

The Past, Present, and Future of Research on LGBTI Seniors

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Abstract

The present article focuses on LGBTI seniors. Our main objective is to provide points of consideration concerning the disregard for and discrimination against this group. From an analysis of five main factors (legislation, ageism, homophobia and/or transphobia, being a woman, and the environment in which the senior lives), we provide evidence that justifies the need to maintain a line of research on LGBTI seniors, one that focuses on shaping social policies to promote the actual inclusion of seniors, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Keywords: Ageing; LGBTI; Stereotypes; Quality of life; Life trajectory; Community

Introduction

The number of senior citizens increases yearly. UN estimates from 2019 confirm that one out of every eleven people are over 65 years old. In 2050, it is estimated that this number will reach one in six. Various studies and reports focusing on LGBTI seniors have made approximate calculations, and according to Advocacy & Services for LGBT Elders (SAGE), in 2014 in the United States approximately 1.5 million seniors identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The same institution estimates that this number will nearly double by 2030. How can we explain such a notable increase? Gimeno [1] makes an important suggestion: it has to do with being able to reveal one's true self via acceptance in family, social, and community contexts. There are five dimensions that have obscured LGBTI seniors. The first is legislation. According to the FELGTB, in 2019 there were still 70 countries in which people were punished for being LGBTI, and in 11, this punishment was death. As per Acnur [2], this persecution is nothing new. What is new is the moral awareness in some countries to requests for asylum made by those who could be considered refugees because of the persecution that they suffer for their sexual orientation. The second is ageism, given that a stereotype is that the elderly are not considered to have sexual/emotional relationships. For Ventura et al. [3], as homosexuality is related to sex, it is difficult to conceive of a homosexual senior. The third has to do with discrimination because of homophobia or transphobia. Related to ageism, the study by Luis-González and Aguilera-Ávila [4] describes four situations marked by such discrimination: (1) discrimination of seniors due to age (ageism), (2) (self)discrimination among seniors for being LGBTI, (3) isolation of LGBTI seniors within the LGBTI community, and (4) discrimination based on the context in which persons live, especially if they are not "allowed" to freely express their sexuality. The fourth dimension deals specifically with women, who suffer even more, not only from ageism and homophobia/transphobia, but from patterns associated with gender, age, marital status, the duration of their careers, and the pension system (notably, widow's pensions) [1,5]. For Osborne (2008) the reality for lesbians is different than it is for gays, as there is a certain level of visibility for gay people, but not for lesbians, amongst whom self-control and social control

prevails, especially in adult women. Along this line, Gimeno [1] has reported that lesbian women over 35 or 40 had had relationships with men, and many of them maintained their main relationship with a man while having women lovers. The fifth dimension has to do with the context in which they live. Acnur [2] includes the environment (cultural, financial, family, political, religious, and social) as a key element that marks a person's life course. Moraes [6] has established that life courses are marked by life experiences, which directly affect conduct, attitudes, and behaviors later in life. In fact, some studies, such as that by Villar et al. [7], have found that in retirement homes, seniors show negative attitudes towards their LGBTI peers. Ultimately, these five factors affect the quality of life of LGBTI seniors, physically (as they cannot freely express their sexuality), psychologically (due to the consequences of "needing" to hide their real sexual orientation), and socially (because of social stereotypes or effects on their closest networks, i.e., neighborhoods and families).

Discussion

The full inclusion of seniors is clearly affected by the acceptance of their context, of their ability to make others aware of their lives in the environment in which they wish to grow old [8]. The five factors discussed in the introduction allow us to address which pathways to take and which ones to avoid. As discussed by Luis-González & Aguilera-Ávila [4], there are four situations marked by such discrimination: (1) discrimination against seniors due to matters of age (ageism), (2) (self)discrimination amongst seniors themselves against LGBTI individuals, (3) isolation of LGBTI seniors within the larger LGBTI community, and (4) discrimination based on the context in which seniors live, especially if they are not "allowed" to freely express their sexuality. In order to do away with stereotypes and move towards complete visibility, normalization, and inclusion, we must work together in different fields. In our role as investigators, and as discussed by Kimmel [9], there are four reasons justifying the study of LGBTI seniors:

- a. To provide younger LGBTI individuals with an increased knowledge of LGBTI seniors so that they may have positive senior LGBTI role models,
- b. To carry out research that focuses on the most efficient and effective ways to reduce discrimination against LGBTI seniors,
- c. To expand the focus of research involving LGBTI seniors to include sexual and gender diversity in their repertoire of knowledge domains, and
- d. So that the results of research may bring to light the problems, service requirements, and specific shortcomings that political and social responses may have.

In this respect, the journey had already begun. As previously mentioned, Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco [10] changed the focus of research. While it once focused on vulnerability, social isolation,

and stereotypes, it now focuses on the interrelationship of physical, psychological, and social wellbeing during ageing, with positive studies being carried out on personal experiences.

Conclusion

Current generations of LGBTI seniors are able to express their sexual orientations and live more naturally in countries like the United States, Argentina, Spain, and Brazil (García, [11]), but we must continue to work on political, social, community, family, and individual levels in order to achieve full inclusion, in a normalized context, that allows any person to age with the best quality of life possible, regardless of their sexual orientation. Ultimately, real social inclusion will become a reality when we are able to speak to seniors without needing the label LGBTI seniors [12-14].

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