotation shows:

My partner, she's a lot younger than I am. She's got a life to lead as well. She doesn't perhaps see it like that, but she knows that's how I see it. I'm concerned that [it] is an extra pressure, in a sense, the whole ageing process. (Joan, aged 54 years)

For those who lived alone and were not in couple relationships, the prospect of needing care could be particularly frightening, as the following exchange indicated:

- John: When one reaches our age and if you're by yourself in that wide world out there, who is there for anybody? (aged 68 years)
- George: There's not much you can do about it. (aged 60 years)
- John: I mean, who do elderly people turn to if they, you know, if they need help?
- Mark: In my family there's not many [I could really turn to]. I may as well have been a monk. I think it would be better if I had been a monk: they look after [each other] (aged 59 years).
- Richard: [You have to] hope you don't fall ill, and you don't need that care, because I'm not sure where it would come from. (aged 56 years)

Overall, there was an overwhelming emphasis that partners and care professionals would be the most likely providers of instrumental care, as revealed in the subjects' limited plans for care. Only 20 women (19.6%) and 18 men (11.0%) had made plans for care in times of serious illness; and only nine women (8.8%) and 14 men (8.5%) had plans for care in old age. The most common approach was to delay planning, probably because of anxiety with the topic. As Barbara (aged 64 years) put it, 'The thought ... petrifies me ... I think the whole issue of care for older people is a minefield'.

When asked what they would do if unexpectedly they needed care, the participants suggested that they would rely on social services, sell their homes to finance professional care, and turn to 'whoever is there and

willing'. The majority (77.5% of women and 62.8% of men) viewed residential care and nursing homes as an 'undesirable' or 'highly undesirable' milieu for care. Among non-heterosexuals, the usual anxiety that the option generates is heightened by the perceived threats to their identity and way of living. John (aged 80 years) spoke for many when he said, 'This is something I've thought about [and I've] met a lot of people [who said that if you had] to go into a residential home as a gay person, your life would be hell'. This is one circumstance in which the resilience of non-heterosexual friendship networks is much appreciated, as illustrated in the following quotation:

I have a friend who's gay and he had a stroke a few years ago. [Now] he's got problems, but there's a group of us [who] help him and we all do different things. In a sense [he was] lucky I suppose, [for] he has a group of people who can help him, and who he knows. I suppose that would be nice, if one had friends. Again I think it's back to having a circle of people that you know. (Mark, aged 68 years)

### *Local community affiliation*

Several authors have argued that two senses of 'community' are central to understanding non-heterosexual experiences and lifestyles (e.g. Weeks 1995; Plummer 1995). First, as Blasius (1994) suggested, mainstream and local communities tend to encourage and enforce a 'heterosexual panorama' through legal, social and everyday sanctions against public displays of 'homosexuality'. Indeed, while there is increasing tolerance of homosexuality, many of our participants were keenly aware of the risks of being open about their sexuality (e.g. abuse and violence). Such risks could compromise their sense of belonging to local communities (see also Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001), and put considerable pressure on them to remain 'closeted' in all manner of community interactions. This, in turn, negatively affected the quality of their relationships in the local communities and of the local supports that they could access at times of crisis.

The second pertinent aspect is the importance of lesbian and gay communities for the establishment and maintenance of non-heterosexual identities and lifestyles. In contrast to mainstream and local communities, such communities provide much-needed supports and resources, through places, spaces and relationships in which individuals can 'be themselves' (Yip 1996). The study findings both corroborate these influences and demonstrate that community relationships are complex. Two-thirds (64.7%) of the women and 54.9 per cent of the men felt that they belonged to a *local* community, while smaller percentages stated that their relationships with neighbours were 'very important' or 'important' (35.3% of

women and 41.5% of men). Indeed, the qualitative data showed that the participants were not only local community members, but often community makers, as the following extract indicates:

We invest [time and energy in the local community which] might be an ‘age thing’. From the point of view of service, this ‘civic thing’, [about] giving service to the community, it might be laid deep within our childhood. (Anna, aged 66 years)

Many participants indicated that their engagement in community and voluntary work had enabled them to develop a strong connectedness with local community life. While some individuals conscientiously concealed their sexuality in community interactions, others were more open. Many did not explicitly disclose their sexuality but assumed that people knew. Some participants felt their community activities played an important part in being accepted locally, as the following exchange indicates:

Anita: Because I had been used to a community when I was younger, I was determined to have a community [when we moved here]. You have to do it. I mean I’m the one who organises things [locally]. (aged 52 years)

Irene: I don’t think they think [of us] as two lesbians that live down the road. (aged 56 years)

Liz: Yes, well it’s the same with [my partner] and I. We’re just accepted. (aged 64 years)

Even when participants felt there was a certain degree of acceptance, they acknowledged that it was contingent on their presentation of ‘respectable’ selves and, to some extent, of publicly presenting a heterosexual self:

Joyce: Oh I think [people are] more relaxed. But at the same time if you go around showing it down people’s throats ... well you’re asking for trouble. (aged 64 years)

Gloria: You see, we don’t shove it down anybody’s throat. (aged 56 years)

Joyce: If you behave like a normal person, which we are.

Gloria: We behave acceptably because we don’t want any hassle basically. Most of us do, don’t we? We’re not brave enough.

The qualitative data vividly illustrate the conscious efforts made in everyday community interactions to minimise the risk of being identified as non-heterosexual. While many participants clearly valued local community relationships, they also felt it important to develop protective strategies. Mary (aged 56 years) expressed the idea very well: ‘I’m always forward planning; I always make friends with the kids on the street; I’ll say hello to them as they’re passing. ... That’s my tactic ... they can’t be nasty to somebody who’s nice to them’. Interestingly, some participants argued that getting older could reduce such risks. Getting older, they argued, could make their non-heterosexuality or same-sex relationship invisible, as

Stephanie (aged 66 years) asserted, ‘I’ve said this before, nobody notices us here or takes offence because we’re older ... I think it gives us anonymity ... Well older people are invisible anyway’. In the same vein, Mark (aged 59 years) said, ‘I think the older you are, the more faceless people think you are’.

### *Non-heterosexual community affiliation*

Given the potential risks of local community life, and the effort required to negotiate and manage them, it is not surprising that non-heterosexual communities are often seen as a crucial resource for non-heterosexuals. Sexuality theorists have placed significant emphasis on the role of these communities in providing a context for the generation of supports and resources that individuals and groups can access (*e.g.* Blasius 1994; Plummer 1995). As Weeks described these communities, they are ‘an invented tradition which enables and empowers ... [and] provides the context for the articulation of identity [and a] vocabulary of values through which ways of life can be developed’ (1995: 83–4). Non-heterosexual communities have many of the characteristics of the new and emergent *reflexive* communities encapsulated by Lash (1994: 161) as ‘a matter of shared meanings’. Plummer (1995) conceptualised non-heterosexual communities as ‘communities of story tellers’, and pointed out the transformational potential of both the stories told and the communities that tell them. Personal narratives, in this scheme, need communities to hear them if they are to become strong stories, but communities themselves are built through such story telling. Indeed, the feminist, lesbian and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s provided numerous opportunities for the circulation of new ‘empowering’ stories about non-heterosexuality and the formation and achievements of new communities.

Access to these stories had been a ‘lifeline’ for many of our participants, and involvement with the communities (through groups, spaces and scenes) had clearly transformed many of their lives. Sophie’s (aged 55 years) account was representative: ‘It was very important when I was coming out that [name of a city] was there, because I could actually join the gay scene as such, as soon as I came down here’. Some of the participants had moved to towns and cities to participate in these communities; although a larger number said that work had determined where they lived (47.1% of women and 57.3% of men) than said that their sexuality was the main influence (28.4% women and 16.5% of men). Some 50 per cent of women and 48.2 per cent of men said that they were currently involved in non-heterosexual clubs, groups or organised networks. This included 34.3 per cent of women and 28.7 per cent of men who felt part of a *local*

network of non-heterosexuals. This suggests that many had contact and involvement with other non-heterosexuals through the local or wider networks and groups that make up non-heterosexual 'communities'. Many participants had witnessed a striking development of their communities, and the stories they told were of connected, active and 'well provided-for' lives:

Daphne: My feeling is, for our age group, [it] is pretty good by comparison ... I think that's because we're from the sort of feminist band, if you like, who have a history of organising and networking and getting together. ... I have to say, actually [there are] lots of things, there's a women's walking group, I could go to clubs, but I choose not to, don't like it anymore, but then there's the lesbian [telephone help] line social. There's *Lesbian Link* and all the activities involved with that. I could go to *Kenric* if I wanted to, and I actually think there's an awful lot, there's the [name of group] for older lesbian and gay men. (aged 50 years)

Joanne: There was *OWLS* – Older, Wiser, Wicked and Wackier lesbians. (aged 68 years)

Daphne: If you choose, there is actually quite a lot, by comparison to younger people, who I think get stuck in clubs and meeting people through clubs ... I think we're really lucky, but we've also made it ourselves.

Jan: It is really, as Daphne just mentioned, it has been organised by us. (aged 55 years)

'Making it ourselves' suggests active engagement in community building that utilises the members' varied abilities and skills. It applied to both women and men. Simon (aged 77 years) spoke in the same vein as the women above: 'I mean we're very spoiled these days, aren't we? For gay groups, I mean, there's a gay group for every conceivable activity, it seems to me, whereas going back to the 1980s, we were just sort of peeping round the corner of the closet, weren't we really? But these days there's a gay group for almost everything'. For some of the women, their community supports were self-consciously framed in terms of a shared politics that provided the basis for caring friendships. Anita (aged 50 years) put it like this: 'I think it does go back to feminist groups for me. [For] lesbian feminists, you were supposed to rely on each other ... and it worked well'. For others, involvement in community groups has been a lifeline at 'critical moments', such as bereavement or the break-up of a relationship. Paul (aged 79 years) said, 'It has been important, it's like a crutch in a way'. The relationships in these groups indisputably constitute a crucial material and emotional support structure, as Duncan (aged 80 years) argued, 'For me it's very helpful ... because I've got to know people, and there is a sense of belonging, you know really good friends I've made there ... between gays and lesbians'.

The possible sources of support of course vary according to geographical location. Those who were most likely to have access to support systems in non-heterosexual communities were likely to live in urban areas with many non-heterosexual residents. In other areas there is more likely to be reliance on local networks, and in some cases on Internet-based networks. Significantly, 21.6 per cent of women and 32.9 per cent of men felt isolated from other non-heterosexuals: most had little or no access to community supports, principally because of the absence of non-heterosexuals in the areas where they lived. Mike (aged 59 years), for example said, ‘they can’t even spell the word “gay” where I live. [They] may as well be early Christians!’ Others who felt isolated included some participants who had formerly been strongly couple-focused (and consequently distanced from non-heterosexual communities), but then their relationship had ended through bereavement or otherwise. Many of them had found it difficult to re-enter non-heterosexual communities. As Rosemary (aged 51 years) put it, ‘It is very hard as an individual to break into a network. I’ve found it, over the past years, very hard to find any friends through lesbian circles [and I don’t want to] thrash around pubs and clubs, which isn’t my scene. It’s harder’.

Age was a significant factor for older non-heterosexuals who attempted to access non-heterosexual communities. In our sample, 30 women (29.4 %) and 49 men (29.9 %) indicated that as they had aged, they felt less and less a member of such communities. While many women saw this as a consequence of their increasing focus on personal support networks, gay men were inclined to attribute the cause to their age. Broadly, women believed that lesbian communities and cultures were less ‘ageist’ than both the mainstream heterosexual culture and some gay male cultures, while gay men consistently believed that gay male cultures place a great emphasis on youth and physical appearance. The contrast is revealed in the following two exchanges:

Jenny: I think in the lesbian community things like age and various things like this matter far less than they do in the heterosexual world. I think that one can be welcomed into all sorts of different [lesbian] groups and I don’t actually think age makes a huge amount of difference. (aged 68 years)

Sandra: The men [in the older non-heterosexual group] used to say they couldn’t go to clubs and things because they weren’t young. (aged 66 years)

Jenny: Well they haven’t got the money and they haven’t got the looks anymore.

Sandra: And there was a bit of prejudice there in the gay whole community.

Jenny: Yes, very sad.

Sandra: I feel [it] is less with lesbians.



Neil: I mean [as] gay people [men] we have to stay young, don't we? We daren't get old. Do you not find that so? (aged 72 years)

Paul: Well, I'm personally not very bothered about that, but I see around me, within the gay sort of thing, [there is] a great thing about age and the search for youth, if you like. (aged 55 years)

Neil: There is a lot of ageism.

Paul: Oh, absolutely.

George (aged 64 years) concurred and said, 'I think it's a lot harder for gays when they get to a certain age, because everything is geared [towards] youngsters, who've got the money, who go to the clubs, and who buy the drinks and go for fashion'. The differential age-consciousness in gay men's and lesbians' cultures was evident in the quantitative data, for 35.3 per cent of women and 69.5 per cent of men felt that there was much ageism in non-heterosexual communities. Compared with women (34.3%), more men (53.7%, consistent across the age range) had felt less welcome in non-heterosexual places and spaces as they got older. Some men, like the following participants, argued that the effects of ageism were compounded by the ways in which non-heterosexual communities were being commercialised:

Mark: I think really we have ourselves to blame for this commercialisation of the gay scene. ... [the scene providers] are going straight where the money is. (aged 56 years)

Vincent: But the thing is, there is also money to be made from catering for the older members of the gay community. We have money. I don't have a lot but I would happily spend it in a gay bar or club. (aged 64 years)

Whether the consequence of a youth-orientated scene, overt ageism or commercialism, a large proportion of older gay men felt uncomfortable or unwelcome in gay bars or clubs. Given that these venues are for some the only community contact points, not to use them brings almost 'total' exclusion: some men saw the situation as active 'discrimination'. At the heart of the matter was a belief that their ageing bodies marked them as unwelcome. As Rob (aged 59 years) said, 'I mean you go into them and you might as well be painted red from top to bottom'.

There have been several studies of the different challenges that ageing presents for gay men and lesbians. Isensee (1999) suggested that a major challenge for gay men in mid-life is to manage their distress over physical signs of ageing. Kimmel and Sang (1995) suggested that mid-life is more likely to be experienced as a crisis by gay than heterosexual men, and that it is a time when the fear of mortality, physical illness and the loss of sexual attractiveness combine to undermine a positive sense of self. On the other

hand, Kehoe (1989) argued that, while ageing presents an important challenge for lesbians aged in the sixties, many report that old age is ‘the best period of their lives’. In contrast, some of the gay men in our study were most concerned with the ways in which the visible signs of ageing had marked them as undesirable in gay culture:

Simon: I still perceive myself as a young gay man [laughter]. (aged 58 years)

Roland: Well I think that as well. (aged 72 years)

Simon: I feel offended when people don’t reciprocate [laughter].

John: Yes, whatever your self-image in that respect I think you’ve only got to go out into the gay world and young people [there] will soon put you in your place. (aged 55 years)

While non-heterosexual communities offer support and resources for some of their members as they approach and experience old age, they do so more *unevenly* than has been suggested in much of the theoretical and empirical work. It is therefore of paramount importance to analyse the provision of support in terms of the factors that influence how individuals view and experience ageing. Only by doing this will the diversity of the ageing experience among non-heterosexuals be understood.

### **Conclusion: difference and commonality in the ageing experience**

There are several reasons why the situations of older non-heterosexuals should be given more attention. First, the increasing public acceptance of homosexuality has resulted in a growing number of non-heterosexuals living openly in later life as lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, and second, the population has developed distinctive ways of living and is therefore likely to face unprecedented challenges as they approach and experience old age (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). Third, the issue of non-heterosexual ageing is likely to become more visible as the generation of lesbian and gay activists, whose identities were forged in the sexual politics of the 1960s and 1970s, enter old age.

Another but contrasting reason is that the non-heterosexual experience of ageing and old age provides valuable insights into the personal consequences of social change. Several theorists have argued that contemporary culture is marked by a radically new contingency, namely that traditional ‘models for living’ are no longer taken for granted. In these accounts, contemporary identities have been characterised as ‘do-it-yourself’ biographies (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000; Beck 2000). Family and couple relationships are viewed as negotiated and contingent relationships that last only until ‘further notice’ (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim

1995). Similarly, in an increasingly mobile and globally inter-connected world, community relationships as traditionally understood are also said to be fast becoming a thing of the past (Bauman 2000; Beck 2000). Such developments are likely to have major implications for the contexts in which people age. From these perspectives, non-heterosexual ageing offers insights into personal ageing in rapidly changing social and cultural contexts. It has been argued that a defining aspect of non-heterosexual experience has been the challenge of developing ways of living outside the institutional supports and cultural guidelines provided in the dominant culture (Blasius 1994; Dunne 1997; Heaphy, Donovan and Weeks 1999; Plummer 1995). Non-heterosexuals have therefore to develop innovative strategies for living outside the normative framework, to the extent that some theorists have argued that non-heterosexual lifestyles are the prime experiments in late-modern ways of living (Giddens 1992; Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001).

This paper has been concerned with the specifics of ageing in a non-heterosexual context. From our analysis, it is clear that there is no simple model for understanding non-heterosexual ageing, but rather that individuals have diverse possibilities for negotiating ageing and experiencing old age. As Michelle (aged 66 years) succinctly put it, 'everybody's exploring it and finding their own way to deal with it'. Nevertheless, the meanings, resources and supports they have access to in this endeavour significantly influence how they experience and explore ageing.

Mainstream analyses of ageing have focused on the dominant (gendered) meanings, as well as material, relational and local community supports. While these are undoubtedly important in a non-heterosexual context, we have demonstrated that the meanings and supports that 'count' are viewed differently, and that 'traditional' meanings attached to relationships, community and ageing can be modified and transformed. Yet, as the theoretical analyses have suggested, these meanings are also being modified in the mainstream culture as a consequence of 'detraditionalisation'. Some have viewed this in wholly negative terms, suggesting that detraditionalisation implies the 'end' of family and community supports, and that individuals are thrown back on their own resources when negotiating the meaning and consequences of their ageing bodies (*cf.* Mellor and Shilling 1993). By contrast, but consistent with Bauman's (2000) argument, this paper has demonstrated that the consequences of detraditionalisation are *uneven*. In other words, it can mean empowerment for some and disempowerment for others. For non-heterosexuals, ageing and old age create both possibilities for living in connected, supported and empowering environments, and for others less creative, unsupported and disempowered situations.

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## NOTE

'The sample' and all percentages in this paper refer to the 266 participants who completed the postal questionnaires. All quantitative data are drawn from this dataset. All quotations are from the focus group data, some of which were generated collaboratively with Liz Bassett of the University of Brighton.

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