

Non-heterosexual ageing

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy lesbijek i gejów w starszym wieku, którzy są kategorią niedoreprezentowaną w społecznych badaniach obszaru LGBT. Ponieważ respondenci do badań często rekrutowani są w klubach i barach bądź za pośrednictwem Internetu, konsekwencją tego jest przewaga w roli badanych osób młodych bądź w wieku średnim. Ponieważ jednak procesy starzenia się współczesnych społeczeństw zachodnich nie omijają populacji osób LGBT, badania tego obszaru stale się powiększają. W artykule najpierw dokonuję przeglądu współczesnych badań związanych ze specyfiką starszych gejów i lesbijek. Są to tylko dane zachodnie, gdyż w Polsce nikt jak dotąd ową problematyką się nie zajmuje. Następnie przedstawiam wybrane aspekty funkcjonowania starszych osób w polskim środowisku LGBT. Na koniec prezentuję ilustrację problematyki z obszaru literatury, czyli wizerunek gejowskiej starości w powieści Michała Witkowskiego *Lubiewo*.

Słowa kluczowe:

lesbijki, geje, starzenie się

Abstract

The article concerns elderly lesbians and gays, who are an underrepresented group in social research in the area of LGBT issues. Since respondents for research are often recruited in community clubs and bars or via websites, the majority of interviewees are young or middle-aged. However, research in this field is steadily increasing, since the ageing of modern western societies pertains also to the LGBT population. In this article I firstly review recent research related specifically to elderly gays and lesbians. These are only western data, as no work has been done on this issue in Poland so far. Next I discuss selected aspects of elderly people's functioning within the Polish LGBT community. At the end of the article I present an illustration of the issue taken from literature, i.e. the image of gay ageing in Michał Witkowski's novel *Lovetown*.

Key words:

lesbians, gays, ageing

1. Elderly gays and lesbians in research studies

Research concerning non-heterosexual senior citizens is based on the assumption that members of this sociodemographic category can be characterized with certain shared traits. Their specificity consists of the combined consequences of minority status and being vulnerable to double discrimination due to their orientation (homophobia) as well as age (ageism). The first research into this community emerged at the turn of the 70s and 80s. It concerned mainly males and referred to two rival ideas, namely

accelerated ageing theory and crisis competence theory. Accelerated ageing theory assumed that gays consider themselves old earlier than heterosexual males, which may be a source of many emotional or social problems. According to certain researchers, some gays already defined themselves old at 30 (Berger 1982). On the other hand, crisis competence theory pointed out that gay men deal with the consequences of the passage of time better than their heterosexual counterparts. It is explained in terms of the necessity of reflexively constructing one's identity during various phases of the coming out process, which conduces to the acquisition of adaptive skills. The outcome of the minority status is thus related here to higher endurance and adaptability. In this perspective, homosexuals develop during their lives traits such as plasticity in gender roles, competences connected with building social support networks (e.g. via the "friend as a family" model) and efficiency in negotiating meanings. Those skills result from the necessity of managing stigma and are treated as conducing to positive engagement with the challenges of older age.

Proponents of the accelerated ageing theory state that the gay community is based on a cult of youth, vitality and carnality. Some point out the important role of sex and sexuality which is bound to an emphasis on physical beauty and fitness. Robert Schope (2005) writes about a change in the perception of ageing among gays, which occurred in the West in the 1960s when the gay movement and infrastructure officially started to develop. Before that, when the homosexual community was based on informal social networks, elderly gays enjoyed respect. They were sometimes sponsors or those who introduced young gays to the gay subculture. When this world "surfaced", official clubs, bars and discos were established and instead of experience and resources, youthfulness and psycho-physical abilities to absorb new sensations began to matter. Tailoring an entertaining infrastructure chiefly to the needs of young people resulted in the isolation and stigmatization of the elderly.

Contemporary research on the opinion of gays on the specifics of the ageing processes of non-heterosexuals illustrate diverse situations and views. Peter Robinson (2011), drawing on interviews with 21 gays aged 40 to 79 from Australia and the US, highlighted two major and four minor narrations which concern how, according to the respondents, elderly gays are perceived in the LGBT community. The major narrations oppose each other. The first is based on the belief that the homosexual environment is one where ageism reigns and an obsession with youthfulness permeates. Some interviewees treated it as a consequence of a gay lifestyle and the expression of "a gay image". The author also noted opinions on a trend among elderly gays of insistently trying to look younger than they really are. The second narration, however, accented the positive experiences of respondents as a result of relations with younger gays. Interviewees talked about the youth looking with admiration at long-term and lasting relationships between older men. Sometimes they appreciated their life experience and eagerly

listened to stories of homosexuals in the 1960s or 1970s. The two major narrations above find continuance, or rather follow-ups, in four minor narrations. The first is about the respect with which young gays sometimes treated older ones. They perceive them as veterans who had lived through the hard times, including the AIDS epidemic. A few respondents add, though, that respect depends on the older gay's position. If he had a low social position and did not manage to achieve career success, he may have been marginalized. The second narration relates to paid sex. Here a theme appears of relations between the youth and the elderly where money plays the main role. According to the authors of this kind of narrative, older gays can only be attractive to young ones when financial rewards come into play. In that case, the younger party can even display emotional commitment to the relationship, but it would have been impossible but for the money. The subject of the third narration is teenage ageism. Here, respondents mention sociocultural ignorance among young gays who are mostly uninterested in the past and do not perceive the elderly as people to whom they owe something in the context of emancipation. They treat them like grandfathers with whom they have no common ground. The last minor narration accentuates the image of elderly gays as sexually unattractive and aggressive. The elderly are often seen as potentially harmful, with the aim of sexually abusing those younger than them. From an analysis of the interviews, the author draws a few general conclusions. According to him, the dominant culture constructs ageist models which are just being reflected by gay subculture. Modern gay identity is connected with youthfulness. As a consequence there are phenomena such as a perception of the elderly as asexual, efforts on the part of middle-aged gays to maintain a youthful image (in terms of look and behavior) and older men's difficulties in accepting the consequences of ageing. The diversity of the collected narrations indicates that there is no universal model according to which the elderly are perceived in the gay community. According to respondents, an older gay may be marginalized but may also be treated with respect.

Illustrations of feelings connected with ageing were presented by Adrian Lee (2004) on the basis of unstructured interviews with 15 homosexual males aged 57 to 84. In their perception of the process, interviewees referred mostly to physical changes and carnality. They also talked about health issues, changes in bodily appearance and mobility possibilities. Decreasing libido and changes in sexual functioning were mentioned as well. In areas related to the specifics of sexual orientation, the theme of a gay infrastructure appears. Respondents spoke about clubs drawing mainly young people. They claimed that they did not go there because of two reasons. Firstly, they felt uneasy and uncomfortable there, and did not fit in. Secondly, certain things favored by the young, such as harsh lights and loud music, were less well-tolerated by older people. One of the interlocutors reminisced about having felt his age severely for the first time at the so called "picket line" (an alternative name for "cruising ground", i.e. a conventional public place

to search for a sexual partner), where he encountered offensive remarks from other men who found him too old for this kind of activity.

Nowadays, researchers more and more frequently notice differences between homosexual males and females with respect to the ageing process and how it is perceived. Their research reveals that many gays approach the ageing processes negatively, with a tendency towards depression and low spirits. Homosexual females are more optimistic and active. Physical appearance and youthfulness play a smaller role in the lesbian environment than it does in the gay environment. Although some elderly women feel socially “invisible”, suffering the consequences of not only homophobia and ageism, but also sexism, other research shows that many of them enjoy respect among young lesbians, performing the role of “community patrons” or “grandmas”. Robert Schope (2005) asked his homosexual respondents (74 men and 109 women) at what age a homosexual person becomes old. The average age selected by gay men is 38,8 years, whereas among lesbians it is 48,4. The younger the respondent, the earlier he or she placed the age border (gays under 40 indicated 37, whereas older gays selected 44). Interviewees were also asked about the LGBT community’s attitude towards ageing, in their opinion. The most pejorative descriptor – “terrible” – was chosen by as few as 3,8% of lesbians and as many as 45,9% of gay men.

Susan Slater (1995) devotes part of her work about the cycles of lesbians’ family life to the ageing of non-heterosexual women. She took note of the economical aspect of their situation. She concluded that retired lesbians may experience more severe consequences of sexist discrimination on the job market than heterosexual females. Women’s statistically lower salaries lead to lower pensions. While retired heterosexual women may potentially have access to their husbands’ higher pension, or welfare payments in the case of widowhood, single-sex relationships cannot rely on such possibilities. According to Slater, elderly lesbians are thus subject to economic problems to a greater degree than heterosexuals and gay men. The author also wrote about the difficult situation of women whose female partners have died. Widows who lose their husbands can enter a socially legitimate role and live through mourning in accordance with its standards. In the case of lesbians it is not so obvious. If their relation wasn’t characterized by utter public openness (which is still rare), the person whose partner is deceased may be deprived of the public components of mourning, such as her role in funeral rites, condolences and obituaries, as the deceased’s family of origin tend to take total control of those rituals. Such situations are chiefly experienced by elderly lesbians, who may suffer from double loneliness – with no close person and no social support at all. Slater (1995: 224) claims, that “lesbian widows are frequently seen simply as lone woman, as if they had never created families at all”.

Western researchers on the specifics of gay and lesbian ageing typically place the issue in the context of problems connected with social services and health care. The authors of books and articles on the subject target students, the health care industry

and gerontology specialists. They assume that knowledge of the experiences and issues of the elderly who belong to sexual minorities can help them in working with patients or clients. In this discourse, more frequently than in case of heterosexuals, loneliness is considered as an essential element of issues affecting elderly gays and lesbians, since they less often have spouses, partners, children and grandchildren. Research on the health of elderly lesbians, gays and bisexuals indicate that this part of population is characterised by a higher level of certain severe psychical and physical chronic illnesses than the heterosexual population (Wallace et al. 2011). It may be connected with higher stress levels as a consequence of minority status.

2. A generational perspective on the Polish LGBT community

In Poland, an officially functioning LGBT community only came into being after the 1989 constitutional changes. Before that, the processes of creating an own subculture concerned mostly males from big cities who created informal social circles. In the 1980s those processes were accompanied by an increased interest in homosexuals on the part of government institutions. The 1985 “Hiacynt” police campaign was illustrative of the state’s attitude towards homosexuals back then. It included detaining gays, interrogating them and filling in forms called “homosexual’s cards”. It was followed by threats to forcibly reveal the detained person’s homosexuality at work, or in front of family or friends. The experiences of today’s older gays are therefore much different from those of homosexuals growing up in the new constitutional reality. Present-day young people have significantly greater chances of functioning openly in a heterosexual environment as well as creating their own milieu, where people of the same orientation can gather. Among LGBT activists, participants in movements and users of the community’s infrastructure, elderly people are invisible. On LGBT websites and blogs, posts signaling the existence of elderly gays as leaders within the community can be sometimes seen. Janusz Boguszewicz (2006) writes about it in the following words: “Matters of age and ageing are a taboo subject particularly in the community. It is a peculiar form of internal hypocrisy and, logically speaking, it seems funny that gay communities demand respect and tolerance as generally understood for themselves while they humiliate, depreciate and exclude older gays. Older, which means old! (...) Gays are, as a rule, maladjusted to the ageing processes. Gays between 35 and 45 are usually practically ruled out of social life, or they withdraw themselves”.

The author also writes about the negative stereotype of elderly gays in homosexual community – they are perceived as an unaesthetic, lustful and impudent individuals. Another quote illustrating gays’ problems with the passage of time comes from a blog whose author writes about the relatively low border of subjective ageing: “The magic number of 30 fixes an important border for gays. Reaching that age signifies

being a gay pensioner for many gays. If one hadn't found one's second half yet, one would have a problem with that. (...) From now on wrinkles will start to appear and, what's worse, hair will start to fall out. One's thirtieth birthday spells utter distress for many gays".

The marginalisation of elderly people is intensified by the contemporary process of gay marketing. Its central image is shifting from political to lifestyle categories of identity. A model gay is young, middle-class and living in a big city, and is an ideal consumer of goods and entertainment. This stereotype is popularized by Polish TV programmes, where there are obviously no elderly homosexuals and the only acceptable figure is a young gay – a photographer, a fashion designer or the owner of an advertising agency.

3. The ageing of gays in literature – the case of Michał Witkowski's *Love-town*

The issue of ageing is not often touched upon in present-day literature, where non-heteronormative ageing extremely rarely appears. An illustration of a literary exploration of this subject in Polish literature is found in Michał Witkowski's novel *Love-town* (2010). Many reviews and interpretations of the book stressed that author's descriptions of the gay community are a reflection of real-life situations and maybe even characters. In the novel there is a visibly drawn difference between two worlds – the People's Republic of Poland, in which homosexuals have created an "underground", unofficial networks of relations, ties and elements of subcultural models, and the world after the constitutional transformation with an official gay infrastructure of organizations, clubs, bars, etc.

Two of the main characters are Patricia and Lucretia, who *...are already old men; whatever lives they once enjoyed are long over and done with*. Symptomatically, they are described as aged, but they about 50 years old. The presentation of their appearance is unequivocally pejorative; their bodies are unaesthetic, ugly and even disgusting. Ageing is here linked with attributes such as obesity (fat abdomens), ugly, pale skin with varicose veins and stains, bald patches, dandruff, ringworm on nails, bushy, untidy eyebrows and droopy chins. It is illustrated by the following quotes:

Patricia: a heavy-set, run-down man with a huge baldpatch and animated, bushy eyebrows. Lucretia: wrong side of fifty, smooth-shaven, cynical, just as fat. Black fingernails eaten away by ringworm, little jokes, blasé airs

Patricia's hands are skinny and covered with liver spots. She has long fingernails and wears a metal bracelet with the word LOVE etched on it in English, like the ones they sell on souvenir stalls at the seaside.

She stands up and smoothes the grey residue of her hair. She turns the record over. She tugs her cheap jumper with its naff pattern down over her protruding belly. She's ugly. Even though she's practically bald, she has dandruff.

The characters' clothes complement their appearance. Their garments are first of all unfashionable, from the times of their youth. Descriptions contain such items as old, patterned jumpers, brown creased trousers, the cheapest black briefs, black, darned socks, berets and leather caps. Patricia's and Lucretia's apparel is the result of, among other things, their low economic status, which is based on annuity benefits. What is also connected with that is the poor and cheap look of their flat where nothing has changed for decades.

Grinding poverty. Their laundry dries on a line hung over the stove. Men's underwear, all of it black, and the cheapest brand; darned socks, black too.

The men are described as museum exhibits – dusty and neglected. Their efforts to keep some pretenses of attractive appearance are shown as absurd and pathetic.

But the moment one takes a seat, the other suddenly realises she needs to spray her armpits with deodorant, or brush her hair in front of the cracked mirror (...). They preen and primp themselves the whole time.

The descriptions of the protagonists are clearly based on the stereotypical image of elderly women. It is illustrated by attributes such as textile, flowered shopping bags or the species of flowers grown on the windowsill, namely geraniums and aloes. Ageing is also connected with infantilism. The feminine men's self-presentation, which descends from gay subcultural models – their feminine names, poses and gestures – is presented as doting and pretentious.

Oh stop, darling! Patricia gets "dramatic" and pours tea into a chipped cup; old and grimy though it may be, it still comes on a saucer and with a serviette (...)

Being "dramatic", "camping it up" and, being "swish" mean acting like a woman, whatever they understand by that. Apparently it means flapping their hand and squealing, saying like "Oh, stop!" and "Christ, Christina!"(...)

Patricia and Lucretia are presented as a kind of "cultural relic"; fossils from the past. Their world consists of cruising (walking around conventional places for establishing sexual relations – parks, the vicinity of railway stations and public toilets), sex with Soviet soldiers deployed in barracks, sitting in old cafés, going to health resorts, etc. For them, ageing holds no benefits, but only losses. They have no chances of finding attractive sexual partners; loneliness is part of their everyday life. Many of their friends and acquaintances from the old days are dead as a result of, inter alia, the AIDS epidemic and once relatively frequent in cases of murders and robberies in the gay

community. They live in a world of imagination and fantasies, and the basic element of their narration is reminiscing the past and youth as a “paradise lost”. They associate the past only with positive things. They surround themselves with relics from their youth which evoke emotions. These are objects like photographs, CDs or – what is described as one of the biggest treasures – so-called “military relics”, i.e. belts, knives and foot wraps that carry a smell reminding them of their sexual conquests in barracks. The characters’ ageing is connected with their conviction that they do not belong in the new times; that they do not have adequate virtues nor skills essential for functioning in the modern society. They do not use the Internet and do not function in the life of the present-day gay community. They feel distance towards contemporary “modern” gays, do not share a common language with them, and find their system of values, attitudes, models of behaviour and adaptive strategies unfamiliar. They are also convinced that young gays not only do not accept them but also accuse them of damaging the image of gays in society. They are experiencing double marginalization – from the dominant community’s nonacceptance of homosexuality and from the minority community for not conforming to the acceptable image of a gay as a young and attractive habitu  of fashionable caf s, an emancipation activist who does not contest dominant values such as faithfulness and linking sex with emotions.

The tragedy of Lucretia’s and Patricia’s situation lies in the fact that their ageing and its consequences overlapped with sociocultural changes which, by creating new values and community standards, pushed them down to the dregs of the gay community. In their case age is associated with unaesthetic carnality, atrophy of sexuality, isolation, exclusion and poverty.

4. Conclusion

The situation of non-heterosexual elderly people in Poland is different from that in the West. In the United States and the countries of Western Europe, older people belong to a generation which fought for the rights of sexual minorities (the so-called “Stonewall Generation”). The number of countries where gays and lesbians are allowed to contract civil unions, marriages and even adopt children is systematically increasing. It is thus much less reasonable to describe elderly homosexual men and women as particularly exposed to loneliness and discrimination in the West than in Poland. Moreover, members of these communities have various associations and organizations at their disposal, such as SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment) or Old Lesbians Organizing For Change. In Poland, LGBT organizations are not numerous and do not include among their goals any actions directed towards senior citizens. Elderly gays and lesbians are an unusual generation in our country. They have grown up in times when homosexuality was widely perceived as pathological, evil or sinful. In new social conditions they are not present

in organizations or associations, they have not established their own environmental infrastructure, which could cater to their needs, and thus they remain an “invisible community”. Elderly lesbians all seem to be symbolically annihilated, whereas older gay men may be perceived, like the protagonists of *Lovetown*, as representing almost exclusively pejorative traits.

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