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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experience of growing older as a gay man. In an attempt to contribute to the gerontological social work literature, three gay men over the age of 65 participated in semi-structured interviews lasting from one to two hours in duration, in pursuit of an answer to the question 'How has being gay informed the lives of men 65 years of age and over'? Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a narrative approach to analysis in order to expand upon the mostly quantitative knowledge concerning sexual minority aging. The findings of this study allow social workers, gerontologists, and gay men themselves to better understand the strengths and challenges that accompany the elder gay male experience of aging in our society. Principally was the finding that a gay sexual identity versus age itself is a more prominent feature of experience among the three elder gay men interviewed. The ideology of heterosexism and ageism intersects in the life experiences of elder gay men, as evidenced through the stories contained in this study. Further, it was found that the concept of developmental milestones is different from the perspective of elder gay men than has been acknowledged in the gerontological literature. Finally, implications for social workers who strive for a practice that can be more inclusive of gay men are provided.
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CHAPTER I - SETTING THE STAGE

Introduction

Within mainstream gerontological literature, it would seem that if older people are portrayed as being sexual at all, they are certainly not homosexual (Quam, 1997). It has in fact only been recently that the reality of older gay lives has even been acknowledged within gerontology (Gallagher, 1996). Yet, gerontologists speak often of the need to understand the aging process as a heterogeneous spectrum of possibilities (McPherson, 1998). If gerontologists are to follow through with their recognition and commitment of the aging experience as a spectrum of diverse possibilities, it has much to do to inform itself of this diversity based on their lack of attention to elder gay men’s concerns and experiences (Beeler, Rawls, Herdt, & Cohler; 1999).

This study explored how being gay has informed the lives of three men over the age of 65. A central aim of the study was to use the narrative voice of elder gay men to challenge some of the key assumptions about aging contained in both mainstream gerontological literature as well as the paucity of gay aging studies that exist. A second goal relates to my commitment to encourage social work as a profession to become more inclusive of the needs of elder gay men in both research and practice. Finally, as a gay man myself I wish to advance the presence of the subjective voice of elder gay men into the field of gerontology.
which at times seems fraught with supposition, inference, and replete with gross
generalizations about the reality of elder gay men’s lives.

**Challenging the Mythology of Gay Aging**

As will be discussed in chapter two, some researchers who have sought to
explore gay aging in the past have advanced a ‘mythology’ of the gay aging
experience as mostly joyful, crisis-free, and quite rewarding. This is providing
that the elder gay man is attached to gay community institutions and causes
throughout the aging process (Lee, 1991). This mythology is seen as resulting
from an inadvertent effort to overcompensate for the heterosexist and
homophobic stereotypes that have persisted in the past which saw elder gay
men as oversexed, lonely, and sad (Lee, 1991). The result has been a swing
from one extreme view of the elder gay man to another with no representation
of the diverse nature of elder gay lives that actually exists.

Choosing to conduct a qualitative study into how being gay can inform the
lives of elder gay men helps to challenge the mythology that Lee alludes to. This
is made possible by surfacing the subjective means by which elder gay men
‘construct’ their lives, something that is not possible through quantitative
methods alone. In fact, Hostetler & Kohler (1997) suggest that ‘research must
take seriously the subjective meanings of lived experiences or risk being
completely irrelevant to the lives of older gays’ (pg.312).
Enhancing Social Work with Elder Gay Men

As mentioned, the second goal of this study is related to the profession of social work itself. Gallagher cites O’Neill & Naidoo (1990), in suggesting that gay men could make up potentially 10% of all clients within senior serving organizations. Yet there appears to be a conspicuous absence of programming around elder gay male concerns throughout our country. In fact, where in Canada is there any government funded program that directly aims to provide services to an elder gay male population? If there is such a service, what practice framework exists that would assist in providing for as effective and inclusive an approach to the needs of elder gay men as possible?

The Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (1994) supports a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Yet, while this may be true, Quam (1997) and Ehrenberg (1996) note that the helping professions, including social work, have not worked hard enough to address the homophobic reality of service delivery that exists in practice with gay populations. They particularly note a lack of attention to gay concerns within social work literature, training programs, and public policy. If social work does not make a concerted attempt to become more inclusive of potentially 1/10th of the consumers of its services, then it risks reinforcing the invisibility of elder gay men that persists within the domain of service delivery.
Identifying Heterosexism and Ageism

The third goal of my study is to increase the voice of elder gay men in the gerontological literature as a way of challenging the presence of heterosexist assumptions about the means by which men can age. This interest is informed by my own experiences as a white, middle-class, university educated gay man who has felt the impact of heterosexism and homophobia in my own life, particularly within the areas of health care and social policy. As a geriatric social worker employed in a long term care facility, I have also witnessed the systemic and personal effects of ageism among the senior population I work with and the individuals who serve them. These two sets of experiences led to a concentrated focus on gay aging that I undertook as part of my graduate study in social work. In reviewing the literature into gay aging throughout this process, my curiosity grew when I noted the scant attention paid to the way in which gay men presently over the age of 65 have constructed their identities in response to a different set of social and historical conditions than I grew up with. I became aware that to some extent the literature has not gone far enough to understand how various discourses of gay identity that develop over time can compete with one another in shaping the diversity of aging experiences that have been noted among older gay men, yet remain unaccounted for.

Thus there are two fundamental questions that remain unanswered in the literature with respect to elder gay men that constituted the focus of this study. How can an understanding of gay identity account for discrepancies in the
literature among the same generation of elder gay men who report at once being both satisfied and dissatisfied with their lives? And finally, what can social work learn from the subjective voice of elder gay men that might better inform social work practice with this population as a result?

**Situating Language**

In approaching this study there are a few qualifications that are worth making at the outset regarding language. While a great deal of research has attempted to confront and challenge negative stereotypes of gays and lesbians, some have found that sexual orientation has rarely been defined with any consistency or reliability between these studies (Chung and Katayama, 1996). This has led to criticisms that the methodological absence of a consistent effort to define sexual orientation has weakened research in this area (Sell & Patruillo, 1996). However, dependent upon whether one operates from 'essentialist' or 'constructivist' approaches to sexual orientation, how would one determine which definition of sexual orientation to best adopt? Can consensus among researchers and participants ever be reached in this regard? And further, if it is thought that it should be, how would one know that consensus has been achieved?

In addressing the need to define sexual orientation in his study of the sex-related counselling experiences of 5 men, Cave (1999) adopted Hart’s (1984) definition of sexual orientation as ‘the object of one’s affection and sexual desire’ (pg. 4). Further, this definition of sexual orientation is conceptualised as the interaction of ‘physical activity, interpersonal affection, and erotic fantasies’. For the
purposes of this study then, a gay sexual orientation will be defined as a man's self-identified desire for, and/or engagement in a combination of physical, interpersonal, and erotic activity/relationships with other men. As will be further explained in chapter two however, the goal of this study is to explore how gay identity, as opposed to a 'sexual orientation' informs the lives of elder gay men depending upon how each has chosen to construct their identities as such. An assumption is that identifying how an individual has constructed their gay identity will yield far more in understanding the experiences of an elder gay man, than simply focussing on that man's sexual orientation. In summary then, sexual orientation and gay identity are viewed as two separate components to the lived experience of the individual, the latter of which is a more fruitful locus of exploration.

When I refer to 'gay aging', I will specifically be referring to the process of aging as it applies to men who self-identify as gay. The word 'older' or 'elder' is being used to conceptualise the age of participants as 65 years and over. This appeals to the conventional use of the term in the gerontological literature (Swanson, 1998). Contrary to ageist myths and stereotypes that have influenced the definition of the word 'old' or 'elder' however, their use throughout this study is not meant to reinforce or support these stereotypes. Instead the words are used to refer to a population of men associated by age, and considered worthy of research, exploration and deeper understanding.
Thesis Overview

This qualitative study documents the results of interviews that were conducted with three men over the age of 65 who self-identified as being gay. The interviews were designed to secure data that would speak to the question 'how has being gay informed the lives of men over the age of 65?'. The results of the data build on our understanding of the means by which age and sexual orientation converge upon one another to inform each of the participant's identities and experiences. These findings also set the stage for a discussion of how social work can develop an inclusive approach to practice with elder gay men.

Chapter two presents the theoretical and conceptual foundation upon which this study is based. This includes a review of the literature to date as it relates to key terms, ideas and concepts concerning gay aging. I also represent some of the key issues that exist in the literature in its ability to represent the reality of elder gay lives, concluding with a review of social work practice in this area. Chapter three provides a description of the methodology used throughout this study. In chapter four I provide the findings from my interviews with three elder gay men and the stories they shared about how being gay has informed their lives. Finally, in chapter five I provide a discussion of the results of my findings in relation to the literature discussed in chapter two. I conclude with recommendations for social work practice, as well as suggestions for future research in this area based upon the findings.
CHAPTER II – CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT

Introduction

Maxwell (1996) suggests that the purpose of a conceptual context is to review the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that support and inform the research to take place. He also suggests that the literature that is reviewed should not be deferred to as an ‘authority’ on a given subject, more so than as a ‘fallible source of ideas’ open to interpretation. The function of the researcher therefore is to use the conceptual context as an opportunity to present ‘alternative ways of framing the issues’ based on previous research (Maxwell, 1996).

In exploring how being gay can inform the lives of men 65 years of age and over, this chapter provides a review of key concepts, ideas, and theories emanating from the gay aging literature. First I will explore the concept of social constructionist versus essentialist views of gay identity. This leads to a discussion of heterosexism, homophobia, and ageism within the context of older gay men. I then review the literature on gay aging to date with the aim of reflecting not just on the content, but on the development of this area of research as it relates to the research question posed in this study. Finally, I present a review of those theories of life-stage and gay identity development that helped to inform this study.
Social Constructivism and Sexual Identity

As alluded to in chapter one I believe that how a man incorporates the reality of being gay into his life is specific to the socio-historical context in which that man will claim and develop that identity. This reflects an adherence to a 'social constructivist’ approach to sexual identity. Stemming from the post-modern ideas of Foucault (1981) social constructivism suggests 'that sexual functions and feelings have no intrinsic or essential meaning of their own, but are given meaning by the ideological systems developed for their explanation’ (cited in Friend, 1991, p. 100). Constructivists believe that culture, history and circumstance will produce many different meanings of the same sexual activity (Jagose, 1996). The argument is summarized as follows. If an individual’s identity is based on the meaning(s) he attaches to a sexual activity, and competing meanings can arise according to the fluid forces of history and context, then many different constructions of identity will be possible based upon that same sexual activity. Thus it is noted that despite the fact that sexual activity between men has and continues to occur in many different cultures throughout the world, this activity does not equate with the participants having necessarily constructed the same identity (Halani, 1999; Weeks, 1981).

This is contrasted with an 'essentialist’ view of sexuality which suggests that sexual identity, gay or otherwise, is fixed, natural, acultural and ahistorical (Halani, 1999; Jagose, 1996). Essentialists view the emergence and meaning of an individual's sexual identity as a reflection of the physical and genetic make-up
of the individual (Jagose, 1996). In this way sexual identity and sexual orientation are seen as one and the same and are viewed as having existed throughout all of history and across all cultures. At its extreme, essentialists would see no difference between the sexual identity of a man living in modern day San Francisco who openly declares to others that he is gay, with that of a man living in a Welsh Mining village in the 1700’s who desires sexual activity with a member of the same sex. In this way it is assumed that there is ‘a’ gay identity.

I reject the essentialist view and suggest that the ‘identities’ of each man in the above cases would be qualitatively quite different from and should not be equated with one another. This follows a social constructivist view which does not see gay identity as fixed, and challenges the dichotomy of gay/not gay as an ‘either/or’ identity. Instead, social constructivists view gay identity as but one aspect of a persons identity and dependent upon more than just the individual.

As a category of sexual identity, the ‘gay’ identity as we know it in North America has been constructed as more than a simple description of an individual’s primary sexual orientation for members of the same sex. According to the social constructivist view, the gay identity is in fact fairly new to the human experience, surfacing as a by-product of the modern age, and mostly confined to the Western world (Weeks, 1981). One view is that it emerged first as ‘homosexuality’ in response to the rise of capitalism in the mid 19th century, (D’Emilio, 1993) and then later as ‘gay’ in resistance to the medicalization and
criminalization of ‘homosexuality’ in the 1960’s (Weeks, 1981). Unlike that proposed by the essentialist view, a gay identity therefore cannot be an indication of what someone is. It is instead a fluid and dynamic view of self and others informed by the ideas, values, and forces of the particular historical epoch in which that identity has developed (Jagose, 1996).

Those men who are now 65 years of age or older represent a group who claimed their gay identities either prior to or after the advent of gay liberation in the 1960’s - two very different historical periods, and therefore two competing contexts in which gay identities were shaped and constructed. Interestingly, the literature into gay aging itself developed across the divide of two separate historical eras for gays and lesbians and represents a collision between essentialist and constructivist approaches to the study of elder gay life. I assert that it is the latter approach that will help to further our understanding of elder gay men. This is because when we talk about how being ‘gay’ can inform the lives of men over the age of 65, we cannot really achieve this unless we are able to articulate in what way that individual has come to construct their gay identity.

**Heterosexism, Homophobia, and Ageism**

Most references in the literature into gay aging are clear that both the development of a gay identity as well as the aging process itself are dramatically impacted by the ideological systems of heterosexism, homophobia, and ageism (Jacobs, Rasmussen, and Hohman, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1999; Humphreys and...
Qualm, 1998; Hunter, Shannon, Knox, and Martin, 1998; Boxer, 1997; Getzel, 1997; Ehrenberg, 1996; D'Augelli and Patterson, 1995; Dorfman, 1995; Adelman, 1991; Grube, 1991; Cruikshank, 1991, Friend, 1990; Lee, 1987; Berger, 1982; Kimmel, 1978). If an exploration of gay identity is the foundation upon which our understanding of elder gay male experiences are built, then it is necessary to define these terms.

Homophobia has been defined as heterosexual persons dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals or homosexual’s self-loathing (Herek, 1996; Weinberg, 1972). The use of the term homophobia is avoided by some due to the fact that the hostility that is expressed to homosexuals by others does not mimic the reactions experienced with other phobia’s per se (Herek, 1996). It is also felt that homophobia implies that anti-gay sentiment and actions occur at the level of the individual, ignoring what is perhaps better understood as a ‘social phenomenon rooted in cultural ideologies and intergroup relations’ (Herek, 1996, pg. 102).

Heterosexism is defined as ‘the ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community’ (Herek, 1996, pg. 101). Herek (1996) notes two forms of heterosexism including cultural heterosexism and psychological heterosexism. Cultural heterosexism is likened to racism and sexism and ‘pervades societal customs and institutions’. The refusal to legalize gay marriage, the ban on gays in the American military, and the lack of access to survival benefits when
partners die are examples of how heterosexism will manifest itself culturally. In this way, cultural heterosexism gains expression through public policy and the institutionalizing of heterosexist norms and values. As well the presence of heterosexism can also be seen culturally through the historically negative depiction of same-sex relationships in nearly every media representation available (Metz, 1997). Some have noted how social work itself participates in the perpetuation of heterosexism through ‘heterocentrically’ oriented training programs (Morrow, 1996). According to Herek (1996) this is ultimately expressed and experienced at the level of the individual through psychological heterosexism.

Psychological heterosexism is seen as the ‘individual manifestation of cultural heterosexism’ and is ‘reflected in heterosexual’s feelings of personal disgust, hostility, or condemnation of homosexuality and of lesbians and gay men’ (Herek, 1996, pg. 102). It is also expressed behaviorally in reports of gays and lesbians having been the direct victims of physical and verbal assault, while also facing discrimination in housing, employment, health care, or social services. For example, 9% of gays and lesbians have reported having been assaulted with a weapon due to their sexual orientation, 19% have been the victims of threats of violence, while 80% stated that they had been the victims of verbal harassment (Hunter, Shannon, Knox, and Martin, 1998). Gays and lesbians have been shown to receive inferior treatment when attempting to access adequate health care due to their sexual orientation (Peterson, 1996).
The ultimate tragic expression of psychological heterosexism is expressed through the internalization of messages of self-hate or loathing on the part of the individual who is gay. The consequences of this form of heterosexism has been explored extensively in the literature. For example, according to Hunter, Shannon, Knox, and Martin (1998), recent studies show that 40% of American and Canadian gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth have attempted suicide at least once. Also, gays and lesbians have far higher rates of alcoholism and drug use than the general population (Anderson, 1996).

Ageism is a term that was coined by Butler (1969) to describe the process of systematic stereotyping of, and discrimination against people because they are old’, (as cited by McPherson, 1998 pg. 140). With ageism surfaces policies and practices that ascribe ability and character according to chronological age, as opposed to functional or demonstrated ability and characteristics. Such is the case with mandatory retirement policies, or stereotypes of older people as having increasing problems with memory, physical functioning or utility in most spheres of life (McPherson, 1998).

As mentioned, at the intersection of ageism, heterosexism and homophobia lie the potential for stigmatized gay men to face added dimensions of oppression that are seldom recognized or discussed in the context of their later life. In fact, confronting and ridding oneself of the internalized messages of self-loathing many gay men learn to live with, is seen as a key to the challenge of aging successfully as a gay man (Adelman, 1991; Berger, 1982; Kelly, 1977).
While gay aging studies have highlighted the ability of elder gay men to overcome the forces of oppression in their lives, it still tends to reflect a limited view of elder gay men as either succeeding or failing in this regard ignoring other more salient features to the lives of elder gay men.

**Situating the Study of Elder Gay Men - a literature review**

An important concern of mine in reviewing the literature into gay aging was the risk of duplicating the observations or ideas of various scholars who have already reviewed the small amount of literature available on this subject. These include previous reviews by Hunter, Shannon, Martin, and Knox (1998), Boxer (1997), Brown, Saroksy, Cook, and Quarto (1997), Christian and Keefe (1997), Getzel (1997), Herdt, Beeler, and Rawls (1997), Kochman (1997), Ehrenberg (1996), Quam (1996), Daugelli & Patterson (1995), Dorfman, Walters, Burke, Harding, and Karanik (1995), Cruikshank (1991), and Lee (1987). Though I was able to access most of the original sources of research referred to in the above-noted reviews, my thoughts and understanding of gay aging are still chiefly the result of having been informed of this early work via these other reviews of the gay aging literature.

I have chosen to conceptualise gay aging research to date as having developed according to the engagement of three distinct focuses within this area. Each focus appears to have initiated around important social and/or scholastic turns that I argue have dramatically informed the construction of gay politics and gay-focused academic work as a result. I have titled each of these as the Reconstruction focus, initiated
around 1970, a Critical Specialization focus initiated at about 1987, and most recently what appears to be an emerging ‘Identity’ focus beginning around 1997. I refer to these as ‘foci’ rather than stages or phases, because it is clear that once engaged, the influences, intentions and values guiding each focus intersect and build upon one another as gay aging research continues to evolve. I use the following discussion of how each focus has emerged as a means of presenting a review of the literature. The following review of the literature is framed alongside the historical developments that have affected the growth of gerontology itself, as a unique field of inquiry.

**The Reconstruction Focus**

A focus on ‘reconstructing’ the image of the elder gay man began with the first direct attempts of researchers to specifically target elder gay men as a subject of study. These studies include contributions primarily in the 1970s and early 1980s by Berger (1982), Friend (1980) Kimmel (1978), Kelly (1977), Minnegrode (1976), Weinberg & Williams (1975), Francher & Henkin (1973), and Weinberg (1970).

Following the rise of gay liberation in the latter half of the decade, the early research into gay aging that followed focused on an attempt to dispel the variety of negative stereotypes about older gays and lesbians as isolated, lonely, prone to depression and oversexed (Beeler, Rawls, Herdt, and Cohler, 1999; Ehrenberg, 1996; Quam and Whitford, 1992). This research also attempted to address the absence of any focus at all on gay aging in the gerontological literature of the time (Berger, 1982; Friend, 1980; Kimmel, 1978; Kelly, 1977; Minnegrode, 1976; Francher & Henkin,
1973). These efforts were part of a much larger attempt to upset previously held beliefs of the 'homosexual' as perverse, mentally ill, criminal, or spiritual abomination.

Results from this initial set of studies generally showed that "gay men were as successful with aging as their heterosexual counterparts" (Beeler et al., 1999, pg. 33) though these were broad generalizations at best. Social support from other gay men and participation with gay organizations and institutions were also linked with greater levels of satisfaction in later life (Berger, 1982; Friend, 1980; Kimmel, 1978; Kelly, 1977; Minnegrode, 1976; Francher & Henkin, 1973). Further, was the proposition that as a result of being gay, gay men appeared to develop critical coping skills that helped ward off the effects of storms and crises associated with development, including the task of managing the stigma of aging. In particular Berger (1982) referred to this as 'Mastery of Stigma' while Friend (1986) developed his own 'Crisis Competence Theory' to describe what amounts to the same idea.

Major concerns with these initial studies involve issues that have been raised with respect to sample composition, methodology, and 'myth-making'. In terms of sample composition, it is noted that most of these researchers were reliant on very small samples that tended to be made up of white, middle to upper-middle class, urban, community attached, and 'out' gay men (Christian & Keefe, 1997; Boxer, 1997; Beeler et al., 1999, Quam et al., 1992, Humphreys & Quam, 1998). A few studies had mixed samples of gay men and lesbians, or samples that ranged in age from 16 to 79 (Kelley, 1977) but where most of the participants were under the age of 40.
Christian and Keefe (1997) observe that grouping men of different age-groups into an homogenous whole ignored important ‘cohort’ effects that could have further illuminated various aging patterns. Cohort effects are represented by the impact of socio-cultural events on a particular cohort (McPherson, 1998). For example, increased inflation in the 1970’s had a low effect on younger cohorts of working people who had flexible incomes but had a high impact on the elderly who lived with mostly fixed incomes (McPherson, 1998).

Methodologically, the homogenized classification of age cohorts was equally compounded by a lack of diversity among samples recruited for these studies. For example, it is strongly felt that most of the participants in these early samples were already politically active members of the gay community who were heavily influenced and informed by the launch of gay liberation politics and initiatives arising out of the 1960’s (Lee, 1987; Adelman, 1981). In contrast, the voice of those men not attached to the gay community, considered to be leading ‘invisible’ lives, were absent. The issues of representation in sampling has been an ongoing challenge to those studying gay populations (Quam, 1997). In reflecting back on his and other’s earlier research, Raymond Berger (1996) argues that it is in fact impossible to adequately represent the ‘older gay man’ at all in research. The problems inherent in defining ‘old’, gay’, and ‘homosexual’ discussed in the introduction to this study, the difficulty of ever knowing whether one has a ‘representative’ sample due to not knowing how many gay men are invisible within a given population, coupled with the social and cultural diversity that exists in and amongst gay men preclude this from occurring.
Thus, this earlier research is seen as having helped to 'reconstruct' the image of the older gay man away from the negative stereotypes of the past, into a man who was generally seen to be no more or less challenged by the aging process than their heterosexual counterparts. As was alluded to however, this work did little to reflect those whose voice and standpoint, as multiply affected by opposing levels of class, race, ethnicity, ability, geographic location, and detachment from the 'institutionalized' gay community, still remained invisible (Getzel, 1997). As well, given that a majority of samples involved men under the age of 65, whose results were generalized to men over the age of 65, it would appear that many of these earlier studies represent more accurately, a portrait of gay mid-life than later life.

**The Critical Specialization Focus: The Current Research on Gay Aging**

Aside from the Stonewall Riots of 1969\(^1\), I would argue that in the early 1980's AIDS emerged as the second most powerful organizing force in modern gay history. It is interesting that the gay aging literature does not really start to speak about the impact of AIDS until the late 1980's and early 1990's. If it does, it tends not to recognize the impact of AIDS on aging gay men beyond the issues of bereavement and loss that were being keenly felt at that time. The impact of AIDS however, most assuredly affected the perspective of anyone who possessed an interest in exploring

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\(^1\) The Stonewall Inn is a popular gay bar located on New York City's Christopher Street. On June 29\(^{th}\), 1969, during what was by then a routine police raid of the premises bar patrons resisted police attempts to arrest them. The resistance sparked rioting that eventually spilled out into the streets and lasted throughout the rest of the following weekend. The wide-spread publicity marking the event around the world led to this event being seen as the start of the Gay Liberation Movement (Jagose, 1996).
the lives of gay men through research. It also threatened to reverse at least two
decades of advances in gay rights. In the context of North America and
other Western industrialized nations, and in the wake of the tremendous
fear and panic that spread due to the growing stigma of AIDS, being openly gay was
once again a possible threat to employment, housing, health care, and general social
tolerance (Patton, 1986).

Some gay men who had bought into gay liberation politics surfacing out of the
late 1960's either felt more compelled than ever to declare their gay identity to
others, or conversely, as a result of a new stigma due to AIDS, found new
reason to adopt invisibility as a key strategy to the management of there
identity. Given that the focus of reconstructing the image of gay men was the
foundation upon which gay aging research began, it would appear that the
emergence and devastating impact of AIDS allowed for a much deeper level of
analysis and critical reflection to occur regarding the reality of gay lives. The
analysis of gay lives now sought to go beyond finding support through research
for basic human rights for gays and lesbians, to a surge in interest with respect
to the psychological and emotional impact of living as gay people in a
heterosexist social context. Particular interest began to emerge with respect to
the impact of heterosexism on health and wellness. As a result a new focus
seemed to find its way into the next generation of gay aging studies to emerge.

Alongside the arrival of AIDS, by the mid-1980's mainstream gerontology
was also changing and had emerged into a period of 'specificity' where increased
focus in research was placed on 'social context' and its' influence on the aging process. This included the 'discovery' and recognition of a multitude of sub-populations and aging sub-cultures that had yet to be represented in the literature (McPherson, 1998). The Critical Specialization focus with gay aging studies emerged as attempts began to both critically reflect and build upon the work of initial gay aging studies that had taken place. Researchers began to explore the heterogeneous reality of gay aging as informed by varying levels of race, class, ethnicity, geography, ability, spirituality, sexual fluidity (not just gay, but pansexual cohorts). They include research by Chappie, Kippax, & Smith (1998), Witford (1997), Van De Ven & Rodden (1997), Grube (1996), Dorfman, Walters, Burke, Harding, and Karanik (1995), Qualm and Whitford (1992), Pope & Shultz (1991), Adelman (1991), Grube (1991), and Lee (1987).

Beginning in the mid to late 1980's, this period includes the publication of research by Canadian Sociologist John Allan Lee (1987), the only researcher to date to have launched a longitudinal study specifically aimed at a sample of elder gay men. Lee became concerned with the pervasive 'Pollyanna' approach to gay aging he felt had emerged through initial studies in the area that specifically aimed to combat the negative stereotypes of older gay men. He called this a new 'mythology' of gay aging. As mentioned earlier, with the first studies into gay aging that had emerged, Berger (1982), Friend (1980), Kimmel (1978), Kelly (1977), Minnegrode (1976), Francher & Henkin (1973), results generally showed that gay men tended to report being satisfied with aging if they were involved with gay community organizations, and were open to
others about their gay identities. In contrast, Lee (1987) found that some of his 57 participants reported being satisfied with their lives though they were still quite ‘closeted’ and had few if any enduring attachments to other gay men or organizations. He also observed that in contrast to Berger (1982) and Kelly (1997) in particular, it was not having to cope with the ‘storm’ of challenges to being gay in earlier years that made gay men more competent and skilled in dealing with the aging process. Instead, Lee proposed that in the case of some of his participants it was more their ability to successfully ‘steer away’ from and avoid these storms related to gay life that constituted a feeling of satisfaction with the aging process.

As with Lee (1987), Adleman (1991) found that psychological adjustment was not associated with levels of disclosure about being gay or attachment to gay community institutions in her study of gay men and lesbians in California. Adelman found that those who waited to ‘come out’ in their mid-life or later, after having experimented sexually previously with others of the same sex, reported far higher levels of satisfaction in later years (1991). She suggests that by experimenting first, individuals take the time needed to disenfranchise themselves from a stigma-based definition of what it means to be gay prior to actually coming out.

As previously noted a focus on the heterogeneous nature of aging for gay men has been expressed in a variety of studies throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s. These have primarily focused on issues related to health and social support. The findings of these studies now constitute what is generally known about gay aging through the literature to date, and will be summarized below.
**Gay aging and health.** There are very few health care services that are specifically tailored to the needs of elder gay men (Schwartz, 1996; Connoly, 1996). It has been demonstrated that because aging is accompanied by a greater reliance on health care providers to assist with the multitude of physical changes that take place, there is a tremendous fear on the part of older gays and lesbians as to how they will be treated by their health care providers (Appleby & Annastis, 1996). For this population the reluctance to visit physician's offices or share information with respect to their identities means decreased levels of medical screening and testing that would otherwise assist in the treatment of diseases that go unreported (Schwartz, 1996). It is suggested therefore that elder gay men may be at greater risk for untreated diseases of aging than non-gays.

The availability of gay and lesbian 'only' nursing homes are next to none (Quam & Whitford, 1992; Whitford, 1997; Ehrenberg, 1996). Should an individual require admission to a care facility, the ability to control and manage their identity through strategies of social detachment are instantly eroded because of the rampant homophobia in these institutions. Once admitted, gays and lesbian persons may face the challenge of battling increased psychological isolation as they struggle to relate with others who are socially free to talk about the lives they have lived, the families they have raised, and the children and opposite sex partners for whom they have cared (Quam & Whitford, 1992).
Indeed, there are very few institutions who are set up to record and acknowledge through their admission forms, policies, and data bases the identity of gay residents (Ehrenberg, 1996). Some researchers have also observed that while nursing home staff are generally reluctant to allow sexual relations between older residents at all, they are much less likely to tolerate let alone allow sexual relations between gay residents (Quam et. al, 1992, Humphreys & Quam, 1998). While the need for gay-specific formal health care supports have been addressed to some extent as a result of AIDS, the value shift that is required for a greater sense of inclusion of gay aging needs has probably not been realised in long term care/geriatric settings.

Dorfman et. al’s (1995) study of depression rates among a sample of 108 homosexual and heterosexual men and women is important because it directly addressed the myth that sexual orientation is a predictor for decreased mental health and/or social support in later years. Of significance is that elder gay men (and lesbians) would appear to be no more likely to be depressed than non-gay men.

Gay aging and social support. Quam & Whitford. (1992) highlight how loneliness in later years is a chief concern of aging gay men. Others highlight research that affirms that social support for older adults is related to their overall level of health, psychological well being and mortality (Charles, 1996). They also note that men and women without children tend to be closer to and more reliant on their siblings than those with children. This is seen to suggest that biological family ties are important to aging gay men across the life
span. Older gay men tend to rely primarily on friends first before family in later years for their primary social support needs. (Dorfman et. al, 1995).

As mentioned earlier, involvement in gay community organizations has been linked with greater life satisfaction (Berger, 1982) although this would appear to be more the case for gay men BELOW the age of 60 (Whitford, 1997). In fact Whitford has found that it is not so much an attachment to gay community organizations more so than ‘informal relationships’ that were of value to aging gay men over the age of 65. Whitford has also found that the issue of loneliness was consistently rated highest of all concerns about aging for gay men. Chapple, Kippax, and Smith (1998) note that attachment to social support via the gay community predicts for greater levels of adherence to safer sex practices among elder gay men.

Critical of the research into social support, Ehrenberg (1996) again notes that most studies concerned with social isolation tended to have representation only from those who were attached to established gay community institutions or services. She points out the lack of attention to the coping strategies or perceptions of gays (and lesbians) who live in rural communities. She also highlights how ageism is as much endemic to the experience of social support among and between gay men, not just between gay and non-gay communities.

**Generational conflicts with elder gay men.** Canadian John Grube (1991) in his study of 35 gay men aged 40 - 92 identified a divide between what he conceptualised as two groups of elder gay men, the pre-sixties ‘traditionalists’ versus the post-sixties ‘liberationists’. He notes specifically that there has been
some resentment on the part of the ‘traditionalists’ toward younger ‘liberationists’ of modern gay life, for not respecting the realities and choices faced by their older cohorts. The traditionalists, a mostly 60 years of age and older cohort, found great difficulty in being open about their identities as gay men because the social consequences of doing so were far greater in terms of job loss, housing problems, harassment, criminal entrapment, etc. For these older gay men, success in aging was in part measured by their ability to ‘manage’ their same-sex identities by invoking strategies of silence and invisibility (Grube, 1996). In contrast, the younger cohort of ‘liberationists’ embraced the values, beliefs, and politics that demanded that to be happy meant to be ‘out’ and free of the need to live in silence with respect to a same-sex sexual orientation. Grube (1996) proposes that the differences between these two cohorts of gay men, and the context within which each developed their homosexual identities, accounts for what has been perceived as conflicts in the literature around definitions of life satisfaction. The focus on identity in Grube’s study is an important one as it set the stage for the development of further clarity through research around cohort differences in gay aging.

A key development out of the critical specialization focus in gay aging, has been that which identifies the existence of specific ‘contexts’ that account for different reports of life satisfaction, social support, and health needs of elder gay men. Again, Lee (1987) and Adelman (1991) were able to show that not all older gay men judge their lives successfully according to whether they are ‘out of the closet’ or not in their
later years. While differences between these reports have been explained on the basis of conflicts between generational cohorts of pre-sixties and post-sixties elder gay men, as was the case with the work of Grube (1996), gay aging research has still not accounted for differences in life satisfaction that have been reported from within the same generational cohort. The need to further account for these differences has informed the emergence of a third focus within gay aging research which has shifted to a focus on gay 'identity' as the locus of investigation.

The Identity Cohort Focus

In what may be the most integrative work on gay aging to date in terms of the integration of theory and applied research, sociologist Dana Rosenfeld (1999) appears to pick up where most others in gay aging research have left off. Following observations by Lee (1987) Rosenfeld asserts that researchers have ignored the intersection of history, generations, and life-course on the one hand, and the local production of identity on the other (pg. 121). Using qualitative data from her study of 37 elder gay men and women she explored the means by which an adherence to the discourse of homosexuality as 'stigma' or 'status', influenced reported definitions of success or dissatisfaction with the aging process. Rosenfeld concludes that understanding how an elder gay individual will report being satisfied or dissatisfied with the aging process is located in how each constructs their gay identity.

The significance of this new focus exists in understanding that sexual orientation does not act alone in creating a context within which an individual will experience the world. With respect to gay men, because the meaning of a same-sex
sexual orientation differs across cultures and time, so too will the impact of these
diverse meanings on the individual's perception of what they are experiencing.
Understanding the power of identity to influence lived experiences also shifts the
focus of research in gerontology away from essentialist notions of 'age' as a defining
variable of experience across different populations, for age too is seen as a social
construction that differs across cultures and history. Thus, Rosenfeld (1999)
introduces a new opportunity for gay aging research to advance its understanding of
elder gay men by seeking to identify how they themselves make sense of their
experience according to at least two different discourses of homosexual identity. I
present her theory in the next section of this chapter in greater detail, which is
devoted to a general discussion of those developmental theory's that have thus far
been considered within the gay aging literature.

**Theories of Development in Later Life**

A consistent critique of the literature relates to the lack of attention to and
integration of developmental 'theory' (Jacobs, Rasmusen, and Homan, 1999)
with gay aging studies. Especially rare has been the application of social theory
to gay aging with the exception of one sociological treatment of the subject
produced by Lee (1987b). He applied the results of his original longitudinal
research to disengagement theory, attachment theory, continuity theory, social
exchange theory, conflict theory, subcultural theory, symbolic interactionism,
stratification theory, as well as the aforementioned 'crisis competence' and
'mastery of stigma' theory's. He concluded that it is 'obvious that social exchange, stratification, and conflict approaches produced a more insightful explanation of homosexual aging than functionalist – interactionist disengagement/continuity models hitherto employed by most researchers of homosexual aging' (Lee, 1987b, pg. 59).

As well, there have been attempts at conceptualizing the 'coming out process' as a unique developmental feature of gays and lesbians (Sophie, 1985; McWirter and Mattison, 1984; Coleman, 1981; Cass, 1979). These would appear to have not gone far enough however in accounting for the impact of the coming out process on aging as a separate concern from the processes leading up to disclosure of sexual orientation to others.

There has been some attempt to pursue the application of psycho-social theories of development to elder gay men. These include references to theories proposed by Erikson (Brown, Sarosky, Cook, and Quarto, 1997; Applegate, 1997; Ehrenberg, 1996; Cornett & Hudson, 1987; Kimmel, 1978) and Levinson (Quarto, 1997; Applegate, 1997, D’Augelli and Patterson, 1995). Following a review of both Erikson and Levinon’s theories of development, Dana Rosenfeld’s theory regarding the influence of identity on gay aging in later life will be discussed below.
Erikson’s Psycho-social Stages of Development

Erikson believed that human development is dependent upon what he called the 'epigenetic principle', which states that everything that grows does so according to a blueprint, where at various stages there is a task that surfaces. The sum total of how we resolve each of eight developmental tasks or 'crises' constitute the nuances of our development through time (Cornett & Hudson, 1987). The first six stages of Erikson's theory include trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame & doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus confusion, and intimacy versus isolation. Erikson proposed that at the latter stages of the life span the 7th stage involves the 'crisis' of generativity versus stagnation, which takes place shortly before retirement age, followed in our latest years by an 8th and final stage characterized as the crisis of integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1968).

With the stage of generativity versus stagnation, Erikson postulated that our goal is to find some way to assist the next generation in learning how to lead a productive life. Should we feel however that we have done nothing to contribute to or help the next generation the result can be an enduring feeling of 'stagnation'. The 8th and final stage of our development involves the task of reviewing the life that we have led, and resolving within ourselves whether we look back with a feeling of satisfaction, or 'integrity', or feel negatively about our lives such that we emerge into a predominant feeling of despair.
Levinson’s Season’s of a Man’s Life

Psychologist Daniel Levinson and his team of researchers at Yale University conducted biographical interviews with 40 men who represented 4 occupational categories including hourly workers, business executives, academic biologists, and novelists. The resulting theory that was generated out of these interviews was published in the book ‘The Season’s of a Man’s Life’. Out of this data he proposed that from their mid teens to their mid-sixties and beyond, most men progress through an orderly sequence of ‘eras’ or ‘seasons’ that are marked by 4 to 5 year periods of ‘transition’ (Levinson, 1978). Beginning at age 17 the stages include childhood & adolescence, early adult transition, entering the adult world, age 30 transition, settling down, mid-life transition, entering middle adulthood, age 50 transition, culmination of middle adulthood, late adult transition, and late adulthood.

Similar to Erikson, periods of transition are marked by phases of growth, stability and change, and involve the resolution of key tasks throughout the lifespan. The form with which each of these tasks is resolved, constitutes a dynamically evolving ‘life structure’ for each man until his death. During the last season of man’s life, there is an effort to integrate both the positive and negative aspects of that life in order to achieve a sense of piece with the life that has been lived. Not doing so according to Levinson runs the risk of a profound feeling of depression or fear of death (Levinson, 1978).
Some have been critical of traditional 'stage model' approaches to development, such as those proposed by Erikson and Levinson, as they have been applied to gay aging (Applegate, 1997; Hostetler & Cohler, 1997). They suggest that these models are not relevant because they are based on a heterosexual life context (i.e. growth within and out of a nuclear family structure) that sees non-heterosexuals pre-determined and set up to 'fail' in terms of developmental 'tasks' (Applegate, 1997). In the case of Levinson, Applegate (1997) notes that the sample used to generate this theory only ranged in aged from 17 to 65 and has very little data that would ground the 7 pages of text he devoted to later life issues. Levinson also did not interview any self-identified gay men that he knew of, so it is difficult to extrapolate his ideas to the unique context of gay aging that exists. Finally, it is also felt that there is little evidence to support the validity of a phase model to development across all cultures, genders, and contexts in general not just in terms of sexual orientation.

While a number of gay aging studies have tried to use these arguments to dismiss the utility of theories such as those proposed by Erikson or Levinson, others have attempted to explore how these theories of development might instead have relevance to gay aging. For example, D'Augelli and Patterson (1995) suggest that despite its short-comings, Levinson's model is thus far the most effective in capturing the dynamic versus static nature of development as it may affect gay lives. Ehrenberg (1996) highlights some of the possible insights to be gained by understanding gay aging through Erikson's model. She observes
that for elder gays (and lesbians) the challenge of finding a sense of ‘integrity’ in our later years is not just dependent upon a simple life review as Erikson suggested:

*Obviously gays and lesbians may stay closeted as they grow older for the same reasons they remained so while younger, fear of alienating others, losing a job, etc., but to the extent that gays and lesbians stay closeted they may experience a sense of self-betrayal. This, in turn, makes it difficult to reconcile oneself to the end of life if one feels it has not been openly lived.* (pg. 201)

The suggestion is that a key focus of practice with elder gay men may involve a concerted attempt to assist with the development of a sense of integrity given the challenges of living with a gay identity that exist across the life span.

**Rosenfeld’s Theory of Gay Identity Cohorts**

As mentioned earlier Rosenfeld’s (1994) analysis is the basis upon which she accounts for why individuals from within the same generational cohort construct different definitions of successful aging observed previously within the literature. Her theory is insightful because it advances our theoretical understanding of gay aging through an appreciation of past and emergent historical constructions of homosexuality. I present her theory here because it is foundational to this study in answer to the question ‘How does being gay inform the lives of men over the age of 65’.

Rosenfeld identifies two discourses of homosexuality that represent two different constructions of gay identity through time. In each case, an individual achieves social ‘competence’ or ‘incompetence’ based on their adherence to either of
the two prevailing discourses of homosexuality. The first reflects the pre-1960’s
discourse of homosexuality as ‘stigma’. In this case, homosexuality is understood as a
negative aspect of one’s character, associated with perversion, pathology, and made
subject to criminal prosecution. This feature can be potentially ‘discrediting’ of the
individual. Homosexual competence can be attained however through concerted
attempts at ‘passing’ as heterosexual, and maintaining invisibility as a homosexual.

In contrast, one who adheres to the stigma based discourse on homosexuality
attains homosexual incompetence due to having been ‘discredited’ through overt
displays of the ‘stigma-associated behavior’, and failure to conceal homosexuality as a
feature of the individual’s identity. The latter are doubly-stigmatized because they are
not just rejected and frowned upon by mainstream society, but are also rejected by
the not-yet-discredited homosexual who needs to avoid contact in order to not
compromise their homosexual competence. According to Rosenfeld then, there are
two identities that emerge out of the discourse of homosexuality as stigma – the
‘discreditable’ versus the ‘discredited’.

An adherence to the post-1960’s discourse of homosexuality as ‘status’
offers the surfacing of two different competencies. In this case homosexuality is
reconstructed from ‘stigma’ to ‘status’, a feature to be celebrated as a visible,
legitimate, and credible feature of identity. It is the basis upon which gay
liberation rejected previous strategies of invisibility and discretion in the
management of a homosexual identity. In this case competence is attained by
those who view homosexuality as a credible characteristic and make their
homosexuality visible in all areas of their life, whether at work, at home, or within the community at large via disclosure. In contrast, the status based discourse views incompetence as resulting when one views their homosexuality as a credible characteristic, but is selective about who one discloses this characteristic to (ex. family only, but not work or community). I have produced a graphical representation of these identity constructs in Appendix 1.

Rosenfeld’s research bridges the work of past gay aging studies and their tendency to just describe various aspects of gay aging. Her work begins to help develop a deeper understanding of how the construction of gay identity can inform the choices and experiences of elder gay men through time. The focus on identity emerges as a key conceptual tool in understanding the diversity of gay aging experiences that can exist, as well as the means by which history will inform and transform these experiences on an ongoing basis. Social work itself would benefit from a more holistic understanding of the role that identity plays in ‘constructing’ issues for practice with gay aging men.

**Summary**

This conceptual context reviewed the concepts of social constructivist versus essentialist approaches to gay identity. This was then followed by a definition of heterosexism, homophobia, and ageism. A review of both the content and the development of gay aging research was concluded with the
presentation of three theories that have been introduced to the literature in this area.

After reviewing the literature, and understanding that it reflects an evolution of thinking about elder gay lives, there is revealed a gap in the literature that calls for further research. Specifically is the lack of attention to how the aging process for elder gay men is lived and experienced from the point of view of elder gay men themselves. While there are references and suggestions that heterosexism, homophobia and ageism influence their experiences, there is little by way of concrete evidence that would account for this. There remains therefore a need to explore how the stories of elder gay men in their own words, might help us to deepen our understanding of the reality of gay identity and aging in later life.

Also, is it possible that as opposed to phases and stages that are prescribed as a ‘typical’ process through which men can age, a focus on how a gay man constructs his gay identity will make better sense of how he and therefore we can account for their experiences in later life? From the practice perspective, social workers have little to draw on in seeking to understand more fully why an elder gay man may make the choices he does, or voices satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the aging process. This is especially challenging given my earlier reference to those who suggest that elder gay men cannot be understood according to traditional developmental models of the aging process. By focusing on the subjective constructions of gay identity that exist, this study helps to
identify how an elder gay man might make sense of the aging process from his own social location, positioning the participant as rightly the expert of his own experience. It begins to address the disconnect between what traditional approaches to gay aging research assumes is a 'reality' of gay aging that exists, as opposed to the multitude of realities that actually can exist amongst elder gay men. In pursuit of research that would begin to address this gap in the literature, the next chapter presents a discussion of the methodological design that was employed in conducting this study.
CHAPTER III - METHODOLOGY

The following is a discussion of the theory, design and methodology I used in seeking an answer to the question 'how has being gay informed the lives of men 65 years of age and over'? Based on this research question, this chapter first provides a rationale for having selected a qualitative approach to this study. I then describe those theoretical principles that helped underscore my own orientation to the research process, the means by which I proceeded with the selection of participants, as well as the gathering, management and analysis of the data that was collected.

Research Approach

The decision to use a qualitative research approach in this study was informed by my need to go beyond being able to identify experiences for the sake of description alone. More importantly, I chose this method because it is most suited for identifying and making explicit the perspective of the participant as a way of challenging dominant discourses of experience (Morrison, 1993). Minority experiences constitute an important component of what is ignored as 'reality' within dominant literature and subsequently the 'knowledge' that is made available to us about minority experiences (Morrison, 1993). This includes elder gay men who while living among us, are rendered almost invisible within the gerontological and social work literature. As mentioned this is because the
dominant discourse of aging within the literature is based upon normative heterosexual paths of development that do not acknowledge the experiences of elder gay men.

Kirby and McKenna (1989) suggest that if the goal of research is to challenge a dominant discourse, then the choice of methodology should ensure that this would take place. They suggest that qualitative research, which allows for the surfacing of the participants voice, helps to meet this challenge, especially if it is the voice of the participant whose experience is lived on the 'margins' of the status quo. Elder gay men live on the margins of the aging experience in so far as their unique issues and challenges are rarely if ever documented or addressed. Kirby and McKenna (1989) further suggest that research which is experientially based leads to greater descriptive power in the resultant analysis. Using a qualitative approach to this study has produced a rich body of narrative that speaks to the aging experience from a standpoint that while alluded to, is rarely discussed in the dominant literature.

In order to seek answers to the research question, this qualitative research design was based upon three lines of philosophical thought. These include the post-modern idea of 'social constructionism', feminist standpoint theory and the concept of hermeneutical interpretation. I have already discussed social constructionism as the basis upon which I conducted my literature review in chapter two. Here I also attempted to convey my own feeling that how each of us 'constructs' our social world speaks more accurately of how we therefore
experience and make sense of world. This was in contrast to the notion of 'essentialism' which would ignore the role that socio-historical forces play in shaping our experience of self and others. With respect to elder gay men, understanding how they have come to construct their gay identities is a pivotal goal of the research process. The ability to delineate gay identity constructions in accordance with Rosenfeld's (1999) notion of the competing discourses of 'stigma' versus 'status' is therefore central to this research design. As well as a focus on social constructivism the principles of feminist standpoint theory and hermeneutics were also central to the research process and will now be discussed below.

**Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory asserts that one's social position, or standpoint, influences that which one experiences and interprets as reality (Swigonski, 1993). This is reflected most often by those whose standpoint dominates or exerts control over what is considered 'the literature'. Feminist standpoint theory is recommended for use in social work research 'particularly in understanding the needs of marginalized populations (Swigonski, 1994, as cited in O'Neill, 1998, pg. 128).

As was mentioned earlier evidence that speaks to the experiences of elder gay men appears to elude the mainstream gerontological and social work
literature. This is because their voice has been marginalized by the dominant heterosexist bias that exists within this literature. The reality of aging as presented in the literature is a reality that reflects the values, ideas, and experiences of a dominant group to which elder gay men are marginalized and excluded. What we know of aging is therefore incomplete and informed by a limited range of experience.

A central purpose of this research is to challenge the dominance of heterosexist knowledge in the gerontological & social work literature and the reality of aging that is therefore portrayed from this perspective. O'Neill (1998) notes that feminist standpoint theory “posits that a better understanding of reality can be achieved by conducting research from the social locations of marginalized groups than from the positions of dominant groups” (pg. 131). Exploring aging from the standpoint of elder gay men may help not only to further our understanding of elder gay men themselves as a marginalized group. By virtue of their social location as such, surfacing the standpoint of elder gay men may in fact help to expand our understanding of aging as a whole.

The standpoint of elder gay men will involve more than just the identification of a ‘perspective’ per se. Instead, their standpoint will be reflected in identifying the presence of heterosexist and ageist ideologies as they have impacted the experiences of the participants. This is not to suggest however that there is an ‘essential’ standpoint that reflects the location of elder gay men in society. What is considered here however is that as a group, there is an essential
mass of individuals known as elder gay men, whose age and sexual identity converge upon one another to inform what they experience and how they make sense of themselves and others. As Rosenfeld (1999) has alluded to the standpoint of elder gay men may also represent a diversity of constructions that are based on the essential ideologies of heterosexism and ageism. Exploring this standpoint will assist in the development of knowledge that can only further our understanding of aging as a social process.

**Hermeneutics**

The research design used in this study has as its basis the interpretation of 'text' produced in part as a result of the interviews that took place with three men. The concept of 'text' however is extended to mean not only the recorded words of each participant, but as well evidence of a 'discourse' with which each participant appeared to interact, enact, and duplicate through the presentation of their experiences. Hermeneutics is the study of the interpretation of this text (Kvale, 1996). It's goal is to allow for a greater understanding of the meaning of lived experience, beyond just description alone. A philosophical assumption of hermeneutics is that experience and the means by which we convey experience to others has meaning that can be studied and interpreted. Hermeneutics is therefore at once both a philosophical idea and a methodology (Kvale, 1996).

As a method, hermeneutics involves an iterative process of identifying the story of a participant as a 'whole' as a basis of making sense of, and deepening
an understanding of the individual part’s of his story. A ‘spiral’ of activity is engaged as questions are asked of each part of the story which therefore contributes to the overall understanding of the story as a whole. In other words in order to appreciate any single part of the narrative as a story, and its’ meaning to the experience of the individual, it must be interpreted in ‘context’ with the narrative as a whole (Kvale, 1996; Van Maanen, 1997). Again, this requires a constant immersion in the data and a back and forth process of movement in analysis where the researcher moves in and out of the data, constantly linking different sections of the story to the narrative as a whole. In engaging this iterative process, or the hermeneutic spiral, contradictions are sought and inform the validity of interpretations through the analytic process. A hermeneutic ‘explication’ of the text can be an infinite process though it tends to end when a meaning has been determined that is free of contradictions from any part of the text (Kvale, 1996).

The influence of hermeneutics supported my ability to focus on the construction of identity as a unit of analysis throughout the narratives of each participant. In order to identify the general overall theme of each participants story, it became necessary to identify evidence of the competing discourses of stigma versus status-based gay identity. The interpretation of each participant’s story emanated from the presence of the identified discourse. The meaning of their experiences was then attached to the prevailing discourse that appeared to
ground their gay identity. An understanding of how each constructed their experiences as elder gay men was then possible.

**Recruiting the Participants**

This study was conducted throughout the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Three participants were recruited using a 'snowballing' technique in which the author sent email correspondence to friends and acquaintances who it was felt might have contact with men required and suitable for participation in this study. Kirby and McKenna (1989) suggest that use of the snowball technique, especially through the use of friends and colleagues works well with researchers trying to access gay and lesbian samples without having to rely on the poor response rates found as a result of advertisements and posters. This corresponds to others who have previously found success with this approach in conducting research with elder gay men (Qualm & Witford, 1992; Adelman, 1991; Bennet & Thompson, 1991; Kimmel, 1979) In all cases cited, the snowballing technique employed with each pre-dated the availability of electronic mail.

Email correspondence notified friends and colleagues of the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, along with a request to approach anyone who they felt might be suitable and/or interested in participating. In order to contribute to the confidentiality of the participants, it was made clear to the
recipient of the email correspondence that the author would not indicate whether or not a prospective participant chose to contact the author or proceeded to participate in the study.

A 'criterion-based' sampling method was employed for selecting candidates for participation. This method was chosen as it is seen as working best when trying to recruit members of a population who have all experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 1998). In this case the criteria specified that participants had to be 65 years of age or over, self-identified as 'gay', and be willing to share what experiences they considered significant in view of these two characteristics. The choice to concentrate on men versus women was informed by the knowledge that gender has been shown to be significant in the experience of gay aging (Aronson, 1999; Brown, 1998; Morris, 1997; Whitford, 1997; Gallagher, 1996; Young, 1996; Quam, 1992). Further, Swanson (1998) noted that 'qualitative research that is gender specific can assist in providing a better understanding of the aging experience for senior men'.

**The Sample**

Three men in total were recruited for this study. The choice of three men represented the commitment of the author to accept as a 'given' that an exploration of elder gay male experiences was worthwhile, in so far as it would help illustrate how practice with this population could be made more effective. By
virtue of the size of the sample used, it is not implied nor suggested that these stories should be considered representative of the general population of elder gay men. Further, the choice of a sample size of three was appropriate as the intent was not to generalize findings (Sandelowski, 1995). Again, Berger (1982) has noted that it is in fact impossible to ever find a representative sample due to the difficulty of ever knowing with absolute certainty how many elder gay men exist. Therefore, as opposed to representation and an ability to generalize, the intent of this study was to offer social work a portrait of the elder gay man beyond what mostly quantitative studies of yet been able to reveal with any depth.

Participants ranged in age from 65 to 74 and reside within the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Only one participant owned his own home. One shared a rented apartment with a partner, while the other lived in subsidized housing for senior citizens. Of the three men interviewed, two had been married for at least 20 years. Of these two, one was still legally married, though having not lived with his wife for almost 15 years, while another had been amicably divorced from his wife for over 20 years. These same two each had three children. Two participants felt that they had been gay all their life and had explored same sex activity during their childhood and adolescence. A third participant had not acted on his same sex desires until well into his adulthood. One participant contacted the author after having been referred by a friend who
had forwarded the author's original email notification. Two participants gave permission to a referring source to be contacted directly by the author.

In each case, a first contact with the individuals who expressed an interest in participating in this study was made by phone. During this first conversation I reiterated the focus of the study, the criteria for participation, the data collection and data analysis methods to be used, as well as the confidentiality provisions that would be observed throughout the duration of the study. This offered the opportunity for participants to confirm their age, and whether or not they self-described themselves as being 'gay'. Participants were then invited to negotiate a time and location in which to conduct one-to-one interviews. All participants requested that the interviewing take place in their home, which I was comfortable with. A date and time was set for this interview along with an agreement that the interview would be tape-recorded and later transcribed.

It should be noted that aside from the three men who actually went on to participate in the study, three other men contacted the writer to express an interest in participating. In two cases, the author declined participation due to these individuals existing below the age requirement of 65. In the third case, an individual had initially agreed to take part in the study, but later declined to participate as he expressed concern that as he was married and living with his wife he did not feel that the study could safeguard his anonymity, despite the mechanisms for the employment of confidentiality that were used.
The Interview Process

Once at the interview location I proceeded through a 'check-list' of tasks to be completed and information to be shared prior to engaging in the actual interview itself. This was important in order to ensure that the terms of participation in the study were completely understood by each participant, as well as to familiarize each with process that would unfold following that interview.

This 'pre-interview phase' included reviewing an information letter that reiterated the purpose and goal of the study, as well as the review and signing of a consent form (See Appendix 1 and 2 respectively for a sample of each). In order to verify that the contents and implications of the consent form were understood by each participant, the author required each to state in their own words the contents of the consent form they had just read. The author agreed to clarify any area of the consent form that had not been recalled by the participant or understood though this was not necessary in each case. On agreeing with the terms of the consent letter, copies of the consent form were each signed by the author and the participant. A copy was provided to the participant for their records, while the author retained a separate signed copy. The information letter was to ensure that aside from our initial telephone contact, each participant had as much opportunity as possible to ensure that they were acquainted with the focus of the study.
As well as reviewing and signing the consent form, participants were familiarized with the actual interview process that was about to take place. As mentioned earlier, this also included a discussion of the author's follow-up process with respect to the transcribing and analyzing of the data collected. Participants were informed that they were free to not answer any question during the interview that they might feel uncomfortable with, and that they could terminate both the interview and their participation at any point throughout the entire duration of the study. Participants were also reminded that in transcribing their interviews, pseudonyms would be used in place of any real names. It was also agreed that any other identifying characteristics such as city names, family names, or work-place locations would be disguised in their transcripts to the satisfaction of each participant.

Each was asked to consider receiving a copy of their transcript as well as a copy of the final report and all agreed to each. Further, each participant agreed that following an initial review of their transcript, the author could contact them for a follow-up interview in order to review preliminary findings, as well as to add, delete, or amend any part of the original transcript requiring alteration. Finally, participants were invited to clarify concerns they might have had. There being no further issues that required review or clarification at that point, the interview then proceeded.

As stated earlier, one-on-one interviews were conducted in the home of each participant and recorded using a hand-held Sony cassette-recorder. A one-
to-one interview allowed for a free exchange of ideas, was more personal, and in the case of men is found to be 'safer' (Swanson, 1998). Further, interviewing allowed for an open acknowledgement of the researcher’s experience and its ability to contribute to the data, a principle advocated by Kirby and McKenna (1989) that honors the authors preference that the researcher not exist as a distant, objective force in the research process.

Data were generated as a result of four main questions. They included:

1. Can you describe how it was that you came to identify yourself as 'gay'?
2. Can you describe your experience as an elder gay man now?
3. How does your age and sexual orientation contribute to your hopes and fears as you grow older?
4. Based on your experience, what should social workers or other health care professionals learn about what is most significant to you in your life?

As Denzin (1989) notes, the interview situation is an opportunity for the research participant to enact the ‘fiction’ that is their story. In this way the suggestion is that no matter what the questions that are asked, especially in the context of a semi-structured interview, participants will tend to tell their story as they have created it regardless. This is not to suggest however that no specificity in the design of research questions should exist.

The first question was used to understand how the participants made sense of their gay identity in the past and at this time in their life. Again, the
need to identify the discourse of gay identity that each has adopted, as a means of understanding how each made sense of their experiences was a basis for having each participant provide an answer to this question. The second question was to ensure that as age was a focus of this study, that those issues and experiences that were reflective of their current life stage could be revealed. The third question was asked in order to determine whether not just the past or present, but as well the future was relevant to the means by which each participant constructed what was relevant to their experiences. Finally, as this research was directed at enhancing social work practice, the fourth question was posed in an attempt to specifically tie the stories of each participant to social work practice directly.

At times, instead of asking a question exactly as worded above, I would reword the questions in a way that suited the context of dialogue that had preceded its introduction. Probes were used to illicit further data when it was felt that either the participant did not understand a question that had been asked, or was not able to answer. Examples of probes were 'can you say a little more about that' or 'how do you make sense of that'? At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to share any thoughts they felt had not been covered by the interview up until that point prior to the tape recorder turning off. Participants were encouraged to discuss any aspect of their life they felt had relevance to the question of how being gay had informed their lives. Again, I began by reviewing the process of how each experienced the evolving
awareness of their gay identity and where they each felt they were at with this today. My assumption was that the presence of a gay identity would inform their experience and outlook, though I was open to hearing, as I did, that for some the dimension of age itself had far more bearing on their day to day experiences than that of their gay identity.

Follow up interviews took place again in the home of each participant. Prior to this interview, I provided a copy of a transcript from the first interview with a request for any feedback, additions, or deletions they wished to make. As is discussed in the section on ‘credibility’ this offered a way to strive for increased validity in the interpretation of the data. The interview format for the second interview consisted of my asking the participant to state anything that appeared to be ‘left over’ from the first interview, while also clarifying any information that was absent from the original transcript.

**Data Management**

Following each interview one duplicate of each tape-recording was prepared in the event that the original was accidentally destroyed or misplaced. Each of the interviews were then transcribed by the same, paid transcriptionist. Instructions to the transcriptionist were to transcribe the recording verbatim, including any pauses, ‘false starts’, or other notable utterances like ‘uh’s or uhms’. The purpose of this verbatim transcription was to ensure that when reviewing the
transcript, any unusual points of hesitation, reflection, or stagnation could be noted. On receiving copies of the transcribed interview, I reviewed the transcript while listening to the audio-taped recording several times to verify that the recording was verbatim. In one case, due to the nature of the participants voice, there were some areas that were not audible by either the transcriptionist myself and were left blank as indicated by a straight underscore of approximately 7 to 9 characters in length. Any identifying information was omitted or changed. The second interview offered an opportunity to receive direct feedback from each participant with respect to any additions, deletions or amendments each may have wished to make.

**Data Analysis**

A ‘holistic-content’ approach to narrative analysis was used in this study based upon the ideas of Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zibler (1998). This supported my belief that it is only through a study of the narrative that we can gain access to how the ‘inner world’ of the individual might be informed by their experience in the larger world around them (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zibler, 1998). This also reinforces my belief that the search for ‘identity’ is the primary center of analysis in understanding how individuals will come to construct their experiences. Lieblich et. al (1998) state “The story is one’s identity, a story created, told, revised, and retold throughout life. We know or discover ourselves,
and reveal ourselves to others, by the stories we tell” (pg. 7). This is not to suggest however that the story that is told and then interpreted represents an ‘essential’ portrayal of a point of view, nor that it is impossible to organize conceptually ideas across stories from individuals like elder gay men, who have some experiences in common. Instead, the story is seen as a construction made around a ‘core set of facts or life events’ that still allows for individuality to surface in the way in which it is expressed (Lieblich et. al, 1998 pg. 8).

Employing the use of a holistic-content based narrative analysis allows for an explication of both the unique standpoint of a group while at the same time honoring the nuances of the individual who exists and constructs himself as a result of the unique context of that group. In accordance with this approach to narrative analysis I reviewed each transcript several times in order to generate an understanding of the ‘foci’ of the story, looking for a global pattern, theme, or issue to emerge, that in some way represented each participant’s story as a ‘whole’ (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber: 1998). I then reviewed the transcript to determine contradictions as they emerged by way of departure points from the main foci, as a means of challenging the authenticity of my interpretation of the main foci itself. The foci were then ‘positioned’ in reference to the research question ‘how can being gay inform the lives of men 65 years of age and over’.

At this point I attempted to draw out those dimensions of each participant’s experience that might speak to the research question via the ‘context’ of the stories from which they surfaced. I was interested in allowing for
the stories of the participants to be heard, while at the same time setting the
stage for a discussion of relevant issues related to practice with this population
later on. Large bodies of text were isolated that in any way spoke to the four
main questions of the interview. I recorded when they emerged with respect to
the global context of the interview itself. I wanted to both appreciate and give
voice to the experiences of the participants ‘within context’ to the story that each
told. The relevance that specific experiences had for each participant was given
more weight when it was allowed to be presented in its original context.

Following an analysis of the data, I engaged in a ‘retelling’ of each
participants story in order to convey a sequence of events in the chronological
order in which they occurred. This was to provide the reader with an
understanding of the general set of life events experienced by each participant.
This then allowed for the identification of significant experiences in context to
when and where they appeared. Following the second interview, each
participant was provided a copy of the ‘retelling’ of their story, and changes were
made according to any feedback they gave in response to this.

Finally, themes emanating from each story were identified. Each theme
was identified when it appeared that within the overall story of each participant,
a thread or pattern of experience emerged as central to that participant’s overall
story. For example, when it appeared that religion and the language of religion
were a recurring presence in the way that Roger conveyed himself and his story,
it was decided that this represented a theme and was therefore discussed as
such. These themes were also discussed with respect to their relationship with
the literature on gay aging that exists, as well as for the implications for social
work practice that emerged. The latter will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Credibility

Maxwell (1996) describes several risks to the validity of analysis in
qualitative data. Of these he mentions the risk to 'interpretation' whereby the
author imposes his/her agenda on to what has been said. As a strategy to guard
against this, some suggest conducting 'member checks' (Creswell, 1998;
Maxwell, 1996). Member checks involve 'systematically soliciting feedback about
one's data and conclusions from the people you are studying' (Maxwell, 1996 pg.
94). As mentioned earlier, I conducted a follow-up interview with each
participant, where their original transcript was reviewed, as well as my
preliminary findings. Further, as was also mentioned, I provided each participant
with a copy of 'their story' in order to check that the interpretations contained
within each were seen as valid for each participant. The ability to 'member check'
assisted greatly in determining whether my interpretations of their data were
correct or not.

In order to review specific findings within each transcript, the author
became concerned that there may have been limited opportunity to assess the
value of these findings reliant purely on the author's thoughts and member
checking alone. The author therefore employed the use of 'peer review and
debriefing’ in order to provide an external check of the research process that was used (Creswell, 1998). In this case the author consulted regularly with a peer conducting qualitative research in another area, to review ideas generated from the analysis, and to seek alternative explanations for these ideas, or alternative ways of viewing the results other than what the author had presented to this peer. This was helpful in keeping the author focused on the research question, instead of falling vulnerable to the distractive merits of wanting to deconstruct areas of each transcript not relevant to this study.

Finally, with respect to another aspect of validity, the writer has employed the use of a ‘rich, thick description’ (Creswell: 1998) to ensure that the reader has the opportunity to consider whether this research is ‘transferable’ to other settings. In keeping with the author’s commitment to introducing the ‘voice’ of elder gay men into the gerontological literature, verbatim quotes have been used in large quantity with ample opportunity to hear directly from the participants themselves about their experiences. The hope is that the stories that are contained are not merely just described, but organized in such a way as to promote a deeper level of understanding with respect to the experience of living as an elder gay man.

**Summary**

The Methodology used for this study allowed for an analysis of how being gay can affect the lives of men 65 years of age and over. Feminist standpoint
theory supported my need to appreciate the unique social location of each of the participants of this study, in so far as this standpoint spoke to the experience of aging. The use of a holistic content approach to narrative analysis, aligned with the hermeneutic process of circling in and out of the data ensured that the themes that were identified within and across all stories were not devoid of the context in which they were connected. Finally, by engaging the participants in more than one interview, and providing them with the opportunity to review my findings related to their stories allowed for a higher level of credibility with the findings that were generated. This ultimately supported the authenticity of the stories told from the standpoint of each participant, as well as the results of the findings that are offered in the following chapter.
CHAPTER IV – FINDINGS

Introduction

The following is a presentation of findings based on the three interviews conducted for this study. For each story, I introduce the participant with a brief description of their chronological life history. As part of this introduction I attempt to orient the reader to the general focus of their story. Following this, I present a ‘re-telling’ of the stories in order to provide a contextual understanding of how each participant has come to construct their respective identities as gay men. Through the re-telling of these stories, I include the identification of key themes that speak to the means by which the construction of each identity has informed their lives as men 65 years of age and over. In this way, the salience of gay identity is merged with an understanding of aging as a complementary force in the construction of each participant’s identity as an elder gay man.

Direct quotations are used frequently throughout each story. Whenever I have included these, their quotes appear verbatim in the form of indented italics. Should the nuance of a word or phrase within a particular quote run the risk of being ambiguous or somehow not immediately apparent, I have attempted where possible to use non-italicized ‘square-brackets’ in order to provide clarity for the reader. The following then are the stories of Edward, Roger, and George.
Edward's Story: Pushing Clouds Away

Edward is a 71 year old man, born in the 1930's within the racially segregated south of the United States. His mother was a laborer who worked many jobs to support Edward, his younger brother, and his alcoholic father. The family was heavily entrenched within the Southern Baptist religious community in which Edward was raised. At the age of 18 he joined the Air force where he met and married his wife with whom he later had three children, including a son and two younger daughters. After leaving the Air Force, Edward worked as the middle-manager of a communications company prior to retiring at the age of 65. Just prior to retiring Edward and his wife separated when Edward decided to fully claim his gay identity. In the early 1990's Edward met Mark, now aged 45 who has been his partner ever since and with whom he now lives.

Both of our interviews together lasted approximately 2 ¼ hours. I was struck by two things when I arrived at Edward's home for the first interview. First was an enormous photographic portrait of a US Marine that hangs immediately inside the doorway to his apartment. It is unavoidable to anyone who enters. Second, was the noticeable southern drawl in Edward's speech as he spoke to me, and the fact that this seemed to inject a unique sense of character into the story that he shared with me.

Edward's journey from the harsh social climate in which he first became aware of his same-sex orientation, to his present day life as an openly gay man allows us to witness the transformation of a sexual identity from that of a
'stigma' to a 'status'. Throughout the course of our two interviews, I was taken with the extent of the cultural and psychological heterosexism that Edward was forced to deal with at such an early age. I was also made aware of the resilience of Edward's spirit in finally being able to claim his identity as a gay man in later life. As an elder gay man his experience of aging appears to be secondary to that of his life as a gay man. He shared many thoughts about how being gay has informed his life, particularly with respect to health care, religion, life satisfaction, family, and his relationship with Mark.

**Recounting Edward's Story.** At the beginning of our first interview, Edward had trouble talking about his childhood stating "I really didn't have a childhood. Terrible things happened that I would just as well like to forget". He made sense of this by agreeing to reach back to what he could remember and felt comfortable sharing with me. His story begins with an early awareness that something was 'different'.

Edward recalls being aware of his attraction for other males quite early in his life. He remembers first interpreting these feelings as 'normal'.

*I knew that I was gay when I was probably seven or eight years old. I didn't know what gay meant then, but I knew I was different and I knew that I was attracted to other boys. And during that time of course I participated in activities that are normal for boys at that age, to experiment with each other [sexually] and play with each other and this type thing.*
Edward recalls how he gradually internalized the negative stigma attached to his same-sex orientation. It is interesting to note that during the interview, as Edward increasingly reconnected with this experience, he actually changes the terminology he uses to refer to himself from 'gay' to 'queer', the latter term carrying a negative connotation.

I began to have lots of feelings about being uh, broken or defective and, you know, having something wrong with me instead of accepting it as who and what I was. So, I just knew that it meant I was queer, but didn't know how to deal with it other than to keep it internalized in myself, knowing it myself but not being able to discuss it or tell anyone else. I was just a kid, you know?.

Compounding the early need to guard against anyone finding out that he was queer, were other pressures in his childhood that he recalls vividly.

My dad was an alcoholic, so we grew up in a malfunctioning home. You know a home that was full of controversy because of my Dad's drinking. My mother had to work all the time to support the family and bring money into the house in order for us to have a place to live, have food and clothing. . . Consequently I had to become like a father to my brother. I was responsible for him, and had to look after him. And if he got into
trouble I was the one who was punished, not him. So it was my responsibility to monitor his activities and keep him out of trouble.

Edward's need to protect his mother from any more shame than she had already suffered due to Edward's father, came to echo the personal anguish he experienced in needing to hide the shame that he felt within himself.

*The reason why I never got in trouble was I never wanted to embarrass my Mother. I was embarrassed to bring people to my home because we were poor and I didn't, you know want people to see where I lived. I was afraid to do things or take chances, or do things that other kids did because I didn't want to embarrass my Mom or be an embarrassment to the family in any way. So I did everything I could to avoid people, or having them come over or seeing how everything really was inside our house.*

Feeling 'broken', 'defective', and living in a 'malfuctioning home' consolidated within Edward the nurturance of a negative self-concept. In an emotional part of our second interview, I was taken aback by the extent to which this negative self-concept even projected itself onto the feelings Edward had about his appearance at the time.

*I thought I was ugly, I thought I was unattractive. . . I had these negative feelings about myself. I just felt I was not a nice person to be around,*
afraid to smile even because when I grew up as a young boy my teeth were all rotten in the front. I felt ugly inside and I know it showed.

I asked Edward if looking back he remembered how he learned to feel badly about being 'queer'. He answered almost immediately, citing the compounding influences of the Southern Baptist Church within which he was raised, the psychiatric profession, as well as his exposure to the heterosexist behavior of his peers and community.

Well, to me, it's because I attended church regularly that it became an issue that I was queer, and it was not normal. Back when I was a young man, if they found out you were gay they would send you to the psychiatrist or whatever and they would run you through these shock treatments and everything and they were all set to change you, and say you know, this is a problem you are sick in the head, and we, we got to cure this... So, I just knew I was queer and I put up with all the jokes and remarks they used make.

Edward's exposure to the forces of cultural heterosexism began to express itself as well after joining the military at the age of 18.

I was extremely afraid of being discovered that I was queer, because had I been discovered when I was in the Air Force I of course would have
been given a dishonorable discharge and it probably would have ruined my life. So I just didn’t do anything all that time with anyone. Not once.

The stigma attached to being queer led to Edward’s decision to marry shortly after joining the air-force. He tellingly portrays the conflict he experienced with the decision, a clear divide between the need to answer to the cultural pressure to be married, versus living according to the truth of who he really felt he was.

_I met her at First Baptist Church and at that point in time I knew I was queer and I felt that I shouldn’t get married. I was torn between what I should do for myself and what I should do for the rest of the world._

He rationalized his decision to marry by hoping that marriage would put an end to his same-sex desires.

_I said to myself you know, I guess I’ll fall in love with my wife. You know, I’ll get married and these feelings will go away and I can be straight and live a normal life._

Edward recalls that he was faithful throughout his marriage until all three of his children were full grown and had moved out of the house. At that time, he describes how “those feelings I had suppressed just gained in intensity and I couldn’t ignore them anymore”. When a reassignment at work allowed him to
travel to different cities, he began to explore his sexual desire for other men. In his mid-50’s Edward fell in love with a man who quite soon after rejected him. His anguish at this rejection, and the obvious change in his mood at home that resulted culminated in the eventual disclosure to his wife that he was gay. To his surprise, his wife only asked that he not leave her, and that they carry on as before as if they were a typical married couple.

The effect of having married a man that she thought was heterosexual may have had more of an impact on Edward’s wife than her initial response to his disclosure would have indicated. In January of 1983 she unsuccessfully attempted suicide through an overdose of medication. It was on this occasion that he found cause to disclose to his children that he was gay in an attempt to account for why his wife had been so unhappy.

Edward helped her in her physical recovery from the suicide attempt. With an agreement that things were simply not working in their marriage, Edward moved out of their home shortly after this incident, only to return again and not make a final move to leave his marriage until 6 years later in 1989. The final decision to move in 1989 arrived after Edward decided to explore why he seemed to continually compromise his own happiness by trying to meet the needs of others in his life.

I began to seek ways of dealing with what I was going through and I joined a support group for codependency which I attended every week. I found out there were a lot of other people who were just like me that had
the same feelings. Some were gay, some were straight, some had other issues in their life and uh, it was an intense recovery program that helped me deal with my sexuality, with my marriage, with the fact that I was a codependent who was attracted to people who were users . . . I realized that because I was gay, things had to change if I was going to be happy. it gave me the courage to make the final decision to move out and separate myself from my wife.

By this time, Edward, was in his mid-sixties. Through the support group he realized that his need to always focus on pleasing others was based in part on his earlier decision as a young man to prevent people from focusing on himself, and the truth of who he really was. The support group was also a turning point for Edward as it was the point at which he began to challenge the stigma of being ‘queer’. We see this again through the subtle but significant choice in the above quotation where Edward now starts referring to himself as ‘gay’, not queer.

His contact with men were through friendships he had developed, as well as through casual sexual contacts he was able to make, though he no longer felt guilty about the latter. In trying to protect himself from any further consequence of ‘living for others’ he lost interest in his desire to seek a significant relationship with another man.
I had reached the point where I had put up fences, I had put up space, I had put up alarms systems and nobody was going to get close to me again unless I wanted them to be close. I was tired of hurting myself and everyone else. So that's another thing I had done. I put up all these defense systems to keep people from getting too close to me.

It was through his introduction to Mark that Edward for the first time was able to safely assert his own needs within the context of a relationship. After several months together Edward discovered that Mark was from Canada, temporarily on a student visa, and would eventually have to leave to return to Canada. It gave Edward a sense of urgency in considering what place Mark should have in his life, and given all that he had gone through, the decision understandably did not come easily.

It was difficult for me to make the decision to move to Canada. I mean I had to do a lot of thinking about that. And I had no idea what lay ahead. It was like uh, a mystery out there. You know here was someone who wanted me in his life, and I wanted him in my life, and the only way that could happen was for me to come here and live... I finally realized that I had found someone in my life who wasn’t a user, who didn’t want to take me for everything that I had, or steal from me, or take whatever they could get and run. I had somebody in my life who really cared for me and loved me. And that’s who I had been looking for all those years that I got
involved in the unhealthy relationships with other gay men, while I was still living with my wife, and after I had left my wife.

If one wonders why a man in his late 60's chooses to leave not only his family, including three children, and several grand children, as well his country in order to live with another man, Edward helps us understand this in reflecting on the meaning that his relationship with Mark has for him. In this, we see that the decision to move to Canada was not only an answer for his longing for a loving relationship, but also served as the opportunity to affirm how he had come to reconstruct a stigma-based homosexual identity, into a newly claimed gay identity that could express itself positively in his life.

What I have discovered is that I am Jim. I am a very loving, caring person, that I am a giving person, that I am gay, I have accepted the fact that I am gay. And that is the, I guess the one step that I had to take was to admit to myself that I was gay, and take responsibility for that, and also live my life as a gay person and that is what I am doing now is living my life as a gay person. . . I have someone in my life who loves me, and I love him. And I'm completely comfortable with who I am, and I have no more of those guilt feelings that I used to have. I have no more shame or anger about things that happened in my life that I had no control over, that I had to deal with and set aside and get on with the here and now. . .
I am comfortable with who I am, and what I am, and who I am with, and where I am. I am happier than I have ever been.

Today, Edward seems to spend a lot of time looking back on his life. At times he connects with the impact that growing up in a heterosexist atmosphere had on his development as a gay man. In having positively reconstructed his identity, Edward’s review of his life appears also to involve an ongoing reconstruction of those forces that had initially had a negative impact on him. He sees a different ‘Edward’ now than he was able to in the past.

When I look back on pictures of myself as a young boy and a young man, I think I was actually a really nice looking, attractive young man, but I just never felt that at the time because I had all these negative feelings about myself I couldn’t get rid of.

He reflects back on the choices that he made in his life, and wonders how things might have been different were he to have claimed his gay identity earlier. It is as if he is searching for a sense of integrity with the choices he made.

There are a lot of things that I would like to have done as a gay person when I was younger. In other words, had I been able to come out and find another gay person in my life and establish a relationship even before my children were grown. You know I may have been willing to do that. I
don’t know. I look back and I wonder why did I wait until my kids were
gone and it was just my wife and me before I decided to make a change
in my life? So you know I took the responsibilities that I had assumed and
did the best that I could with them and all my kids did grow up to be
beautiful people and have beautiful families. So I feel that I was a good
Dad, even though I was secretly a gay Dad. I was still a good Dad and
took care of my family and provided for them and saw that they got an
education and, and uhm assumed my responsibilities. But in so doing, I
lost sight of who I was and at a very late age in my life had to deal with
that and face the issue and do something about it which I consider that I
had the courage to do that, you know it took courage for me to do that.
Cause I knew that it was going to hurt someone and most assuredly
would hurt my wife, you know and, and I am sure it did. I feel bad about
that, but that is just the way it was.

He has also found time to reconstruct the place of religion and the Bible in
his life. He is especially vocal about this with his daughters about their faith-
based view of homosexuality.

My daughters still have a great deal of difficulty with my being gay, uh,
because they are involved in a very devout charismatic religious group
and um, so to them they’re the type of people that say you know, the
bible says you will go to hell because you are gay. One thing I have come
to believe is that although Paul the Apostle had a lot of things to say about homosexuality and there are some things in the old testament about it, Christ himself never said a word about it, not a word. Never dealt with the issue, never came up. And so I just tell them you know, you believe what you believe, I believe what I believe. I’m happy, and you can be happy, but you know, don’t be judging me. These religious groups are all screwed up and they need to get their act together and get back to Christianity and live a Christian life according to Christian principles and forget about religion. And I tell them, religion is a blight on the world, which it is. What’s all the fighting about in the world? It’s religious groups who hate each other and they have been taught to hate each other ever since they were children.

Though he loves them very much, Edward’s relationship with his daughters have been strained due to their difficulty in accepting his identity as a gay man. As well as with his partner Mark however, it is Edward’s son who has affirmed that at 71, Edward still has a role as a Father and is a part of his family.

E: My son and his wife are very accepting of Mark and me and we can go and spend a week or two weeks at their home and they treat both of us just like we are family We’re welcome in their home and they accept me as a gay dad who has a partner and they accept Mark as like part of the family.
I: What does that mean to you now?

E: It means a hell of a lot. It means a hell of a lot. And, it makes my son very special to me, not that my daughters aren't, because they both are, but uh, my son is very special because he has accepted me the way I am.

It was at this point that Edward informed me that the prominent photograph of the US Marine that hangs in his hallway, is in fact a portrait of his son, who is now the married father of three, working as a State Patrol Officer in the northwestern United States.

Though he has found a positive sense of self in his later years, Edward in some ways shows that he is still very much concerned about the negative impact he might have on others. He expresses this through his thoughts about the future of his health and its implications for his relationship with Mark.

I don't want to be burden to Mark and I don't want to be a burden to anybody else. You know, if I lose my mobility, and end up in a wheelchair, um, I would just as soon, you know they stick me someplace where I'm away from everybody I know and I'll just deal with it on my own so that I don't, I don't cause pain or problems with people I love or what have you.
Edward’s happiness today is very much tied to the relationships in his life, his security as a gay man, and the ability to maintain his health.

*I’m happier than I have been in my whole life. Because I’m content with who I am and happy with who I am and happy with who I am with, happy with my life. I’ve got a good income, I have my health, and I have friends and family who love me, you know for who I really am.*

Based on all that he has been through, Edward is clear about what is essential to being content in his life.

*To me, it’s the acceptance of being gay and being able to live your life as a gay person, instead of living your life the way somebody else or some other group wants you to live it even though you are gay. Because I did that for years and it was so stressful... I can’t tell you how much it meant when I finally just accepted who I was because it was like everything became clear, there were no more clouds, it was like pushing clouds away. When you can be yourself, be who you are and what you are that to me is what makes life livable.*

What is interesting about Edward’s story is that ‘age’ or ‘aging’ seems to elude how he makes sense of his experience. This is perhaps due to Edward’s not feeling that he has yet to experience himself as ‘aging’ and of equating being ‘old’ with an experience of physical changes that he has begun to experience.
I don't feel old, I know I’m older and I hate to use the word old because old is just not what I am. I know I’m older than I was ten years ago, but I, I don’t feel older other than I don’t have as much energy, I don’t have as much spring in my step as I used to have. I can’t take off running like I used to. But, I still feel good about myself and good about my life and my health.

These days, Edward spends his time keeping house, running errands, while also finding time for socializing with friends, mostly through a local group for senior gay men. Edward also finds time once a week to volunteer in the library of a local Gay and Lesbian Center, work that is important in helping him ‘give back’ to others who are currently struggling with their own identities. This year Mark graduates from a training program. They plan to move down to the US together so that Jim can be close to his children and grand-children.

Roger’s Story: I have survived

Roger was born in a small town in Eastern Canada, the youngest of 7 children. He had two sisters and allows 4 brothers, two of whom were gay. His mother died when he was six years of age. The only memory that he was able to offer of her was that he was devastated when he lost her. It was his father who raised the family as a single parent, and of few individuals is Roger so emphatic - his father was ‘the single most important person I ever met in my entire life’.
At the age of 19, Roger joined the Air Force. He left a few years later and relocated to Vancouver. He has held a variety of jobs, the last of which involved co-ownership of a business with his partner at the time Danny. Today, Roger lives in a down-town senior’s residence and spends much of his time gardening, and socializing with a number of young friends. At the time of our interviews, Roger had just turned 65, and was anxiously awaiting receipt of his first Canada Pension cheque. His friends held a party for him recently in anticipation of its arrival.

Both of our recorded interviews together lasted approximately 3 1/2 hours. They were held in the privacy of his apartment. During the first of these, I was informed within the first 15 minutes that Roger is now in his 25th year of recovery from Alcoholism. Both his Father and Danny, his lover of 22 years, died within months of each other. I also learn that he suffers from Seasonal Affective Disorder which forced an early retirement at age 60, and that one of his brothers was murdered in 1996. As well he shares that another one of his brothers and that same brother’s son had both died in the week prior to our interview. His story is as much about learning to cope with psychological isolation that results from heterosexism as well as learning to survive multiple losses, as it is a reflection of how being gay can inform life at the age of 65.

Roger demonstrates how it is that the construction of a gay identity as stigma serves as a valid path to adapting to the many struggles he has had to face as a gay man. His story also allows us to understand that the support of
family and parents alone, are at times not enough to mitigate against the long term effects of having to live within a heterosexist and ageist society. But the real message of Roger's story was difficult to identify. It wasn't as easy as simply accepting, as he said, 'The three most important events in my life were meeting my Father, joining AA, and reading the book Sermon on the Mount. This is because unlike Edward, Roger's story was fractured, completely circular in structure, moving back and forth through various time periods and events in his life. He was tangential and placed an emphasis on a number of smaller 'stories' that at first appeared to have little to do with the three events that were most important to him, nor with the questions I asked of him given the focus of this study. It was through Roger however that choosing to actually listen to and focus on what he was actually saying, versus what I was looking for, held important answers to how being gay had in fact powerfully informed his life.

Recounting Roger's Story. As with Edward, Roger was aware that he was attracted to other boys at an early age. He similarly framed this awareness as 'normal'.

I have been gay all my life. Oh God, since I was about seven. Well, I always, I thought it was a normal part of growing up. The sexual experimentation started in about grade seven or grade eight and went on from there.
Roger recalled that as he grew up, there were times when he was the target of heterosexist insults, mostly because he was effeminate and "not like the other boys". Yet, while knowing that he was being insulted because he was perceived to be gay, he did not know what the actual words used to insult him meant.

R: *When I was a teenager I was called a 'gear box'.*

I: *Gear box?*

R: *And I have no idea why, but you know, if somebody was gay they'd say 'he's a gear box'. I don't know what that meant.*

I: *That was the common term?*

R: *Back in the late 40's, early 50's you were a 'gear box'.*

I: *Any idea of why 'gear box' was used?*

R: *None whatsoever.*

I: *Was it considered derogatory?*

R: *Oh, it was very derogatory, oh yeah.*

The hostility that Roger was exposed to in his childhood, followed him as he chose to join the Air Force at age 19. Again, as with Edward, the decision was practical because he could not afford a university education on his own. Away from his family for the first time in his life, he clearly felt alone and looks back with some regret at the decision to join, and the personal consequences of having done so.
Uh, when I was in the Air Force it became really, really tough. I mean it was the dumbest move I ever made because here all of a sudden I am it, the only one [gay man] among hundreds and hundreds of men,

Hello??!!???. Uhm, I know they knew [that he was gay], and uh, it was like 'keep that one [Roger] away from me'. Yeah, and for me it was a form of purgatory. It was really awful. . . I never had one drink or smoked one cigarette before that. When I left I was a chain-smoking alcoholic (laughter).

I explored why it was specifically that Roger felt he drank. It is clear that he felt isolated from a tangible support system, and had no place to turn that could accommodate his life as a gay man.

I: You mentioned alcohol was a mask and I am wondering what it was that that mask needed to cover up.

R: Loneliness. Incredible loneliness. That uh, it was only after I really sobered up that I looked at just how lonely I was. It was incredible loneliness. Look where I was [Air Force] uh, it was the, people really could not understand someone like me.

After leaving the Air Force, Roger relocated to Vancouver where he has lived ever since. As he settled into his new home, the verbal insults in his childhood and the hostile atmosphere that Roger was exposed to while in the Air
Force was gradually accompanied by the realization that there were practical dangers associated with being gay.

*Out here in the, in the well 50's and early 60's you got killed very easily if you were gay. I had friends beaten up, one brutally murdered, stabbed a zillion times with a butcher knife. No one was ever convicted. A fellow got beat up while walking his little poodle on Kitsilano beach and lost an eye and the perpetrators were fined $25 for 'disturbing the peace'.*

It also appears that for Roger, there was also the need to be wary of the zealous anti-gay sentiment on the part of the Vancouver police in the 1960's.

*I know that I was in the police 'blue book', as it was, which was a list of all the perverts in town. We were considered perverts at that time and I was listed in there because when this man was murdered, they found pictures of me sitting on his knee. So I was immediately put into this, uh, blue book. Yeah, in those days they kept track of the perverts.*

He met his partner 'Danny' in the early 1960's, after which they lived together for the next 22 years. It was through Danny that Roger confronted his alcoholism and initiated his recovery through AA. But it was also through a unique feature of Danny that Roger would have to confront the overt presence of heterosexism within their relationship.
Following an admission to a psychiatric unit, Danny was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. They had only been together a few years. Roger recalls the impact of Danny’s illness and the unique dynamic that entered their relationship as a result.

R: The longer he was off his medication, the crazier he got and the harder it got on me. He was dual personality so I distinguish between ‘Danny’, who I love, and ‘Daniel’ who was the other personality. Daniel didn’t like me at all. He hated me.

I: He actually was somebody else?

R: Oh, totally, the eyes changed, everything. He could clear a room when he changed (laughter).

I: Was ‘Daniel’ gay like Danny?

R: No. That was the problem. And that’s why he hated me (Laugh).

Roger for the most part coped alone with Danny’s illness. As he notes, many of their friends ‘became afraid, and stopped calling after awhile’. Compounding this were subtle hints that homophobia may have interfered with the ability of the mental health workers assigned to Danny to take seriously Roger’s role as his primary caregiver and partner.

They took him off his medication and refused, literally refused to assist him. I told them you will kill him and they treated me as if I was just a
bother. They did not acknowledge our relationship, they did not acknowledge 22 years of partnership.

Roger recalls that after taking Danny to the hospital with slashed wrists resulting from what he described as a 'routine psychotic break' in May of 1986, he had pleaded with the team to keep Danny in hospital for longer than they were willing to. As he recalls, his advice to the team not only appears to have fallen on deaf ears, but as well was ignored by the attending psychiatrist. The resulting decision was fatal.

Got him to the Psych Ward, told them don’t give him his clothes, he’ll run away, he’s done it before. . . the doctor phoned me and said he had been given his medication and it was his clinical decision not to have him return to the [Care Team]. So, he left and ran away. They all had degrees, all I had was experience.

The day that Danny disappeared was only two months after the death of Roger’s father, from which he was still recovering. Danny’s body was not found until four months later in September. An inquest revealed that Danny had committed suicide and died in a park.

Roger was understandably grief stricken and deeply angered as a result of his feeling isolated, ignored and invalidated as Danny’s partner and caregiver. For the next 4 years, he somehow continued however to manage the business
he and Danny had established until a critical episode in 1991. He had fallen into a severe depression which by then had completely incapacitated him. He described himself as having reached 'the end'. Roger is so clear in his narrative that based on the description of the experience alone, it was as if he himself had died.

*I went in the space of a year, from President of a successful, respected company to welfare. I just gave up. And what my doctor couldn’t understand, when the suicide and everything came in ‘86 [4 years prior] was that I never got sick. Well, it hit me in 1991 and I ended up in a clinical depression. I would wake up in the middle of the night and I couldn’t move. I couldn’t move. My entire body was locked and I just had to meditate. Like every muscle, I couldn’t move my legs, it hurt too much and I had to meditate to get to sleep. For almost a year I flat-lined.*

Making matters worse, as a result of losing his business and not being able to work, his monthly income was reduced to just under $500.00 a month, he lost his home and was living 'hand to mouth'. For Roger, 'there was no lower than this'. He managed to maintain his sobriety throughout.

A year later brought what Roger describes as the moment of his 'rebirth'. Roger said that it arrived after reading 'the most important book I have ever read in my entire life'.
It was called the Sermon on the Mount by Emmett Fox and it is a word by word analysis of Matthew 5, 6 and 7, Sermon on the Mound. I have never even wanted to be religious, never been a church-goer. But as I read this, everything became very clear to me, who I was, what my purpose was.

Everything I had heard at AA, the 12 steps became perfectly clear what I was supposed to do, how I was supposed to do it, everything. And in the back of it is a word by word analysis of the Lord’s prayer and what it really means and my only comment was, why didn’t somebody tell me this a long time ago?

With the help of medication, and a new outlook on life, he was able to climb out of his depression. He states that with the help of this book he first came to grips with his past, and then decided on a strategy for moving on with the present.

I suddenly realized after 22 years that I was half a person. The other half, being Danny, uhm, I finally had an invitation to be human. Where before concentrating on career, success, and money and all those things has a cost to your humanity. . . You’ve got to be reborn with everything that was. You are reborn by the renewing of your mind. Let go of all your old ideas, let go of all your resentments, get rid of all that anger.
But has Roger really been able to get 'rid of all that anger'? Would anyone be able to? In as much as Roger cherished his father's early acceptance that he was gay, it appears instead that Roger still lives with the effects of feeling stigmatized both in terms of his sexual identity and now as a result of his age. This was not immediately apparent throughout either of our interviews together. Perhaps this was because even as Roger discussed the most painful aspects of his past, he did so with laughter, almost making light of himself and all that he has been through. However, after reviewing the transcripts a number of times I noted that Roger was quietly conveying that he in fact still very much lives with the experience of feeling stigmatized by others. I first observed this when he spoke of how he feels other tenants in his apartment building perceive him.

*Some of these people in here think I am a dirty old man. Goes with the territory I guess (laughter). And I tell them I got the job because I am so good at it (laugh). . .I mean someone has got to do it, uhm, you know 'we got to have one of those', right (laugh).*

Somewhere deep within Roger, the 'territory' of being older and gay in his community means that he is presumed to occupy the role of 'dirty old man'. Further is the idea that somehow it is expected that every community requires a dirty old man, and that he somehow fits the bill as 'one of those'. But perhaps even more distressing is that Roger's feelings of isolation throughout his
childhood, in the Air Force, in his relationship with Danny, and now is also echoed through his feeling stigmatized by the gay community as well:

Well, none of them [other gay men] are going to look at an old queen like me. What for? The image of me out there is it's a dirty old man who is sleeping with all the most beautiful young men in town and I'm not sleeping with any of them. But you know how they are [gay men]. There are times when I think I'm going to be pushed under a bus for Christ sake. And you can bet there are bids out on my little black book.

As with Edward, it is interesting to note here how Roger implies an attachment to homosexual stigma through the use of the words 'queer' or queen, where elsewhere when talking about himself positively, he refers to himself as 'gay'. In his case, Rogers use of 'queer' or 'queen' are used to imply stigma, not status i.e. to be seen as queer or a queen is negative. Also interesting to note however is that it appears that Roger has found a way to use 'stigma' as a means of protecting himself from others.

They [the other tenants] know not to cross me. A couple of them have and you just don't cross me. Don't fuck with me. I have been through too much, too old to put up with this shit from anybody. I just say to them 'I'm here, I'm queer' and that's it. I don't have another problem again.
I frighten people because I am just so open, so out there and in your face with it . . . You know, and I do the same thing with straight people. I was here first, I ain’t going anywhere, so you might as well get used to me.

I’m here. I’m queer, it’s that simple.

Ironically however, Roger reinforces an attachment to the stigmatized nature of his identity when referring to how potentially ‘discrediting’ some of his friends can be for him, as a result of these friends behaving ‘so gay’ in public.

I said to my young friend Ben here the other night when we were having a discussion, why do you insist on being so gay? What is it about you that makes you want to be so gay? Because he is a very good looking young man from Prince Edward Island um, and I find that with young people, many young people they just want to be so gay. Why?

The theme of isolation due to stigma, that runs throughout Roger’s story made sense of his response to my question concerning whether or not he felt attached to the gay community.

**R:** I have avoided the community. I have never been a member of the community. I haven’t rushed out to drag shows, or I, I mean I will go to the gay pride parade every year

**I:** What’s that about?
R: You mean my non-involvement? I don't think that's what being gay is about. I just don't think that's what being gay is about. You know running around to drag shows and helping the queens get their shoes on, their wigs on and all that horseshit. I mean it just seems so silly but, I mean its fine I guess. I took Bruce [a friend] to a drag show - to Doll and Penny's, he's never been. Luckily they sat us back where the drag queens couldn't get at us (laugh)

Aside from the heterosexist climate that Roger was exposed to in his youth, in the Air Force, as well as through his contact with the mental health system, I searched for other possible reasons why Roger felt so stigmatized. This was especially given what he constantly described as such a supportive father and family. By far, Roger was no more vocal with this than when he shared with me how Religion has failed him. While using the language of religion as a comfort, as was seen in his description of his 'rebirth', Roger, as with Edward, reveals how religion has served as a source of oppression.

My god the damage that organized religion has done to people. I have never seen so much guilt and shame in my life. And why because I'm gay? I don't think so uhm, there is a program on tonight, Sex in the Bible. It started off, Adam and Eve, Cane and Able, Cane kills Able, so we've got our first murder and within a year or so, he's married. To who? His sister. So we've got incest now. And the bible hasn't even started and
these, the Christian right, are the most dangerous group in our whole society. Hateful, they are hateful. . . I've just dismissed organized religion.

During our first interview, shortly after Roger had described the multiple losses in his life, his struggle out of depression, and various memories related to his recovery from alcoholism, Roger showed me one of the wall's in his bathroom. Adorning the wall, from top to bottom were several photographs of all the young men (from approximately age 19 to 27) that are in Roger's life. They are his friends, and gather regularly at his home for social visits. He has very few friends his own age, with the exception of one, a fellow alcoholic who is dying of AIDS. I wondered allowed about the significance of Roger's friendship with these young men.

I: What would it be like if younger people were not in your life?

R: I'll tell you one thing, if it wasn't for the young people around me, I'd be destitute.

I: Why?

R: These are my children. These are my children, like 'little Paul'. I met him when he was 19 and possibly the most beautiful child I have ever come across, blond, blue eyed, good little Catholic boy. And little Bruce is very much like that too.

I: So their friendship with you is important.
R: Oh, vital to me, absolutely vital.

I: It’s vital.

I: How would your life be different if they weren’t in your life?

R: Oh it would be dreary, oh, it would be dreary. I, I couldn’t even imagine it.

The young gay men with whom he has surrounded himself have provided not only companionship. They also provide Roger with the sense of recognition, acknowledgement, and inclusion that in previous years had eluded him.

*The young people around me validate my existence. They validate it in every way, you know in the caring and the love and the sharing and all of that. That is what, they are my family. These children are my family.*

For Roger, validation he receives from his young friends would appear to provide him the opportunity to feel vindicated for the years in which he felt rejected because he was gay, by ‘Daniel’, or the people on whom he counted to care for ‘Daniel’. That he is able to receive this validation from younger gay men, who other-wise may have dismissed him as a ‘dirty old man’ only heightens the value of his friendship with them. His impact on the young men around him also appears to constitute his primary sense of purpose today.
R: I have young friends who have totally changed their lives. I just remember...I had a young man come to me, five years ago I guess it was, totally on the dark side.

I: Totally on the dark side?

R: Involved in white supremacy, everything. And I hadn't seen him for six months and he called me and he came over and we talked and I said, if you read that book [The Sermon on the Mount] and you think you understand it, then you and I can really talk. 24 hours, 48 hours later he came back and said this I can understand. I changed his life. He is the most delightful, the most prosperous in every sense of the word. He has a prosperous attitude, he has a prosperous little business and he is just a joy to be with and none of it in your face, it's just there. He glows, he glows. The, the real light of my life I would have to say would probably be my young friend little Bruce. The transformation that came after he and I talked and he read the book, the transformation of his whole attitude and his whole life was one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had. That's what life is about.

In considering the theme of validation throughout his story I finally realized too why it was that Roger cites repeatedly that the three most important events in his life were meeting his father, joining AA, and reading the book
Sermon on the Mount. It is clear that as with his young friends today, each of those three other events mark an occasion, perhaps the only one’s, in which Roger has ever meaningfully felt validated and recognized for what he has been through. His cry to be listened to and acknowledged for what he has had to experience, explained his interest in this study in fact, as he said ‘You have not heard anything as unique as my story, I can guarantee you that. . . . I am a very unique man and not a lot of people would know that by just looking at me.’.

At this time, Roger’s need for validation is now slowly being joined by a growing focus on the legacy he will leave behind. It also accounts for his connection with younger men and why he feels so drawn to them at this time.

To help them avoid what I went through. To change the world if you will, one person at a time. Because with all of them behind me that will be my legacy. I can die knowing that at least that part of me will be carried on. I don’t have children, I don’t have all that to do, but at least a positive attitude. I will leave behind a positive attitude. More so than just, just being famous, you know when you have had an impact and participated in that and watched the cocoon to the butterfly process is a true wonder.

Today, Roger spends as much time as possible tending to the garden that adjoins the seniors housing complex where he lives. His devotion to the garden serves as a metaphor for his current outlook on life and the meaning that his friendships have for him.
This is the age of the gardener, the cultivator, and that’s what I am doing. I cultivate in the garden and I cultivate in society. This garden used to be overgrown and was a disaster. Now look at it. They [other tenants] love it, and it proves to them that I am not so bad, right?

As mentioned in the introduction to this narrative, I for the longest time felt I could not make sense of Roger’s story. How could I possibly know what to include given all that he had shared. I also implied that it seemed no matter how many times we spoke with one another, I always felt that I just did not connect with what he was actually sharing with me, nor with the depth that accompanied that sharing. And yet Roger was absolutely clear that he needed to be interviewed for this study, and that he had something to say.

I shared my frustrations with Roger during our second interview. I have since come to understand that the social and psychological isolation that Roger experienced as a gay man has led to the unique and individual path of adaptation that he feels serves him well today. I have also come to understand that the presence of so many young gay friends offers Roger the opportunity to experience the validation and recognition that he otherwise has been without all his life. One can wonder what life for Roger would be like though, were he to have been spared the intense heterosexism and stigma that has so often challenged him. Roger HAS survived these challenges however, and as a gay man at the age of 65, that is in fact what he wanted us to know.
George's Story: Being Reborn

George begins his story at the time in which he was in his early 40’s, the period that immediately led up to George claiming a homosexual identity. While George structured his story in a chronologically linear way, it wasn’t until our second interview that I learned about George’s origins. He was born in the Maritimes in a small conservative community and was the only boy of two children. After marrying in his early 20’s George and his wife raised 3 boys. They relocated to Vancouver in the 1970’s where George continues to live today.

At 74 George is now well into his retirement. He lives with ‘Liam’, a man half his age who while not a romantic partner, is very much a constant and endearing companion. Typically, George spends his days reading, going for walks, watching movies, shopping daily for groceries, as well as pursuing community work through volunteerism at a local community housing project. Occasionally he finds time to provide assistance at the college where he worked for many years prior to his retirement and has been an active member on the Strata Council that manages his condominium residence. He is an engaging conversationalist, incredibly well read, and absolutely open and proud of the fact that he is gay.

Recounting George's Story. George never actively explored his interest in other men until well into his marriage in the late 1960’s. It was his
wife Betty in fact who first approached George, then 42, about exploring what she intuitively sensed was an unrealized attraction he had to other men. He states in fact that were it not for his wife's 'permission' he may never have explored his gay identity.

I really wonder if I ever would have come out because I was quite comfortable in the life style we had. We traveled together, we had a nice home, had the kids, and sex was good. I enjoyed sex with her. It wasn't as if I was having sex thinking I was making out with some guy... I wasn't like buying gay magazines or renting a gay movie or that kind of thing. I didn't know anybody at that time that was gay and I didn't have any so-called gay friends. I guess it was Betty saying have you ever thought you were gay? And then I thought, yes.

This is not to suggest however that George had no 'sense' that he was attracted to members of the same sex. As he explained, while being raised in a small community in the Maritimes he had no concept nor any reference point that might help make sense of his same-sex feelings. While having an awareness of his attraction to men, George was not feeling driven to act on this awareness.

Growing up in a small town in the Maritimes of 8,000 people, it was wrong. This whole issue of being sexual was wrong, not only being gay. In fact there was never any word called gay that I knew of... It's interesting, all through high school I never dated a girl. It was always a
guy that I used to notice I liked. It was like my high school chum, but we never had sex. We never played. But we’d always be something. I really liked him. He was my best friend. I would like to be near and around him, but there was never any touching or any, you know.

As he alluded to earlier, it became clear that the extent to which George resisted his attraction to other men, reflected his response to a climate of homophobia that existed throughout his childhood, his high school years and throughout his university education. This awareness surfaces when he reflects on why after understanding he had some kind of attraction to other men, he made the decision to proceed with his marriage to Betty.

A friend used to say, looking back why did you ever marry if you were gay? And I would say, well I didn’t know. I had no idea it was there. It just never occurred to me I was gay. You know in high school or even at university to be gay was wrong and really was disgusting. And you never heard anybody tell you he’s a faggot, cause around college dorms in those days to be gay or openly gay was a real put down and you would be really ostracized.

With George’s awareness that he was attracted to other men came the need to actively suppress these feelings, explained in part by associating being
gay with 'something disgusting'. He routinely guarded against any possibility that he might actually act on his feelings.

*If I was at a party, it was often the men there that I was aware of, but in fact I would never acknowledge it. And I would watch how much I drank. I was always in Toronto or Montreal at sales conventions and you always had someone you'd share a room with. Again, in that kind of situation, I would watch exactly how much I drank, so there was never any chance I would slip up or say something. And so I never did all those years. Right up until, right through that whole marriage in 1968, I had never had a gay experience.*

In reflecting on his feelings George looks back and recalls that while not aware of it at the time, he invoked a strategy of denial as a means of coping with his feelings. The denial was facilitated in part by George’s awareness that while he had the feelings he did for other men, he had never actually acted on these and therefore would have no reason to consider himself gay. He shared this when I asked him if prior to coming out, he ever actually defined himself as someone who was gay prior to his wife’s suggestion that he might be.

*No, no, never. To me I guess it was a lot of denial, massive denial. So, it was just buried and kept away and never looked at or acknowledged. There was no need to call myself gay because I had never actually been with a man.*
But as was alluded to above, at his wife’s suggestion a summer trip to Chicago began the process of George acknowledging to himself that indeed he was attracted to other men. Betty had inquired if George ever felt he wanted to be with a man to which George had affirmed that in fact he did.

*So we talked about it and she said well you are going to be in Chicago for ten weeks, you should find out. And I sort of looked at her and said well, why, because if we go down that road there is no guarantee we will come back up together. She said yes I know that and I just think you need to find out more of who you are and what you are.*

For the time that he was away, he still had not acted on his feelings during this trip, though the time alone allowed him to fully acknowledged that the attraction to other men was there. This acknowledgement was a powerful turning point in George’s life. He recalls how Betty had taken note of this on his return home that fall.

*I remember her saying when I walked in, she looked at me and she said you didn’t really want to come back, did you? And I said no, actually I was quite enjoying Chicago. There was just this incredible sense of being free, not responsible, you know? It was just that I liked that sense of being you know, free.*
George describes that it wasn't the freedom to be gay which felt so emancipating, more so than the opportunity to be away from the routine of his married life that had unexpectedly meant so much to him. Despite this experience, Betty and George made the decision to continue with their marriage, partly for practical reasons.

*We agreed that well I'm back so let's make it work. And why bother at my age of 42 or whatever? Why get into this whole gay thing now anyway? And she said okay fine. Life carried on as usual then.*

A year later, in 1969 Betty disclosed to George that while he had been away in Chicago, she had become involved in a relationship. Ironically, the news served as the catalyst for George's first sexual experiences with other men.

*Over the past year she had been involved in a relationship. I was surprised and shocked and partly hurt. I said well I thought we were going to make this thing work, and she just said, well you know, I was thinking. But then I remember I was so angry. I remember getting up, putting on my coat, and going downtown to a hotel, sitting there drinking. I picked up the first man, it didn't matter who. There were a whole bunch of skid row hotels there so I did this night after night.*

As time went on George and his wife separated and later divorced. In doing so, George and Betty approached their then teen-aged sons in order to
account for the reasons for the divorce. Interestingly, the reason given was George’s having realized that he was gay, as opposed to his wife’s extra-marital affair. This constituted George’s coming out to his son’s.

And they said, well we kind of knew that things weren’t great with you guys. So then I said yup, we want you guys to know why. The reason Betty and I are separating is because I’m gay. And they kind of looked at us. Both were part of that hippie era and they said, well you gotta do your own thing. And they both kind of laughed and said, look, we love you both. I can still see them sitting on the couch saying don’t ever ask either one of us to go into court to take sides because we’ll never do that. If the two of you are going separate, then make sure that that is what you want. But don’t get us caught in the act.

Perhaps, George and Betty interpreted that being gay was a far greater infraction than a break in monogamy and therefore would constitute more of a reason to proceed with a divorce. George never explained this however during his interview, and no follow-up interpretation was given. It may be that Betty’s extra-marital affair was hurtful for George, and that in some way he was sent off to explore his gay identity as a means of providing the justification for the affair to take place. Either way, fidelity was and would remain important to George.

After separating from Betty, George grew in his experiences with other men as well as with his knowledge about the gay world. Not soon after the
decision to end the marriage, he met a young man named ‘Phillip’, 16 years his junior, with whom he would share the only long-term romantic relationship George has had with another man. The relationship ended after 11 years when similar to his wife, George accepted that Phillip would be unable to adhere to George’s value for monogamy within their relationship.

Sadly, some years later after he had left him, George learned that Phillip went on to develop AIDS, only to find out some time after that, that Phillip was found dead in his home as a result of a murder. There was an inquest and George was called to testify, though to this day the murder remains unsolved. George reflected back on the relationship with mixed feelings and of the process of healing from both the positive and negative experiences he had as a result of Phillip having been in his life.

*There’s still a sadness at times of what I could have had with him. Equally though there’s a lot of good times with Phillip you know. But I was so in love with him at the time and he gradually destroyed that love through his affairs and flings on the side, that kind of thing. So it used to be I would get sad or emotional when I talked about him, whereas now I generally talk without all of those feelings of sadness I once had.*

While there were others after Phillip, George has not found as much happiness as he enjoys now through the companionate relationship that he has with ‘Liam’. At 37 years Liam came into his life after needing a place to stay and...
renting a room from George. His active pursuits with everything from boating to flying, as well as his evolved sense of caring for George have forged between them a bond that is directly tied to George’s present day-to-day sense of happiness as an elder gay man.

*I think it confirms that I am someone worth while. That it gives me a meaning. For me for instance, with Liam, the fact that I have this relationship with him, it gives me an identity, that when I’m out with him I’m proud. . . . I guess it’s the fact that he pays attention to me. He’s very attentive. Like if we’re out anywhere walking, Liam tends to walk faster than me, and he’ll get ahead of me and he’ll always stop and look back and wait. Or, if we’re out walking he’ll say ‘Are you feeling tired?’ So he keeps an awareness of me. If I’m not feeling good, he’s very quick to put pressure on and say I want you to go to the doctor. . . There’s that feeling that you’re important, and you’re special.*

While not a romantic partner, Liam’s physical youth, as well as his friends who are also young are important to George. It is through his discussion of Liam, that I observe that ‘age’ emerges as a significant dimension to what George considers significant in his life at this time.

*With somebody so much younger, I got to know all of his friends. He was always dating guys that were five or six years younger than he was so there was always a crowd of young guys going through the place. And*
they were great. They always included me. We were friendly. And if they
got to seeing more of each other, we'd go out to movies together, the
three of us, or go out for dinner and do all these kinds of things.

George relays that as with Phillip, he was always attracted to men who
were much younger than himself. And while he acknowledges this, he also
comments on the reality that for him as an elder gay man, there is an
entrenched focus on youth resulting in ageism amongst gay men that can be
alienating for him now.

_I was so naïve, had no realization of how important youth was in the gay
world. It never occurred to me, you know, and it took me a while to learn
that because you’re over 40, it doesn’t make you attractive to a 22 year
old, for the simple reason that they know you are over 40._

For George, the different experiences he has had with younger or older
gay men has carried over into experiences with groups like Primetimers, the
same group for elder gay men that our first participant Edward attends as a
means of support and socialization.

_Primetimers I found for me personally, I enjoyed the monthly meetings, but I
found mostly the older men I wasn’t interested in. So, I kind of slowly dropped
out. Didn’t bother. None that I met interested me which was my problem. I
wasn’t really wanting to get to know older gay men so I think I just didn’t put
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out any interest when one would say you know, do you want to go out for coffee or come by for a drink? I'd make some excuse and say, well, maybe later I'll give you... So I just avoided it.

I asked George how he made sense of the fact that he seemed to be more comfortable around younger gay men rather than older gay men, especially because he had observed that there seemed to be such a 'youth-oriented' focus within the gay community that he had found uncomfortable.

I guess younger people, I always feel they keep you young because they're more involved in life and doing things. Whereas so many of the older men I used to meet with Primetimers were much more set in their ways or not as active in doing things or having new ideas or just in talking about issues. Not just gay issues, but just life. And they seemed to be the ones I met.

George feels that a dimension to his sense of well being is his acceptance about who he is as a gay man, something he recognized had not occurred for all of the men he came into contact with at Primetimers. Part of his ability to secure happiness in his life today is related to his ability to socialize more with other gay men who have adopted the same positive definition of their sexual orientation that he has. But it is not unnoticed that these men are, as in the case of Roger, young men. Both George and Roger suggest that the presence of younger men has as much to do with a need to counter the ageism that exists
within the gay community as it does with the ability to find like-minded companions.

*There is something about younger men which is much more accepting, much more open and honest than older men that I am somehow attracted to which the guys at Primetimers didn’t always have. I do think that a lot of older gay men or older men are less accepting of the gay life than younger men, whereas I have always been proud of the fact that I am gay.*

George elaborated on the impact that finally accepting his sexual identity has had for him, and of the role that it plays in his sense of happiness.

*I think, all I can say is once I acknowledged that I was gay, going way back, and recognized it, openly admitted it to myself, I suddenly felt a freedom, a weight off of me. For me, it’s a sense of being almost reborn. I was alive. I was vibrant. I was just exciting. You know, it’s just tremendous freedom.*

For social workers who wish to understand the meaning that freedom through self-acceptance can have for elder gay men, George serves as a clear point of reference. He is specific in helping to guide a practice approach that would be explicitly inclusive of the needs of elder gay men who adopt the ‘homosexuality-as-status’ perspective. This begins with his awareness that
ageism and homophobia intersect to the degree that it renders not only his homosexuality, but his ability to be seen as a sexual person, invisible.

*I would think that a lot of people don’t associate age or aging or elder men with being gay. I think they would meet me and just assume well now. They might assume that I am married and construe things if I was younger, but I think they would meet the older person and it would never occur that person, being man or woman, could be gay, or have a sex life, and that sort of thing.*

This is further emphasized by the fact that one of the significant dimensions to his life is that he is still very much a sexual person with an active sex life. But it is the emotional and social relationships that he has created that are most important to him. George states that his life is made meaningful because he is still seen as important in the lives of others. This helps make further sense of his relationship with Liam, as well as the importance of his relationship with his 3 son’s and their families.

*To me, certainly having one single person, much like Liam in my life, would be, is really important. I need people. I think that expands into the relationship with my three boys, the fact that I’m not cut off from them. Life could be very unfortunate. Like some men are totally cut away from their family of origin or family.*
Understanding the role that both a family of origin as well as a ‘chosen’ family can have, coupled with the need to maintain an environment that helps to celebrate and acknowledge who George is and needs to be as a gay man, also involves some thoughts about those who have yet to consider the presence of elder gay men in their practice. George feels that for professionals, learning to respond to the needs of elder gay men should begin within the context of their formal education.

*I think that it has to start with, at least it can be started or encouraged somewhat by the faculty member himself whether it’s research or policy. It’s how honest, how open, how real they are as people. Because I always felt my biggest asset to teaching was trying to show a class that I could be genuine and real and honest and say this is me.*

Should social workers wish to become more inclusive of the needs of elder gay men in their practice, George questions the extent to which there are resources available for his cohorts.

*The other thing that I’ve always been interested in, is where do gay men go for counseling? 25 years ago, when I was doing some work at in the community that always intrigued me. We never had or never knew of any gay clients. . . . They may have come in for a marital problem, or depression or something but eventually they got into something. But they didn’t phone and say I’m in a relationship that’s gay and we’re having*
trouble. . . . And I don’t think every gay man needs to see a psychiatrist. I guess my feeling would be I would, well I was going to say well I would prefer to see a gay psychiatrist. I guess it’s the degree of comfort. . . . I’m sure that there’s a lot of older gay men that could benefit from some counseling of some kind. I may be wrong, but where could they go?.

As we approach our final thoughts on the subject, George reflects on his own work as a teacher in the social sciences, and of his own strategy for promoting within his students a means by which they could become inclusive of the needs of sexual minority clients. He used to administer a questionnaire that encouraged students to look at their own level of homophobia. His motivation was not so much to ‘change’ anyone, more so than to encourage a level of respect for the needs of the client.

Get to know your own inner thoughts and feelings. You won’t have to go out and get involved in therapy. But just recognize ‘I don’t feel comfortable with alcoholics’. And if I feel that way, then don’t work with alcoholics. Maybe you never will like them and therefore if you don’t like homosexuals, then by all means if you meet one who’s on your case load, then say openly, ‘I’m not comfortable dealing with this but I will get you a referral to a Jane, or Harry who likes this work’. To me that is vital, you don’t have to justify it to the client.
In talking about his hopes and fears about the future, George does not see much needing to change in the next few years, in part because he has provided for himself financially for his retirement.

You’re still able to get around. I don’t think someday I’m going to end up in an Old People’s Home, or whatever. I think fortunately for me that I have a good pension and I can see, you know, staying on here for turning another 10 or 15 years. And I could always, if Liam was gone or whatever, I could rent out a room, make some arrangement to have a live-in caretaker if necessary. So I’m fortunate in that way. I’m not strapped for cash.

This does not preclude him however from giving some thought to his own longevity or what things might be like were his health to decline. He recalls that both his mother and father died within 10 years of his own present age. And, in preparation for his recent throat operation, he went through his address book and indicated who he wanted informed in the event that he should die during surgery.

Though he is confident that he will remain quite independent for some time to come, George reflected on the impact that potentially requiring a nursing home might have for himself as an elder gay man.

Say for instance if I was to end up in a long term care facility. I would hope, and this probably would never happen, that I could end up sharing
a room with another older gay man. Because then I could at least talk
about, reminisce about my past, about the boys, or the times I have had
as a gay man . . . if I’m alone in a long term care facility with a straight
man, I can’t reminisce in the same way. I might talk about my
grandchildren and my sons, I might even venture to say to him I’m gay
but it would stop me from really reliving some of the joy of that life.

The issue of age itself seems, as with Edward to be secondary to his
story. In fact when asked to talk about his age George replied “You know it’s
funny. I don’t feel old”. George only discussed feeling old or aging in the context
of the future, i.e. what might happen. And as with Edward and Roger, aging is
seen as something that has yet to occur and is thought of in terms of the future,
not the present.

When I was reviewing the transcript from our first interview, I became
aware of the fact that so little of what George had to say included references to
his family of origin in his reflections and reminiscences on his development as a
gay man. I was especially curious because in having made the transition from
heterosexual married life to an openly lived gay life, George expressed that he
has never felt burdened or consequenced as a result of having come out,
something that seemed curious given his efforts to guard against acting on his
same-sex feelings in the past.
I've never felt out right rejection of anybody when they've heard I'm gay, I've never experienced that. That somebody didn't want to see me again or have anything to do with me. I never experienced that feeling.

What is of interest is that in fact George's only sibling, a sister, has not spoken to him since he disclosed through a letter that he was gay. My sister doesn't even acknowledge that I'm even alive anymore. She's out East. I wrote her and told her that Phillip was living here and that we shared a bedroom. Liam wasn't here then. I had a good friend going east who wasn't gay that was staying with her. When he mentioned my name, she would leave the living room. Finally he said to Sally's husband Ross, didn't Sally ever get George's letter and Ross said, Yes she got it. She read it and gave it to me to read and then tore it up and said as far as I'm concerned he's dead. We've never acknowledged each other since.

The response he had from his sister muted any deep sense of loss he may have felt however based on what George described as the already distant relationship he had with her, in saying My sister will always be a loss, but it's not the same kind of loss I would feel had she been one of the major figures in my life. George never did disclose to his mother or father that he was gay while they were alive, though he felt that his mother had subtly conveyed her acceptance of him by asking if I was happy, and that I should never forget about
the boys. For George, the acceptance that most matters in his life is that which he has received from all three of his sons, his ex-wife with whom he is still in contact, as well as through his social contacts which in part are maintained through sharing his home with Liam. But his primary source of well-being appears directly tied to his own sense of self-confidence and pride, at the time in which he actually came out.

*By the older gay man acknowledging he is proud of himself, his own self worth is not diminished by being gay. I think if one has good self worth when he’s moving into an acknowledgement of his being gay, I think it carries over into the rest of his life. I think it’s when people with low self worth move into gay relationships or a gay lifestyle that they may still feel even less self worth because they feel even more stigmatized for being involved in what they haven’t accepted as being ok.*

Our first interview ended with some shared thoughts about Raymond Berger’s book entitled *Gay and Gray*, (1982b) part of the inspiration for this research. He tells me that he is glad that the work to highlight the needs of gay men continues. He echoed the books findings by noting the importance that aligning himself with others who not only accept him but as well can share his world view as a gay man means for him as a gay man.

*The big factors for me are relationships that are fulfilling. These can be met either through a lover or a partner or equally through very close gay*
friends. I don’t think the older gay man who only has mostly older straight friendships, men or women, will find the same degree of fulfillment as with gay friends because he can’t share much of his intimacy or his feelings of having been with somebody or having seen a gay movie or whatever kind of thing in the same way. . . . And the other thing I think hopefully for the older gay man would be either to become comfortable with his coming out to his family or his children because otherwise he’s always carrying a certain load of stress having to cover or make excuses on where he is or what’s happening in his life and he can’t truly share certain issues that are enjoyable or important or fun for him.

George’s story helps us to understand that while it is not only important for some older gay men to manage the impact that coming out to family and friends might have, it is as important to nurture a context where ‘family’ includes access to and involvement with other gay men who can relate with and the uniqueness of their experiences as gay men through time. In fact George affirmed that participating in this research effort was in itself a valuable opportunity to affirm that with all that he has experienced, he has no regrets about any of the choices he has made in his life.

This thing has sort of been a confirmation of myself and what I experienced when I was coming out, and the freedom I felt or that kind of sense of being alive and almost reborn. A great sense of I now know who
I am and I feel great and I now am truly happy. I would say now, at my age, I've had a very satisfying life, I have no big regrets for either life, 20 years of marriage nor the balance of my life in being gay. For me, I'm very happy I've had both and I would say quite comfortably to someone that was talking with me that was disgusted or very disliking of any aspect of being gay, my remark might be, don't knock it if you haven't tried it.
CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

Introduction

Edward, Roger, and George affirm through their very different stories, it is not as if one could ask the question ‘tell me all about how being gay informs your life as a man 65 years of age or over’, whereupon a definitive and essential answer to the question is elicited. Rarely was there nor could there be a direct answer to the question. As stated earlier, Berger asserts that it is impossible in fact to make generalizations about what it means to be an elder gay man, for each is man’s experience will be different based upon the psycho-social context in which they grow as gay men(1996). Rosenfeld (1999) has taken this further to suggest that it is by understanding the connection between adherence to either a ‘status’ or ‘stigma’ based gay identity that we can speak more holistically to the choices made and view of life lived among the current cohort of elder gay men. The following is a discussion of those themes that surfaced as a result of the stories shared by each participant, and their implications for previous research findings in the area, as well as future research to take place.

The effects of homophobia, heterosexism, and ageism were consistent throughout each participants story. Rather than discuss these as separate dimensions to their experience, the influence of each will be woven into the discussion of the other general themes that emerged and are discussed below. These include themes related to Development, Identity, Social Support, Social
Policy and Social Services. This is then followed by a discussion of how an awareness of these themes can be integrated into an affirmative approach to practice with this population.

**Developmental Tasks, Stages, and Milestones**

Common to all three participants were events and turning points that reflect various steps taken in their development through time. This appeals somewhat to the focus in mainstream gerontological literature on what an individual can expect to experience as he or she passes through 'context' dependent stages or phases. I have previously cited the ideas of Erickson (1968) and Levinson (1978) as two theorists whose ideas have been referred to most in this regard within the literature related to gay aging. I also noted however that there has been criticism that these phase models of development have been seen as problematic to the study of gay aging, because they are seen to be based upon heterosexual assumptions of development. The findings of this study do not imply that these ideas should therefore be rejected, more so than to suggest how the experience of being gay, might better inform the conceptualization of aging as a developmental process for a variety of individuals, gay or otherwise.

For example, Erik Erikson's stages of adult development emphasize several milestone events such as leaving the parental home, finding a member of
the opposite sex to marry, starting a family, raising children, focusing on leisure
pursuits, and preparing for and responding to retirement (1968). As mentioned
earlier, Swanson’s (1998) study of community-dwelling heterosexual men over
the age of 65, found that most of his participants in fact emphasized these
milestones as having been especially important to them, such that having
achieved in each of these areas gave them meaning in later life. Swanson found
support therefore for both Erikson and Levinson’s theory’s of development
through this study (1998). With the three men that were interviewed for this
study however, the different trajectory that their lives took, in part because of
their efforts to integrate their identities as gay men, suggest other points of
departure in development that may differ from a purely heterosexist approach to
this process that has yet to be fully appreciated.

For example, when Edward recalled experiences that were significant to
him during his first interview, he did not emphasize such things as high school
graduation, moving out on his own for the first time, the birth of his children, his
career, or his retirement. It was in fact not until the second interview that I
pointedly asked Edward what jobs he held, how many children he had and when
he had retired before I was able to learn these things. This is also not to suggest
that his children are unimportant to him. Quite the contrary is true in that
regard as he later explained.

Instead, Edward’s developmental story emphasized his ability to develop
the assertiveness skills necessary to achieve a gay identity on his own terms,
such that what stands out as a significant milestone in his life, reflects this journey. For instance, a significant milestone for Edward was the day he made the decision to leave his family and grandchildren and move to Canada not only so he could live with Mark, but also to fulfill his commitment to himself to live openly as a gay man. For George, he chose to story his life from the time in which he claimed his gay identity, at the age of 42 onward. This emphasized his emergence into a long-term relationship with Phillip, coming out at work, and his relationship with his current room-mate and companion Liam. There was rarely a mention of any context or event that took place prior to this. Again, during our second interview, I learned about his family of origin, his childhood home, his university education and the degrees that he has earned, as an after-thought to the emphasis placed on the process of claiming his gay identity and the life that he has created for himself as a gay man since his midlife.

With Roger, he stated that the most important events in his life were meeting his father, reading a book, and joining AA. As was alluded to, by examining the subtext to Rogers narrative however, it is clear that he emphasized that the ability to be ‘heard’ not simply as a gay man, but as an individual who has survived a multitude of challenges faced in part because he was gay, constitutes one of the only ways in which he can muster a sense of achievement at this time in his life.

Unlike Edward and George, Roger’s achievements are especially vulnerable to being rendered invisible in their own right were they to be
measured only against the assumptions of a heterosexual context of adult development. This is because unlike himself, both Edward and George were married, and claimed their gay identities much later in life than Roger did, at a time (post-1960's) when it was seen as much more positive to do so. Edward and George also have children through their marriages and viewed holistically, they have through their early lives secured a much more concrete adherence to heterosexist notions of development than Roger, who was never married and did not become a father. It appears as important therefore to isolate those milestones and turning points that were significant in the development of three elder gay men as they would have us understand them, that might otherwise be overlooked and unrecognized. The stories of all three of these men help us to understand that a process of development is itself not something that the individual will or will not conform to, more so than what the individual will inform us about.

Another dimension to the developmental reality of each participant is how they have confronted what Erikson conceptualized as the last two of eight stages of development. As was discussed earlier Erikson proposed that at the latter half of the life span the 7th stage involves the 'crisis' of Generativity versus Stagnation, which takes place shortly after retirement, followed in our latest years by a final stage characterized as the crisis of 'Integrity versus Despair' (Erikson, 1968).
With Generativity versus Stagnation, Erikson proposed that a central focus is to ‘give back’ to the next generation. The suggestion is that developmentally, one focuses on transmitting the wisdom and knowledge gained in one’s life to the next generation in support of their own development. Roger was quite direct in stating that the most ‘vital’ aspect of his life at this time is ‘the legacy I will leave behind with the young people in my life’. Clearly Erikson’s theory applies in his case.

However, what was interesting among all three participants is that each also benefits from the presence of youth in their life, not only by virtue of an opportunity to ‘give something back’, but as well, and perhaps more significantly, as a means of countering the ageism that each identified being aware of within the gay community. In this way, each conforms to what Erikson referred to as the function of ‘reciprocity’ with this developmental stage.

For example, George commented that he “had no idea how important a focus on youth was in the gay community” and that the reason why he prefers the company of younger men like Liam is because “I always feel they keep you young. . . . I think it confirms that I am someone worth while”. The assumption is that if George feels he is seen as ‘old’ then he is then rendered as someone who is not worthwhile, evidence of internalized ageism.

Edward remarked at one point that being with Mark, his partner who is significantly younger than himself is reflective of the fact that “there’s a real heavy focus on youth in and amongst gay people and maybe that’s partly why I
am with him”. And for Roger, his repeated statement ‘oh they all think that I am a dirty old man” when referring to both the gay and non-gay community in which he lives, is a testament that at the intersection of homophobia and ageism is his struggle to confront daily the fact that he is in fact not a dirty old man at all. Instead, he is someone who is relied upon as a sounding board for those who have yet to see the struggles in life that he has.

With respect to the last stage of Erikson’s theory, what was noteworthy among the three participants was the degree to which each appears to have accelerated the developmental search for ‘Integrity’. Erikson suggested that this is a component of development that occurs in the last years of the life-span (i.e. 80 years and older), whereby the individual searches for inner peace with the life that has been lived and reconciles oneself to the choices made in living that life through a life review.

The participants’ development as gay men appears to force an earlier reckoning of the life that they have not only lived, but have yet to live. Thematically this implies that the search for integrity in claiming a gay identity does not appear to wait until the last phase of the life span to emerge as a central organizing force in the lives of elderly gay men. It would appear instead to have been present from the moment that the participants awareness that they might be gay intersected with a stigma-based definition of that awareness, something that would seem to elude the developmental experience of non-gay men completely.
Identity and Life-satisfaction in Later Life

Closely related to the theme of development, is the theme of 'identity' and how each of the participants have come to construct their sexual identities as well as their age. As Rosenfeld (1999) observed gerontologists and social scientists have rarely explored the construction of identity by the lesbian and gay elderly themselves. In the past some have suggested that the identity of today’s gay elderly can simply be constructed as being composed of one of two groups, those who came out prior to the 1960’s, and those who came out after the 1960’s (Berger, 1982b; Lee, 1989; Grube, 1996). As the stories of the three participants in this study attest, Rosenfeld allows us to understand that it is not simply when or whether each participant ‘came out’ that defines their gay identity. Instead, it is the adoption of being gay as either a 'stigma' or a 'status' which yields more to our understanding of how being gay can inform the lives of men over the age of 65.

Edward and George claimed their gay identities as a status, i.e something to take pride in, and something that is worth working hard to accept and feel good about. For example, Edward stated repeatedly that he is ‘happier now than I have ever been’ because ‘I accepted that I was gay, and that there is nothing wrong that’. For George, the adoption of a gay identity based on status overturned many years of having reacted to his gay feelings as a stigmatized characteristic, and something that was at one time in his life conceived of as
'disgusting'. On the other hand for Roger, despite his father’s acceptance of his sexual orientation, he appears to have had little support elsewhere in his life.

If social work wishes to develop an effective practice that will meet the needs of elder gay men, they must first endeavor to make visible the extent to which the individual’s identity as a gay man is based on ‘gay’ as either a stigma, status, or a ‘tension’ between both. For example, even though Edward maintains that he is proud of his gay identity and ‘happier than he has ever been’, he has yet to resolve completely his ambivalence in the choices he made in claiming his gay identity. As was noted in Edward’s story this was evidenced by his sharing with me the fact that at times he questions whether claiming his gay identity and having made the choices he did as a result was worth it. Through this, Edward helps us to understand the importance of what is in fact a goal, versus an achieved goal with respect to his gay identity.

Rosenfeld’s (1999) theory posits a binary of ‘stigma’ versus ‘status’. This echoes the tendency in gay research to affect and reinforce other binaries such as ‘out’ versus ‘closeted/not out’, ‘gay’ versus ‘straight’, or ‘pride’ versus ‘shame’, all of which exist as either/or constructs that do not speak to the complexity of experience that can exist. Roger’s story makes us aware that simply stating that he has a ‘stigma’-based sexual identity, as suggested by Rosenfeld’s theory, can be somewhat misleading. Instead, it seems that it would be more accurate to say that Roger’s identity as a gay man has been constructed on the basis of having managed and survived the forces of homosexual stigma, versus the assumption
that he has simply capitulated and internalized stigma as a part of his identity. In fact, it would behove anyone not to accord Roger and others like him with the acknowledgement that their lives have simply not allowed for the privilege of a status-based path of development.

Along these same lines is further support for Lee’s (1987) criticism of all theories of successful aging, most particularly with ‘mastery of stigma’ (Berger, 1982) and ‘crisis competence theory’ (Friend, 1986) discussed previously in chapter two of this study. The idea of successful aging, or prescribing that a ‘goal’ for the individual during a particular phase of aging is equated with the acquisition of a particular life skill simply sets some individual’s up to fail. George was quite clear in stating that he might not have claimed his gay identity were his wife not to have given him ‘permission’ to explore his feelings of attraction for other men. Were George to have elected to have remained in his marriage, as a heterosexual, he would no more have failed in his growth in later life than the gay man who chooses not to explore a heterosexual relationship in the same way. Academia, in trying to eradicate judgmental stereotypes and generalizations would seem at times to in fact contribute to their existence.

In referring to the participants’ identities as gay men, we can also understand that living as such is not effectively conceptualized as a static experience of either having or not having ‘come out’. It is here that my previously stated frustration with some coming out theories as never quite capturing the meaning of gay identity development might be explained. Through
the three stories that were shared, we are able to see how a definition of being gay is experienced as either a positive or negative feature of one's identity, at various points along the life-span. This speaks more accurately to whether one will or will not voice satisfaction with the life they are living, especially in later life, dependent upon what that individual may be faced with at that time. For example, Roger felt tremendous psychological isolation when in the Air Force during the late 1950's. During this period he felt quite unsatisfied with the impact of his sexual identity on his life. Conversely however, now at the age of 65 and having managed to survive the challenges that were presented to him earlier in his life, Roger conveys feeling satisfied with who he is. This is because the wisdom that he feels he offers to a younger generation of gay men based on these past struggles, is a source of validation and recognition as was mentioned earlier.

And finally, there was an interesting aspect of the role that self esteem played in the construction of identity for each participant. As noted, both Edward and George did not actually claim their identities as gay men until their midlife. They both either had a long standing awareness of their attraction to other men, or in Edward's case, managed to experiment sexually with other men prior to disclosing to another that they were 'gay'. In George's case, the time in which he claimed his sexual identity was also supported by a very positive self-esteem that he had developed earlier in his life. Edward joined a support group which is where he began to gain a positive self-esteem. This served as the catalyst to his
decision finally to leave his wife and live openly as a gay man. Both Edward and George made explicit statements that they were happy with who they were and that this was related to their acceptance of their identities as gay men.

In contrast Roger, who had accepted that he was gay quite early in his adolescence, never stated that he was happy, or that his sexual identity as a gay man informed whether he would be happy at this time in his life. In fact, Roger stated his perception that the physical effects of age had more of an impact on his life than his sexual orientation, and that further, these effects were experienced negatively. The results of this study support Adelman's (1991) finding that those men who waited to 'come out' in their mid-life or later, after having experimented sexually before-hand with others of the same sex, reported far higher levels of satisfaction in later years. This leads to a consideration of the role that the building of self-esteem for gay men at all points of their development can have in promoting greater psychological adjustment to aging.

**Aging**

It was interesting that the issue of aging itself did not feature prominently in any of the stories that were told. This was not simply the result of the first interview question that was asked – i.e. 'Can you describe how it was that you came to identify yourself as 'gay'? Each participant was also asked to describe their experiences as an elder gay man at present, as well to describe how they
felt that their age and sexual orientation affected their hopes and fears about the future.

As was noted in the findings both Edward and George actually made the statement that they both did not feel that they considered themselves to be old. Roger only referred to age in a derogatory sense as was evident in his story. In each case age or being aged was referenced as an aspect of their future, not the present. The impact of age was seen by each as not having primacy over their lives to the extent that their gay identities had. If feeling older was mentioned, it was firstly in terms of the physical aspects of aging that were being noticed. Secondly, as has been referred to throughout the findings and discussion section of this study, aging was referred to through subtle hints of ageism that have either directly affected the participants or were reflected through their own internalized ageism.

The fact that aging was so subtle an overt issue of experience for these men may also reflect the fact that the three participants are from what is considered the ‘young-old’ cohort of persons over the age of 65. More importantly however is the realization that the dominant discourse of aging excludes the impact of gay identity in the lives of older men. The literature on aging almost presume that age is to be taken for granted as a central unit of analysis. The standpoint of elder gay men however, reveals that the concept of aging and even ageism, while important, are overwhelmingly overshadowed by the impact of heterosexism in the lives of the three participants of this study. It
is then perhaps not so much sample size nor due to neglect on my part as a researcher that aging does not feature more prominently within this study. Rather it is the reality of life on the margins of sexual identity for elder gay men that does have prominence.

**Social Support**

Each of the three men interviewed reflect the value not just of receiving social support from others, but of being seen as a support to others at this time in their lives. For George, the interaction with his sons, their families and his grandchildren clearly are important to him. Edward too mentioned that his son and daughters and their families are also important for him, though with the exception of his son, he has yet to receive complete acceptance as a gay man from most other members of his family which makes him sad.

For Roger, who did not experience the creation of a family system through fatherhood as did Edward and George, it is not so much biological family-ties as it is his chosen family of many young gay men he has gathered around him who help him to feel 'vital', needed, and validated. Roger himself stated that he has 'nothing to offer but the wisdom of my experience' as currency for his friendship with these men.

Edward and George also tend to reach outside the traditional family system for the unique support that non-traditional 'family' can provide. For example with Edward, aside from his relationship with Mark, the friendships he
has made through a local gay seniors social group concretely address his need for companionship and the company of other gay men. Most likely for Edward, the uniqueness of these friendships affirm his decisions with respect to his gay identity. George was specific about this when talking about the need not only to rely on his sons but 'on others who can relate to me the way only another gay man can' that provide him with a unique sense of support that otherwise might not exist. This reinforces previous findings in the literature which show that social support not just for gay men, but by other gay men is integral to their happiness in later life (Jacobs, Rasmussen, and Hohmen, 1999; Kochman, 1997; Qualm & Whitford, 1992; Adelman, 1986; Berger, 1982b; Kimmel, 1979).

Related to social support was the conspicuous absence from each of the three men's story of the role women in their current lives. The only women who featured in any of the stories were those with whom each of the men had a familial tie to, as conveyed to me with respect to their past, not the present. For example, Roger talked of how his mother died when he was quite young and that he was devastated by this. Edward talked of 4 women in his life, including his mother and how hard she worked to support the family, his wife whom he regrets hurting in having to leave her, and his two daughters who have yet to accept Edward as a gay man. And then for George, there was his wife whom he divorced after claiming his own identity as a gay man. I was not able to address this directly in this study, but it is curious to me that no previous research
relating to elder gay men has made explicit or sought to explore the role of women in their lives.

Another aspect of social support that is consistent among all three men is their participation in gay community causes and/or organizations, something that Berger (1982b) noted was a key characteristic of gay men who reported being satisfied with their lives in later life. Interestingly, if Edward, George, and Roger stated that they felt they belonged to a community, they did not feel that this was solely in terms of ‘gay community’, more so than what George referred to as ‘the broader community as a whole’. While this may reflect the reality that ageism can isolate elder gay men from feeling completely included in an established youth-oriented gay community, each feels that he belongs to a sense of community in some way.

What was particularly evident with respect to social support was not just the role that religion played in the formation of their gay identities, but also in the means by which each participant has incorporated spirituality into their lives as a result of having claimed a gay identity. Humphreys and Qualm (1998) note that because of the unique challenge of confronting the homophobic teaching of Judeo-Christian beliefs as they conflict with the emergence of a gay identity, coupled with the search for meaning that gains in intensity in later life, religion and spirituality take on increasing importance as one ages as a gay man or lesbian. In each case, organized religion appears to have served as a primary source of stigma that heavily influenced the early construction of each man’s
identity. But as Roger emphasized, while religion has served as a source of oppression in the past, the language of religion and the ability to support instead the ‘values’ of Christianity toward love and acceptance has taken on greater importance among all three in the present.

For example Edward talked at length not just about the effect of being raised in the Southern Baptist tradition, but of his having overcome the power that the belief system attached to this tradition once had over him and his ability to assert his identity. If Edward was animated about any one aspect of his story, it was when he conveyed movingly his belief that living as a Christian for him, is now entirely different than living according to the rhetoric of the Southern Baptist Church. For Edward, reconciling himself to his identity as a gay man, required of him a complete reformation of what God would mean in his life.

George, whose upbringing in the Maritimes was influenced in part by his family’s membership in the United Church, discussed as well a time in which leaving the organized aspects of the Church he attended and worked for was replaced instead with a personal experience of spirituality that could integrate with his identity as a gay man. As a former elder in the United Church, his decision to leave was a rejection of what he felt were the contradictions between what the Church taught, versus how those who ran the Church behaved. As he alluded to during our second interview, rejecting the formal and organized aspects of his Church allowed him to reconcile a belief in God that could be

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inclusive of himself as a gay man, rather than to continue with a belief in God in spite of his gay identity.

Roger insists that his sense of spirituality is critical to his sobriety. As we recall, one of the three key experiences he has had in his life, was the reading of The Sermon on the Mount by Emmett Fox, wherein exists a word by word account of the Lords Prayer. Roger insisted that while he is not religious, he believes in ‘a power greater than myself . . . and yes, that includes God’. Roger, in his unique way also allows us to connect with the means by which he has found a way to allow a reframing of his belief in God to provide sanction for his identity as a gay man. As only Roger could say, ‘God has room for all of us, not just some of us. Otherwise most of what the Bible says would have to be crap’. Clearly, Roger has adopted the means to align himself with the God of Judeo-Christian belief systems, in such a way as to find spiritual support for his identity and survival as a gay man.

**Social Policy and Services**

Each participant discussed various issues related to social policy and services that have significance in their lives as elder gay men. Roger discussed the extent that both he and his partner Danny worked to build up a business which had become quite successful, prior to Danny’s tragic death. Because the assets of the travel business were in Danny’s name, as well as some RRSP and
other savings they had amassed, Roger was ineligible from inheriting a larger before-tax share of these assets that he would have been able to inherit were he and Danny to have been considered legally defined spouses. As a consequence, Roger not only had to sell the business at a loss, in order to finance the mounting debt that had amassed in his absence. In the last two years, the Federal Government has enshrined the definition of marriage as only occurring between two members of the opposite sex. Currently, neither Roger, Edward nor George would be eligible to inherit the Canada pension benefits that heterosexual spouses are able to on the death of a partner.

George and Edward are both supported by healthy pension plans that allow for a retirement where they each receive an income adequate to provide for their needs. Roger lives in a subsidized senior’s housing complex and is now receiving Canada Pension Benefits including the Guaranteed Income Supplement that he feels is adequate to meet his needs. Edward, George, and Roger discussed however the possibility that each at some point might require facility care. George feels that he might actually be able to arrange for private care at home if necessary. As some observe however, the question of housing exists as a serious concern to elder gay men because of the lack of specialized public and private housing options, including nursing homes, that would appeal to the unique social needs of gay men and lesbians in later life (Humphreys and Qualm, 1998; Whitford, 1997; Ehrenberg, 1996).
As was previously cited, George spoke most directly about the impact that heterosexism in a nursing home would have for his ability to feel comfortable and included were he to require facility care. Should an individual require admission to a care facility, the ability to control and manage their identity through strategies of social detachment are instantly eroded because of the rampant homophobia in these institutions. Once admitted, gays and lesbians can face the challenge of battling increased psychological isolation as they may be encouraged to participate in activities with others who are socially free to talk about the lives they have lived, the families they have raised, and the children and opposite sex partners they have cared for.

With respect to social services for elder gay men, both George and Roger commented on the significance of their contact with social services either as consumers, or as providers of services to others, from the perspective of living as gay men. George wondered about the ability of elder gay men to have a counseling resource that would be sensitive to their needs. In noting that a lot of older men, who claim their gay identities as George did late in life, might probably benefit from counseling, George asked ‘where could they go?’. Indeed, where would they go?

With Roger, his story leads us to understand that the treatment he received at the hands of a mental health team led him to feel not only that he was not a valid participant in the care of his partner, but that their relationship had been invalidated as well. What is significant is the extent to which the
unique contribution that Roger could have made to care-planning for his partner Danny was ignored. As we see from his story, Roger attributed this to the fact that they were a gay couple, a characteristic that the literature finds has bearing on the overall health of gays and lesbians alike. The consequence of excluding Roger is that he now feels wary of the 'system'. This is problematic not only for Roger's health, but as well for the implications of a health care system that is not geared toward the inclusion of elder gay men's needs.

For example, a number of researchers have demonstrated that as aging is accompanied by a greater reliance on health care providers to assist with the multitude of physical changes that take place, there is a tremendous fear on the part of older gays and lesbians as to how they will be treated by their health care providers (Appleby & Anastas, 1996). The reluctance to visit doctors offices or share information with respect to their identities means decreased levels of medical screening and testing that would otherwise assist with diseases that might otherwise be treatable ((Hunter, Shannon, Knox, and Martin, 1998). In this regard, older gay men may be at greater risk for untreated diseases of aging than there heterosexual cohorts, particularly if the heterosexism and internalised homophobia of service providers remains unchecked.

**Implications for Practice**

The focus on social services is directly related to a primary purpose of this thesis which was to explore how what we know of the role that gay identity can
play in the lives of older men might also help us to better inform social work practice with this population. The next section will use the stories of all three participants, given the above discussion, as a means of identifying the requirements for a social work practice that will be affirmative and inclusive of the needs of elderly gay men with respect to their development, identity work, social support, social policy and social service needs. The implications of these findings will be integrated with recommendations for an affirmative model of practice advocated by Applebby and Annastas (1998).

- **Do not assume a client’s sexual orientation.**

  When talking about elder people in general, George in particular was quite specific in stating his wish that others not jump to conclusions with respect to his sexual orientation when he said "I would think that a lot of people don’t associate age or aging or elder men with being gay". To George, and many people like him, the ability to take for granted that sexuality exists in the elderly prevents the acknowledgement and validation of those needs that are inherently related to the ability to be sexual, let alone to maintain an identity based in part on a marginalized sexual identity.

  Also, sexual orientation itself does not appear to inform the needs of elder gay men, as does the construction of their identity around that sexual orientation. To the extent that someone views themselves pejoratively to be ‘queer’, a ‘faggot’, a ‘sissy’ says more about the reality of the messages of
heterosexism that they have been exposed to, than it might about sexual orientation, the former being a much more vital focus of practice on the part of a practitioner.

- **Accept the adoption of a same-sex sexual orientation as a positive outcome of development.**

  With all three participants the ability to achieve acceptance within themselves for who and 'what' they are, in so far as this is defined in terms of their sexuality, is actually 'essential' to a sense of well-being for each at this time of life. Edward states 'be who you are and what you are and you will have a life that is happy' while George states that when having finally accepted that he was a gay man he experienced 'freedom', he was 'vibrant' and felt 'reborn'. The implication is that if social workers are not able to view the experience of a client accepting their gay identity as a positive milestone, they may ignore the ability to celebrate an important component to the elder gay man's achieved sense of self. As was mentioned previously, this is made even more important when considering that for George and Edward especially, other developmental milestones such as the birth of children, education achieved, and retirement, are barely mentioned as significant turning points within the context of the stories they told. When they were mentioned they were sometimes devalued, such as when Roger recalls how his 22 year relationship was not acknowledged or valued by the workers or psychiatrist at the local mental health team. The ability to
receive validation and acknowledgement comes out of a recognition of having survived the challenge of living with and adapting to the presence and influences of a marginalized sexual identity, more so than the subjective appraisal of whether an individual has 'overcome' these challenges.

- Practitioners should consciously commit to review their own homophobia.

Brown (1998), a lesbian social worker teaching and working in the U. K. sees the practitioners ability to confront their own homophobia as a critical feature of affirmative practice. For her the ability to develop practice competence with older gays and lesbians involves a dedication to acquiring knowledge not only about the issues that affect gay aging, but as well about the context-specific resources that are required to respond to these needs. She also insists that as practitioners, we engage in a reflective assessment of our own values and beliefs and recognize the need to affirm the worth of the homosexual identity at every juncture in our practice. Otherwise we in some way are doomed to work against our gay and lesbian clients. In his story George reinforces this in saying "if you don't like homosexuals, then by all means if you meet one who's on your case load, then say openly, 'I'm not comfortable dealing with this. . . get to know yourself".
• Respect privacy and confidentiality and the need to withhold disclosure

Both Edward and George referred to what things would be like if they were forced to enter a long-term care facility. For Edward being gay would have to be hidden in order to protect himself. As we note earlier, George feels that he would prefer to share a room with someone who is gay, and were that not possible he most likely would be restricted from sharing very much about himself. Planning for and maintaining an informal ‘housing registry’ would allow those interested the opportunity to be matched with potential room-mates that may enhance the opportunity for social support as well as the sharing of living expenses.

For front-line workers, if one suspects a same-sex orientation on the part of a client, it would be critical to assess the value in promoting disclosure from that client out of a recognition that for some clients, their ability to maintain their integrity and dignity has been and is dependent upon their ability to manage disclosure on their own terms, in their own time, and at their own pace.

• Embrace an ongoing commitment to understand the coming out process.

As we have come to understand, all three participants share a coming out experience that has seen to the development of a gay identity of which they are proud and would most likely want to share with a care provider. Workers dealing
with those who have not had a similar outcome with the development of their gay identity, i.e. with those who have experienced their gayness as a stigma, should consider how to interpret decisions made on the part of that client. For example when assessing an older individual in their home as requiring service, while being presented with their decline of the offer to receive that service, it may be important to assess this not so much as 'resistance', more so than as a possible function of an ongoing strategy of identity management based on stigma. In this regard, an affirmative practice will honor 'invisibility and silence' i.e. a request for privacy, as a skill and strength reflective of where that client is in their identity development, not as a handicap or a shortcoming. Creating a genuine bond of trust that is authentically grounded in respect for and an affirmation of an individual's choices is a core social work ethic that cannot be abandoned with elder gay men.

- **Respect and honor the CLIENTS language for identifying themselves.**

Brown (1998), and Humphreys et. al. (1998) note the ongoing challenge research has in trying to speak to those people who have fluidity with the terminology that is used and the linguistic means by which individuals define themselves. Edward and Roger described themselves as having been 'queer' before the adoption of the word 'gay' and as a result use the words interchangeably. Because he came out as a gay man later in life, George always
uses the word ‘gay’. The choice to label oneself ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ can represent a political decision that may be based on philosophical considerations though for some elder gay men, the choice of what one calls one self, whether ‘gay’, ‘queer’, or ‘straight’ can be made for more practical reasons, such as avoiding disclosure (Quam: 1997).

- **Recognize that there is diversity among sexual minorities.**

Nowhere did the diversity among the three participants express itself more than with respect their socio-economic status. For Roger being on welfare has meant needing to learn a system, endure countless intrusions into his privacy, and having to develop a rationalization that helps him accept the 'gifts' of others. In meeting his practical needs it can not be underestimated that this has also been necessary to his basic survival. As alluded to earlier, it also means that Roger has a picture of social work and of social services that is somewhat 'tainted' by the negative experiences of having been on welfare.

At one point in our interview Roger suggests that he wishes he 'saved more' for his retirement’. A practitioner's ability to understand and recognize the need to consider that inheritance laws greatly discriminate against same sex couples, may greatly influence their ability to assist in promoting appropriate financial planning with sexual minority individuals PRIOR to retirement (Appleby and Annastas, 1998; Young, 1996; Brown, 1998). Social workers should
encourage minority elders to also plan ahead for their later years to provide for adequate insurance coverage, powers of attorney, health care directives, living wills, health care proxy’s, funeral arrangements, and property rights. A knowledge base of gay-sensitive legal services and assistance is critical in ensuring adequate planning. This might be particularly relevant to Edward given the precarious nature of his status in Canada, and of the implications of potentially being deported away from his partner.

- **Acknowledge that not all problems are associated with being gay or old.**

Related to the concept of diversity is the degree to which either being gay or older is in fact the focus of all that might affect an elder gay client. For example, another difference among the three participants is the extent to which being gay does or does not affect how they experience life day to day. Edward was quite clear in saying that his age affects him more now than being gay. It seemed that this made sense given that he has created safety and a secure home that allows for a focus on age as opposed to a struggle to claim his gay sexual identity. Roger on the other hand, had difficulty making an explicit connection to how his sexual identity impacts his current experiences. Indeed, he is understandably consumed with past events that have had a traumatic effect on his life, versus being able to concentrate on the present as it may or may not be informed by his age and sexual orientation. And for George, being
gay is something to be ‘proud’ of, that is an ‘achievement’ that exists as a result of some hard personal work. It is a constant factor in his thoughts not only about his happiness in the present but as well in the future. If he has issues that are of concern to him though, most likely these appear related more to the quality of the relationships that he experiences, as well as his concerns about his physical health, and community work.

- **Treat identified family as family.**

Of note is the effect that a level of integration between family of origins vs. ‘chosen’ families and partnerships can have on the experience of ageing for gay men. A similarity among all three of the participants was the presence of some form of ‘family’ in their life that was essential to their happiness. For Roger, the young men, who are his ‘children’ are ‘vital’ to him such that his life would be ‘devastating’ were they not to be there. For Edward, his need for Mark’s love and partnership was so strong that even after age 60 he felt compelled to move his life to Canada illegally in order to be with him. Edward consistently says that as a result of having Mark to share his life, i.e. his ‘little family’, he is happier than he has ever been. Edward’s son holds a special place in his life because ‘he treats Mark and me as family’. For George, Liam continues to be a source of family, in as much as George feels he requires this. It is clear though that there is great meaning derived out of Liam’s integration into George’s family via his three son’s and ex wife.
For each of the participants, their experiences as elder gay men, appear dependent upon a context that was created through their relations with a primary support of some sort at each stage of their life. Our ability to recognize the significance of these supports will only help to honour and validate the lives that they have led, and continue to lead. It is hoped that in providing a context, via the stories of these three men, an appreciation for the need of an affirmative approach to practice can be emphasized in the education and training of social workers and other helping professionals. As Roger said at one point in his interview "... above all it’s simple. Respect, from anyone, whether they are a worker at welfare, Revenue Canada, the building manager in my building. You don’t have to like me, but I need you to respect me’.

- **Assume that internal and external homophobia contributes to issues that are experienced.**

The findings section related to social policy alluded to the role that legislation plays in reflecting prevailing heterosexist and homophobic policies that continue to inform the day to day experience of gay and lesbian lives. Within the context of practice, this is helpful in understanding how to assist elderly gay clients with various types of planning that should occur given this climate. For example, disclosure of relationship status to an employer is required in order to designate most private pension/insurance beneficiaries. This results in some gay men deciding to forgo disclosure for fear of reprisals (loss of promotion, firing, harassment) denying partners access to benefits that they might otherwise be entitled to. ‘Advanced Directives’ that speak to what life saving measures
would be exercised in a medical emergency can be contested by biological family members if adequate legal protections of the partner's role and authority have not been provided for. Further, some institutions are legally required to only have 'next of kin' (meaning next of biological kin) notified or authorized to make major medical decisions, ignoring the role of the partner.

George, Edward, and Roger remain vulnerable to policies not set up to act inclusively to honor those that each have brought into their lives in places of trust, whether they be a partner, a young friend, or a companion. Social workers should promote policies within their own workplaces, as well as participate in collective efforts to overturn legislation and policies that erode the opportunities for equal participation with respect to social benefits. To not do so, is to reinforce the very policies that serve to diminish the life chances of gays and lesbians at all points across the lifespan.

**Strengths and Limitations: Implications for future research**

A strength of this study lays in my disclosure to the participants that I was a man who shared a gay identity. The opportunity to provide each participant with a voice as to the experience of living as gay men at this time of life gained in authenticity when they knew they were conveying this to another gay man who they perceived would honor their stories and their need to be heard. Perhaps the noted challenge to researchers in accessing 'hidden' or 'invisible'
members of the elder gay male community might be assisted if the researchers themselves were more explicit about their sexual orientation in advertisements and recruitment ads. Future research will continue to have to rely on convenience sampling however so long as the need to remain invisible is encouraged by the rampant heterosexism that continues to pervade our society.

While the participants in this study differ in terms of socio-economic status, a limitation of this study is that it does not contain the stories of men who are culturally, ethnically, or geographically diverse. It also does not consider the experience of elderly gay men who are in heterosexual partnerships, nor who are considered members of the 'old-old' population of individuals 80 years and older. Future research should seek to explore how culture, ethnicity, geography, relationship status, and aging beyond aged 80 might further inform the experiences of elder gay men. Future research should also seek to use qualitative methods to continue to give expression to the voice of elder gay men themselves, so that a diversity of experience will further account for the reality of life as an elder gay man.

I found that conducting an interview in the home of each participant offered a greater level of depth in learning to take place that a questionnaire or survey would simply not be able to support. Qualitative research also allowed for the participant to determine that which was important to his life, as opposed to me, as the researcher pre-determining this for him at the outset.
This study helped to build upon previous research into gay aging by using an exploration of identity as a means of understanding how the aging process of gay men might be informed. What is apparent however is that even Rosenfeld (1999) relies on a binary of 'stigma versus status' as a means of conceptualizing sexual identity. There is a danger here in further labeling gay men as either 'competent' or 'incompetent' on this basis ignoring how competing discourses of identity can be mutually claimed by the same individual. In other words, this study reveals that gay men in later life construct their identities BOTH as stigma and status, at varying levels, depending upon the context and circumstances of their lives at the time. Future research into elder gay men should explore how both stigma and status interact with versus existing in opposition to one another. This would most likely reveal an even greater level of understanding about the reality of gay lives than has yet been discussed in the literature.

Finally, of note was the importance of language in how each participant conveyed themselves in the stories they told. Through the use of unstructured interviews, each participant was free to express themselves in whatever language they chose and this allowed for the identification of important turning points in their development. It is important for research to honor the language of evolving gay identities as it expressed by research participants, as opposed to trying to homogenize how it is that we conceptualize these participants. That an individual chooses to refer to themselves or others at different times in their stories as 'queer', 'gay', 'homosexual' or otherwise, is symbolic of the journey
that has been experienced. The more that research allows the story to be told on the participants terms, the more we will come to appreciate the importance of how identity informs the evolution of our stories through time.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how being gay informed the lives of men over the age of 65. Through Roger, Edward, and George’s voice, we were able to make sense of a range of experience in later life that has yet to be incorporated into the mainstream gerontological or social work literature. While we have a long way to go in seeking to achieve full recognition in the literature for the effects of homophobia, heterosexism, and ageism at all points along the life-span, this study now joins others that will help identify and help unsettle the myths and stereotypes that continue to impact our understanding of the aging experience in all of its facets. It is hoped that by including the perspective and standpoint of all marginalized populations, the opportunities and chances that elder gay men and others have for an inclusive response to their needs through service delivery and design, will only be enhanced.
REFERENCES:


APPENDIX I Interpretation of Rosenfeld’s Account of Possible Elder Gay and Lesbian ‘Identity Cohorts’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homosexual Competence</th>
<th>Homosexual Incompetence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discreditable</strong></td>
<td><strong>Discredited</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Homosexuality is a discreditable characteristic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- This identity must be ‘managed’ ex. ‘passing’ behavior, to safeguard against disclosure/overt display to others.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Competence is achieved with invisibility of homosexual identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accredited</strong></td>
<td><strong>‘Failed’ Accredited</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Homosexuality is a credible characteristic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Identity is best managed by a personal and public claiming of a homosexual identity in all areas of one’s life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Competence is achieved with visibility of homosexual identity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Homosexuality is a credible characteristic.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- One is unable or fails to conceal their identity to others such that associating with this person poses a risk to the Discreditable, who will be ‘guilty’ by association.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Double Stigma exists</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Stigma - Based Identity ➔ Status - Based Identity ➔
What is the purpose of the study?:
- The purpose of the study is to assist the social work profession in developing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of gay men over the age of 65 from their perspective.
- This research is a great opportunity for older gay men to tell their stories from their unique point of view.
- The study is being conducted by social worker Christopher Koth, BA, BSW, MSW (candidate) in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Social Work Degree from the University of British Columbia.

How will the study be conducted?
- Individuals will participate in a one to one interview, lasting about 1 to 2 hours, at a location of their choosing.
- Interviews will be conducted by Christopher Koth, and will be more like a conversation, based upon one general question, which will be asked at the start of the interview.
- The interview will be audio-taped, and then transcribed.
- Participants will be provided with a copy of their transcript for feedback and review.
- Participants will also be provided with a copy of the final report of the research project.

Who can participate?
- Males, who identify as being gay, over the age of 65 who also,
- believe that their personal experiences are uniquely influenced both by their sexual orientation and their age, AND
- who are willing to share these thoughts in a confidential interview.