



Research Brief

LGBTQIA2+ Friendly Aging

About This Research

To date, most age-friendly efforts have overlooked the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQIA2+ older adults who, due to their complex histories of oppression and discrimination, experience unique aging trajectories compared to their non-LGBTQIA2+ counterparts. The current study sheds light onto the experiences of this population through an age-friendly lens and hopes to encourage other researchers and service providers to do the same.

Key Findings

1. LGBTQIA2+ older adults value intergenerational interaction yet face interpersonal and self-directed ageism when forming connections with younger queer individuals.
2. LGBTQIA2+ older adults form close friendships and “families of choice” that include connection to spaces of spirituality and religion.
3. Few LGBTQIA2+ older adults report feelings of loneliness or isolation in their current experiences, but do recall these feelings during other periods of their lives.
4. Despite not reporting current feelings of loneliness, interviewees often felt as if their social connections were lacking intimacy, closeness, and honesty, particularly connections with non-LGBTQIA2+ family members, friends, and service providers.
5. Safety and acceptance were highlighted from participants as both a barrier and facilitator to social connection and using self-efficacy as a strategy to improve relationships

Study Overview

The Age-Friendly Innovation Center (AFIC) of the Ohio State University College of Social Work innovates with older adults through research, education, and engagement to ensure inclusion and build resiliency to make our communities age-friendly. AFIC strives to advance research that is inclusive of communities often excluded from the age-friendly communities' movement. Through semi-structured interviews (N = 15), this study sought to understand the experiences of loneliness and isolation among LGBTQIA2+ older adults living in Columbus, Ohio. Also of interest were the ways in which this group were engaged in community,

utilizing services, finding information on community events, and how future services and supports could be developed to create LGBTQIA2+ friendly communities.

Interestingly, few participants in this study reported current feelings of loneliness or isolation. More often, LGBTQIA2+ older adults spoke of feeling embedded socially, noting multiple points of connection. In numerous instances, participants described relationships arising from experiences of hardship over the life course. Interviewees referenced several different types of connection, such as (1) connection with oneself, (2) connection with others, and (3) connection with institutions. Connection with oneself encompassed participants' relationships with their own sexual/gender identity and aging process. Participants described their connection to others as including intergenerational relationships, significant others, and "chosen family." And finally, interviewees' relationship with institutions manifested through their interactions with service organizations and providers and connection to religion.

Despite reporting an abundance of social connections, many interviewees expressed an overall sense of lacking intimacy, closeness, and honesty within their relationships. This was particularly pronounced within their relationships with non-LGBTQIA2+ individuals. Interviewees reported a reluctance to being fully open regarding their gender and sexual identity and behaviors with their non-LGBTQIA2+ family, friends, and service providers. Consequently, many expressed a preference for interactions with other queer individuals. Having affirming connections with other LGBTQIA2+ individuals allowed interviewees a chance to be authentic and unapologetic resulting in enhanced connection with, and acceptance of their own identity and aging process.

Interviewees regarded a romantic partnership as a particularly important connection. Those with a partner or spouse believed they received a unique kind of attention and support from that relationship, while those without a partner or spouse longed to experience the same connection. Intergenerational relationships too, were often mentioned by interviewees as an important source of knowledge and support. Some LGBTQIA2+ older adults sought relationships with younger individuals because they anticipated needing caregiving and/or instrumental support in the future and wanted friends who would be able to provide that for them. Others simply cherished the new perspectives that younger people had to offer. While LGBTQIA2+ older adults liked the idea of forming relationships with individuals of younger generations, they perceived there to be barriers to connection. For example, differences in experiences of discrimination, acceptance, and the historical context of LGBTQ+ rights among different age cohorts of LGBTQIA2+ individuals created strained social relationships.

Across all types of connection, two common themes emerged: acceptance and safety. LGBTQIA2+ older adults constantly assess the level of acceptance and safety within their environment and form their connections accordingly. This hypervigilance may be a result of navigating a lifetime of oppression and stigma. A discriminatory or dangerous environment may cause LGBTQIA2+ older adults to hide their identity and refrain from making connections to protect themselves from victimization. Conversely, environments that create a sense of safety and acceptance foster the development of meaningful connections.

The ability of LGBTQIA2+ older adults to form rich, affirming connections despite rejection demonstrates this population's remarkable resilience. Yet an expressed lack of these environments led many participants

to signify the desire for relationships that embodied higher levels of intimacy, honesty, and closeness. The Age-Friendly Framework explores “respect and social inclusion”, as well as “social participation”. To overcome barriers to connection and form additional meaningful relationships, opportunities to strengthen relationship self-efficacy throughout the life course are desired by older members of the LGBTQIA2+ community. Building upon the foundation of acceptance and safety, LGBTQIA2+ older adults envisioned a world that not only tolerates but celebrates their mosaic of rich experiences and identities.

Conclusion

This study highlights the need for aging service providers to dedicate explicit attention to LGBTQIA2+ older adults. Programs and services that aim to facilitate safe and accepting social environments and build deeper, more honest, and intentional connections across the lifespan should be developed and supported to serve this population. Aligning with the Age-Friendly framework, LGBTQIA2+ older adults should be included, as experience experts, in the development and facilitation of future initiatives.

About the Researchers

Christine Happel, MSW, LSW has 10+ years of experience working alongside older adults, with a focus on aging-in-community. Their research explores experiences of LGBTQ+ older adults within the Age-Friendly framework. **Al Cho, MSW, LSW** completed his Master of Social Work at The Ohio State University and works as a case worker with older adults. **Jen Justice** is a Master of Gerontological Studies student at Miami University of Ohio whose research focuses on the aging trajectories of queer older adults. **Charlie Andorka** is a Master of Social Work student at The Ohio State University and is an Age-Friendly Scholar with the Age-Friendly Innovation Center. **David A. Jenkins, PhD, LCSW** is a Professor and Dean of the College of Social Work at The Ohio State University. Much of his scholarship focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals and family forms suffering from marginalization with specific interests in the lives of sexual minorities.

Contact information: happel.2@osu.edu

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