Gender Transitions in Later Life: A Queer Perspective on Successful Aging

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Purpose of the Study: Most understandings of successful aging are developed within a heteronormative cultural framework, leading to a dearth of theoretical and empirical scholarship relevant to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) older adults. This study explores the experiences of transgender persons who contemplate or pursue a gender transition in later life in order to develop culturally diverse conceptualizations of health and wellness in older age.

Design and Methods: Using the extended case method, in-depth interviews were conducted with male-to-female-identified persons (N = 22) who have seriously contemplated or pursued a gender transition past the age of 50. In addition, 170 hr of participant observation was carried out at 3 national transgender conferences generating ethnographic field notes on the topics of aging and gender transitions in later life.

Results: Interpretive analyses suggest that many transgender older adults experience challenges to their gender identities that put their emotional and physical well-being at risk. Contemporary queer theory is used to understand these experiences and argue that greater attention to experiences of queer “failure” and negotiating “success on new terms” may be integral aspects of growth and development for transgender older adults.

Implications: The Baby Boom generation is aging in a post-Stonewall, LGBTQ civil rights era, yet gerontology’s approach to gender and sexual identity has largely been formulated from a heteronormative perspective. A framework for understanding older transgender persons’ experiences informed by queer theory offers a new orientation for conceptualizing successful aging in the lives of marginalized gender and sexual minorities.

Key words: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender, Successful aging, Qualitative research methods
The role of social context in shaping meanings of aging and the social construction of age-related norms has long been a central discussion in the field of gerontology (Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1963). The influence of these assumed norms in the study of aging is constituted, in part, by an orientation to the life course that assumes universal heterosexuality and binary gender and thus, informs scholarship that perpetuates a heteronormative conceptualization of aging. The successful aging paradigm, and its emphasis on person-based domains of “success,” has been widely critiqued for minimizing the structural determinants and social context of aging (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009), which includes the challenges and realities of growing older for those who are marginalized due to their non-normative gender and sexual identities. This study explores the experiences of transgender persons who contemplate or pursue a gender transition in later life and uses queer theory to reconceptualize notions of success and failure in order to expand perspectives on health and wellness for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) older adults.

Normativity and the Successful Aging Paradigm

The notion of successful aging that associates success with a low risk of disease, high physical functioning, and active engagement with society (Rowe & Kahn, 1987, 1997) has grown paradigmatically in gerontology and laid the groundwork for contemporary discourses in positive gerontology, which emphasizes overlapping domains of successful aging, productive aging, and civic engagement in later life (Johnson & Mutchler, 2014). Given its paradigmatic influence, the notion of successful aging has also been scrutinized from multiple perspectives for its underlying normative assumptions and lack of attention to the role of social context in shaping these ideals (Katz, 2000, 2001; Lamb, 2014). For example, sociopolitical critiques draw attention to the ways in which these concepts are inextricably bound with Western neo-liberal expectations for productivity and independence in a capitalistic society (Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009; Katz, 2000; Minkler & Holstein, 2008). In addition, cross-cultural critiques highlight the inappropriate translation of these concepts to various cultural contexts and illuminate the need for more culturally relevant theoretical frameworks (Liang & Luo, 2012; Torres, 2003). Most notably, feminist scholars have long raised concerns about the lack of attention paid to structural inequality, gender, race, and class in the successful aging paradigm (Calasanti, 2004; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001).

On the whole, these critiques are part of a movement to draw attention to the “composite professional/popular knowledge [that] has emerged that elaborates the kinds of productive, physical, ethical, and socially interactive activities appropriate for aging lifestyles” (Holstein, 1999; Katz, 2000, as cited in Katz & Laliberte-Rudman, 2009, p. 145, [emphasis added]). There are many modes through which culture shapes what constitutes an “appropriate” lifestyle. Heteronormativity, one such mode, is the assumption of view of social life that aligns biological sex, sexuality, gender identity, and gender roles in such a way that assumes that “natural” pairings result in expectations that men are masculine and attracted to women, and women are feminine and attracted to men (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1993). The societal normalization of heterosexuality and gender conformity leads to a range of expectations that people fit this “natural” order. Scholarly discourse within the successful aging paradigm, by ignoring the constraining effects of heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia in the lives of LGBTQ older adults, perpetuates unspoken assumptions that a heterosexual orientation and gender conforming identities are associated with ideal outcomes in later life.

Pervasive heteronormativity in Western societies has led to the pathologizing of non-normative gender and sexual identities, which can also be internalized by LGBTQ adults and have deleterious effects on self-esteem, mental health, and identity development (Maylon, 1982). Although gender and sexual minorities have recently been included in research within the successful aging paradigm (Porter, Ronneberg, & Witten, 2013; Van Wagenen, Driskell, & Bradford, 2013) and gerontology has demonstrated greater awareness of LGBTQ aging issues (Witten & Eyler, 2012a), this inclusion must also be accompanied by theoretical advancements in how gerontologists account for gender and sexual minorities’ experiences throughout the life course. Although “success” in later life is not necessarily a heteronormative construct and may be universally desired to some degree, the narrow conceptualization of success in this paradigm ignores the diversity of individual LGBTQ experiences and the structural influences of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia on well-being for members of these groups.

Transgender Older Adults

Within the realm of LGBTQ aging research and scholarship, significant social welfare concerns for transgender adults, such as health, legal, financial, spiritual, trauma/abuse, and end-of-life issues, have gained increasing attention in recent years (Cook-Daniels, Munson, 2010; Fredrickson-Goldsen et al., 2013; Persson, 2009; Williams & Freeman, 2007; Witten & Eyler, 2012b). To date, only a few scholarly endeavors specific to successful aging constructs have focused more explicitly on gender and sexual minorities (Friend, 1990; Porter et al., 2013;
Contemporary Queer Theory

Contemporary queer theory is used to call attention to the ways in which normative constructs of sexuality, gender, and identity have functioned in modern society and to destabilize these cultural influences. This critical discourse emerged in the late 20th century in reaction to studies on homosexuality and gay and lesbian identity politics that were thought to perpetuate normative social constructions of gender and sexuality (Jagose, 1996). Many of the earliest queer thinkers, such as Michael Warner, cautioned against an assimilationist approach to arguing for gay rights and worked to draw attention to the pervasive heteronormativity in contemporary social justice movements (Warner, 1994). Today, many critiques of the gay marriage movement from LGBTQ persons themselves make use of queer theory to argue against seeking social justice through an institution built on expectations of heterosexual dyads, monogamy, and reproduction. This argument claims that queer people are seeking legitimation of homosexuality and gender variance in such a way that actually cuts at the heart of its uniqueness and perpetuates expectations about gender expression, identity, sexuality, and relationships that are at odds with the variance of queer lives and culture. Queer culture is made up of a vast array of relationship structures, sexualities, gender expressions, and both platonic and romantic intimacies that do not align with traditional marriage structures (Warner, 1999). Similarly, older adults are a vastly heterogeneous group and demonstrate multiple pathways to aging well that are not yet fully accounted for in the successful aging paradigm.

In direct contrast to the priority placed on positivity in the successful aging paradigm, some queer theorists have turned toward an exploration of the meanings of failure, negativity, and abjection in contemporary social life (Halberstam, 2011). One of the ways in which this shift has been realized is through scholars’ rejection of identity politics that use assimilation as the guiding principle for civil rights advocacy. In fact, queer theorists and activists argue that there is liberation in a so-called “failure” to conform. In his book, The Queer Art of Failure, J. Jack Halberstam offers a cultural critique of success and positivity in American culture through queer readings of contemporary films, art and literature that draws attention to characters that lie outside modern society’s “tyranny of success” (Esteban Muñoz, 2011). Through readings of contemporary art, such as Tracey Moffat’s photographic project, Fourth, which captured images of Olympic athletes in the moment they realized they took fourth place in their event, Halberstam argues that an obsession with winning has blinded us to alternative ways of thinking about self-hood outside the spotlight of success. Further, Halberstam argues that beyond offering alternative ways of being, failure also offers a form of liberation that is distinctively queer. By embracing the failure to live a “normal” lifestyle, one is liberated to set alternative parameters for one’s existence, however unproductive these may seem from a mainstream perspective. In this way, Halberstam constructs the abject as a site for cultural subversion. This active resistance to being “normal” is at the heart of queer theory and is applicable to transgender adults who actively embody identities that exist along the periphery of societal norms.

Linn Sandberg (2008), in her article “The Old, the Ugly and the Queer: Thinking Old Age in Relation to Queer Theory” (2008) directly juxtaposes this emphasis on rejecting identity politics and assimilation with the successful aging paradigm in gerontology. She argues that the discourse of positivity in aging depends on the construction of the negative and abject elder that can be rejected through successful aging, just as some LGBTQ civil rights activists construct the identity of a perverted and abject homosexual in order to reject it through assimilation. The homogenization of queerness through gay assimilation politics is not unlike the minimizing of the undesirable and negative aspects of aging through a focus on success and positivity in discourses on aging. By separating our view of LGBTQ aging and older adults from an attachment to expectations of success grounded in a heterosexist social context, gerontologists may facilitate LGBTQ older adults’ ability to embrace the realities of queer aging.
Method

The data collected and analyzed in this paper are part of an extended case method study that seeks to refine existing theory or concepts by exploring macrolevel social forces through analyses of microlevel social settings (Burawoy, 1998; Burawoy et al., 1991; Samuels, 2009; Small, 2009). Extended case method was carried out in three stages reflecting recent articulations of this method by Wadham and Warren (2013): 1) the successful aging paradigm was identified as a highly influential framework in gerontology that is ideally suited to expansion and refinement; 2) gender transitions in later life was identified as an ethnographic case that provided an anomalous aging experience that challenges mainstream notions of successful aging; and 3) ethnographic data from in-depth interviews and participation observation were gathered and analyzed in order to expand notions of successful aging to account for the social forces that shape queer older adults’ experiences of aging.

Data Collection

Sample and Recruitment

Purposive sampling (Mason, 2002) was initially used to recruit persons 50 years of age or older who have seriously contemplated or have pursued a gender transition. I intentionally recruited male-to-female-identified persons for interviews because they often come out/and or transition later in life than female-to-male-identified persons (Cook-Daniels, 2006). I recruited 22 participants through the use of e-mail flyers to community leaders with whom I had developed relationships through activist work in Chicago, word of mouth, and some snowball referrals.

The demographic characteristics of the 22 participants varied across race, class, age, relationship status, and transition experiences. Eighteen participants were European American, three were African American and one was Asian American. Based on information shared during the interviews, approximately 20% expressed ongoing socioeconomic challenges, 30% expressed a sense of socioeconomic stability, though somewhat tenuous, and about 50% shared that their socioeconomic position afforded stability and some luxury. Twelve participants were between 50- and 60-years-old, seven were between 60- and 70-years-old, two were between 70- and 80-years-old, and one participant was 82-years-old. Many of the participants were in or had been in long-term relationships; 7 were currently in heterosexual marriages, 11 were previously in heterosexual marriages, 2 were in same-sex partnerships, and 2 were never married or partnered in heterosexual or same-sex relationships.

Conceptualizing older adults’ gender identities is complex, multifaceted and is understood from diverse theoretical and practical standpoints and within multiple professional domains. For the analyses in this study, I use the language of the participants themselves to discuss how they contemplate and pursue transitions. For some people, a transition may mean pursuing hormone therapy or surgical modifications of their bodies, whereas for others, it means renegotiating their social and familial relationships to accommodate their gender identity. Therefore, I use the word “transition” to reference processes through which a person may decide to change from living “part-time” (a term often used by participants to label expressing their preferred gender identity as female in private or only in some aspects of their lives) to “full-time” (a term used to describe living in and expressing their preferred female gender 100% of the time). At the time of my interviews, 15 of the participants were living full-time, 3 were living part-time but were still not sure about transitioning, three were living part-time and had decided not to transition, and 1 person was living part-time and considered herself in preparation for transition.

Interviews and Participant Observation

In-depth biographical interviews focused on participants’ gender expression and identity over time, work and relationships, and thoughts about transitioning. They were conducted at participants’ homes and, in a few cases, at public locations such as coffee shops or parks and lasted from 1.5 to 2.5 hr. Eighteen interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; four were recorded with handwritten notes. Participant observation (Burawoy et al., 1991; Emerson, 2001) was carried out with the permission of organizers at three community-based transgender conferences in the Southeast, Midwest, and Northwest of the United States in order to generate additional data that would aid in developing a socially and historically contextualized analysis. I participated in the full range of activities at conferences; this included attending seminars, discussion groups, meals, and social outings and in all cases introducing myself as a researcher while also contributing personal reflections in conversations and at times disclosing aspects of my own identity. This balancing of both researcher and participant roles aided in developing alliances with fellow participants and generating in-depth field data. I took extensive field notes about these experiences (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) that focused on issues of aging, later life transitions, and the history of the conferences themselves. Each conference lasted approximately one week; I spent a total of 170 hr in the field.

Data Analysis

I used NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2012) to organize the interview and field
data and develop a set of open and focused codes on a wide range of descriptive topics evident in the transcripts and notes (Padgett, 2008). Some of the open codes captured significant domains of life experience, such as childhood experiences, marriage and family relationships, and work life. I developed additional focused codes that identified life challenges such as financial strain, substance abuse, suicidality, and social isolation. I then used extensive analytical memo writing (Emerson et al., 2011) as a method of drawing conceptual connections between these coded data and developing an early articulation of themes related to successful aging and queer theory. I used these themes as my foundation for further abstraction and interpretation of the data with respect to queer theory's emphasis on failure and negativity. The process of analyzing the data was an iterative one that included first presenting raw data for discussion with colleagues in a qualitative methods seminar at the University of Chicago, the extensive use of analytical memos, and the articulation and refinement of conceptual findings with an interpretive methods advisor. I used member checking (Padgett, 2008) to add rigor to this iterative process whereby I published early findings in community-based newsletters, gave presentations, and elicited participant feedback at original field sites for 2 years following data collection and had ongoing discussions with members of transgender community groups about the relevance of this study’s findings to their life experiences.

Findings

Interpretive analyses of interview and participant observation data suggest that traditional notions of successful aging do not account for the barriers to achieving individual wellness that transgender adults encounter by negotiating society’s heteronormative expectations, and perceived homophobia and transphobia. I observed that the participants in this study take unconventional paths to wellness in later life—often by embracing “failure” and defining success on new terms that prioritize identity development in later life and a sense of authenticity before death.

Embracing “Failure”

Older transgender persons who participated in this study were acutely aware of the ways in which their identities did not align with heteronormative expectations of manhood as well as the toll this misalignment took on their mental and physical health. For some, contemplating a transition in later life was done after a significant amount of frustration at having tried to “make things work,” with many people expressing the anguish of spending years feeling some sense of failure in their lives. Deborah (All names in this paper are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of study participants.), a European American woman who runs her own business at age 55, and who recently completed her transition to living full-time, reflects on how this struggle influenced her decision to transition:

I was getting close to my 50th birthday. I was like – I was what, you know, 45 at that point. Yeah, it was, like 45 or 46 – and I just felt that I’d been a failure my whole life. I had my whole life – the better part of my life behind me, you know? I mean, that’s the way you tend to think of it, at least in this country, right? And I couldn’t keep living that way. That was the thing. I couldn’t quite put a finger on what I had to do. I couldn’t keep living that way. Then I started experimenting with the trans things and drinking and just feeling – and I was extremely depressed the first couple of years I started transitioning...for the first time in my life, I could actually feel things, so it was like a whole lifetime’s worth of feelings were just coming out and I would just sit in the room and cry....Not only was I unhappy, but I was making all the people that love me very unhappy too. And that was the start of this whole process.

For Deborah, who had been through three marriages and divorces by the age of 45, multiple bouts of unemployment, and had suffered from severe depression in relation to her desire to cross-dress and explore her gender identity, “living that way” meant trying to succeed in the world as a man despite many signs that she was not flourishing in that role. By “sitting in the room and crying” during those first years of recognizing her transgender identity, she was allowing herself to feel the pain of her struggle to succeed as a man and the magnitude of what life might be like as a transgender woman. The release of years of pent-up feelings speaks to the ill fit she experienced with respect to heteronormative societal expectations and the severe constraints on her identity development caused by these expectations.

Another way in which people went through the process of recognizing their “failure” to fulfill society’s expectations was acknowledging to oneself the futility of trying to exist within perceived suitable options for social identities. Typically, these suitable/acceptable options required living as males, marrying females, and playing the socially expected role of man, husband, father...and in Genevieve’s case, the “good boy.” Genevieve, an African American woman in her early 60s who is working on completing her college degree, narrates her process of coming to terms with her own identity over the years:

People don’t really change, my dear, because they want to. People change because they get sick and tired. They’re forced to change. Sick and tired, or they keep doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results,
and they don’t get them, so they’re forced to change. I had tried everything. I had tried to be a good little boy. I had tried to be a good gay guy. I had tried to be a great friend and lover. I had tried to sneak into the background. I had tried to be an artist, an eccentric. I had tried being a hairdresser, extravagant, flamboyant. I had tried everything, and she didn’t leave.

Genevieve’s narrative of trying again and again to push away her female self and inhabit other social identities, even ones that illicit stigma such as being a gay man, demonstrates the endurance required to negotiate society’s expectations and boundaries for gender and sexuality. It also demonstrates how heteronormativity in society makes it difficult for transgender people to recognize an internally guided sense of identity. The idea of being “forced to change” and the motivating emotion of feeling “sick and tired” suggests that acceptance of one’s gender identity often comes with confronting the reality that one’s identity is being externally constrained, letting go of society’s approval and actively rejecting society’s expectations.

The process of becoming aware of one’s needs as a transgender person and recognizing the negative effects of trying to succeed in heteronormative terms is a gradual one that for most people in this study took many years of trial and error. Often participants described this process as fraught with emotional anguish and anger, which took a toll on their mental health. Janine, a 57-year-old European American accountant who is in the process of transitioning after a recent divorce, describes the tension and anger she felt when she would have to come home from transgender social meetings where she could dress in feminine clothing and “be herself”:

And so then – when I came home, the anger part was – Okay, well, the anger part was before I got home – it was when I had to get changed in the car, because I had to go back home in male mode. And then I got home, and then I go to work, and I’m – it’s right there. I’m touching this world, and now I’m back into this reality. So, it – it underscored what I always believed in my life. The more I was able to touch this other world, the more I’d want to connect to it, the more anger, the more disconnected I would become from the life that I had built. I was always afraid of that. Now, I’m still afraid of it, but I’m still willing to – to move forward. I’m kinda willing to risk certain things where, in the past, I wasn’t.

In Janine’s case, she speaks of a risk that many people in this study weighed very carefully along with feelings of anger while contemplating a transition. As a White male, with a stable professional life, Janine had achieved a certain degree of success in the role of a heterosexual White male in mainstream society. By gradually entering a queer social world that accepted her gender variance, she had to let go of her “success” as a man (and the social privileges this afforded her) and be open to the risks of living as a transgender woman in a still largely heteronormative society. In Deborah, Genevieve, and Janine’s stories, we see how a buildup of tension, frustration, anger, and ultimately a “failure” to happily fulfill society’s expectations created the kind of pressure that could only be released by liberating themselves from this effort to conform.

Success on New Terms

Facing the pain and addressing the anger that stem from feeling oppressed by one’s opportunities for gender expression does not mean pushing out joy. Most participants shed tears of joy in talking about points of awareness, support from some family members, and the sheer peace of accepting oneself and feeling comfortable in one’s own skin. Emotions of shame and anger were balanced with great fortitude and a sense of joy and liberation for most participants in this study. Genevieve, who spent many years living as male in the gay community, puts things in this perspective when she recounts an interaction with a friend who cautioned her against coming out as HIV positive along with her gender identity. Instead, for Genevieve, this was a reality check and challenge to live an honest and authentic life that included more publicly living her female identity:

I said, ‘Look, here’s the deal. I’m HIV positive, okay. We already know that, so what are my choices? I live an authentic life, or I die.’ Now, I’ve got HIV, and my way of saying, ‘Fuck the world,’ is, okay, from now on I’m gonna be perfectly honest and live an authentic life, because it’s really too late, so if I get one good hour as a trans woman it would be worth it. So, that’s how I view it, so I have to take my chances.

Genevieve’s perspective demonstrates the ways in which many older transgender persons set new expectations for themselves and live authentically on their own terms. In addition to managing HIV, Genevieve struggled with time spent on the street, prostitution, financial instability, and sexual abuse at different points in her life. Traditional conceptualizations of successful aging would view these struggles and their consequences as impediments to aging well, which they are, but an understanding of the role these challenges play in transgender older adults’ own sense of identity in later life helps illuminate how alternative paths to wellness take place despite normative expectations.

For some participants in this study, the experience of self-acceptance led to an emerging sense of self-confidence that actually impacted domains in which they had previously struggled.
Through participant observation at one conference, I spent several days getting to know Cynthia, a veteran of Desert Storm in Iraq, who was attending her first transgender conference. Cynthia wore her heart on her sleeve from the moment she arrived and one quickly gained an appreciation for the deep pain she had endured as a closeted transgender woman along with the ecstasy she felt expressing herself and finding support at this first conference. There is one moment that Cynthia demonstrated what I call “success on new terms.” Cynthia shared with me that she had been unemployed and under significant financial stress for many years since she served in the military, and that she felt she was caught in a string of failures when applying for jobs. As it happened, a potential employer called during the week of the conference and wanted to conduct a phone interview. Cynthia took the call in private and when she returned exclaimed to the group, “I nailed it!” Cynthia later told me via e-mail that she received the job offer and that she had never been so confident in an interview in her entire life. That Cynthia had a long period of failing to gain employment, only to experience an exceptionally positive interview in her first week living in female mode demonstrates how movement through failure to fulfill normative expectations can lead to greater confidence and redefining new terms for success that some transgender adults experience in later life.

Another example of setting new terms for success was enacted at a conference where organizers held a special ceremony for veterans in attendance. An excerpt from my field notes emphasizes the ways in which conference attendees recognized their military service on their own terms by honoring each other using preferred female names and while presenting in female mode at the conference. Both of these things are especially significant because they would have been unacceptable during their active duty in the military.

After we finished lunch in the ballroom, conference organizers announced there would be a ceremony for veterans in attendance and asked anyone who had served in the United States military to stand up. The wave of people getting up around the room in that moment nearly took my breath away. One by one, the leader of the ceremony asked each veteran’s female name, about her tours of duty, and performed a formal military salute. The sight of so many trans women being honored for service in Korea and Vietnam was astounding.

By honoring each other for their service while also respecting a part of themselves never deemed acceptable by the military, the attendees at this conference renegotiate the context in which they are able to access an experience of “success” by celebrating, simultaneously, two identities that mainstream society deems incompatible. Participants at conferences across the country frequently discussed and compared stories about why they decided to enlist in the military (many of whom had volunteered for service during the Vietnam War). I heard from many people that the desire to fulfill expectations and responsibilities for manhood often led them to consider military service. For some, they hoped that participating in such a masculine culture might “snuff out” their transgender feelings. For others, they hoped to silence the teasing and taunting about being a “sissy” they had experienced at school and in their families. Years later, many transgender women are proud of their military service and able to integrate their experiences in the military, which constrained their gender identity, with a process of accepting and nourishing this same identity later in life.

This development of a cohesive self that falls outside of normative expectations was a poignant aspect of many people’s autobiographical narratives. Genevieve, who shared part of a memoir she is writing, captures this integration well:

As early as she could tell she remembered feeling discordant with her body...she kept to herself with her shame, and all that pain she held within herself. Despite her fear, pain and shame, this would become the center of her beauty and development, like a volcano packed with dirt...She would erupt into the most powerful woman, all because of her fear, something most people never conquer in life.

Genevieve’s memoir, parts of which she read aloud during our interview, epitomizes what it means to find liberation in queer failure by describing how the discomfort and pain of knowing one does not embody normative expectations for gender can be transformed into strength, power, and liberation. Heteronormative expectations about what a little boy should grow up to become contributed to decades of struggle for Genevieve and many of the participants in this study, and it was finally rejecting these expectations and the internalized shame associated with the inability to embody these norms that helped many feel liberated and authentic in their later years.

Discussion

For the majority of participants in this study, contemplating a gender transition in later life only came after years, often decades, of internal and interpersonal struggle. Making a decision about one’s future necessitated reflecting on one’s past in ways that raised awareness of deep sadness, frustration, suffering, alienation, marginalization, and emotional and physical trauma. Financial, interpersonal, and substance abuse troubles were often associated...
with mental health difficulties and suicidal thoughts and attempts for many of the people who were interviewed for this study. The existential and emotional dynamics inherent in this process are not ones that can be fully accounted for within a successful aging paradigm that has yet to recognize the pervasive influence of heteronormativity in our society. Although successful aging studies often address how older adults cope with challenges as they age, a queer perspective on embracing negativity through liberation from society's expectations provides a more culturally relevant meaning to these struggles in the lives of transgender older adults.

Scholars have recently called for renewed efforts to integrate critical and humanistic approaches to gerontology in order to better link understandings of social structure, individual experience, and meanings of aging (Baars, Dohmen, Grenier, & Phillipson, 2013). The findings in this study contribute to this effort by illuminating the connection between heteronormativity’s pervasive influence in contemporary society and the ways in which transgender older adults make meaning of their experiences at the periphery of these norms. The successful aging paradigm’s lack of attention to heteronormative forces and the salient effects this has on LGBTQ older adults is problematic if gerontology is to expand its theoretical boundaries and conceptualize wellness in terms beyond traditional notions of success and failure. A queer perspective on failure may also add additional nuance to recent discussions of risk and resilience in the lives of LGBTQ older adults, expanding our conceptualization of what it means to age well for gender and sexual minorities whose identities and development have been constrained by heteronormative influences.

Limitations

The findings in this paper are based on analyses using contemporary queer theory, which is not an intersectional theory that facilitates in-depth analyses of race and class. Thus, the use of queer theory in this paper is a limitation in terms of how well the findings address these social forces in the lives of transgender older adults. Future research should seek to extend a queer perspective on successful aging to account for these complexities of identity and life experience. Also, the age range of the sample in this study focuses attention on current generations of older adults, and caution should be used in extending these findings to younger transgender adults. The aim of this paper is to make theoretical generalizations that challenge normative conceptualizations of wellness within the successful aging paradigm; however, these do not constitute far reaching empirical generalizations about older LGBTQ people.

Implications

This study introduces new concepts into aging discourse, offering a conceptual bridge between queer perspectives on social life and gerontological ones. This bridge can be used to complicate the way we perceive queer older adults’ struggles and challenges and draw attention to the ways in which these may actually enhance a strong sense of self. Halberstam’s notion of the queer art of failure challenges us to pay attention to the stories that do not always paint a pretty picture and that cannot be seamlessly assimilated into mainstream culture. In fact, these stories generate meaning through their very resistance to heteronormative social structure. Just as queer critics of the gay marriage movement argue that assimilationists minimize diverse forms of queerness that do not fit into the institution of marriage, gerontologists should be careful not to fit gender and sexual minorities into traditional notions of success that do not take the social influence of heteronormativity into account.

Drawing attention to the connection between heteronormative social forces and the successful aging paradigm has implications for the ways in which research and scholarship translate to practice. Internalized homophobia and transphobia have real effects in the lives of LGBTQ persons and these issues stem in part from a lack of compatibility between normative socialization processes, mainstream society, and the reality of queer identities and lives. The quality of social welfare services for gender and sexual minorities is subject to the same cultural influences that shape gerontological scholarship. Practitioners in fields such as clinical psychology, social work, counseling, education, and health care are vulnerable to perpetuating heteronormative assumptions about identity and human behavior, which can blind them to the unique ways in which queer people have the potential to age on their own terms and reject traditional norms. Integrating queer perspectives into the successful aging paradigm is poised to influence the ways in which practitioners design interventions for LGBTQ older adults that are culturally attuned to issues of queer “failure” and how these may actually facilitate positive growth and development later in life. In this way, practitioners in aging services, along with gerontological scholars, have the opportunity to increase awareness of what it means to resist conforming to mainstream notions of success and join with queer older adults in expanding opportunities for aging well.
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