

The Needs of Older Gay, Lesbian and Transgender People



A Report Prepared for the ALSO Foundation

Chris Chamberlain
Associate Professor of Housing and Urban Research,
RMIT University

Peter Robinson
PhD Candidate, School of Social Science and Planning,
RMIT University

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Chris Chamberlain

Peter Robinson

July 2002

Executive Summary

- 1 This report is about the needs of gay, lesbian and transgender people aged 50 or older. It is based on interviews with 26 gay men, 21 lesbians and five transgender people.
- 2 Two arguments underpin the report: the ‘modernization hypothesis’ and the ‘special needs argument’ (Chapter 1). The modernization hypothesis argues that older people share common experiences of disadvantage in contemporary society, and that most non-heterosexual people will have broadly similar experiences of the ageing process, rather like heterosexual people. The special needs argument sees oppression (‘heterosexism’ and ‘homophobia’) as central to the lives of non-heterosexual people. This argument contends that older non-heterosexual people are discriminated against because of their sexuality. They have special needs in old age.
- 3 The semi-structured interviews consisted of questions on the current and future needs of the respondents. People were recruited to take part in the survey by ‘snowball’ sampling. The interviews were carried out by ALSO volunteers. In the analysis, we quote extensively from the interviews because we want the respondents ‘to speak for themselves’.
- 4 We divide the respondent into three groups on the basis of how well they reported they were ‘travelling’ in their own lives. We made these judgments after reading the whole transcript for each respondent. We took into account their material situation, the character of their relationships with friends and family, whether or not they had a domestic partner, and their sense of optimism or pessimism about the future.
- 5 Chapter 3 shows that people in the first group were ‘travelling well’ (40 per cent); the ‘intermediate group’ was more diverse (40 per cent); and that people in the third group were ‘doing it tough’ (20 per cent).
- 6 In most cases those who were ‘travelling well’ celebrated their current lifestyle and were optimistic about the future. This group was disproportionately upper or middle class. The majority of those in the intermediate category pragmatically accepted their current

life situation, but a minority were 'battlers'. Most of the respondents who were 'doing it tough' were single, and had few friends or family ties. All were gay men. They were either working class or poorly attached to the labour force, and some had work histories reminiscent of the underclass. Our analysis shows that there is no truth in the argument that gay men, lesbians and transgender people have broadly similar experiences by virtue of the fact that they are over 50.

- 7 From our investigation of heterosexism or homophobia, we found a widespread sense amongst our respondents that gay men and lesbians and other non-heterosexuals do have special needs. Chapter four shows that in all our groups there were people who used terms like 'homophobia' and discrimination to refer to the marginal position of non-heterosexual people. Others alluded to heterosexism. They talked about it being 'more comfortable' to be with one's own kind, particularly in retirement villages.
- 8 Chapter five examines what services might be provided for older non-heterosexual people including outreach services, nursing homes and retirement villages, and social groups. We consider how organizations such as the ALSO Foundation might assist older people who experience ageism within the gay community. Our conclusions are that:
 - a. There is a need for outreach services for older people who wish to remain in their homes. A model already exists in the form of the home care given to people living with HIV-AIDS. This could be expanded to support elderly non-heterosexual people who need assistance to remain at home.
 - b. There was a widespread sense among our respondents that there is a need for nursing homes and retirement villages for older non-heterosexual people. This issue should be re-opened for discussion.
 - c. The lesbian community is more inclusive of older people, whereas many gay men are isolated and lacking in social support groups. For gay men the experience of ageism is embedded in the dominant character of social relations in the commercial gay scene, and many gay men feel that they have nowhere else to go. The experience of isolation and loneliness is felt most by single, working class men, although single men in other classes also draw attention to ageism in the gay sub-culture. The challenge for the ALSO Foundation is to provide for the needs of all age groups.

Chapter 1 The Ageing Experience

... the process of 'reaching middle age' and 'becoming old' as a homosexual are two areas where little is known and much needs to be known. (Plummer 1975, p152)

This is a report about the needs of gay, lesbian and transgender people aged 50 or older. It is based on semi-structured interviews with 26 gay men, 21 lesbians and five transgender people who were interviewed as part of a research project conducted by the ALSO Foundation¹ in Victoria, Australia. This chapter begins by setting the context, then it outlines two arguments which underpin the report. They are called the 'modernisation hypothesis' and the 'special needs argument'.

The modernisation hypothesis contends that older people share common experiences of marginalisation and disadvantage in contemporary society, because the dominant culture celebrates youth and undervalues the knowledge and achievements of the aged. It predicts that most non-heterosexual people will have broadly similar experiences of the ageing process, rather like heterosexual people.

The special needs argument contends that oppression is central to the lives of non-heterosexual people. The terms 'heterosexism' and 'homophobia' are used to describe this oppression. The special needs argument contends that older non-heterosexual people are discriminated against because of their sexuality. Thus, they have special needs in old age.

This is a report on big issues, based on a small sample. However, as Jo Harrison (1999, p.32) has pointed out, 'there is a lack of research addressing gay and lesbian ageing in Australia'. The intention of this report is to open up the debate - by allowing a small number of gay, lesbian and transgender people to speak for themselves.

Ageing population

In the next 30 years, there will be a marked increase in the proportion of the population aged 65 or older. Table 1 shows that eight per cent of the population was aged 65 or older in 1971. This increased by about 50 per cent, to 12.4 per cent in 2001. The Australian Bureau of Statistics predicts that one in five (21.3 per cent) of

¹ The ALSO Foundation was originally the Alternative Life Style Organisation.

the population will be aged 65 or older in 2031, and by 2051 it will be one in four (24.2 per cent). This is a ‘dramatic’ shift in the age structure of the population over a short period of time.

Table 1: Age composition of the population, estimates and projections, Australia

| | 1946 | 1971 | 2001 | 2011 | 2031 | 2051 |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| % aged 65 or over | 8.0 | 8.3 | 12.4 | 14.0 | 21.3 | 24.2 |

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999, p.6)

The growth in the number of older people is partly a consequence of increased longevity for both men and women. The average life expectancy for men is now 76 years and for women it is 82 years. The increase in the older population is also a consequence of the post-war ‘baby boomer’ generation working its way through the population structure. The ageing of the population raises many issues about how large numbers of retired people will be cared for, if they become increasingly frail and unable to live independently.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999, p.6) predicts that the population will be 23.7 million in 2031 and 24.9 million in 2051. This means that there will be about five million people aged 65 or older in 2031, and six million in 2051. Not all of these people will require services at the same time. Nonetheless, there is a formidable policy challenge to plan for such a large increase in the older population.

It is not known what percentage of people are either gay, lesbian, transgender or bi-sexual, but a number of authors suggest that the figure could be about 10 per cent (Davies and Neal 1996a). If this is correct, it means that there are currently about 240,000 people in these minority groups aged 65 or older. This will rise to just over 500,000 people in 2031 and to 600,000 in 2051. In this context, it is relevant to ask whether minority groups such as older, non-heterosexual people have similar needs to the heterosexual majority, or whether their needs differ in significant ways.

Modernisation hypothesis

The first argument underpinning the report is the ‘modernisation hypothesis’. This argument is associated with the work of Cowgill and Holmes who outlined their argument in the book *Aging and Modernisation* in 1972 (quoted in Brown 1990,

p.70). We also draw attention to other authors who identify complementary themes although, strictly speaking, they are not modernisation ‘theorists’.

The modernisation argument points out that the social position of all older people in contemporary Western societies is more problematic than was the case in pre-industrial societies, where older people were often given considerable social respect and perceived as wise, knowledgeable and powerful (Giddens 1989; Riley 1987). In those societies, the elderly usually had a secure position in the community, and they retained important duties within the family.

The argument contends that ageing is a difficult business for most people in Western society. There is a tendency for the aged to become marginalised from mainstream institutions, and their contribution is devalued:

Negative stereotypes and prejudices about the aged are embedded in the dominant Australian culture. Along with sexism and racism, ‘ageism’ has been rationalised on the grounds of old people’s biological deficiencies’ (Russell 1981, p.28).

The aged are occasionally ‘pitied’, usually ignored, and often treated as a ‘problem’. According to Cherry Russell (1981, p.30), ‘The elderly in our society are frequently rejected’. When Simone de Beauvoir published *Old Age* she wrote: ‘Society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that is unseemly to mention’ (1977, p.7).

The process of ‘modernisation’ is thought to have brought with it a decline in the status of older people. There is a strong emphasis on youth culture, physical prowess and ‘beauty’ in contemporary popular culture. Another manifestation of the high status of ‘youth’ is the modern obsession with hiding the physical symptoms of ageing. There are multi million dollar industries devoted to hair colouring, cosmetic surgery, and so forth. This public celebration of ‘youth’ has been accompanied by a corresponding decline in the social prestige of the elderly.

In the past, older or retired workers were often repositories of ‘knowledge’ to whom younger workers might look for advice or assistance. These days, most of the skills that older people learnt in their youth are obsolete. Contemporary workers are expected to update their skills as new technological changes are incorporated into the workplace. People who have retired often find that their skills are quickly outdated. They are no longer ‘fountains of wisdom’, but owners of outdated knowledge.

These changes have contributed to a decline in the social prestige of the elderly, and ‘retirement’ from the paid labour force is one of the major *rites de*

passage in modern society. For most men and an increasing number of women, retirement typically takes place between about 55 years of age and 65. There is variation in how people handle retirement. However, in a society which places high value on paid work, there is a tendency for retirement to be marked by a reduction in social status, a decline in income, and the loss of everyday routines. It is well known that some people find the transition difficult.

According to Earle and Fopp (1999, p.376), the modernisation hypothesis provides 'an excellent basis for explaining the decline of older people and the difficulties that confront them in modern societies'. The proponents of the uniform needs hypothesis do not rule out the possibility that certain minority groups may have some special needs, but they believe that most older people share common experiences of marginalisation and disadvantage.

In this study, we only have non-heterosexual respondents, but if the modernisation argument is right, we would expect them to have similar experiences of the ageing process. We examine this argument in Chapter 3.

Special needs argument

The special needs argument contends that 'oppression' is a defining experience for older non-heterosexual people. One version of this argument is developed by Jackie Langley (2001, p.920) who argues that 'oppression is central to the lived experience of lesbian women and gay men'. She carried out a small study of older people in the South of England. Eleven women and eight men filled out a questionnaire, and eight participated in a follow-up interview. Langley uses the terms 'heterosexism' and 'homophobia' to explain how this oppression occurs. These terms are used in a number of different ways (see: Davies and Neal 1996b).

In this report, homophobia will be used in three senses. First, there is 'cultural homophobia'. This refers to the irrational dislike of gay men and lesbian women. It often takes the form of anger, disgust, aversion or fear of homosexual people. Cultural homophobia was widespread in the past, but it has been increasingly challenged in the years since the Stonewall protests in New York City in 1969. These gave rise to the birth of the 'gay liberation' movement. Gay and lesbian activists condemned cultural homophobia as oppressive and invalid. They celebrated gay and lesbian relationships as legitimate forms of sexuality, and urged people to 'come out of the closet'.

Second, there is institutional homophobia. This refers to institutional arrangements that discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation. In the past, sexual relationships between men were prohibited in many Western countries. In Britain, homosexuality was made a criminal act, following the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. It could lead to a maximum of two years imprisonment. This legislation remained in place until 1967 when the Sexual Offences Act legalised sexual relations between consenting adults in private, over the age of 21. The age of consent was lowered to 18 in 1994. In Australia, there was legislation in all states prohibiting sexual relations between men until relatively recently. It was repealed in most states in the 1970s and 1980s, although not until 1997 in Tasmania.

The third term is 'internalised homophobia'. This is used to describe the negative feelings that homosexual people have about themselves if they have internalised cultural homophobia. Dana Rosenfeld (1999) carried out a study of 37 older gay men and lesbians who were living in Los Angeles. She found that those who recognised their homosexuality before the advent of gay liberation, were much more likely to have internalised homophobia. In contrast, those who recognised their identity post liberation were more likely to have a positive view about homosexuality, and to be open about their gay or lesbian identity.

Homophobia leads to discrimination against non-heterosexual people, because it assumes that their sexual orientation is either illegitimate or inferior. In the past, it was often assumed that homosexual men either had a mental illness (they needed treatment), or that they were criminal (they should be imprisoned). Up until gay liberation in the 1970s, cultural and institutional homophobia went hand in hand. Not surprisingly, internalised homophobia was widespread.

In recent years, the term 'heterosexism' has succeeded the term 'homophobia' in some contemporary literature. Heterosexism is a broader term which refers to the institutional and ideological dominance of heterosexuality as normal behaviour, and to the implied illegitimacy of other forms of sexuality. In this report, we use the term 'heterosexism' in three ways.

First, there is cultural heterosexism. These are taken for granted cultural assumptions that heterosexuality is normal sexual behaviour. This takes many forms. For example, it involves the celebration of heterosexual unions in popular magazines and television programs. It includes people making the assumption that other people

are heterosexual in routine, everyday interactions. Cultural heterosexism often means that parents find it difficult when children report that they are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender. They have to 'come to terms' with this news. Many do – but they have to think about it first. This is cultural heterosexism in action.

Second, there is institutional heterosexism. Heterosexual relationships are implied (or taken for granted) in many institutional arrangements, and they are formalised in regulations about marriage and divorce. Institutional heterosexism involves treating people differently if they are in one of the minority groups. For many heterosexual adults, one of their key life experiences is the marriage ceremony. This normally involves an elaborate celebration of the formal union of two people, with gifts and good wishes for the future. There are no equivalent institutional arrangements for non-heterosexuals, although they too form partnerships, some for very long periods of time.

Third, there is internalised heterosexism. Most young people grow up taking it for granted that they will be heterosexual. In part this occurs because most young people grow up with heterosexual parents, surrounded by heterosexual relatives and friends. One consequence of internalised heterosexism is that people who start to recognise that they have different sexual feelings often have to come to terms with the fact that they are not in the majority group. For most teenagers, 'coming out' to friends and family members is still a major issue.

One consequence of heterosexism is that people can experience 'discrimination'. However, this operates in a somewhat different way from the 'discrimination' that is experienced as a consequence of homophobia. As we have pointed out, homophobia discriminates against non-heterosexual people because it assumes that their sexual orientation is either illegitimate or inferior. Heterosexism is a weaker form of discrimination. It operates from the assumption that everybody is heterosexual. One consequences of heterosexism is that people in sexual minority groups can feel uncomfortable in situations where it is assumed that everybody is in the majority group. In practice, we think that 'discrimination' is best understood as a continuum between homophobia and heterosexism.

In Chapter 4 we investigate whether older gay men, lesbians and transgender people experience discrimination in their daily lives, and whether they think older gay men and women have special needs. We also investigate whether they

experience homophobia or heterosexism. In Chapter 5 we discuss the policy implications of our findings.

Chapter 2 Methodology

The idea that the ALSO Foundation undertake an older persons' needs assessment survey was first mooted at a community consultation forum in September 1998. In April 2000, a working group was established by ALSO, with representatives from homosexual community organizations, such as Matrix, Vintage Men and the Metropolitan Community Church. Their task was to supervise a pilot study of the needs of older gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.

The number of respondents was small. The records show that people were asked to discuss any aspect of ageing that they wished, and they were not asked specific questions. The pilot study found that the respondents had some concerns that were similar to those of heterosexual men and women, and other concerns that related specifically to the needs of non-heterosexual people.

It was on the basis of the pilot study that interview questions were formulated for the older persons' needs assessment project. The interviews consisted of five very broad questions on the current and future needs of the respondents, as well as any other issues and concerns that they had. The interviews were all carried out by ALSO volunteers. They were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. We used the *NVIVO* qualitative data software programme to code the transcripts.

There are both advantages and disadvantages of using semi-structured interviews. On the one hand, it allows respondents to speak for themselves and to bring up those issues that are of salience for them. However, it does not give respondents clear guidelines as to the issues that the researcher might want to hear about. Nonetheless, the overall quality of the interviews was good, and many of the transcripts were very detailed.

People were recruited to take part in the survey by 'snowball' sampling. This is a technique whereby respondents are recruited because they are known to members of the research team, or where respondents recommend friends who might be willing to participate. This is a common technique when researchers are attempting to contact minority groups where there is no list of the population.

Table 2: Number of gay men, lesbian women and transgender respondents by age group

| | Gay men | Lesbians | Transgender | All |
|-------------|---------|----------|-------------|-----|
| 70 or older | 4 | 1 | 0 | 5 |
| 60 - 69 | 7 | 7 | 1 | 15 |
| 50 - 59 | 15 | 13 | 4 | 32 |
| Total | 26 | 21 | 5 | 52 |

Table 2 shows that there were 26 interviews with gay men, 21 with lesbian women and five with transgender respondents. There were no people who identified as bi-sexual in the sample. Some of the respondents had previously been married, but all currently identified as either lesbian, gay or transgender.

There were 32 interviews with people in their fifties (Table 2), 15 with people in their sixties and five interviews with people aged 70 or older. Our sample was biased towards the younger age groups, and this has some bearing on the analysis that follows. Many of our respondents were talking about potential needs ‘in the future’, rather than current concerns. The youngest respondent was 50 and the oldest was 75. The average age of gay men was 60; it was 59 for lesbian women; and 55 for the transgender respondents.

In the analysis that follows, we quote extensively from the interviews because we want our respondents ‘to speak for themselves’. In order to protect people’s privacy, we have used a number of devices to hide their identity. Most importantly, we have invented all the names that are used in the report. Names were not recorded on the transcripts. We have also changed various personal details to disguise the identity of those who took part.

Chapter 3 Making a Life

The 'modernisation hypothesis' contends that most older people share common experiences of marginalisation and disadvantage in contemporary society, because the dominant culture celebrates youth and undervalues the knowledge and achievements of the aged. In this chapter we investigate whether older gay men, lesbians and transgender people have broadly similar experiences on the margins of society. We also consider the converse hypothesis that gays have diverse experiences - because they are located in the broader system of social inequality in different ways.

All Western societies have 'socio-economic layers' or what are commonly referred to as 'classes'. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a major debate about how best to 'map' the class system in Western countries, with disagreement on a number of important issues. However, in more recent years Craig McGregor (2001) and Belinda Probert (2001) have both suggested that there are four classes in contemporary Australia, and we draw selectively on their accounts.

They identify an 'upper', 'middle' and 'working' class, and an emerging 'underclass'. The upper (or 'over') class is made up of major employers, company directors, and those who earn very large salaries in senior positions. In material terms, they 'get the best of everything'. The middle class usually have tertiary educational credentials. They include senior managers, professionals and small business owners. They are often comfortably off, but if they work in the private sector their jobs are often less secure than in the past. If they work in the public sector, their jobs have usually become more stressful in recent years.

The working class comprise skilled and unskilled blue collar workers. They are disproportionately male, although there are women from non-English speaking backgrounds in blue collar work. The working class also includes routine white collar employees who are disproportionately female. These days working class families find it difficult to survive, unless they have two incomes. Finally, there is an emerging under class, primarily defined by 'their tenuous relationship with employment' (Probert 2001, p.36). They include the unemployed, discouraged job seekers, people in part-time work who want full-time jobs, and those in casual employment.

In this chapter, we divide our respondents into three groups on the basis of how well they reported that they were ‘travelling’ in their own lives. We made these judgments after reading the whole transcript for each respondent. We took into account their material situation, the character of their relationships with friends and family, whether or not they had a domestic partner, and their sense of optimism or pessimism about the future. We draw attention to the fact that ‘class position’ has a significant effect on the lives of gay men and women, although it does not determine everything.

People in the first group were ‘travelling well’. In most cases, they celebrated their current lifestyle and were optimistic about the future. This group was disproportionately upper or middle class. The ‘intermediate group’ was more diverse. The majority pragmatically accepted their current life situation, but a minority were ‘battlers’. Their lives were not straightforward, but they were determined to cope with life’s challenges. People in the third group were ‘doing it tough’. Most were single, and they had few friends or family ties. They were either working class or poorly attached to the labour force, and some had work histories reminiscent of the underclass.

Travelling well

Just over 40 per cent of our respondents were travelling well. Two-thirds of this group (15 out of 22 people) were currently in a relationship. For most people this was very important in their lives. Many also had strong friendship networks or significant family ties. They were also materially well of and most were ‘solidly’ middle or upper class.

Trevor, 64, has lived with Mark for the last 18 years. He reports that they have a close, loving relationship and many friends. ‘We’re very fortunate because we have a large circle of friends and we entertain at home a lot’. They are also invited to friends’ houses for meals and other social occasions. Trevor notes that they have good family relationships, ‘although we don’t see the family as much as we would like’. Trevor and Mark have both retired and they have no money worries:

In the 18 years we’ve been living together, we’ve paid off our home ... we have no money worries ... we employ a cleaner who comes in to look after the place ... so when I was offered an early retirement package, we decided to take it. We wanted to take advantage of our good health ... we like to travel quite a bit.

Eleanor, 56, has her own business. She and her partner, Lydia, are well off. These days Eleanor does not work so hard in the business and has a range of other interests. They have a comfortable home which they own outright and a 'timeshare' flat in New York. It means that 'we meet new people all the time which is really interesting'. Eleanor enjoys entertaining friends. 'As you get older, you appreciate a relaxing night by the fire ... friends become more important'. Lydia and Eleanor have planned for their future. 'We are never going to be dependent on state benefits because we've planned for everything'. When Eleanor was asked about her life as an older lesbian, she replied:

I feel very fortunate to have the life that I have ... I have a very good time. I have a wonderful relationship and I'm very lucky. I hope it goes on for many more years!

A number of respondents drew attention to some of their partner's failings. Nonetheless, there was a widespread sense that partners were key persons in their lives. Having a relationship was important for love, affection, emotional support and shared projects together. Rory, 70, reflects that when he was about 17, his parents were worried that, 'I would end up as one of those sad old characters, fed by meals on wheels ... having a lonely old age'. He points out:

They were wrong! I am in a deeply satisfying relationship with a life-enhancing partner ... my remaining years will ideally be spent with him.

Isobel, 58, has two adult daughters from a marriage that ended in her early 40s. She is currently, 'looking forward to my first grandchild with great excitement. My partner and I will share the role as mutual grandmothers. There is a lot to look forward to ... We enjoy life as a couple'.

About one-third (seven out of 22) of those who were travelling well were currently single. On the whole, they had professional or managerial occupations. If they had retired, they owned their own home and had superannuation. They usually had strong friendship networks. This was particularly true in the case of older lesbians who often belonged to social groups for older women, attended dances or other social occasions, and had extensive friendship networks.

There were also some single men who were travelling well. Rick, 58, has a professional occupation and plans to retire in two years. He owns his own home and

is in a generous superannuation scheme. He has planned his retirement so that 'I can see those bits of the world that I still want to see, and then start seeing my own country'. He has a large network of friends, and anticipates that, 'I will be spending my life mainly with the people that I spend it with now ... we will probably just grow old together'.

Overall, just over 40 per cent of our respondents were 'travelling well'. They were disproportionately upper or middle class. They were usually 'well off' or 'comfortable' in material terms. Two-thirds were in a relationship and many had strong friendship networks. Some had close contact with family members, but others had few family ties.

Intermediate group

About 40 per cent of our respondents (20 out of 52) were in the intermediate group. The majority pragmatically accepted their current life situation. They tended to say that their life was 'no worse than anyone else's' or that 'you take life as it comes'. A minority were 'battlers'. Their lives were not straightforward, but they were determined to cope with life's challenges. People in the intermediate group were less well off than people who were 'travelling well'. In the main, they held middle or working class jobs. A number were retired, and some were marginally attached to the labour force.

Olaf, 56, pragmatically accepts his life. He was born in Norway and arrived in Australia in his mid twenties. He has a part-time job in the clothing industry which he describes as a declining area of employment. 'I work three or four days a week because there is not enough work'. He lives with Frank, his partner of 20 years, in a modest home. According to Olaf: 'I suppose the secret of getting old is not to be dissatisfied, and knowing your limitations, and then accepting yourself, and accepting the world around you'.

Linda, 64, had a routine white collar job but she has now retired. For much of her life she lived with her parents, but they have both died and she is now on her own. Linda does not have any brothers or sisters, but 'I have a lot of cousins'. She also has a small number of old friends:

I have my friends and I spend time with them ... I am diabetic, but otherwise I'm fine. I just go day to day. I keep myself busy at the opportunity shop. It's unpaid, but I meet people there. I have a house and a garden. I keep myself occupied.

There were two transgender people who pragmatically accepted their lives. Steven, 57, felt that, 'I have come to the point where I know who I am and I don't have to justify myself to anyone else'. Jean, 53, accepted her life with a degree of resignation. However, she commented that it was unfair that transgender people cannot be issued with new birth certificates. Jean would like to meet 'a man who is warm and loving', but she could not marry him. Her birth certificate records 'male', and under the current legislation this cannot be changed. There was an element of the battler in Jean.

In general, people who 'pragmatically accept' their life try to make the 'best of things'. Eric, 56, is retired. He is single and he is HIV positive. He is close to his family and has a small number of friends:

I'm not well off ... but I'm happy. I don't see any problems in the future. I'm willing to take whatever life brings.

However, a minority of those in the intermediate group were battlers. Judy, 51, grew up in a homophobic family. She came out when she was 41 and it was 'one hell of a thing to do'. She reports that she got no support from her family who were strongly disapproving when she left her marriage. She moved to Melbourne with her daughter to 'escape' from family pressure. After a while, she 'came out at work'. This was a big step and she has become increasingly politicised. She has also confronted her parents:

I am out with my parents now. It's a sore subject, but life's tough. They accept my relationship because if they didn't, then they would lose their daughter and their granddaughter.

Judy is proud of who she has become, but it has not been an easy journey. 'Life is difficult, but you have to meet the challenges with a positive attitude'. Judy is in a very happy relationship, but she points out that 'life would not be so rosy' if she were single.

Two of the transgender respondents were also 'battlers', as was another gay man who had come out in his mid 40s, and an older lesbian in her early 60s. Overall, the intermediate group was more diverse than the other two groups. Those who pragmatically accepted their situation were in the majority, but the battlers were a significant minority presence. The intermediate group was not particularly well off.

The majority were (or had been) in middle or working class occupations, and a few were marginally attached to the labour force.

Doing it tough

We classified 10 of our respondents (19 per cent) as 'doing it tough'. All were gay men. Most had working class occupational histories or had been marginally attached to the labour force. Two were retired and eight were of working age (50 to 65). Of the eight, three were unemployed, three were receiving disability support pensions, one had a part-time job, and one had full-time work.

Mario, 50, was born in Southern Europe. He is a shift worker in full-time employment. Mario was married, briefly, 30 years ago. 'She was a lovely brunette. I don't regret it. I remember the affection ... not the ... How can I say it in English? ... So much affection. She was gentle. In the end I can't make her happy. What does society do to me?'

Mario was the only man in this group who was currently in a relationship. He sees his partner about once a fortnight but the man does not provide Mario with emotional support. 'I would like to have a partner who would live with me. But he has to be my age and similar to me. How do I say it? ... I want company more than sex. I want to find somebody of my own'.

However, Mario is not integrated into the gay community. In part, this is because he does shift work and he often works at weekends. He also feels out of place in gay venues. 'They're only for young people, big muscle boys, the good looking ones. Not for people like me. I feel intimidated ... so bad ... I prefer to stay home ... honestly'. Mario suffers from depression, 'because of my age, because of my house. I disconnect the phone and I do nothing. I sit in there wondering what I will do. But the next day comes. I have to go to work. I keep going'. Like many older men in this group, Mario is lonely.

Vince, 58, is disabled. He is single and can see himself 'becoming more isolated as I get older and that frightens me'. He is an only child and does not have strong family connections. 'I have two cousins in Sydney. It would be nothing to them if I had four eyes. I'm not part of their everyday lives'. They exchange cards at Christmas, but other than that there is little contact. Vince would like to do some voluntary work to keep himself active and to meet people, but is ambivalent about the gay community. 'I think that people with disabilities are really discriminated against

in the gay community at large. So much of the gay world is about beauty and bodies, and looking for sex'. As a disabled man, he feels out of place in mainstream gay culture.

Bruce, 55, has part-time employment. He owns a house in an outer suburb which he bought with his superannuation payout. 'I was retrenched about a year ago and I'm still coming to terms with that. I used all my super buying this place'. Bruce can just about manage financially, but he is worried about what will happen if he can no longer work. He has few friends and lives on his own. He does not socialise much and is not good at getting to know people. 'That makes it very hard for me to get out or to join a club, or anything like that. I know I should do something, but I just don't'. Like the others, he feels uncomfortable on the gay scene. 'It's a community for young people where good looks and dressing smartly mean everything'.

Conclusion

One argument in the literature suggests that most older people share common experiences of marginalisation and disadvantage in Western society, because the dominant culture celebrates youth and undervalues the achievements of the aged. This chapter set out to investigate whether older gay men, lesbians and transgender people have broadly similar experiences – when measured in material terms and their general satisfaction with life.

As we have seen, about 40 per cent of the respondents were travelling well. Most were either upper or middle class. They were usually home owners and most belonged to superannuation schemes. In general, they celebrated their current lifestyle and recognised that they were 'doing well'. Another 40 per cent were in the intermediate group. Many pragmatically accepted their current life situation, but a minority were 'battlers'. Most were in middle or working class occupations, and a few were marginally attached to the labour force. Finally, 20 per cent of our respondents were 'doing it tough'. All 10 were gay men and most had working class occupational histories or were marginally attached to the labour force. Most were poor and only one man had a partner. There is no truth in the argument that gay, lesbian and transgender people have broadly similar experiences by virtue of the fact that they are over 50.

Table 3: Number of gay, lesbian and transgender people in different lifestyle categories.

| | Gay men | Lesbians | Transgender | All |
|-----------------|---------|----------|-------------|-----|
| Travelling well | 10 | 11 | 1 | 22 |
| Intermediate | 6 | 10 | 4 | 20 |
| Doing it tough | 10 | 0 | 0 | 10 |
| Total | 26 | 21 | 5 | 52 |

These findings also have bearing on another argument which has been influential in recent years. Van de Ven, Rodden, Crawford and Kippax (1997) have argued that older homosexual men in Australia are fairly closely attached to the gay community and that, in general, they are travelling well. They are not lacking in self acceptance, depressed, lonely, or poor. Table 3 shows that 10 of the gay men in our sample were travelling well, six were in our intermediate category, and 10 were doing it tough. Obviously, our sample is small, and we have no data on young men (for comparative purposes). Nonetheless, we think that Van de Ven et al. have missed the most important point. There are some older gay men who are travelling well, but there are others who are doing it tough.

Chapter 4 Investigating Discrimination

This chapter examines the argument that gay, lesbian and transgender people have special needs in old age because ‘oppression is central to their lived experience’ (Langley 2001, p.920). In Chapter 1, it was explained that the terms ‘homophobia’ and ‘heterosexism’ are used to explain how this oppression is thought to occur.

Homophobia leads to discrimination against non-heterosexual people, because it assumes that their sexual orientation is either illegitimate or inferior. Heterosexism is a weaker form of discrimination. It operates from the assumption that everybody is heterosexual. One consequence of heterosexism is that people from minority groups can feel uncomfortable when it is assumed that everyone is heterosexual. In practice, ‘discrimination’ is best understood as a continuum between homophobia and heterosexism.

In this chapter we investigate whether older gay men, lesbians and transgender people experience heterosexism or homophobia in their daily lives, and whether they think that older gay men and women have special needs. However, we have seen that there are marked divisions within the non-heterosexual community. Therefore we also consider the possibility that different social groups will see the world in different ways.

Better off

Twenty-two of our respondents were identified as travelling well. They were ‘better off’ in a number of senses. First, they usually had material security. Most of them owned homes. Many of them had well paid jobs. Other had retired on generous superannuation schemes – and, in general, they were affluent. They were also better off in social terms. Two-thirds were in relationships, and people usually described their partner in positive terms. Some of those who were currently single were hoping to find the ‘right person’, but most of them usually had strong friendship networks and were not lonely.

A minority of those who were ‘travelling well’ believed strongly in individual initiative and also thought about the world in largely individualistic terms. George, 64, retired a couple of years ago and lives with his partner of 22 years. He describes himself as having ‘tons of money’ and says ‘I can look after myself in every way’.

For the last 30 years, he has travelled overseas at least once a year. 'My lover and I like this sort of lifestyle'. This year, they have two holidays planned. When he was asked about the needs of older gay, lesbian and transgender people, he commented:

I am in the happy situation of not having to worry about myself ... We older gay men don't usually need help. We are usually OK money wise. I think there are many things for people to do ... It's up to each person.

According to George, 'I've had a great life and I am having a great life'. He had no sense that non-heterosexual people might have special needs. He never referred to any experiences of discrimination or homophobia in the interview.

Erik, 68, has been retired for three years. He has plenty of interests to occupy his time; he has a large circle of friends; and he is in a good financial position. He says, 'These have been the best years of my life. No question about it!' However, Erik is aware that retirement is not easy for everyone:

I don't have any financial problems. But I know people whose lives are in a mess. Financially, they are not able to do what they want. And they have problems all over the place. But that's their own fault.

Like George, Erik is very individualistic. He recognises that some people have a range of problems in retirement, but he sees it as 'their fault'. He made no mention of homophobia when asked about the needs of older gay men and lesbians.

However, some people thought that gay people were discriminated against, although this was understood in a number of different ways. In Chapter 3, we met Trevor and Mark. They had been together for 18 years and described themselves as 'very fortunate'. Trevor was concerned about the future. 'We may have to call on other people – say from the council – to come and help us. We might be stigmatised because of our lifestyle. Some people still look upon you as freaks'. Trevor was worried about homophobia.

Rose, 56, has also had a successful career and is thinking of retiring at 60. She says that 'most people are not concerned about gays or lesbians these days. ... we are accepted in the broader community'. She says: 'My life is much the same as most people's. I get up in the morning and I go to work the same as any normal person does'. I am 'relaxed about my sexuality'. However, when she talked about the breakdown of her long-term relationship, she said:

I found that when we had the property settlement it was easier to do business with a lesbian solicitor. I felt much more at ease. It might have been difficult with a heterosexual solicitor.

Rose was alluding to heterosexism.

Other people were certain that discrimination occurs. According to Jacob, 'Gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people have been horrendously discriminated against. It can ruin people's whole lives'. He thought that it was important that representatives from the gay community should have strong links with the Equal Opportunity Commission. Most people did not express their views as strongly as Jacob, but there were others who felt this way. Often, people were most incensed if they had experienced discrimination.

Overall, those who were travelling well held a range of views about whether gays and lesbians experience discrimination. One group thought that they did not. They saw no need for special services. Another group were worried that they might experience discrimination if they needed services for older people. Some were worried about homophobia, but others were concerned that they might feel uncomfortable. Their concern was 'heterosexism'. A third group were certain that homophobia still exists. They saw the need both to confront homophobia, and to provide special services.

In general, those who saw the need for services – such as home help, special accommodation and so forth – were talking about the future. They were 'travelling well' at the moment. However, they thought that their needs might change as they became older and frailer.

Transgender

There were five transgender respondents in the sample. One was categorised as travelling well and four were in the intermediate category, including two who were 'battlers'. They all thought that the broader community did not accept transgender people. According to Paul, 57, 'most people treat us as though we were a disease'. They were also uncertain about the gay and lesbian community. According to Gina, 'Well as far as gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people are concerned, I really don't ally myself with them'. Some recounted stories of discrimination in the broader community and some recounted stories of discrimination in the gay sub-culture.

However, the transgender respondents found it a liberating experience to have made the decision to 'come out' as a person of the opposite sex.

Joan, 57, had thought about making the change for many years. In her youth, she thought that she was a woman in a man's body, but she was aware that the dominant discourse about sexuality did not allow for this possibility:

I knew I was different ... but the social climate was totally against it. If you came out and said that to somebody, or your parents, they would have put me in a psychiatric hospital and given me electric shock treatments.

Joan (then Joe) married in her early thirties and fathered two children:

I have a son and a daughter and I wasn't prepared to do anything until they were older. When my wife and I separated, my son came to live with me. So I waited until he was 21 and left home ... then I finally said I am going to do something for myself. I had the op at 55.

For Joan, it was very fulfilling to 'come out', having lived so long as the other person. 'It was dramatic, truly wonderful'. According to Jack, 51. I feel like I have been reborn and that I am still in adolescence'. According to Gina, 'Since I made the decision two years ago, I look forward to every new day'. She had encountered barriers and discrimination but 'It's going to be a new life. I want to do it. I am going to make it somehow'.

The transgender respondents were acutely aware of discrimination in the broader community, and sometimes in the gay sub-culture. They also thought that their group had special needs. Nonetheless, the decision to come out was usually seen as 'liberation'.

In the middle

This section examines the 16 individuals who identified as gay or lesbian in the intermediate group. Once again, there was variation in whether or not people recognised homophobia and heterosexism.

Louise is 69. She is in a long-term relationship, but her health is failing. She has had her left knee replaced twice, but the problem has not been solved, and she uses two walking sticks. 'I can't have a shower any longer, because my balance is too insecure'. She enjoys taking a bath. However, 'the other day it took me four tries

to get out of the bath. She (partner) had to come in and gave me a hand'. Louise regards her increasing physical disability 'with no joy at all'.

Louise and her partner are still active in lesbian social events. However, she complained about ageism in the lesbian community. 'Sometimes if you go to dances, people will look at you as though the cat had brought something in. It doesn't help your self-confidence'. She wanted 'greater acceptance of older lesbians within our own community', as did another woman. Two men also complained about discrimination on the basis of age.

Louise also pointed out that the needs of older lesbians will vary, depending on whether they are single or partnered:

It strikes me that one of the things that you will discover is that most people who are in a settled relationship will feel reasonably secure about their future. Those who are not in a steady relationship will regard the future with much more trepidation.

Other people referred to this. James, 50, talked about older gay men who were lonely. He also talked about the 'need for specialist nursing homes and retirement villages for gays and lesbians'. He knew lots of people who 'would feel more comfortable in a gay environment and decidedly uncomfortable in a heterosexual nursing home'.

Karen, 57, held similar views:

Quite a lot of older gay men and lesbians have no family. When they get too old to live in their own home, they want to live in an environment here they can be with their own people, or with gay and lesbian friends. There should be nursing homes and retirement villages for gays and lesbians.

These respondents were worried about heterosexism. They had a sense that older gay men and lesbians might be discriminated against in a conventional nursing home where there were mainly heterosexual residents. It was often said they would feel 'more comfortable' in services where there were other gays and lesbians around. They had a clear sense that older non-heterosexual people have special needs.

In Chapter 3, we met Judy, 51, who grew up in a homophobic family. She 'came out' when she was 41 and described it as 'one hell of a thing to do.' She was aware of her parents' homophobia when she was growing up, and had internalised the idea that it was not possible that she could be a lesbian. She married and had a

'beautiful daughter'. When she finally came to terms with her sexuality, she became aware of the reasons why she had not 'come out' earlier. This involved a major confrontation with her parents.

Judy grew up internalising homophobia and she believes that discrimination operates in the broader community. 'Of course, there can be blatant discrimination. It does happen. I've seen it in places where I've worked'. She believes that many people internalise heterosexism, and that lesbians have to be careful in public. 'Clare (her partner) and I couldn't walk down the street holding hands'.

Once again, we found variation in the views of our respondents. About half of our respondents talked about 'discrimination', and a few used the term 'homophobia'. However, many people in the intermediate group were worried about heterosexism. They thought that older gay men and lesbians did have special needs. They suggested that people would feel more comfortable in accommodation for older, non-heterosexual people.

On the outside

There were 10 respondents who were 'doing it tough'. All were gay men. Of the eight who were of working age, three were unemployed, three were on disability support pensions, one had a part-time job, and one had full time work.

Yuri, 54, was born in the United States of Russian descent. He arrived in Sydney in 1974. 'In my youth I was part of a very big gay scene. The seventies were the real gay days. It was a period of breaking out of the closet. We were flamboyant. We were in your face. The camaraderie was second to none'. Yuri says the he had hundreds of friends. It was the best time of his life.

These days, he says that he is lucky if he will see one 'old acquaintance' if he goes into a bar. He has lost many friends from AIDS and he has been HIV positive for the last 12 years. He is on a disability support pension and he is acutely aware of discrimination:

In the last 10 years I have been hit left, right and centre with antagonism because I am HIV positive. I've lost three jobs. I can no longer work. I feel that I am of no value to my society, or to the gay community.

He also experiences discrimination within the gay community:

We in the gay community have remarkable opportunities to unite and make it ourselves. I mean we've done it for 25 years. As an older gay man I am really sad that this unity has dissipated. I watch the kids party. I watch them turn their backs on their elders. The younger generation have become very cruel, very ageist.

Yuri is doing it tough. In his youth, 'there were always parties, we danced, we roller skated, there were always thing going on'. These days he is old, alone and poor. 'I feel lonely, disheartened and sad'.

In Chapter 3, we met Vince, 58, who was disabled. He was also poor and hoping to find voluntary work to keep himself active. As a disabled man, he feels 'marginalised' in the gay community, because he is no longer 'young, fit and handsome'. He also recognises discrimination in the wider society, and he uses terms such as 'homophobia':

We must put pressure on governments. They have to improve the attitude of the general community towards homosexuals. Violence towards homosexual men is a major issue in rural and regional areas. There is a lot of homophobia. It's not safe for gay men to live openly in country towns.

Mal, 61, is also disabled. He is active in the disability rights movement and he is also involved in community radio. He recounts how he came out to a friend in a community based organization some years ago. 'That was it. Bye, bye. Tat Ta. She didn't want to know me'. He says that he is 'somewhat in the closet'. After that experience 'I was scared of being victimised'. He also feels that older people are discriminated against in the gay community, especially if they have a disability.

Karl, 55, is unemployed and single. He is worried about the future because both of his parents had Alzheimer's disease.

If I get sick, what will happen to me? I don't have any children. I don't have any friends really. It's always at the back of my mind.

Like the others, he feels that older people are not accepted in the mainstream gay community. He also thinks that older gay people need support services, and he has wondered about the possibility of residential arrangements for older gay men and lesbians.

Many of the gay men who were doing it tough saw discrimination within the wider society. A lot mentioned homophobia and most were worried about

heterosexism. There was a widespread sense that older gay men and women have special needs, and they would feel more comfortable in accommodation designed for non-heterosexual people.

However, eight out of the 10 working class men also complained about discrimination within the gay sub-culture, because of 'ageism'. Homophobia is a problem in the wider society, but many older gay men also experience discrimination within their own community.

Conclusion

There was a widespread sense amongst our respondents that gay men, lesbians and other non-heterosexual people do have special needs. In all groups, there were people who used terms such as 'homophobia' and 'discrimination' to refer the marginal position of non-heterosexual people. Others alluded to heterosexism. They talked about it being 'more comfortable' to be with one's own kind, particularly in retirement villages. They were worried about 'prejudice'.

There were 10 older, working class men who were 'doing it 'tough'. They experienced homophobia and heterosexism in the wider society. Nearly everyone in this group also experienced discrimination within the gay community because of ageism, as did four people in the intermediate group. The transgender respondents experienced discrimination in the wider society. They also felt marginalised in the gay and lesbian community.

Chapter 5 Services for Older People

In this chapter, we focus on services for older non-heterosexual people, including outreach services, nursing homes and retirement villages, and social groups. We also consider how organizations such as the ALSO Foundation might assist older people who experience ageism within the gay community.

Outreach

More than one quarter of our respondents recommended that outreach services should be provided for older gay men and lesbians. Phil, 54, is travelling well and does not need assistance himself. However, he has a strong social conscience and he pointed out that many older people need practical assistance at home if they do not have the money to move into retirement villages. He thought that the elderly were likely to experience isolation and loneliness if their partner dies and ‘there will be a need to maintain contact [in the form of home care] with these people’. Rory, 70, thought that many older gay men do not have supportive networks to rely on. Older people might need, ‘someone who can come and do the cleaning ... and do the shopping. I think that would be wonderful because as you get older you become less able to do the normal things that younger people can do’. He also thought these services should be ‘available at a reduced price or even free’. Karen, 57, had talked with other lesbians about the need to provide older people with ‘home care and to have help being taken to the doctor’s and hospital and things like that’.

A number of respondents pointed out that there is a network of home care for people living with HIV-AIDS. This could be extended to provide care for older people who were lonely or frail. Jamie thought that it would be useful to expand the ‘gay men’s health centre ... [with an] emphasis on things other than HIV and AIDS related illness’, and also to provide a welfare officer or nurse, ‘whom older gay people could stay in contact with’. He thought that volunteers could also be used to support older people who ‘were living in their own home or in frail health’. Bradley saw a similarity between the organisational arrangements set up for people living with HIV-AIDS and the organisational arrangements needed to support elderly people who want assistance to remain at home. He knew that the support groups for people living with HIV-AIDS had done good work:

Those groups work really well. I think ... there are groups of older gays in the community who may be living alone and ill, and don't feel comfortable, can't get [the] support from ... their local council that they want.

Many of our respondents thought it was desirable to provide services to people at home, so that they could maintain their independence for as long as possible. There was also widespread agreement that these services must be provided by people who accept the lifestyle choices of non-heterosexual people. Some respondents were worried that this might not be the case when services were provided by the local council. They suggested that outreach services for the elderly could be provided from within the gay community.

Nursing homes and retirement villages.

Just under half of our respondents made comments regarding nursing homes or retirement villages for non-heterosexual people. There were a variety of views, but only one respondents thought the idea was impractical. Phil, 54, is travelling well. He has business experience 'funding people to build retirement homes'. He is not in favour of community group such as the ALSO Foundation trying to build and operate nursing home homes because 'you would need a couple of million dollars to get started ... so while it is a good concept I don't think it's a very practical one'.

Other respondents thought that the ALSO Foundation should take the issue of accommodation seriously:

Sure you operate dance parties. I read all about that in the newsletters. But that holds no interest for people in my age group. ALSO was set up to assist and care for gay males in the first instance ... and the original idea, going right back to the very beginning, was to establish a retirement home for gays.

He has been disappointed because 'I haven't heard about that for ten years or more'. He thought that the ALSO foundation had 'wandered off the path in the years since it's been established', and he was considering whether he should renew his membership.

George was a foundation member of ALSO and explains what he remembers to be the original role of the organisation:

One of the reasons for starting this organisation was that we were thinking specifically about older people and we were hoping to raise funds to establish old people's homes.

George explained that the original idea allowed for a creative solution to the problem of how to cater for the accommodation needs of old gay men who were alone. He and his fellow foundation members had wanted to create 'communities', not 'compounds':

We were thinking of establishing communities ... in a bricks and mortar sense for older gays who suffer isolation not only because of their age and the natural breakdown of relationships as partners die but also with the inevitable failure of health and so on.

He still believes that it would be a good idea to build a community to cater for the special needs of older gay men and lesbians.

Many of our respondents thought in the same way. Karen remembered visiting her mother in a nursing home in Hobart. She suspected that there were gay men and lesbians in the same home but that they were 'not catered for in any way'. She knew that she would not want to go into a home 'where I am separated from people I know, and the lifestyle'. She dreams of 'living in a community of like-minded people,' and suggested that it 'would be a good idea if we all lived close by or ... or even if we bought a group of houses or even built something'.

Frances also believed that facilities are needed for older gay men and lesbians. While she is not sure how they would be established, she says of the prospect of her own old age: 'if I ... finish up in an old people's home, I'd like to be with a bunch of old lesbians and not a bunch of other people'.

Similarly, Owen said:

I would like to see a place ... where gay males and females can retire ... [and] feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging ... and feel protection ... [from] that homophobic nonsense going on.

A number of transgender respondents also commented on the need for 'safe' accommodation.

Nick, 63, is single and not travelling well. He says that all older people face the grim prospect of surviving on their own, but that gays and lesbians find it particularly difficult because 'there are not many places around that will provide us with single accommodation'. His solution is simple:

We could buy two houses side-by-side, one for gay men and one for lesbians ... and between the two houses there can be a service like a housekeeper and a cook ... and

someone to look after the place and ... there [would be] a common lounge room. I would like to see that happen

Kathleen, 68, has been happy in her current house, but recognises that she will have to leave it when she is too old to look after herself: 'if there's no lesbian village then I'll probably end up in some other retirement place, which I won't be very happy about'. Her dream is to be able to move into a lesbian village when she has to be looked after. Her picture of the village incorporates aspects of existing day and community centres, with facilities for people of all ages to make use of:

I would like to see a lesbian retirement complex ... [with] independent houses and units and then a hostel and then a nursing home and the whole works. It would be really nice. I'd also like to see a lot of greenery around it. Lovely gardens. Set in lovely gardens. And ... it would be nice to have things like a lesbian centre within it that other people [could] use. The centre could be a library complex. It could be all sorts of things that the rest of the community could come and use. I think that would be good from the point of view of having people of different ages around, having people [as] part of the whole retirement scheme. It would be nice to be looked after by younger lesbians, rather than straight people. In fact, it's highly preferable.

Kathleen's dream is of a community centre where the old and the young would be in touch with one another every day by virtue of making use of the facilities provided under one roof. If it were ever realised, this would create a complex where people from different age groups could mix, as well as a centre providing day care, hostel and nursing accommodation for people in various degrees of need. There is widespread support for nursing homes and retirement villages for older non-heterosexual people.

Social activities

About one-third of our respondents wanted existing community organisations to provide more social activities for ageing non-heterosexual people. Only one transgender respondent commented on this issue. He said that 'the gay and lesbian community should try to provide more facilities where older people can get together in the daytime'. Therefore we focus on the views of lesbians and gay men.

Lesbian women

In Chapter 4, we saw that lesbians were less concerned about ageism in their community than gay men. There were a minority of women who were conscious of the youth orientation of commercial bars and clubs. Olga, 52, would like to see:

more older friendly venues that are expressly for women. I think that most of the venues have been taken over by the younger people. Some of my friends don't like going to venues. They just don't feel comfortable.

Isobel and her partner are not drawn to the lesbian nightlife where, 'you either play pool, which we don't, or you have to go to clubs, which we don't because we are quiet people. So, on the social scene I don't really think that we are looked after that well'.

Many women, however, were active in community organisations for older gay women. Most were positive about these organizations, and many spent a lot of time in the lesbian social community. Barbara is 63. She and her partner attend one older gay group:

I am really most grateful to them. They're really good, the 'Golden Oldies'. I think how they reach out into the older gay community is absolutely marvellous.

Heloise belongs to four organisations:

I am part of a circus group called Performing Older Women, which is open to women over 40. We have a show coming up at the end of the month, so that's happening. I am also a member of Matrix, as well as the Jewish Lesbian Group of Victoria. I am also a member of the Archives Group.

Catherine, 64, is single. She has never 'come out' to her family, but she has an active social life in the lesbian community:

I think that as a single, older woman, you are better off being a lesbian than a heterosexual. There are dances and balls. They are very inclusive of older people. I am also a member of Matrix. I am in the lesbian cancer support group. Our community organises its own activities. The lesbian community has given me a really good life in the last few years.

The lesbian respondents were less concerned than the gay men about the shortage of social venues and meeting places. The lesbian community has not embraced the commercial market place to the same extent as men. At the same time,

gay women seem to have been better at forging and maintaining community organizations, which are more inclusive than the youth oriented scene in the commercial sub-culture. This reflects the influence of Western Feminism (including lesbian Feminism) over the last thirty years. Despite fragmentation amongst academic feminists, those women who have been at the forefront of the political movement have always emphasised the importance of women 'sticking together' and protecting the interests of minority groups. The lesbian community is more inclusive of older people.

Gay men

In the major capital cities, the centre of social life for gay men is the 'commercial scene'. This consists primarily of bars, nightclubs, and commercial saunas. Here men socialise, dance, drink, take drugs and look for sexual partners. It is a world primarily oriented towards younger men, where there is a high premium on 'good looks', physical attractiveness, and wearing the latest fashions. Ridge, Minichello and Plummer (1997) carried out a study in Melbourne which involved interviewing 24 young men between the ages of 19 and 36 who were on 'the scene'. They argue that 'the scene' does not provide young men with a real sense of community, where they make strong friendships and feel a sense of belonging. On the contrary, their research revealed weak social networks and quite widespread 'alienation'. They also point out that 'youth' is highly valued in the scene, and older men are often marginalised. As one of our respondents put it, 'being gay is a young man's game'.

In Chapter 4, we saw that most of the older working class men reported either that they felt uncomfortable in the gay subculture or that they had experienced discrimination. A minority of upper and middle class men drew attention to this as well. According to Harold, 60:

Most of the venues in the city are for the younger generation, such as pubs, dance venues and so forth. In fact, I went to a dance venue not so long ago and was told I couldn't get in because I was too old. I was extraordinarily upset about that.

Harold was critical of the ALSO Foundation. 'The thing that disappoints me about ALSO is that it gears its activities to dance parties and rages ... I think that ALSO should accept some role in strengthening the community ... providing facilities for all age groups'.

According to another middle class man, 'These venues are uncomfortable. I don't like the smoke. I don't like the noise and I don't like standing around waiting for someone to say hello'. According to a working class man, 'I've been to (venue named) a few times. It's a pity that the music is up so loud'. Many respondents pointed out that they wanted social venues of a different kind. As Harry put it:

I am thinking about activities where older people could be brought together. I don't mean for a sexual orgy. I am thinking about social events and a sense of community and belonging.

Similarly, Jim said:

I want the companionship of people of my own age ... in a range of social settings ... I don't want to go to every ... party like a 20 year old.

Our respondents saw different solutions to the problems of isolation and loneliness, and their views tended to vary by social class. Bruce, 55, does not have many friends and is worried about being lonely and alone as he grows older. His preferred social venue is the pub. He says that the pub is 'a pleasant idea for older gay men' as long as it 'opens reasonably early and there isn't loads of deafening music'. He knows that the commercial scene has many dance bars that open at 10pm or 11pm at night and close at dawn, but these are not suitable for older men. Nick, 63, would like to play lawn bowls but says that, 'there is no club or group for gay and lesbian people to join. It would be wonderful to enjoy a game of bowls with a group of older gay people'.

Our upper and middle class respondents tended to have somewhat different preferences. For example, Jacob, 56, thought that ALSO could sponsor activities for older people. These might include 'cocktail parties and theatre nights ... or co-sponsoring events for older people with the Victorian AIDS Council at the time of the Midsumma Festival'. Others talked about organising picnics, or dinners for small groups, where people could meet new friends.

Bradley, 58, would be interested in 'specialist groups for playing bridge, or book clubs, or musical events, or days in the country'. There was a widespread sense, among both our upper, middle and working class respondents that there was a need for 'clubs and social activities where people can get together'. As Bradley put it, 'There could be groups for whatever people would be interested in'.

Conclusion

This report set out to investigate the needs of gay, lesbian and transgender people aged 50 or older, based on semi-structured interviews with 26 gay men, 21 lesbians and five transgender people, interviewed in Victoria, Australia. As we said at the outset, this is a report on big issues, based on a small sample. Our intention has not been to ‘answer all the questions’. Rather, we have tried to open up the debate by allowing a small number of non-heterosexual people to speak for themselves.

Nonetheless, we will draw some tentative conclusions. In our judgment, the data points towards the need for outreach services for older people who wish to remain in their own home, but need various types of support to remain independent (housework, shopping, social visits etc.). There is already a network of home care for people living with HIV-AIDS which has done excellent work. These organisational arrangements could be extended to support elderly non-heterosexual people who need assistance to remain at home.

We found a widespread sense among our respondents in all classes that there is need for nursing homes and retirement villages for older non-heterosexual people. This is a formidable challenge. It would require long-term planning, substantial funds, and a body of experts overseeing the project. These would include persons with experience in the nursing home industry, as well as people with legal, accounting and other professional skills. We recommend this issue should be re-opened for discussion.

Finally, there is the issue of social groups and social spaces for older people. Our data indicates that the lesbian community is much more inclusive of older people, and that many gay men are isolated and lacking in social support groups. For gay men the experience of ageism is embedded in the dominant character of social relations in the commercial scene, and many gay men feel that they have nowhere else to go. The experience of isolation and loneliness is felt most by single, working class men, although single men in other classes also draw attention to ageism in the gay sub-culture. The challenge for the ALSO foundation is to provide for the needs of all age groups.

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