

Growing old as a gay man: how life has changed for the gay liberation generation

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ABSTRACT

Men in the gay liberation generation are approaching or entering older age. Being at the forefront of gay rights movements since the 1970s and 1980s, this generation has experienced dramatic changes in gay life. The present study aimed to provide a greater understanding of this generation by examining some of the ways these men perceive their changing lives. Participants included 439 Australian gay-identified men aged 50 years and older who completed an online survey of their health and wellbeing. These men gave unrestricted open-ended responses to a question on how life had changed for them as a gay man since being aged in their twenties. Responses were analysed qualitatively using a thematic analysis approach to identify main themes. Participants expressed many positive changes to their lives, including greater public- and self-acceptance of their sexuality, greater confidence and self-esteem, and more freedom for same-sex relationships. However, some men expressed a loss of gay community compared to their younger years and a perception that the younger generation under-appreciated the struggles they had endured. Age- and HIV-related stigma from within the gay community, as well as a loss of sexual attractiveness, also emerged as concerns for some participants. These findings may assist researchers, health professionals and aged care services to further understand the needs and experiences of this older generation of gay men.

KEY WORDS—gay men, men who have sex with men, older, ageing, stigma, wellbeing, gay rights.

Introduction

In developed countries, gay and lesbian liberation movements gained much of their momentum in the 1970s and 1980s (Weeks 2007). These movements involved a broad cross-section of sexually and gender-diverse

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groups advocating for recognition and equal rights, as well as challenging traditional notions of sexual and gender expression (Adam 1987; Adam, Duyvendak and Krouwel 1999; Woolcock and Altman 1999). Today, those who are in their sixties were in their twenties during the height of public protests. In the following decades, this generation overcame some of the biggest challenges around public acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people (LGBTQ). They began the fight for anti-discrimination legislation and other rights, including same-sex marriage. They witnessed some of the largest changes in public attitudes toward sexuality, although more so in some jurisdictions than others (Andersen and Fetner 2008), and were at the forefront of the emergence of LGBTQ communities and organisations that now provide advocacy and support to sexually and gender-diverse populations in many countries throughout the world.

In this article, we focus on gay men who were aged in their twenties during the height of the gay liberation movement. We focus on men, in this instance, as it is likely that some ageing experiences vary between genders and also between those of different sexual orientations. HIV is one issue that has had a disproportionate impact on the life trajectories of many gay men. In developed countries, HIV continues to be largely confined to gay men (Beyrer *et al.* 2012) and many of those who are now aged 50 years and older were sexually active before the arrival of HIV in the early 1980s. They lived through the most challenging period of HIV before the availability of highly active antiretroviral therapy in 1995 (Rosenfeld, Bartlam and Smith 2012), a time in which many lost their relationship partners and friends to AIDS (Martin 1988). In addition to the impact of HIV, there is also evidence of differences in public attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, with tendencies towards lower acceptance of gay men, especially among heterosexual men (Herek 2000). Further studies point to numerous disparities in health, social support and resilience between lesbians, gay men, and bisexual men and women (Fredriksen-Goldsen *et al.* 2013a, 2013b; Lyons 2014; Lyons *et al.* 2012), which further suggest potential differences in challenges faced by these groups. Thus, some aspects of the socio-cultural context for ageing may differ between men and women of different sexual orientations, therefore necessitating a separate focus on these groups.

Today, gay men who were at the height of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s face new challenges around growing old as a gay man. In the past, fears of discrimination, or of being treated as having a disorder (Clarke *et al.* 2010), resulted in many gay men exercising considerable caution around disclosing their sexual orientation (Morrow 2001). However, the current generation, having spent much of their lives as part of

the liberation movement, are arguably less likely to want to be invisible (Brotman *et al.* 2007; Clover 2006), particularly if they are in same-sex relationships. This poses new challenges to health and support services, which may have had limited experience working with older men who are open about their sexual orientation. Unfortunately, many in the older generation report experiences of age- and sexuality-related discrimination (Balsam and D'Augelli 2006; D'Augelli and Grossman 2001) and these experiences are significantly linked with poorer health and wellbeing (Lyons, Pitts and Grierson 2012, 2013*b*). Despite these and other challenges, such as ageing with HIV (Lyons *et al.* 2010), there are signs that many are thriving, especially those who report high levels of social support (Lyons, Pitts and Grierson 2013*a*).

An understanding of growing old as a gay man is needed to provide targeted and effective support to the older generation (Clover 2006; Kimmel 2012; Price 2005). Much of the research on older gay men has sought to identify factors for poorer health and wellbeing (Balsam and D'Augelli 2006; D'Augelli and Grossman 2001; Lyons, Pitts and Grierson 2013*b*). While this research provides guidance for shaping support strategies, relatively little information is available on what it has been like to grow old as a gay man from the height of the gay liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s to today. Of particular need are qualitative analyses that bring to light some of the main themes from men's reports of how their lives have changed. Indeed, some of these changes may be complex, with potential gains and losses. For example, many may be benefiting from fewer instances of discrimination than previously, but at the same time, gay community life has changed in less favourable ways (Reynold 2007). Some older men, for instance, report feeling less valued and more invisible within the gay community than they did before (Heaphy 2007). Some of the ways that men report on the changes to their lives may therefore provide important indications of their current health and support needs. Despite this, there have been no major in-depth investigations, at least to our knowledge, of ways that life has changed for older gay men since their earlier adult years.

In this article, we report on findings from a national online survey of middle-aged and older Australian gay men, conducted in 2010–11. In the survey, men were asked to describe how life had changed for them as a gay man since they were aged in their twenties. Responses to this question are the focus of this article with the aim of providing new understanding of the gay liberation generation and their experiences of ageing. We specifically focused on the cohort of men aged 50 years and older, as these men were adults and likely to have been sexually active during liberation movements in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s.

Method

Participants

Data for this article came from LifeTimes, a survey we conducted on the health and wellbeing of Australian gay men aged 40 years and older. The survey was completed by 1,179 men from around the country. There were 460 men in the sample who were aged 50 years and older. Of these men, 439 reported their sexual identity as gay or homosexual, 16 as bisexual and five as some other orientation. For the purposes of this article, we focused on the 439 men aged 50 years and older who identified as gay or homosexual. [Table 1](#) displays socio-demographic characteristics of these participants. In all, just over two-thirds were aged 50–59 and the remainder aged 60 years and older. The mean age was 56.7 years (standard deviation=6.3). Seventeen per cent reported their HIV status as positive. A majority reported having some form of tertiary education, were not working, had an annual pre-tax income lower than Aus \$50,000, and lived in a large city as opposed to a regional or rural area. Around half reported not being in a relationship. A little more than half reported currently receiving treatment for a major health condition, such as cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal diseases, cancer and diabetes. Around three-quarters reported that everybody or almost everybody in their social networks knew of their sexual orientation. Almost all spoke English at home. Of the sample, 380 (87%) responded to the question of how life had changed for them as a gay man since they were aged in their twenties.

Procedure

The survey was hosted online from November 2010 to April 2011. Recruitment advertisements appeared on websites likely to attract large numbers of gay men, such as Facebook and the websites of HIV organisations. To ensure inclusion of HIV-positive men, advertisements were also emailed to two national databases of people living with HIV. The survey asked a wide range of questions on demographics, health and wellbeing. At the end of the survey, an open-ended question was asked about living as a gay man today compared to when men were aged in their twenties. Specifically, they were asked, ‘In what ways has life changed for you as a gay man today compared to when you were in your 20s?’ The question was optional and men were given unlimited space to provide a response. Participation in the survey was anonymous and no incentives were offered for taking part. Ethical approval was granted by La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee.

TABLE 1. *Participant characteristics*

	N	%
Age:		
50–59	312	71
60+	127	29
HIV status:		
Positive	78	18
Negative	317	72
Not sure	10	2
Prefer not to say/not answered	34	8
Highest education:		
Secondary or below	151	34
Non-university tertiary	119	27
University	169	39
Employment:		
Full-time	207	48
Part-time or casual	76	17
Not working	152	35
Income (Aus \$):		
0–19,999	80	20
20,000–49,999	126	31
50,000–99,999	129	32
> 100,000	68	17
Language spoken at home:		
English	416	98
Other language	8	2
Residential location:		
Large city	312	71
Regional town or city	78	18
Rural	47	11
Relationship status:		
Not in a relationship	223	51
In a relationship for <5 years	74	17
In a relationship for >5 years	138	32
Health status:¹		
Receiving treatment for a major health condition	232	55
Not receiving treatment for a major health condition	193	45
Numbers in social network who know about sexual identity:		
All or almost everybody	336	76
Some	75	17
Nobody or almost nobody	28	6

Notes: N=439. 1. Major health conditions other than HIV; includes cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal diseases, arthritis, diabetes, cancer and other major health conditions.

Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006) within a realist epistemological framework. All responses to the open-ended question were coded using NVivo software. Responses to the open-ended

question comprised 41 words on average. However, there was a large variation in the amount of content participants provided, with 101 (27%) responses comprising between 42 and 99 words and a further 30 (8%) comprising 100 words or more. The first two authors of this article were the researchers who carried out the main analysis. Both researchers first read through the responses independently and identified main themes. They then met face-to-face to discuss and compare notes. Both researchers had arrived at the same broad themes and, following discussion, a more detailed set of themes and a coding system were agreed upon. This formed the basis of further analysis. The second named researcher then coded the responses in NVivo. Both researchers continued to meet regularly during the analysis to further optimise the coding system. Through this process, we identified four main themes: acceptance and recognition of gay men; experiences of gay community; the social impact of HIV; and experiences of ageing.

We report on the main themes that we found in the data and have tried to represent the full range of experiences of each. All data are represented as written. Quotes were first selected by the second named researcher according to codes assigned to responses in NVivo. The first and second named researchers met regularly throughout the manuscript drafting process to discuss the suitability of quotes selected. To present as much of the participants own words as possible, we have embedded short quotes from participants in our descriptions of each theme. While this can give the illusion of more coherence than is necessarily the case, we have provided participant details (participant number and age) along with these quotes to indicate that the account is an amalgamation of different participants' responses. We have also made sure that all quotes are consistent with the data they represent (*i.e.* the group of participants whose experiences we are referring to), and have specified when the quotes refer to the unique experiences of individual participants. Similarly, longer quotes were chosen because they were both consistent with the theme being discussed as well as providing a more in-depth illustration of it.

Results

Acceptance and recognition

The most common change that participants cited was a change in society's attitudes toward gay men. Having sex with a same-sex partner had been a 'jailable offence' (Participant 24, age 53) when participants were in their twenties. Now, as compared to then, they were 'no longer afraid [they would] go to jail for being gay' (Participant 340, age 53). Many were

not out to most people in their life at the time. As one participant put it, 'In my 20s everything was hidden or underground' (Participant 136, age 63).

Many comments on gaining acceptance were framed within an essentialist perspective (Clarke *et al.* 2010), where participants referred to an inherent sexual orientation or sexuality that they had concealed for large parts of their lives. Some described having 'kept a straight persona for many years' (Participant 80, age 63), as, when they were in their twenties, 'the fear of being "found out" was high' (Participant 367, age 59). In most situations, being out at that time would have been to risk 'victimisation or personal injury' (Participant 436, age 51).

Coming out to friends and family in my fifties has liberated me from the fear of being 'discovered'. Growing up in the fifties and sixties, life was very much a matter of hiding your sexuality for fear of being bashed or indeed getting into trouble with the laws that were in place at that time. (Participant 440, age 60)

There were a few participants who said that they had been out since their twenties and that this was a positive experience for them: 'I came out as a gay man in the early seventies and it was the best decision of my life and I still feel it has given me my freedom and happiness' (Participant 239, age 66). In contrast, some 'did what was expected' of them and got married (Participant 142, age 52). While they did not regret the children that resulted from these marriages, the often long periods of time that they were in heterosexual marriages were unhappy and painful. There were many stories of men coming out late in life to 'great emotional relief' (Participant 74, age 65).

I have only recently in the past 18 months or so decided to tell my family and friends that I am gay. The love and support I have received has been amazing. I believe that back when I was in my 20s it would have been difficult to tell people. Attitudes have changed over the years and I now feel more confident about my own sexuality. (Participant 364, age 51)

Along with changes in society's attitudes, participants also described the acceptance of their families as significant changes that had occurred from the time when they were in their twenties. One participant linked 'greater community acceptance and acceptance of [himself]' with the increased acceptance of both his sexual orientation and HIV status from his 'broader family' (Participant 176, age 58). For another participant, his family's acceptance was the most significant change for him since he was in his twenties:

Being out and loved by nephews and nieces is wonderful, especially where my sexuality is not even an issue (maybe it even rates as a positive issue for them). (Participant 433, age 52)

Some participants reflected on the differences between their generation and the current younger generation. Some perceived younger gay men to have more freedom and to be less restricted in their expression of their sexuality and their affection for other gay men. It was a ‘completely different world’ (Participant 224, age 69) than the world of their youth, one in which younger gay men were able to ‘feel more comfortable with themselves’ (Participant 80, age 63). The following participant conveyed a sense of disbelief at the changes that have occurred:

I now feel that I am living in the most exciting time for gay men ever. The world over we are seeing the toppling of stigma and repression at a pace that I could not even have allowed myself to dream of as a gay child. (Participant 222, age 59)

There was now greater recognition for gay men. Some saw the fact that gay men’s ‘existence’ was recognised to be a step forward, while others pointed to a growing recognition of gay rights and an awareness of issues facing gay men. One participant said that he felt that he did not ‘need to fight so much for basic space and recognition’ (Participant 366, age 54). Gay issues were ‘now discussed openly’ (Participant 39, age 63), and as a result, participants felt more able to discuss the challenges that they faced as gay men, and to address negative attitudes when they encountered them:

Today I feel quite free to talk about gay issues and peoples’ attitudes have changed. There are still negative attitudes out there but I probably challenge them more than I would have dared in my 20 s. (Participant 265, age 58)

Others noted that there were now venues and services catering specifically to gay people, and ‘events that celebrate(d)’ gay people’s experiences (Participant 48, age 52). They thought that gay people were ‘less invisible’ (Participant 316, age 52). Although some participants expressed frustration at ‘gay stereotypes’ in media representations (*cf.* Jowett and Peel 2010) as well as at community events, others said that there were now more positive images of gay men and greater diversity in the way gay men are portrayed in the media:

Things are so much easier now. Gays and lesbians are visible in a way that was just not so when I was in my 20 s: on TV, in films, in the papers, on the web and on the streets. (Participant 310, age 60)

Along with the sense that ‘being gay is not as big a deal these days as it used to be’ (Participant 112, age 52), there was a sense that being gay had become mainstream to some extent. Public attitudes towards gay men had evolved to the point ‘where gay is “almost ordinary”’ (Participant 257, age 52) and that there was ‘more mainstream political acknowledgement of gay issues’ (Participant 216, age 53).

Acceptance concerns

While the majority of participants said that things had improved for gay men since their youth, some described the situation today as a greater 'toleration' of gay people that was still a 'long way from acceptance' (Participant 446, age 62). Some also said that society had become more accepting, but there was 'still a lot to change' (Participant 354, age 54). One participant said that while 'being gay is no longer illegal', in some situations it is 'still socially unacceptable' (Participant 335, age 78). Another participant echoed this, saying:

I am no longer afraid I will go to jail for being gay but I am still terrified of telling some of my friends especially those with a Christian faith. (Participant 340, age 53)

Others also qualified their statements on acceptance by noting that the extent to which men experienced greater acceptance depended on variables such as location and context. As reflected in the sexual geographies literature (Browne, Lim and Brown 2009; Valentine 2010), they perceived 'place' as a factor, and in particular that gay men had greater 'freedom to be themselves' in cities, especially larger ones such as Melbourne and Sydney, while they thought that 'in the country not too much [had] changed' (Participant 258, age 54). Also while many participants cited being able to come out at work as a prime example of how far things had come, some noted that 'depending upon the particular industry', coming out at work could still be 'tricky' (Participant 334, age 52).

...discrimination is as strong as it ever was in many areas such as my trade and in rural country areas. (Participant 179, age 62)

Another participant's experience reflected the importance of context for people's experiences of coming out. Having come from a strong Christian background, when he finally came out in his forties, he initially 'lost every friend and social acquaintance bar one', although he has managed to 'renew friendships' over the years (Participant 29, age 58). One participant acknowledged that in general 'people [were] more open' now but that families could be more difficult, saying, 'my mother will never be OK if I have a partner' (Participant 157, age 51). For an HIV-positive participant, it was his HIV status that resulted in him 'losing family and friends' (Participant 161, age 54). Losing support was also the impetus for one participant who had experienced 'a lot of discrimination from family and society' to fight for gay rights: 'I am an active gay rights campaigner and activist for the sake of the younger generation of same-sex attracted people' (Participant 348, age 53).

Australia does not currently permit same-sex marriage and one of the main areas that participants said that recognition had not been achieved is

marriage equality. While there has been some debate over the extent to which same-sex marriage promotes public acceptance of same-sex attracted people (Peel and Harding 2008), participants tended to represent this issue as one of fairness or equality, a theme that was also prevalent in an online survey of lesbians and gay men in the United Kingdom (UK) (Harding 2006). As one participant said, for ‘full equality’ to exist for gay people, being ‘equal under the law’ was essential (Participant 8, age 52). Participants also thought that the ‘government need(ed) to catch up with society and treat everyone as equal’ (Participant 58, age 61) and that it was ‘not a good feeling when your own government discriminates against you’ (Participant 248, age 60).

Experiences of gay community

Participants had a range of experiences in relation to the ‘gay community’. For some, as the acceptance of same-sex attracted people grew and they felt more able to be open about their sexuality, they were simultaneously able to ‘feel part of a community’ (Participant 314, age 52). Alternatively, a greater acceptance of one’s own sexuality appeared to allow some participants to embrace the gay community:

I accept who I am now. I love being gay because I love being me now. I love the gay community and being a part of it. (Participant 313, age 55)

Others referred to being part of the gay community to indicate a shift away from feeling ‘alone/abnormal’ (Participant 56, age 54) and starting to ‘feel less wrong about [their] life’ (Participant 314, age 52). Knowing that there were others like them and identifying and connecting with them was a part of the process of self-acceptance.

The role of technology

Reflecting previous findings on the role of technology in connecting LGBTQ (Baams *et al.* 2011; Gudelunas 2012), some participants referred to the arrival of the internet as an important development in fostering a greater sense of gay community:

Technology (Internet etc) has made it more possible to think of one’s self as part of the ‘gay community’ and to know there are like-minded people all over the world. And technology has made it possible to contact them – that’s a long way from scribblings on a toilet wall! (Participant 350, age 72)

A number of participants singled out the capacity for building community via the internet as having had a large impact on their social and sexual lives. One participant said:

The internet has made a huge difference for me as a gay man. I am now able to link up to people with common interests across the globe very different to when I was a student at [university] all those years ago. (Participant 256, age 50)

While most participants thought that the internet had increased their capacity to connect with other gay men in a favourable way, this was by no means everybody's experience. One participant noted how difficult it was to tell what someone was like through an online profile and he found online networking sites to be an 'unsatisfactory' way to meet other HIV-positive men. He said: 'although we're supposed to be a more "connected" society, the paradox for me is that I feel more disconnected' (Participant 439, age 55).

Loss of community

For some participants, the importance of gay community had diminished as society became more open, and also as they grew older. They felt that their sexuality had become 'far less relevant to [their] social life' (Participant 316, age 52) and was only a part of who they were and hence they felt that their need for gay community had diminished:

I no longer go to gay venues looking for love or community and connection but feel comfortable and pleased that it is still there and available if not for me for others. (Participant 353, age 50)

For some, this had to do with feeling more a part of the 'general community' (Participant 176, age 58), while others felt a sense of 'disconnectedness' (Participant 203, age 50). As Heaphy (2007) found in a study of older British gay men, many participants commented on the youth-centredness of the gay community and saw older men as having a marginal place within it. One participant said that since his fifties, he had 'found it harder to identify with the gay community' (Participant 404, age 61), and another noted that 'the gay scene is not tailored to older men' (Participant 398, age 52).

Being an older gay man means you don't feel a part of the gay community as you did when younger. However life is more settled now which has its benefits. (Participant 430, age 51)

Some participants wrote about feeling invisible, ignored and isolated from a 'gym fit youth dominated and oriented' gay community (Participant 303, age 55). They described it as being an 'outsider looking in' on to what they perceived to be a 'youth dominated scene' (Participant 109, age 55). They also commented on an absence of venues catering for older gay men, and places where older gay men could meet. Some said they avoided gay venues because they felt unwelcome as older men, while others said these places just did not appeal to their tastes. One participant said:

At 62 years of age, I would love to know where all the other gay men my age hang out. I feel there is a real need for such a venue. (Participant 307, age 62)

For some, the solidarity that came with the collective mobilisation against oppression and the response to the HIV epidemic had defined their

experience of gay community. Some saw the absence of this solidarity as evidence that there was ‘no gay community any more’ (Participant 40, age 52) or at least ‘less community spirit feel’ (Participant 27, age 50). For one participant, it was what he perceived to be an over-emphasis on ‘party culture’. This aspect of ‘gay community’, he said, excluded many and:

It’s also ultimately superficial, boring and meaningless. I’ve done my time in the scene over the years including now occasionally – but like a lot of guys, I find myself quoting Peggy Lee: ‘is that all there is?’ I want to keep that side of our community but want to see more ‘real’ community develop somehow to balance it. (Participant 8, age 52)

Participants expressed pride about the progress in campaigning for gay rights that they were able to make through their efforts, but many voiced a concern that younger gay men took this for granted. One participant thought that many younger men had ‘no idea’ what it had been like for gay men in the past, how even decriminalisation needed to be fought for (Participant 471, age 51).

... it is refreshing to see the younger generation enjoying the freedom we never had, but in saying that, they should never take it for granted and forget the struggles of the older generation and acknowledge that if it was not for those brave men and women back then they would not be enjoying the freedom or being able to openly express their love for another of their same sex. (Participant 407, age 56)

The social impact of HIV

Many participants cited the devastating impact of HIV on the gay community as having caused the biggest change in their lives since they were in their twenties. Participants talked about losing friends and partners. One participant said that ‘most of [his] friends and acquaintances from [his] 20s died’, and so his life had changed ‘quite dramatically’ (Participant 92, age 52). Another said that while gay men now enjoyed more freedoms than when he was younger, he had ‘lost so many friends to HIV’ that these freedoms meant little to him (Participant 250, age 50).

The HIV/AIDS epidemic also had an impact on societal attitudes towards gay men (Ruel and Campbell 2006). One participant described the time when ‘HIV came to public awareness’ and the negative attitudes that the public had. With many of his friends dying, he says it was a time when he ‘found it tough being gay in society’ (Participant 268, age 51).

Participants’ responses about HIV indicated the complex challenges that HIV presented for the gay community. Participants said that HIV had changed the way they had sex. When they were in their twenties, people rarely used condoms and sex was freer. A number of participants said that their experience of sex changed significantly because of the ‘threat of being

exposed to HIV' (Participant 96, age 68) and they experienced sex as 'so much more dangerous' (Participant 128, age 69).

While attitudes had changed over time and participants perceived HIV to be less stigmatised, HIV-positive participants regularly talked about the difficulties they faced negotiating sex and relationships with other men. One HIV-positive participant said that he found it 'much easier to put these details on a website than negotiate things when out' (Participant 398, age 52). For another HIV-positive participant, negotiating relationships was the hardest aspect of having HIV:

HIV has been a challenge to live with but the gay community has generally been supportive. My biggest difficulty has been around relationships. I did not settle down during my twenties and when I was ready to at 32 years I was diagnosed HIV-positive which changed a lot of things around dating. I find changing people's attitudes about dating a pos man a continuing problem. (Participant 301, age 59).

Many participants expressed a sense of a gap between their generation and younger gay men who had not experienced the devastating impact of HIV on their friendship circles, and who had a different attitude towards safe sex. Some described this as a 'breakdown between the generations of gay men' (Participant 163, age 50):

I appreciate the freedoms enjoyed by today's young Gay people however as in all things they grow up looking forward and have little knowledge of the Tragedy [*sic*] and turmoil that gave them those freedoms and they have little respect for the fact that AIDS/HIV is still out there because they are not losing friends as the older generations did. (Participant 118, age 65)

Experiences of ageing as a gay man

Experiences of ageing are often different for gay men compared to heterosexual men, with the management of stigma and an emphasis on youth within gay male communities as two particularly prominent issues (Clarke *et al.* 2010; Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco 2010). The experiences of ageing that participants wrote about covered these topics, but also touched on other challenges, as well as a range of positive outcomes. For some, older age had brought greater confidence and fulfilment. For others, struggles with the physical effects of ageing and dealing with what they perceived to be an ageist culture within the gay community were their most salient experiences of older age. Perhaps reflecting perceptions of gay male communities as being youth-oriented (Bergling 2004; Heaphy 2007), one of the younger participants in this group pointed out that ageing was a different experience for gay men than it was for straight men, saying: 'I feel very old at 50 which I don't think my straight male friends understand' (Participant 471, age 51).

Those who compared their life favourably to their experiences in their twenties, when they had experienced 'confusion' about their sexuality, said

that they had now reached a point in their lives where they felt comfortable being who they were. They had a sense of confidence and fulfilment in their lives. One participant said that in his twenties, being gay had ‘scared’ him (Participant 10, age 58), while another participant similarly said that he now experienced ‘higher self-esteem about being a gay man’ (Participant 225, age 51).

I like myself now. Back then I probably didn’t like myself as much as would [have] been good for me, which is somewhat sad when you think about it, but at the end of the day, here I am 55 years old and happy as a pig in shit. (Participant 472, age 55)

Sexual changes

Many participants wrote about changes to their sex life. While it was common for participants to say that they were having less sex than when they were in their twenties, it was also common to hear from participants for whom a greater openness about their sexuality had opened up the possibility of greater sexual connection. Of those who reported having less sex now that they were older, a small number talked about the impact of erectile dysfunction and a loss of libido resulting from the medications they were taking. These concerns echo similar themes in a recent study of chronic illness among older gay men (Jowett, Peel and Shaw 2012). In another recent study, gay men also expressed greater concern than heterosexual men over loss of sexual functioning as a result of treatment for prostate cancer (Wassersug et al. 2013). Another group reported having less sex than when they were younger but said they were less interested in casual sex anyway. The most common experience that participants talked about was the impact of ageing on their physical appearance and the attitudes of younger men towards older gay men:

My attraction to other men is just as strong as it was then but now since young men can live openly as gay I find it very difficult to find casual partners since the gay community is very ageist. Older men are shunned. (Participant 138, age 60)

Other men similarly attributed having less sex to being less ‘desirable’ now that they were older (Participant 91, age 54). One participant said that it was because he was ‘unattractive, unfit, which in the gay world means you are dead’ (Participant 331, age 54), and others also talked about a decreased confidence in their appearance and their desirability. These men felt ‘less confident’ about ‘going out to clubs, bars, beats and sex on premises venues’ (Participant 465, age 50).

Others, in contrast, wrote about feeling more comfortable with their sexuality. Due to the difficulties they experienced with their sexuality in their twenties, they were ‘not really sexually active at all during this time’

(Participant 86, age 51). Compared to that period, they now had a greater enjoyment of sex: 'It's so much easier to be open about what you do and who you do it with' (Participant 286, age 52).

Need for companionship

Despite the capacity for connection via the internet, a small number of participants also said that isolation and loneliness had become a problem for them in their older years, or that they were less sociable than they used to be. One HIV-positive participant, who had lost many friends and who was struggling to make new ones, said that he had become 'way too introverted and lonely' (Participant 465, age 50). Others were able to find companionship in their pets. For example, consistent with studies on the benefits of pet ownership among people living with HIV (Siegel *et al.* 1999), another HIV-positive participant who had struggled with loss and illness said that his dog made 'every day worth living with a lot of unconditional loving' (Participant 449, age 59).

With around half of participants being single (*see Table 1*), a number of them wished that they were in relationships and some expressed regret at opportunities that they had missed out on when they were younger. One participant said he was 'dreaming of the day when [he could] meet a man to have a long term, monogamous relationship' (Participant 131, age 50). Another participant who had been in a number of bad relationships said that he was now 'resigned to a single life' but that he '[sought] joy from [his] friends and other interests such as art, music, gardening, cooking, reading' (Participant 363, age 50).

Many participants cited 'companionship and intimacy' (Participant 294, age 53) with their partners and the support of their families and friends as the most significant difference in their lives as gay men. A participant who had been married to a woman said that while coming out had been difficult, it had been worthwhile as he now had children and grandchildren 'who adore[d]' him and his partner (Participant 190, age 69). Increased public recognition of their relationships was also important, and one participant said that he enjoyed the fact that he and his partner were now 'recognised as two elderly guys who have been together for nearly 50 years' and were now 'respected as such' (Participant 411, age 68).

Discussion

In this study of older Australian gay men, participants from a large online survey were asked about how life had changed for them since they were aged

in their twenties. Many of these men wrote about marked changes in their experience of living as a gay man. Many changes were positive, including greater acceptance of gay men, more freedom to engage in same-sex relationships, feeling more comfortable with their sexuality, having greater self-esteem, and finding supportive and rewarding friendships through the gay community. There were, however, a number of challenges. Some men wrote about having lost relationships with their families and friends during the process of coming out. Many wrote about the social impact of HIV, including a loss of friends and partners to AIDS, and the stigma that HIV brought to the gay community. Some also perceived a loss of gay community compared to when they were younger and presumably at a time when the community was strongly united around fighting for recognition. Some felt the need to point out how much their generation had fought for gay rights, and how they felt the younger generation have taken this for granted.

One of the biggest challenges that men wrote about was age-related stigma, especially within the gay community. Many referred to the gay community as youth-oriented (*also see* Pugh 2005) and how growing older was experienced as a process of marginalisation within the gay community where they felt increasingly invisible. Experiences of age-related stigma are also found among heterosexual men and women (Woolhead *et al.* 2004). However, gay men are likely to have some different experiences. Although in some towns and cities, social groups and organisations that cater for older gay men may provide opportunities for new relationships, much of the gay community is focused on the 'gay scene' which tends to attract larger numbers of younger men (Lea, Reynolds and de Wit 2013). It is this perception of exclusion that emerged in some of the responses by men in our sample, and experiences of isolation may explain, at least in part, why older gay men are more likely to be single than heterosexual men. Large national surveys in Australia, for example, report between 40 and 50 per cent of older gay men as single (*e.g.* Lyons, Pitts and Grierson 2013b; Lyons *et al.* 2012) compared to around 25 per cent of heterosexual men (*e.g.* Rissel *et al.* 2003; Smith *et al.* 2011).

Despite this, many of the men in our sample wrote about feeling happy with their lives. While some expressed greater confidence, self-esteem and acceptance of their sexuality, it is notable that some also referred to friendship. A number of studies suggest that older heterosexual men draw more support from family than friends while older gay men draw more support from friends than family (Dewaele *et al.* 2011). Indeed, a recent study of older Australian gay men found that social support, and in particular support from friends, was linked strongly to experiences of positive mental health (Lyons, Pitts and Grierson 2013a). It is also notable that some men referred to feeling content despite widespread age- and sexuality-related

stigma still existing today. It may be that some men simply have not experienced age- and sexuality-related discrimination as much as others have. Some may have also developed resilience over the years. Crisis Competence Theory (Friend 1990) predicts that many older gay and lesbian adults develop coping strategies from a lifelong process of facing sexuality-related stigma, which then serve them when encountering age-related stigma. There is, however, a lack of knowledge around the specific coping strategies that may develop from this process.

Findings from this study point to some challenges for aged care services. One such challenge will be to uphold the acceptance and recognition that many men felt they had achieved over their lives. Discrimination may not only come from health professionals, but also from fellow patients. Policies that enable men to feel safe, included and respected will be important in promoting wellbeing. The impact of age-related stigma within the gay community may also need to be taken into account by aged care services when seeking to improve the wellbeing of older gay men. For some men, a sense of loss of community and marginalisation was something they felt they needed to mention in our survey, and finding ways to maintain or build a sense of community with other older gay men could be one important focus for support programmes. Also requiring consideration is the possibility that some men who reported losing friends and relationship partners during the AIDS era may still be experiencing a sense of loss. In addition to losing social networks, those who were HIV-positive in our sample also spoke about the additional stigma they face, especially the difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships. These struggles, including further marginalisation due to having HIV, also deserve attention in services and programmes that seek to support older gay men. Relatedly, a recent study on chronic illness among gay, lesbian and bisexual adults identified a range of challenges that were closely entwined with sexuality, such as isolation from gay communities as a result of illness and homophobia from health professionals (Jowett and Peel 2009). While participants in our study made little mention of illnesses other than HIV, perhaps due to the broader focus of the study, more than half reported receiving treatment for a major health condition (excluding HIV). Thus, support from health agencies for older gay men with chronic illnesses, and not only those with HIV, may also require a focus on managing stigma and marginalisation.

Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that this study was conducted in Australia. While there are many parallels in the evolution of the gay liberation movements in developed countries, such as the United States of America (USA) and the UK, there are some differences. Public acceptance of same-sex attracted people varies between countries (Andersen and Fetner 2008), and also between jurisdictions within a country. Recently, the UK

legislated to enable same-sex marriage. In the USA, either same-sex marriage or civil partnerships are permitted in some states, but not in the majority of states. In Australia, same-sex marriage remains outlawed in all parts of the country, but the federal government and some state governments have legislated to implement equal rights in other areas, such as inheritance from a same-sex partner and hospital visitation rights. While the experiences reported by older gay men in our study may have many similarities to those reported by older gay men in such countries as the USA and the UK, the differences between these countries in terms of gay rights today, the specific challenges fought by the gay liberation generation and ways in which gay rights issues are represented in the media, such as same-sex marriage (Jowett and Peel 2010), would necessitate separate studies in these and other countries. For now, our study may be regarded as a broad glimpse into some of the ways in which older gay men perceive how their lives have changed since their younger years.

There are some additional limitations to this study that require consideration. Our analysis was based on responses from 439 participants to an open-ended survey question that asked how their lives had changed from the time that they were in their twenties. This approach allowed us to paint a broad picture of some of the positives and challenges of being an older gay man today. One limitation of using an open-ended question in an online self-complete survey is that participants answered in idiosyncratic ways that are not possible to do justice to with a large sample size. While we have tried to present the data as fully and as meaningfully as possible, future research is needed to explore each of the themes in a more in-depth way, such as in focus groups (Jones and Fenge 2013) or in face-to-face interviews. One potential avenue is the use of a Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method, which is a multi-method approach shown to be effective in eliciting in-depth accounts of life experiences by older gay men (Jones *et al.* 2013).

Another limitation is that having been conducted online, the study would not have attracted men who do not use the internet. Some of the oldest old, such as those in their eighties and nineties, are less likely to have access to the internet (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013). This may explain why the mean age of our sample was younger than 60. Further investigation is therefore needed of men who are much older. It is possible that the oldest old have different perspectives to those in our sample given they were likely to have spent a larger part of their early and middle years during a time when public attitudes toward gay men were particularly negative. For many men, their lives prior to gay liberation movements may have been especially difficult, with some known to have hidden their sexuality within heterosexual marriages (Ross 1979). For those who are now heavily reliant on support

services, any experiences of stigma or discrimination from service providers may also influence their views of how life has changed.

Finally, this study was restricted to those who identified as gay. This assumes that the men had a degree of acceptance of their sexuality. Although a small number reported that nobody or almost nobody in their sexual networks knew of their sexual identity, it is possible that others who have had life-long difficulties coming to terms with their sexuality or who are same-sex attracted but who identify as bisexual or heterosexual may not have responded. These men may have different perspectives on how life has changed for them since they were in their twenties. It is therefore important to note that the question we asked of men specifically referred to ageing as a gay man, and findings from this study are therefore limited to men who identify as gay. Future studies may wish to broaden this scope to target men who have sex with men, in which a diversity of sexual identities may be explored.

Conclusion

Our study of gay-identified Australian men aged 50 years and older revealed several key themes in their descriptions of how life had changed for them as a gay man since they were aged in their twenties. This online sample of the gay liberation generation referred to many positive changes, such as greater public- and self-acceptance of their sexuality and greater freedom to engage in same-sex relationships. However, key challenges emerged, such as age-related stigma within the gay community and, for some men, a sense of loss of community over time. Fostering a greater sense of community connectedness and combating age-related stigma in gay communities are perhaps two areas where policy makers and support organisations may wish to focus when devising strategies to improve the lives of older gay men. Despite the challenges raised by men in our sample, there were many who also spoke of happiness in their lives. Given the sexuality- and age-related stigma and the many struggles for freedom and recognition that the gay liberation generation have encountered throughout their adult lives, additional focus on understanding ways in which some men in this group develop strengths and resilience may be helpful for promoting successful ageing among other gay-identified men, or even among older adults generally.

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