To be or not to be open in everyday life: the use of impression management strategies among older LGBTQ adults

Jenny Gillingsjö
Linköping University, Sweden

Anna Olaison
Linköping University, Sweden

Dimitris Michailakis
Linköping University, Sweden

CORRESPONDENCE:
Jenny Gillingsjö
e-mail: jenny.gillingsjo@liu.se

Abstract

The key issue in this article is to identify and interpret how older LGBTQ adults use impression management strategies in social interaction with non-LGBTQ persons in everyday life situations. The collection of data consists of 15 semi-structured interviews with older LGBTQ adults (65+) in Sweden. A reconstructive methodology for analyzing the material were used and we focused mainly on the latent meaning in the interviewee's communication. Our findings indicate that the interviewees employed specific impression management strategies. Some of the informants disclosed their LGBTQ identity while others instead tried to conceal this part of their identity, and this depended on individuals' openness and/or visibility. We also noted differences in using a defensive or assertive impression management strategy and differences between the older LGBTQ adults. A thorough understanding of how older LGBTQ persons deal with being LGBTQ in social interaction with non-LGBTQ persons could be useful knowledge in a practice context. By illuminating the different initial positions of older LGBTQ adults as well as their different impression management strategies in every day social interaction we hope this will be practical knowledge also in different social service settings. This could facilitate the acceptance and the inclusion of older LGBTQ persons. The findings can hopefully be useful for social service personnel to help older LGBTQ adults feel secure about disclosing their LGBTQ identities.

Keywords

Older LGBTQ adults, disclosure, concealment, impression management strategies, visibility, openness.

Introduction

The social climate regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights has become more positive and accepting in Western societies in the past few decades, although the still existing health inequalities between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ individuals may be due to the negative attitudes they experience. These inequalities also apply to older LGBTQ adults (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014). The concept «minority stress» has been used to describe stressors that LGBTQ individuals are exposed to and that affect psychological well-being negatively. Such stressors can be discrimination/victimization (both experienced or expected), internalized heterosexism, and concealment of identity (Meyer, 2003). As for older LGBTQ adults, many have lived most of their lives in a climate with less acceptance of LGBTQ persons, and research supports the observation that many older LGBTQ adults have a fear of disclosing their LGBTQ identity (Gardner, de Vries, & Mockus, 2014; Putney et al., 2018; Löf & Olaison, 2020).

Central for many LGBTQ individuals in social interaction is whether to disclose or conceal their LGBTQ identity in everyday life situations, and this can both result in positive and negative effects. Concealment can be a strategy to deal with negative reactions and to protect oneself against discrimination and rejection. Nevertheless this can also result in decreased social support and that can add extra stress (Chaudoir, Earnshaw, & Andel, 2013; Camacho, Reinka, & Quinn, 2020). Being open can result in better social support, and psychological well-being, but can also lead to a higher risk of being exposed to discrimination (Camacho, Reinka, & Quinn, 2020).

Coming out processes have been widely studied among younger LGBTQ populations but have only been in focus to a limited extent in previous research regarding older adults (Dunlap, 2014; Neville, Kushner, & Adams, 2015; Hasmanová Marhánková, 2019; Averett, Pylant, Craft, & Ricks, 2020; Hurd, Mahal, Wardell, & Liang, 2022) Coming out is not something that happens once, instead it is something that is present regularly in social interaction. Individuals can also be partially out, that is only in some social circles and contexts, maybe only to close friends and/or family. This article will focus on how older LGBTQ adults deal with impression management strategies of disclosing and concealing their LGBTQ identity in everyday social interaction. The intention is to provide a better understanding of how older LGBTQ adults deal with their LGBTQ identity in meeting with non-LGBTQ individuals.

Previous research on identity

Coming out processes among older LGBTQ adults have, as already mentioned, not received much scholarly attention. However, a considerable amount has been written about LGBTQ identity in a broader sense. Based on our review of previous research we

have identified three themes that structure this section of the paper, namely: (a) the significance attributed to the context with respect to the identity of older LGBTQ adults, (b) aging as an LGBTQ individual, and (c) the issue of categorizing older LGBTQ adults.

The first theme concerns how the spirit of the times affects identity construction. Rosenfeld (1999, 2003) discusses how the identity of older lesbian and gay adults has been influenced by the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Rosenfeld (2003) the concerns of older lesbians and gays must be understood in relation to birth cohort, since the prevailing morals at the time when individuals first identified as non-heterosexual affect their identity constructions. Due to previous experiences, Fox (2007) points out that older gay adults can have developed passing[1] strategies. Research also highlights that, while changes in the social climate in recent decades have enabled individuals to live the way they want, the social conditions for doing so vary considerably (Heaphy, 2007; Heaphy & Yip, 2003). Research that includes both younger and older generations of LGB individuals states that older generations have experienced more problems in their coming out process (Dunlap, 2014). Weststrate & McLean (2010whose isolation from the canonical narrative of sexuality may limit the available resources required for establishing a coherent identity. We examined these contested identities in relation to cultural-historical factors that may have played a role in shaping these identities over the past 50 years, and looked at how such factors have impacted the voicing and silencing of gay experiences. Participants (N = 251) concludes that younger gay generations have more individualized identities whereas older gay generations more often share a sort of master narrative, since older generations have had fewer choices concerning identity construction.

Another strand of research that is interrelated to how accepting/rejecting the social climate was and to coming out possibilities focuses on psychosocial factors and how health conditions are related to negative attitudes. For older LGBTQ adults that affirm their identity this positively impacts mental health status as well as social resources (McParland & Camic, 2016; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2018). The relationships among concealment, psychological health and internalized heterosexism are complex. Hoy-Ellis (2016) notes that concealment operates on psychological distress, but this is not a direct effect; instead, it is mediated through the variable internalized heterosexism. Fabbre & Gaveras (2020) have studied older transgender adults' experiences of multiple levels of stigma and asserted that stigma on an individual level manifests as an awareness of the possibility of being rejected by others, leading to a vigilance about oneself. Also addressed in studies is the need for older LGBTQ adults to live in accordance with the true identity, and that they can reach a point where they feel urged to be open with their sexuality or gender identity (Neville et al. 2015; Hurd, Mahal, Wardell, & Liang, 2022). In a recent study

---

[1] The term «passing» refers to an individual being observed as a woman or man depending on the individual's appearance, behavior and expression. It also means that, in social interaction, other people interpret the individual's gender in a way that is consistent with the individual's own gender identity.

by Lyons et al. (2021) more than half of the older gay and lesbian respondents did not feel totally comfortable disclosing their identity within a health and elder care context. Being comfortable with disclosing sexual identity was associated with less internalized homophobia as well as not having experienced discrimination in the past year (Lyons et al., 2021). In a study focusing on older lesbians the authors noted that the respondents had more frequently experienced homophobic discrimination than ageism (Averett, Yoon, & Jenkins, 2013).

Moving on to the theme of LGBTQ aging, Heaphy, Yip, & Thompson (2004) argue that aging processes are experienced in different ways by non-heterosexual individuals. For example, some believe their sexual orientation enriches their life whereas others find that it leads to loneliness and isolation (Heaphy, Yip, & Thompson, 2004). Research has also shown that the openness of individuals can affect their aging process; for example, individuals may develop certain strategies that can help them deal with other adversities later in life (McParland & Camic, 2016; Orel, 2004). Later life can also be a life phase with new opportunities to be open about one´s sexual orientation, for example due to factors such as retiring and fewer expectations on heteronormative family building (Hasmanová Marhánková, 2019). Regarding transgender and aging, Siverskog (2015) emphasizes that aging affects individuals differently. Some individuals in her study felt that aging restricted them, while others saw more positive effects, for example that getting older also made them more androgynous (Siverskog, 2015). According to Fabbre (2014, 2015), the older transgender individuals in her study stressed the need to live in accordance with their preferred gender identity for the remaining part of their life.

The third theme concerns the complexity of categorization and how gender, sexuality and other categories intersect for older LGBTQ adults. Some researchers emphasize the importance of paying attention to variances within the LGB group, since different factors affect the living conditions of individuals (Heaphy, 2007; Cronin & King, 2010). According to Cronin & King (2010) it is important to understand variances within groups; otherwise there is a risk of reproducing certain norms. One researcher interested in studying how individuals shape their identities is King (2016a, 2016b). According to King (2016b), there is an intricate interaction between different categories such as age, gender and sexuality and he emphasizes the importance of reflecting on what meanings different individuals ascribe to these categories. Among the older LGB adults who participated in his study, they viewed not only their sexuality as important when defining their identity, but also categories such as gender and age (King, 2016b). Rosenfeld (2009) has studied how individuals use heteronormativity strategically in their everyday life by passing as straight, and she stresses the importance of understanding the complexity of heteronormativity and not only focusing on its limiting aspects. In a study by Pollner and Rosenfeld (2000) they discerned different views regarding the heterosexual other; while some considered passing as the best strategy to avoid problems, other thought it was important to be out to enable authenticity.

In summary, previous research has focused on how different social environments affect older LGBTQ adults and their identity construction. Research has also addressed issues concerning minority stress and the psychological well-being of older LGBTQ adults. Another theme concerns how aging affects older LGBTQ adults, their living conditions, and the possibility to be open about one's identity. Studies have also focused on categorizations *per se,* highlighting differences between and within groups and concentrating on how individuals themselves respond to categorization and labels.

However, what has not yet been explored in any depth is how older LGBTQ adults deal with their LGBTQ identity in everyday social interaction. Our intention is to contribute to this strand of research by investigating how impression management strategies are used.

The article addresses the following question: How do older LGBTQ adults use impression management strategies in regard to their LGBTQ identity and how can this be understood?

Impression management and stigma

The idea of using Goffman's concepts of impression management strategies and stigma emerged after a thorough acquaintance with the material. Goffman's focus on the interpersonal level and on everyday social interaction was useful in order to help us understand how the older LGBTQ adults dealt with their LGBTQ identity in social interaction in everyday life. Especially it was helpful to differentiate various strategies and the rationale behind this. By using Goffman, we could better understand how the interviewees carefully read the environment and then apply strategies accordingly. Our ambition in this article is therefore to understand interpersonal communication regarding strategies concerning identity management and stigma. When analyzing the material, it was clear that the interviewees used impression management techniques that could be understood with the theory of Goffman. We believe that all individuals try to present themselves in a way that results in the best outcome, but that individuals that are non-normative do this more actively or strategically.

Goffman states that there is a difference between the message (or «performance», to use Goffman's term) a person expresses, and the observer's perception of the performance. Individuals use different strategies to protect themselves in relation to other people's opinions in social interaction. Goffman (1959) points out that the audience (the receivers of the message) have expectations of the performance. The actor, the person behind the performance, is trying to achieve a certain effect with the performance, by trying to control the information process. Often the actor wants to achieve an image that is consistent with what she believes the observer expects (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, actors often choose to disclose only characteristics of themselves in line with norms of what is expected, and conceal other aspects, for example by emphasizing some facts and downplaying others.

How individuals deal with impression management due to their LGBTQ identity can also be understood from the Goffmanian concept of stigma. Stigma according to Goffman (1963) has to do with individuals being categorized with an attribute that others consider to be negative and often leads to the person with the stigmatizing attribute having to deal with a discrepancy between a virtual social identity and their actual social identity. He distinguishes between persons who are discredited (with stigmas that can be detected) and those who are discreditable (with unknown stigmas). A discredited individual can be seen to be stigmatized in various ways depending on the context. Our understanding of Goffman (1963) is that people with stigmas can apply different strategies; they can either take on a defensive approach to protect themselves or apply a more assertive strategy. Individuals can also decide to go from discreditable to discredited by disclosing information about the stigma. There can also be different experiences for the discredited versus the discreditable. A person with an unknown and non-visible stigma must manage information about the self (and the biography). If the stigma is less obvious this allows the individual to choose from more option, for example by withholding information about the stigma. The visibility of the stigma affects whether a person can pass as for example straight or CIS, i.e., conceal the stigma, without other people knowing about the stigmatized attribute. An attribute that is more difficult to conceal probably affects a person to a greater extent (Goffman, 1963).

Material and method

The material for this article is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with older LGBTQ adults aged 65+ and older who self-identified as LGBTQ. The interviews varied in length from 45 minutes to two hours and 20 minutes. Since the interview guide was used in a flexible way and consisted of open-ended questions, the interviews also turned out slightly differently in terms of length. The location for the interviews was decided by the interviewees and they took place in different settings, such as the interviewee's home, in cafés, parks and libraries. Five of the interviewees were transgender.[2] Six of the interviewees identified as bisexual or lesbian women.[3] Five of the participants identified as bisexual or gay men.[4] The older adults interviewed lived in mid-sized and large cities and were born between 1939 and 1950.

To find participants, several different channels were used, such as retirement organizations, LGBTQ organizations, including specific organizations for older LGBTQ adults, a senior housing facility for older LGBT adults, and LGBTQ-certified elder care

---

[2] One of the older transgender adults also identified as a lesbian so that is why the total doesn't add up to 15.
[3] One identified as a bisexual.
[4] Two of them said they were a mix between gay and bisexual.

services. Moreover, the information was communicated on one organization's website. In addition, snowball sampling was used (Silverman, 2005). The study was approved by a Regional Ethics Committee (d.no. 2016/125-31). All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the first author. In the findings section, all interviewees were anonymized and given fictitious names.

Reconstructive methodology

As constructivist research shows, there are good reasons to assume that strategies for identity constructions are mostly latent. In other words, the parameters of these constructions do not appear explicitly in the interviews we will analyze; not even the interviewees need to be aware of their underlying assumptions. We can therefore assume that in terms of «how» identity is constructed, it must be «excavated» and reconstructed by us. Thus, a method is required that is well suited to detecting latencies in communication. We use the so-called reconstructive methodology developed in connection with qualitative research (Knudsen & Vogd, 2014; Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2014) which we consider to be well suited to the task. The method has been used successfully in several studies on different topics, with a similar research design to that of the present study (Michailakis, Gillingsjö, & Olaison, 2020).

The reconstructive methodology is based on three consecutive steps: formulating interpretation, reflective interpretation and comparative interpretation.

1. *Formative interpretation*: This entails identifying which issues are communicated (issues associated with the sexual identity or gender expression/identity of the older adult). Here, the analysis is conducted on the basis of the informant's own words and observations. No social science concepts are used in this step to reformulate the informant's descriptions. The aim is to «open» the material and its empirical variance in order to avoid having the scientist's preconceived judgments confirmed.

2. *Reflective interpretation*: Different identities are communicated in the interview. This step entails finding the underlying assumptions that govern the communication; i.e., discovering underlying assumptions that the investigated group uses in the formulation of descriptions. These assumptions can be reconstructed by identifying motives, values and causality attributions contained in the interviewer's explicit formulations about sexual identity and or gender identity. For our project, this step involves discovering the variations in the ways older people communicate their sexuality or gender identity/expression by discovering latent causal relationships, values and practical solutions.

3. *Comparative interpretation*: Different comparisons are made in order to find similarities and differences regarding latent assumptions (from step 2) among

different identities. These latent assumptions illuminate the different perceptions of older LGBTQ adults as a group.

Initially, the transcribed interviews were read thoroughly several times by all authors and then NVIVO was used for data processing and for the encoding process. All of the material from the interviews were then given codes that were sorted into different themes. Our analysis was as described earlier carried out in three consecutive steps, where all authors were involved. In the first step, two themes were made central in the informants' stories, *openness* and *visibility* since we observed that they talked about impression strategies in regard to this. Further we used peer debriefing sessions where we discussed the themes and their meanings in order to ensure trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 2000). In step two, we found that openness/visibility needed to be understood in relation to *disclosing or concealing* one's LGBTQ identity in interaction with others, and also in relation to how concealing and disclosing was done. In the third step, comparisons were made within the LGBTQ group since we observed variations between different older LGBTQ adults. These steps will be further developed and illustrated in the following result section.

Results

The participants were all, at the time of the interview, more or less open with their LGBTQ identity. Although all the interviewees had disclosed their LGBTQ identity, the degree to which they were open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in different social contexts varied. The timing varied as to when the interviewees came out, with the period spanning more than half a century (from 1958 to 2014). It should be kept in mind that this was a time of profound changes in the official stance of Swedish society regarding LGBTQ rights.[5] The participants had lived rather different lives; some came out as gay or lesbian early in life and mostly had experience of same-sex relationships. Several of the participants identifying themselves as bisexual, lesbian or gay had also been in long-term heterosexual relationships, some of them had previously been married with children before they came out. The transgender individuals who participated in this study came out later than the older LGB adults, that is in the past three decades, most of them in the 2000s. This can be understood in relation to the fact that changes regarding trans rights took place later. Among the participants who came out earlier (1950s-1980s) they described experiencing a tough environment and that being LGB (the transgender did not come out

---

[5]   For example, the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) deleted its diagnosis of homosexuality as a mental disorder from its instructions in 1979, gender-neutral marriage was introduced in 2009, and transgender individuals who underwent a transition process were no longer forced into sterilization after 2013.

during this period) was stigmatizing and not something discussed in public debate. Some described how they stayed in the closet because of the climate, whereas others said that the hostile environment did not affect them as much, and one participant explained that the tough climate strengthened him as a person. Something else that the interviewees mentioned was how the AIDS pandemic made it harder to be open during the 1980s. A common narrative among the older LGB adults was how they had moved from their smaller hometowns to bigger cities to find gay arenas and meet like-minded people, and this had enabled them to live out their sexual orientation. Among the older transgender adults, some described episodes of traveling to other cities (or countries) to dare to dress and act as the other sex in public. Being away from their home area and people who might know them was a way of protecting themselves and of avoiding being revealed. Among those who came out in the later decades (the 21st century) they saw the social climate as more positive and accepting or tolerating, which helped them be themselves. However, one of the older transgender adults mentioned a problem with the heightened awareness, and said that this had resulted in her becoming more visible as a transgender individual. Nine of the interviewees had experienced discrimination or negative treatment.

In the following analysis section, we will focus on studying strategies of self-presentation practiced by older LGBTQ adults in social interaction in everyday life, as we then understand how they experience their situation in contemporary society. The age dimension was not as prominent as gender and/or sexuality in the informants' tales in relation to impression management strategies. The analysis consequently focused on the dimensions of gender and sexuality.

Openness and visibility

Before discussing impression management strategies, we should point out that we noticed from the interviews that it was essential to make a distinction between openness and visibility. Openness can be understood as informing others that you are LGBTQ, for example, by telling others about this. Openness and being open is often discussed in an LGBTQ context and expressions like «coming out»/«coming out of the closet» are common when referring to LGBTQ individuals that decide to be open. In the interviews, openness was discussed by all interviewees when they talked about their initial coming out processes. Ten of the interviewees said they were open about being LGBTQ, two of them said they were mostly open, whereas three were open in some social contexts. Four of these five were lesbian and one of them identified as transgender. However, among the gay men one said he became open rather recently. Below is an example of a state-ment that addresses openness:

> Yeah, I am in a way. It's not the case that I tell people I meet — who I don't know and just happen to meet. It's not the first thing I say — that I'm a lesbian. In fact, I generally

don't say that at all. Just to people I socialize with or who need to know about it for some reason (Bodil, lesbian, born in 1945).

As we can see in this excerpt, openness about an LGBTQ identity is something that the interviewee informs others about. According to Goffman (1963), it is in contact with strangers that individuals need to manage a stigmatizing attribute to a greater extent. Participants said that being LGBTQ may not be the first thing you tell other people that you do not know well and just meet more sporadically. Some said that even though they saw themselves as open and standing up as being LGBTQ they did not want to be too obvious about it.

One element that appears in tandem with openness about one's LGBTQ identity is visibility. Although the concepts of openness and visibility at first glance may seem to deal with the same identity issue and are close to each other, we would argue that there is an important difference between them. If openness is about informing others that you are an LGBTQ individual, we want to reserve the term «visibility» to refer to the visual, when individuals express their LGBTQ identity through their appearance and/or bodily expression. In that sense, visibility constitutes another characteristic that may be complementary to or independent of openness. Some LGBTQ individuals choose to be visible about their LGBTQ identity (which usually coincides with openness). But there are individuals who instead try to avoid such visibility, and if they are successful in this, they can then decide if they want to be open or not as an LGBTQ individual in social interaction. However, some individuals do not have the option of avoiding visibility if they want to be themselves. The following excerpt illustrates how one interviewee explained visibility:

> I'm pretty discreet about myself. I don't dress in a particularly provocative way etc. So I feel pretty calm the way I am. You don't know when you are provoking other people. You don't know what's going on in other people's heads and all. What they've been involved with and things like that. It may just be something small, and people will still be provoked (Kim, transgender, born in 1950).

The excerpt shows how the interviewee emphasizes the visual aspects of being transgender — in other words, others may notice that a person is LGBTQ by their appearance/bodily expression. Visibility was brought up as a theme in 11 of the 15 interviews. If we try to understand this excerpt using Goffman´s (1959) concepts of impression management, Kim is a person that risks being discredited by others due to visual aspects. So, in this first step we primarily wanted to illustrate that the older LGBTQ adults have different starting positions regarding whether to let others become aware of their LGBTQ identity. Here Goffman's concepts of discredited and discreditable are applicable. We can understand that when participants are not visible with their LGBTQ identity, they are discreditable, that is, this part of their identity can be unknown if they decide not to tell others about it and if they are careful when handling biographical information about themselves. Nevertheless, they can go from being discreditable to discredited when tell-

ing others about this. But individuals that show visible signs of being LGBTQ risk being discredited, and that means that others understand them as being LGBTQ just by looking at them and thereby they do not have the opportunity to decide themselves whether others should find out about their identity or not.

Strategies used related to individuals' LGBTQ identity

In the second step of the analysis, we tried to enhance this understanding of openness/visibility by also analyzing strategies regarding the interviewees' LGBTQ identity. Whether people choose to disclose or conceal their LGBTQ identity and how this is done are conditioned by their openness or visibility (which also includes gradual differences, since openness and visibility is better understood as a continuum and relative to context). We start with examples where interviewees chose to conceal their LGBTQ identity. The first example is related to openness:

> I've been really discreet, I can tell you, and haven't stood out. Someone told me in the past few years that I'm the kind of person who goes with the flow and that I'm diplomatic, or should we say cowardly or something like that? If I'm to be negative, I think sometimes I am cowardly then. But that's the way I am. A group of us lawyers were in Italy at some conference, and we ate and drank a lot. I thought, no, now I can say that I'm a lesbian. There were about ten people there then and they were all typical heteros — you can't avoid hearing that. You know that after five minutes [laughs]. And I had such heart palpitations that I just couldn't (Bodil, lesbian, born in 1945).

So here we see an example of a concealing strategy, and it can also be understood that the interviewee is very discreet about her private life, and careful about what and when she tells others about herself. In some contexts, she chooses not to be open about her sexual orientation when most people around her are heterosexual. It is important to note that this impression management strategy of concealing her identity is possible because she is not visible. Goffman (1963) points out that the visibility of a stigma affects whether a person can pass, i.e., conceal the stigmatizing attribute, without other people knowing of it. This gives Bodil greater discretion when she wants that. In her view, selective openness is the best strategy to use. In the interviews there are examples when interviewees who are not visible with their LGBTQ identity are trying to read the social context and other people's attitudes in order to decide whether to tell others or not about their LGBTQ identity. Some participants only tell people they know well, or they believe have a reason to know. Others say they answer if anyone asks questions about the LGBTQ identity but will not talk about it otherwise. In the interviews, the strategy of concealing is often done in a way that can be understood as being defensive. Nevertheless, concealing is not only done in relation to openness; next we give an example that is related to visibility:

> I haven't lived my life perhaps in a way that people have seen that I'm gay in any way. When I went to clubs and discos, you went there and had fun there and then you just went home from there. I was never there until three in the morning or anything like that when they closed. It did happen that maybe some people were beaten up and things like that outside on Kungsgatan in the old RFSL (The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights) building when it was a disco. And other places, for that matter. No, and I never dressed in a way that was provocative in any way and I don't behave that way, waving my arms and acting like that. And all that with feminine movements. I'm really masculine in my looks and my way of moving (Isak, gay man, born in 1943).

Goffman (1959) asserts that actors try to act according to norms and expectations, and some attributes are toned down and others are exaggerated to accomplish this. In this excerpt the interviewee emphasizes his masculinity to prevent the risk of getting into trouble. We can see how the person feels more or less forced to accentuate his masculinity in order not to be attacked by others. Other interviewees express similar stories when they are trying to adjust the visual appearance to pass as straight and/or CIS. To be able to protect themselves they are trying to pass by acting in a gender confirmative manner. So, in the previous example it had to do with not telling others and in this example the focus is on not showing visual signs that can be connoted to an LGBTQ identity.

We will now turn to one example where the interviewee instead chose to disclose her LGBTQ identity and where this is related to visibility:

> The only thing I can think of now is the one time. It might have been at — what's the name of the place that closed down in Vasastan... Oh, whatever. It was some place that closed down. I had been there that night and was on my way home. At the metro station at Odenplan I stood there waiting for the train and was about to get on. Then a gang of guys in their late teens came up: «haha that's a guy, haha» [they said in a needling tone]. But I didn't get mad. I just lifted my tank top and showed my breasts (Isabelle, transgender, born in 1949).

This example illustrates how the interviewee does not want to adjust to other people's expectations. The interviewee more or less forces other people to understand her in the way she wants and in the gender expression she prefers. In the excerpt we can distinguish how this interviewee chose to stand up for herself in a rather confrontational way. The interviews show that being assertive is mainly associated with visibility and this sort of strategy is mostly used by older transgender adults. One of the participants explained that she saw it as important not to conform to gender binarism to be able to achieve change. She believed there was no point in passing but instead strived to be gender transgressive. This can be understood as wanting to challenge societal gender norms and to avoid reproducing strict gender binarism. So, if we apply Goffman's impression management strategies, we can understand from the interviews that older LGBTQ adults that are discredited and that risk being outed due to visual aspects choose a strategy that can be understood as rather assertive. The defensive strategy is used more often among those who have a possibility to pass and who are not discredited but discreditable.

Differences within the LGBTQ group

The third and final step entails looking at differences and making comparisons among the older LGBTQ adults that participated in the study. We believe that to better understand the strategies used, we need to study the differences within the LGBTQ group. LGBTQ individuals encounter resistance differently in contact with others because they challenge heteronormativity and gender binarism in diverse ways. The choice of impression management strategy used is conditioned by the resistance individuals face in an uncomprehending or non-accepting environment. Our findings show that some individuals are more cautious about being open or visible about their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, something that we have interpreted as having a defensive strategy. Below is an example of how one interviewee sometimes encounters surprise when she comes out as a lesbian:

> Yeah, but people could never really believe you're a lesbian. «You're so nice. You're this or that». People could never believe it. I've encountered that many times… sometimes, I think, I've let it just go by. I didn't say a word, like. And sometimes I've reacted and asked them if they have any idea what they're talking about. How could you say that? What do you base that on? In fact, I've confronted people too (Nina, lesbian, born in 1941).

The informant says that other people are surprised when she discloses her lesbian identity because she does not deviate visibly from norms related to gender or sexuality in any obvious way. This also means that she expresses a certain degree of self-determination as to whether she wants to talk about her sexuality or not. This indicates, in line with Goffman's reasoning, that she uses an impression management strategy where she chooses to disclose only those aspects in line with heteronormativity and what is expected, and conceals other aspects. It appears that visibility more or less forces individuals into openness, rather than the opposite, which also affects the possibility of self-determination. One issue conveyed in the interviews is that the informants deal with these expectations rather differently. Individuals who challenge gender binarism use a strategy of not accepting misrecognition by others to a greater extent and instead choose to manifest more clearly who they are, which we interpreted as having an assertive strategy, but that probably also has to do with not passing. This strategy is used especially when individuals realize that they are at risk of being exposed as having an LGBTQ identity (discredited if using the terminology of Goffman) like being gender transgressive. The excerpt below illustrates how openness and visibility are often interconnected for transgender individuals:

> But at the beginning of this, like, really coming out process, or coming out publicly, I started by saying I was a trans person. Without people asking. Because I felt like I had to tell people about this so that they would know what it's about, neighbors and people like that. I went around and dropped off a brochure etc. But then in the summer, a roofing guy came and was supposed to take a look. He was supposed to look at my roof and I came out in a skirt and all. And I told him, you have to excuse me that I look like this, but

> I usually go around dressed like this. And then he says: «But I didn't think about that». I wasn't thinking about that. He was really considerate and all. And then it, like, hit me that no, now I won't explain myself to people. I no longer apologize for who I am (Kim, transgender, born in 1950).

This person realizes that she is likely to be visible because she deviates from gender norms, which also makes her feel obliged to inform others about her transgender identity. The interviewee describes the change in her position and does not want to continue to have this defensive attitude and apologize for herself. She can be understood as not wanting to continue taking other people´s questions and concerns into account and adjusting her appearance accordingly. In the material, we can identify tensions and variations which indicate that it is not always easy as an older LGBTQ adult to meet expectations about how to behave or use impression management strategies, no matter whether one is an older bisexual, lesbian, gay or transgender adult. It is also important to note that differences within the LGBTQ group lead to dealing with different realities in social interaction. Although being transgender is not related to one's sexual orientation, sexuality is often incorrectly associated with this, which is noted in the interviews. When individuals do not follow gender normativity, this also raises questions concerning their sexuality because of the prevailing notion that gender determines sexual preference. Discussions about avoiding visibility are most prominent in the older transgender adults' stories, where some of them said that they wanted to pass with their gender expression and wanted to be seen as gender-confirmative. But also, in the interviews with the older bisexual/gay men, the association between sexuality and gender expressions was noted when they talked about managing their physical appearance. This was not mentioned at all in the interviews with the bisexual or lesbian women. Also, in Rosenfeld's (2009) study the gay men described trying to pass as straight by adjusting their bodily expression, something not mentioned by the lesbian women.[6] This might have to do with men being at greater risk of being victimized than women are (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001). This may also indicate that norms of masculinity are narrower than norms of femininity, a sign that notions (and tolerance) of female sexuality and male sexuality differ.

Discussion

In this article, we have examined how older LGBTQ adults interpret and deal with challenges in coming out with their LGBTQ identity. Before we discuss the findings, we want to acknowledge that when the interviewees talked about impression management strategies this mainly concerned gender and sexuality. Age was not addressed when

---

[6] Although dressing was mentioned by the lesbian participants in Rosenfeld's study, it was not mentioned in this study.

the interviewees talked about the impression management strategies that they used in everyday social interaction. A possible interpretation of this can be that the LGBTQ identity perhaps was of more concern to manage in social interaction with others rather than age. However, age was mentioned on a few occasions in ways less specific but still worth mentioning. For example, when the interviewees talked about how aging resulted in being more invisible in society in general and how age affects the way other people perceive you. Also, that other peoples' expectations vary with age. Information on age and time aspects is also important since it can give an understanding of how previous experiences during the life course can affect individuals in old age. This also shows that LGBTQ adults might have been using impression management strategies for a long period of time. We also believe that if the focus of the analysis had been on the initial coming out process, the age category might have been more in focus since a lot of the transgender individuals came out more recently.

As we move on to discuss our findings, using Goffman's ideas can help us understand how older LGBTQ adults deal with being LGBTQ in interaction with others and deal with the discrepancy between the virtual social identity (what others ascribe to individuals based on the first appearance) and the actual social identity (Goffman, 1963). When we analyzed the material, we could see that different impression management strategies were related to the older LGBTQ adult's openness and/ or visibility. Here we have relied on Goffman's reasoning of having a stigma that is discredited (with more visible stigmas) or discreditable (a stigma that could more easily be concealed) as this affected the interviewees differently and conditioned the interaction with others. Individuals who felt a need to conceal their identity chose to be more discreet, which we understood as using a defensive impression management strategy. But this strategy was only possible for those who could be read as heterosexual, cisgendered individuals. For the older LGBTQ adults who were more visible in their LGBTQ identity, it was not possible to use this strategy in the same way. Goffman (1963) asserts that individuals having a visible stigma have another starting point in dealing with the stigmatizing attribute in social interaction. Our interviews showed that visibility more or less forced individuals to come out, but not the other way around. Individuals who did not act or look gender normative were the most visible, and the older transgender adults who did not pass also applied a more assertive impression management strategy.

In order to grasp the complex landscape of how social identity unfolds in interaction we believe that it is central to have a multifaceted understanding of impression management strategies. Orne (2011) emphasizes that it is important to realize that coming out to a great extent depends on the context and that this is a relatively complex process. In his article, he highlights a variety of ways to come out and notes that the interviewees were considering different outcomes when they decided to disclose their identity (he calls this strategic outness). Even though his research does not deal with older adults we observed the same tendencies in our material. Our findings show that the older LGBTQ adults were

trying to be strategic in relation to others when they used different impression manage-ment strategies. We believe that regardless of strategies used, the use concerned dealing with other people in social interaction and adjusting acts, expressions and behavior based on what interviewees believe will lead to the best outcome, with the aim of being treated with respect and gaining recognition for the identity.

When the informants talk about the impression management strategies that they use this addresses the social pressure they are exposed to. The use of these strategies stems from the discrepancy between the individuals' image of themselves and that of the people around them in terms of expectations of gender expression or sexuality. The strategies the interviewees choose, and mostly in regard to being assertive or defen-sive, indicates whether individuals try to change themselves, to conform with prevailing expectations or if they are trying to alter other people's attitudes. Some adjust more to others' expectations and societal norms and others are more confrontative. Individuals deal with these expectations in different ways, and there are also differences within the older LGBTQ group. Impression management strategies also have to be understood in relation to identity congruency, *i.e.,* whether an individual's inner feelings about their identity are in line with their behavior, which also can affect the well-being of individu-als (Guest, 2021). Adapting to a social role and acting in a way that differs from how you perceive yourself can be difficult for individuals. Existing research shows that to be an older LGBTQ adult and to have an affirming identity is associated positively with mental health (McParland & Camic, 2016; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2018). So, adjusting to others' expectations might cost in psychological well-being.

How older LGBTQ adults perceive being open and/or visible and the strategies used when meeting others can also influence how they feel and act within healthcare and social services. Awareness of the impression management strategies that older LGBTQ adults use is therefore important for professionals who work with older LGBTQ adults, so they can enable an affirmative environment and treatment. Recent research (Fasullo et al., 2022; Lyons et al., 2021) given that nondisclosure is associated with poorer health and well-being outcomes. In a sample of 752 lesbian and gay adults aged 60 years and older living in Australia, we found only 51% of lesbian women and 64% of gay men felt fully comfortable to disclose their sexual orientation to health and aged care service providers. For both the women and the men, those who felt fully comfortable to disclose reported significantly less internalized homophobia; had fewer experiences of discrimination in the past year; and reported greater lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI shows that many older LGBTQ adults do not feel comfortable being open with health and social services. Studies also highlight that there often exists a heteronormative discourse within social service organizations resulting in a lack of knowledge and insecurity among professionals when interacting with older LGBTQ adults (Willis, Maegusuku-Hewett, Raithby, & Miles, 2016; Smolle & Espvall, 2021). Because of this, LGBTQ adults might feel anxiety about disclosing this part of their identity, and this is important to take into

consideration when interacting with these individuals. Human relations are important in social work practice. It is therefore essential that older LGBTQ adults feel welcomed and secure to be themselves. This we believe it is a prerequisite in order to achieve equal, reciprocal and respectful relationships that is central for relational social work (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017). We also believe this reasoning is in line with the concept of «experts by experience» that starts with the assumption that individuals needing help within a social work context are their own experts (McLaughlin, 2009). Against this backdrop we hope that older LGBTQ adults should feel included and be encouraged to talk about previous experiences and what they need from social services. This study adds to previous research on identity management among older LGBTQ adults as it shows that they renegotiate their identity depending on the situation and that they often have different starting positions when dealing with impression management strategies. Detailed studies of how LGBTQ older adults deal with their LGBTQ identity in social interaction, such as this study, can play a role in education for professionals working in social services to ensure that older LGBTQ adults receive inclusive care appropriate to their sexual/gender identity.

Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

Åkerstrøm Andersen, N. (2014). Den semantiske analysestrategi og samfundsdiagnostik. In G. Harste & M. Knudsen (Eds.), *Systemteoretiske analyser. At anvende Luhmann* [Systems Theoretical Analyses. Using Luhmann]. København: Nyt fra Samfundsvidenskaberne.

Averett, P., Pylant, J., Craft, K., & Ricks, I. (2020). «I would do it again»: Past and present experiences of older lesbians. *Journal of Women and Aging*, *32*(3), 314-328.

Averett, P., Yoon, I., & Jenkins, C. L. (2013). Older Lesbian Experiences of Homophobia and Ageism. *Journal of Social Service Research*, *39*(1), 3-15.

Camacho, G., Reinka, M. A., & Quinn, D. M. (2020). Disclosure and concealment of stigmatized identities. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *31*, 28-32.

Chaudoir, S. R., Earnshaw, V. A., & Andel, S. (2013). «Discredited» Versus «Discreditable»: Understanding How Shared and Unique Stigma Mechanisms Affect Psychological and Physical Health Disparities. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, *35*(1), 75-87.

Creswell, J. W. (2000). Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, *3*(39), 124-130.

Cronin, A., & King, A. (2010). Power, Inequality and Identification: Exploring Diversity and Intersectionality amongst Older LGB Adults. *Sociology*, *44*(5), 876-892.

D'Augelli, A. R., & Grossman, A. H. (2001). Disclosure of Sexual Orientation, Victimization, and Mental Health Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Older Adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *16*(10), 1008-1027.

Dunlap, A. (2014). Coming-Out Narratives Across Generations. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, *26*(3), 318-335.

Fabbre, V. D. (2014). Gender transitions in later life: The significance of time in queer aging. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *57*(2-4), 161-175.

Fabbre, V. D. (2015). Gender Transitions in Later Life: A Queer Perspective on Successful Aging. *The Gerontologist*, *55*(1), 144-153.

Fabbre, V. D., & Gaveras, E. (2020). The Manifestation of Multilevel Stigma in the Lived Experiences of Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Older Adults. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 90*(3), 350-360.

Fasullo, K., McIntosh, E., Buchholz, S. W., Ruppar, T., & Ailey, S. (2022). LGBTQ Older Adults in Long-Term Care Settings: An Integrative Review to Inform Best Practices. *Clinical Gerontologist*, *45*(5), 1087-1102.

Folgheraiter, F., & Raineri, M. L. (2017). The principles and key ideas of Relational Social Work. *Relational Social Work*, *1*(1), 12-18.

Fox, R. C. (2007). Gay Grows Up. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *52*(3-4), 1-9.

Fredriksen-Goldsen, K. I., Cook-Daniels, L., Kim, H. J., Erosheva, E. a., Emlet, C. a., Hoy-Ellis, C. P., & Muraco, A. (2014). Physical and mental health of transgender older adults: An at-risk and underserved population. *Gerontologist*, *54*(3), 488-500.

Fredriksen-Goldsen, K. I., Kim, H.-J., Barkan, S. E., Muraco, A., & Hoy-Ellis, C. P. (2013). Health disparities among lesbian, gay, and bisexual older adults: results from a population-based study. *American Journal of Public Health*, *103*(10), 1802-1809.

Fredriksen-Goldsen, K. I., Kim, H., Bryan, A. E. B., Shiu, C., & Emlet, C. A. (2018). The Cascading Effects of Marginalization and Pathways of Resilience in Attaining Good Health Among LGBT Older Adults. *The Gerontologist*, *57*(1), 72-83.

Gardner, A. T., de Vries, B., & Mockus, D. S. (2014). Aging out in the desert: disclosure, acceptance, and service use among midlife and older lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *61*(1), 129-144.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* New York: Doubleday.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on managing spoiled identities*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Guest, M. A. (2021). Sexuality and identity in older age. In S. J. Dodd (Ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Social Work and Sexualities* (pp. 195-204). London-New York: Routledge.

Hasmanová Marhánková, J. (2019). Places of (in)visibility. LGB aging and the (im)possibilities of coming out to others. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *48,* 9-16.

Heaphy, B. (2007). Sexualities, gender and ageing: Resources and social change. *Current Sociology*, *55*(2), 193-210.

Heaphy, B., & Yip, A. K. T. (2003). Uneven Possibilities: Understanding Non-Heterosexual Ageing and the Implications of Social Change. *Sociological Research Online*, *8*(4), 99-110.

Heaphy, B., Yip, K. T. A., & Thompson, D. (2004). Ageing in a non-heterosexual context. *Ageing and Society*, *24*(6), 881-902.

Hoy-Ellis, C. P. (2016). Concealing Concealment: The Mediating Role of Internalized Heterosexism in Psychological Distress Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Older Adults. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *63*(4), 487-506.

Hurd, L., Mahal, R., Wardell, V., & Liang, J. (2022). «There were no words»: Older LGBTQ + persons' experiences of finding and claiming their gender and sexual identities. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *60*, 1-9.

King, A. (2016a). Queer Categories: Queer(y)ing the Identification «Older Lesbian, Gay and/or Bisexual (LGB) Adults» and its Implications for Organizational Research, Policy and Practice. *Gender, Work and Organization*, *23*(1), 7-18.

King, A. (2016b). Troubling Identities? Examining Older Lesbian, Gay and/or Bisexual People´s Membership Categorisation Work and its significance. In E. Peel & R. Harding (Eds.), *Ageing and sexualities: interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 163-182). Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Knudsen, M., & Vogd, W. (2014). *Systems Theory and the Sociology of Health and Illness. Observing Health Care.* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Lyons, A., Alba, B., Waling, A., Minichiello, V., Hughes, M., Barrett, C., et al. (2021). Comfort Among Older Lesbian and Gay People in Disclosing Their Sexual Orientation to Health and Aged Care Services. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *40*(2), 132-141.

Löf, J., & Olaison, A. (2020). «I don't want to go back into the closet just because I need care»: recognition of older LGBTQ adults in relation to future care needs. *European Journal of Social Work*, *23*(2), 253-264.

McLaughlin, H. (2009). What's in a name: «client», «patient», «customer», «consumer», «expert by experience», «service user» – What's next? *British Journal of Social Work*, *39*(6), 1101-1117.

McParland, J., & Camic, P. M. (2016). Psychosocial factors and ageing in older lesbian, gay and bisexual people: a systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, *25*(23-24), 3415-3437.

Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, *129*(5), 674-697.

Michailakis, D., Gillingsjö, J., & Olaison, A. (2020). Tolkande innehållsanalys. In M. Dahlstedt & S. Gruber (Eds.), *Metoder för forskning i socialt arbete: Hur, var och varför?* [Interpretive content analysis. In *Methods for research in social work: How, where and why?*] (pp. 129-141). Malmö: Gleerups.

Neville, S., Kushner, B., & Adams, J. (2015). Coming out narratives of older gay men living in New Zealand. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, *34*(2), 29-33.

Orel, N. A. (2004). Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Elders: Expressed Needs and Concerns Across Focus Groups. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *43*(2-3), 57-77.

Orne, J. (2011). «You will always have to "out" yourself»: Reconsidering coming out through strategic outness. *Sexualities*, *14*(6), 681-703.

Pollner, M., & Rosenfeld, D. (2000). The cross-culturing work of gay and lesbian elderly. *Advances in Life Course Research*, *5*, 99-117.

Putney, J. M., Keary, S., Hebert, N., Krinsky, L., & Halmo, R. (2018). «Fear Runs Deep»: The Anticipated Needs of LGBT Older Adults in Long-Term Care. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *61*(8), 887-907.

Rosenfeld, D. (2009). Heteronormativity and Homonormativity as Practical and Moral Resources: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Elders. *Gender & Society*, *23*(5), 617-638.

Rosenfeld, D. (1999). Identity work among lesbian and gay elderly. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *13*(2), 121-144.

Rosenfeld, D. (2003). Identity Careers of Older Gay Men and Lesbians. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Ways of Aging* (pp. 160-181). Oxford: Blackwell.

Schirmer, W., & Michailakis, D. (2011). The responsibility principle. Contradictions of priority-setting in Swedish healthcare. *Acta Sociologica*, *54*(3), 267-282.

Silverman, D. (2005). *Doing Qualitative Research: A practical handbook*. Los Angeles, LA: SAGE Publications.

Siverskog, A. (2015). Ageing Bodies that Matter: Age, Gender and Embodiment in Older Transgender People's Life Stories. *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *23*(1), 4-19.

Smolle, S., & Espvall, M. (2021). Transgender Competence in Social Work with Older Adults in Sweden. *Journal of Social Service Research*, *47*(4), 522-536.

Weststrate, N. M., & McLean, K. C. (2010). The rise and fall of gay: A cultural-historical approach to gay identity development. *Memory*, *18*(2), 225-240.

Willis, P., Maegusuku-Hewett, T., Raithby, M., & Miles, P. (2016). Swimming upstream: The provision of inclusive care to older lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) adults in residential and nursing environments in Wales. *Ageing and Society*, *36*(2), 1-25.