Grief in the Lives of Older Lesbians

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Introduction

• Grief, aging, & lesbian identity – can be characterized as subversive activities
• Rendered invisible by dominant culture
• Made efforts to speak out
• Driven back into their respective closets
Grief as a Health and Mental Health Issue

- What grief issues do you anticipate that older lesbians (age 60+) might face?
- How might these issues affect the physical health and mental health of lesbian elders?
- Why is this topic so important?
Statement of Problem

• Grief issues affect individuals, families, and communities
• Social, political, and economic factors
• Voices have been silent for generations
• Coming out of the closet in recent times
• Baby boomers aging (including LGBTQ elders)
Literature

• Grief, grief & lesbians, grief & aging, lesbians & aging
• Very little combining grief, aging, & LGBTQ community
• Body of literature is growing (See References)
Purpose of Current Study

• Understand lived grief experiences of self-identified lesbians age 60 and older
• Develop theory as foundation for practice and teaching
• Explore grief due to a wide variety of experiences including, but not limited to, death losses
Research Question

What is the experience of grief as perceived by lesbians age 60 and older?
Methodology

• Grounded theory qualitative study
• Focus groups – beginning, middle, & end of study – 3 groups, 5 participants in each
• Individual interviews – 22 individual interviews, 1 interview with an interracial lesbian couple
Sampling

- Snowball sampling
- Theoretical sampling
- Sampling to the point of saturation (no new information is emerging)
Data Collection

- Interview guides
- Audio recorder
- Field notes
- Researcher as instrument
Data Analysis

• Analysis throughout the study
• Constant Comparative Analysis
• Open coding, memo writing, focused coding
Limitations

- Lack of ethnic diversity in sample
- Only interviewing “out” lesbians
- Past and present hostile climate
Findings

• Experiences of Grief – Personal Grief, Interpersonal Grief, & Grief Due to the Political Climate
• Categories not mutually exclusive – fluidity
• Many grief experiences common to all human beings – unique, experienced through lens influenced by age, lesbian identity, class, race, etc.
Personal Grief (Quotes)

• Death losses

• Aging

• Lesbian identity
Interpersonal Grief (Quotes)

- Family of origin
- Partner relationship breakup
- Discrimination due to sexism, ageism, homophobia, etc.
Grief Due to the Political Climate (Quotes)

• Feeling powerless to correct injustices
• Hiding relationships
• Lack of financial benefits
• Lack of acceptance in religious communities
Additional Topics Related to Grief (Quotes)

- Unique to Older Lesbians
- End-of-Life Issues
- Coping Strategies & Supports
- Vision for Social Action and Change
Statement of Theory

• Grief as experienced by these older lesbians is an overall global grief that permeates the essence of every aspect of human life due to the lack of acceptance, celebration, and support of these women’s primary relationships as well as of their individual lesbian identity.
Statement (cont.)

• Experiences of grieving, aging, and lesbian identity intersect constantly surrounded by the interacting aspects of grief.

• Due to complexity, this global grief is not something that can be worked through by the “steps of any grief process, because it never goes away.
The Good News

• These grief experiences are mitigated by coping strategies, supports, and these women’s vision for social action and change as well as their hope for the future.
Discussion

• How would you define “cultural competency” in relation to the elder LGBTQ community?
• How would knowledge of grief in the lives of older lesbians contribute to this sense of cultural competency?
Discussion (cont.)

• How can health care professionals and leaders in faith communities become more culturally competent in relation to the LGBTQ community?
• How can people in the LGBTQ community contribute toward assisting in this process?
Implications for Clinical Practice

• Offer clients opportunity to divulge identity
• Groups – for lesbians only and/or advertised as welcoming
• Ask openly about client’s needs
• Be aware of assumption of heterosexuality
Implications for Community Practice

• Advocate for LGBTQ-friendly institutions at all levels of care

• Include older lesbians in community organizing and political activities

• Think of LGBTQ people in every aspect of community practice (policy, grass roots organizing, etc.)
Implications for Policy and Social Change

• Advocate for equal rights for all people
• Encourage political activism for all our clients and colleagues, from writing letters to marching
• Advocate for equal marriage rights
Implications for Education

• Infuse LGBTQ elders content into all aspects of curriculum and training
• Create open environments for sharing views, opinions, and experiences
• Research, write, and publish, including LGBTQ elders as co-researchers in projects
Future Research

• Coming out process and effect on grief
• Grief in older LGBTQ communities of color
• Grief experienced by LGBTQ people in their 80s and 90s
• Grief experiences of younger lesbians, bisexual people, transgender people, etc.
• Grief of the “hidden” partner
Intersections

• Train ourselves to be aware of the intersections of race, ethnicity, disability, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, gender identity, etc.

• Acknowledge grief as a physical health and a mental health issue
Conclusion

• Grief – woven into the fabric of our lives and of the lives of the women in this study
• Hope for the future
• We can work together to achieve cultural competency so that we can serve one another in a compassionate way
References

Available as a separate document

Thank you!

Questions and Comments