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Examining the Influence of Pre-HAART Experiences on Older, Self-Identifying Gay Men's Contemporary Constructions of Quality of Life (QOL)

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ABSTRACT

Some older gay men (50+) experience diminished quality of life (QOL) due to historical and ongoing discrimination in addition to living through a collective trauma—the pre-HAART era of the HIV/AIDS epidemic—characterized by the absence of treatment and rampant discrimination targeting gay men. A growing body of literature, however, illustrates that older gay men demonstrate remarkable resilience but little is known about how QOL is conceptualized and how these conceptualizations are potentially shaped by pre-HAART experiences. The current study drew on constructivist grounded theory methods to examine how QOL is conceptualized in light of the sociohistorical relevance of pre-HAART. Twenty Canadian based gay men aged 50+ participated in semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Ultimately, QOL is understood as experiencing contentment, which is made possible by the development and implementation of three key processes: (1) developing and cultivating meaningful connections, (2) growing into and embracing identity, and (3) appreciating the capacity to do what brings joy. QOL for this group is greatly informed by a context of disadvantage, and the demonstrated resilience warrants further investigation to meaningfully support the overall well-being of older gay men.

KEYWORDS

HIV/AIDS; quality of life (QOL); sexuality; aging; gay/lesbian

Introduction

It is substantiated that gay men experience diminished quality of life (QOL) when compared to heterosexual men, a finding increasingly understood to be the product of structural and interpersonal discrimination (Oginni et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; Slater et al., 2017). Structural discrimination related to

sexual orientation—also termed heteronormativity, is the assumption and systemic privileging of heterosexuality, and remains pervasive in Canada despite progressive legislative developments over the past 20 years. These developments include the passing of Bill C-23 which ensures same-sex couples receive the same social and tax benefits as heterosexuals in common-law relationships in 2000 (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2015) and recognition of same-sex marriage by law (CBC, 2015). Further, identification of sexual orientation as a protected ground of discrimination by the Canadian Human Rights Act of 1996 (Government of Canada, 2022), and the recent criminalization of conversion therapy¹ (Treisman, 2021). Heteronormativity resides in the realm of the unconscious as a normalized, uncontested belief and becomes perpetuated and reproduced within interpersonal interactions (van der Toorn et al., 2020). Consequently, heteronormativity powerfully shapes the norms and dynamics of societal structures and institutions (e.g., sites of education, healthcare, and employment) where the assumption of heterosexuality imbues interactions and effectively alienates those who do not ascribe to the heterosexual “norm” (Berg et al., 2013; van der Toorn et al., 2020). Discrimination also manifests at the level of individual interaction as homophobia—hatred and/or fear of men who do not abide by heterosexual expectations (Kitzinger, 2004). Homophobia effectively represents interpersonal discrimination and spans physical acts of violence, name-calling, or exclusion (Kitzinger, 2004). Ultimately, the ongoing reproduction of heteronormativity at the interpersonal level continues to impose threats on the QOL of gay men (Oginni et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; van der Toorn et al., 2020).

Amidst recognition of the detrimental impact that discrimination poses for QOL, there is a growing body of literature that highlights the ways gay men continue to resist discrimination to promote and protect their well-being and the well-being of their communities (Emlet et al., 2017; Ferlatte et al., 2015, 2017; Handlovsky et al., 2020). In particular, there is growing interest in the QOL of older gay men due to their uniquely situated experiences within systemic discrimination, HIV, and stigma both pre- and post- HAART² (Beedie, 2019; Forstein, 2013; Handlovsky et al., 2018). Discrimination was particularly relentless during pre-HAART: anti-gay discourses were compounded by the deadly inaction of governments and active framing of HIV as a gay issue (Forstein, 2013; Hedge et al., 2021; Schulze, 2015). Further, it is well substantiated that the stigma inherent to this period has greatly impacted men regardless of HIV status (Forstein, 2013; Kia et al., 2019; Kia et al., 2020; Rosenfeld et al., 2012; Schulze, 2015).

The extant knowledge pertaining to QOL and older gay men is predominantly quantitative in nature: investigations have emphasized evaluating the impact of factors such as HIV stigma, chronic disease management, ageism and experiences of discrimination on QOL (Oginni et al., 2020; Slater et al., 2017; Wen & Zheng, 2019). This work bears importance by

identifying these specific barriers to QOL; however, there exists diversity in how QOL is defined and in particular, there is little understanding as to the meaning of QOL from the perspectives of aging gay men themselves. Critical work in the field of disability studies indicates the need for qualitative inquiry pertaining to QOL, particularly those groups affected by intersecting processes of social exclusion, given that normative definitions of QOL often poorly capture the experiences of those who have been subject to marginalization (Bigby & Beadle-Brown, 2018; I. Brown et al., 2013; R. I. Brown et al., 2015). Investigations have highlighted the construct of social inclusion as bearing relevance in that the opportunity to belong to a social network or perform social roles holds different meanings for individuals who experience multiple barriers to participation in societal activities. Appreciating the diversity of collective experiences for different groups of people, informed by power and oppression, is essential to developing meaningful conceptualizations of QOL (Bigby & Beadle-Brown, 2018; I. Brown et al., 2013; R. I. Brown et al., 2015).

The need for qualitative investigation into older gay men's conceptualizations of QOL with sensitivity to how experiences incurred pre- and post-HAART continue to play out and influence these conceptualizations is necessary to support the psychosocial well-being of older gay men. In this study, to investigate how the sociohistorical context of HIV has informed QOL perspectives, we draw on a strength-based approach and an understanding of the pre-HAART period as a shared/collective experience of grief, loss, stigma, and discrimination that has informed contemporary constructions of QOL among gay men, irrespective of serological status. The research question that informed this study was: *How has the sociohistorical context of HIV influenced older (50+) gay men's contemporary constructions of quality of life (QOL)?* In this paper, we present our main findings and discuss implications for supporting the psychological well-being of older gay men in the context of aging.

Methods

Design

This study comprised a constructivist grounded theory design as per Charmaz (2006). Constructivist grounded theory is often employed to examine social processes with an appreciation of the unique contextual considerations within which these processes unfold (Charmaz, 2006). Maintaining this appreciation of context necessitates researchers to look beyond the surface in seeking meaning in the data, searching for and questioning tacit meanings about values, beliefs, and ideologies. Charmaz (2006) asserts that discovered reality arises from the interactive processes and their temporal and structural contexts. By applying grounded theory methods in this way, it was possible to

examine the impact of contextual, historical, and socio-structural elements on men's contemporary constructions of QOL.

Sample

Following ethics approval from the University research ethics board (#H21-01363), participants were recruited using a flyer that was shared via community-based organizations, social media sites, and community members connected to groups of gay men who were known to the principal investigator. Recruitment also unfolded as per a snowball approach whereby participants further disseminated the flyer to prospective participants within their social, work and community circles. Men were eligible to participate based on the following criteria: (1) self-identification as a gay man, (2) age 50 or over, (3) currently residing in one of the following locations: Vancouver Island, Gulf Islands, or the Lower Mainland (a region inclusive of the city of Vancouver and its suburbs), and (4) English-speaking. Twenty men ranging in age from 54 to 71 years old (*mean* = 65 years) took part in the study (Table 1). Five men were currently employed, 13 were retired, and two were unemployed. Of the 20 men, 19 self-identified as White, one as Southeast Asian, and half of the men ($n = 10$) self-disclosed a positive HIV status.

Data were collected over a four-month period (June-October, 2021) via semi-structured, one-on-one interviews held via Zoom at times convenient for the participants. Questions broached three main domains: 1) descriptions/recollections of the pre-HAART period, 2) the most pressing interpersonal challenges experienced during the pre-HAART period, 3) conceptualizations of QOL. Inclusive to questioning were specific probes to allow for elaboration on unique contextual features; i.e., to describe at length features of the nexus of discrimination that experiences were situated. A list of psychosocial support

Table 1. Descriptive qualitative sample statistics.

Characteristic	Qualitative Sample
Characteristic	$n = 20$
Age, in Years	
Range	54–71
Mean	65
Ethnoracial Identity n (%)	
White/Caucasian	19 (95)
Southeast Asian	1 (5)
Employment Status n (%)	
Employed	5 (25)
Unemployed	2 (10)
Retired	13 (65)
Self-Disclosed HIV Status n (%) ^a	
Positive	10 (50)
Negative	10 (50)

^aNote that some participants may have identified as both HIV-positive and undetectable; however, this estimate is unavailable as it was not explicitly asked in the interviews.

resources was available in the event that participants experienced emotional distress due to the emotionally evocative nature of the interview content. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by an experienced transcriptionist. Verbal consent was obtained prior to each interview, and interviews were conducted by the first author. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and offered the choice of \$30 CDN in cash or a coffee shop gift card in appreciation for their contribution. To ensure voluntary consent, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Data analysis

Data analysis was informed by a sensitivity to how socio-structural aspects of men's lives have influenced contemporary constructions of QOL. Tenets such as constant comparison, reflexivity, and consideration of how sociohistorical context (e.g., stigma, discrimination, loss, and other themes reflected in relevant scholarship) played out in men's perspectives facilitated keen consideration of how experiences inherent to the pre-HAART period along with historical and ongoing discrimination inform how men perceive and ultimately construct QOL.

As per the iterative nature of constructivist grounded theory methodology, data were collected and analyzed simultaneously (Charmaz, 2006). The first step was a broad read of each interview transcript to establish familiarity with the text and an opportunity to reflect on the information as a whole (Charmaz, 2006). Next, open coding commenced wherein large portions of data were compared and patterns were summarized by assigning a short phrase (Charmaz, 2006). For example, open codes included "viewing grief as beneficial to growth," "watching friends get ill" and "being bullied in high school." As analysis progressed, particular attention was paid to how men talked about QOL, and how conceptualizations of QOL evolved over time, informed by experiences incurred during the pre-HAART period and by historical and ongoing discrimination more generally. Memo writing was integral and included notations about how the codes being identified related to one another and the participants' overall constructions of QOL (Charmaz, 2006). As the data reached saturation on key processes at approximately interview 15, that is, recurrent themes were systematically identified in the transcripts, categorizing was refined to three processes that constitute QOL. Although saturation in qualitative research remains a topic under debate, a recent systematic review highlighted that saturation is most commonly achieved between 9 and 17 interviews, despite the varied approaches to assessing saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Finally, the analysis culminated with highlighting how these three processes relate to each other and identifying the central phenomenon ultimately driving the processes. To enhance accuracy, feedback and guidance

were elicited from participants twice during the analysis. Participants were sent a short summary document that outlined the developing and finalized themes and were asked to share their perspectives and voice any concerns, an approach that is consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Sandelowski, 1986). Participants in this case did not raise any concerns with the analysis presented.

Findings

Through conversing with participants, it became clear that the events of pre-HAART impacted and continue to impact men to this day. For many participants the onset of the pre-HAART period was particularly distressing because it came at a time when the gay rights movement was experiencing considerable momentum on the heels of the Stonewall riots.³ The burgeoning gay rights movement facilitated connections with gay communities and promoted embracing sexual identity. As such, some participants described the pre-HAART period as the end of an era: the celebratory aspect of life within gay communities that was widespread in the '70s and '80s was destroyed by the emergence of a novel and deadly infection. Others described at length the devastating role of media representation, i.e., the relentless politically informed discourses that conflated gay men with HIV/AIDS and further positioned gay men as responsible and deserving of infection. For some participants, these discourses served to further aggravate narratives they were subject to growing up in their home and faith communities that situated homosexuality as deviance. For many participants, however, the most challenging aspect of the pre-HAART period was the constant presence of suffering and death. The loss of friends, partners, community members and peers was heartbreaking. To compound this devastation was the observation of no coordinated supportive public health response. Gay communities were left to fend for themselves and develop supportive services by their own means until the virus broached heterosexual communities. Government inaction was described as sending a clear message that gay men were expendable.

Accounting for these experiences and drawing on the interview data, a preliminary conceptualization (Figure 1) of older self-identifying gay men's QOL as *experiencing contentment* was developed. Experiencing contentment, which is described as being at peace and happy with one's life and life circumstances, represents the central phenomenon underpinning and driving the three interrelated processes that comprised QOL which were: (1) developing and cultivating meaningful connections, (2) growing into and embracing identity, and (3) appreciating the capacity to do what brings joy. Experiencing contentment was made possible by adopting, implementing, and refining—over the passage of time—these three interconnected processes. As such, QOL is understood as dynamic and evolving over the course of

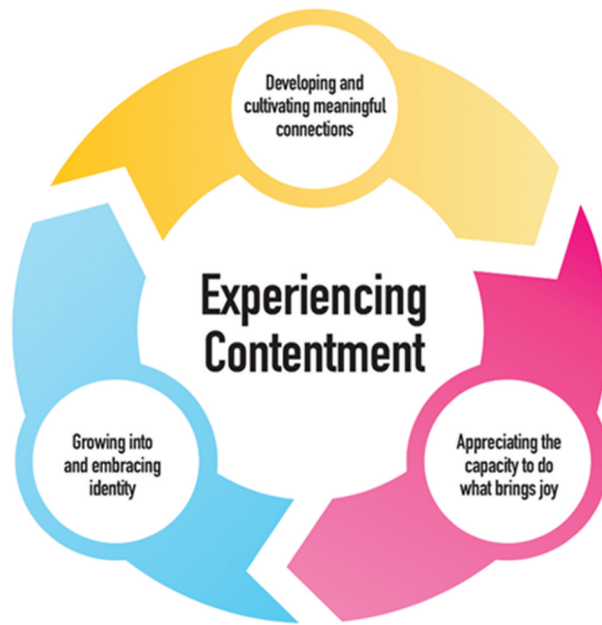


Figure 1. Experiencing contentment.

participants' lives, informed by the intersections of unique personal experiences, shared historical and contextual elements, and greatly impacted by maturation. Among the participants, inherent to the passage of time were shared social experiences as gay men living in an overwhelmingly heteronormative society: thus, experiences shaped by power and oppression through interpersonal and structural discrimination are of marked importance to men's perspectives of QOL, and are folded into the collective, cultural trauma of living through the pre-HAART crisis. Despite individual variability, there is a multitude of shared experiences across participant accounts, which continues to influence how QOL is understood and defined. Below we describe in detail the three processes that comprise QOL fueled by the central phenomenon of experiencing contentment.

Developing and cultivating meaningful social connections

The majority of participants spoke of the value placed on personal relationships, and in many instances, connection was described in terms of the new and enriched meaning that comes from sharing experiences with another person(s) generally. For some men, QOL was explicitly described as connection; to accentuate the importance of relationships with others as a fundamental component of experiencing contentment. Of note was the tendency for participants to articulate how their perspectives on the nature of relationships that brought about contentment changed over time; namely,

as men aged, they craved closer, more in-depth friendships that were key sources of emotional support. Men often described companionship in their youth in the context of fun and celebration—and for many, this kind of socialization was greatly rooted in embracing and exploring their sexual identity and increasing engagement within the gay community (herein defined as a community of sexual and gender-diverse people). As young men, the process of coming out was riddled with challenges and complexities rooted in discrimination including the loss of relationships (family and friends); consequently, to have the unwavering support of a network of gay men fostered contexts of celebration. In addition, for many men, coming out and becoming increasingly involved with the gay community commenced amidst the 1980's, a time characterized by indulgence as described by William, age 71:

We used to talk about it - that it took longer on Sunday to gossip about what happened on Saturday, than it did to live it . . . well, you have to remember the 80's also was a time of unbelievable excess. If you're into television, it was like *Dynasty* and *Dallas* . . . well, partying was the most, the most uh, you know, it was all about how much fun you could have before you die.

Over time, experiencing contentment was increasingly derived from spending time with fewer friends, in a diversity of settings. This change was in part due to the influence of maturation but also due to the onset of HIV/AIDS, which greatly tempered celebratory activity. Many men noted that the energy amidst HIV/AIDS shifted from the jubilant commemoration of sexual identity and liberation to organizing and deploying supports and efforts for those impacted by the virus and dissemination of any available information to foster prevention. This shift was recognized as incited by the delayed response from public health authorities. Participants reflected on the magnitude of mobilization within gay communities in reaction to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and communicated deep appreciation for the support that manifested within the gay community from these efforts. This depth of engagement echoes the nature of relationships that many participants described seeking today. In particular, the men articulated a desire for depth and presence as the basis of current relationships. Such descriptors signify an authenticity to the relationship, of feeling unconditionally valued and supported by the other person, as communicated by Scott (age 61):

And I think now, what is truly valuable is just to bring presence, like to, to the other . . . and some people are very capable—they are just present . . . And it's like, what is that? What is that presence? But you, you recognize it in people who—they're there. They're just there. And it, it does something to us . . . but I think it's quote unquote magical. Like, it has a power of its own when someone is simply present.

The importance placed on close connections was understood by participants in part by the process of time—as men matured, they placed greater value on the contributions of close, deep connections to their

sense of contentment. Embedded within the impact of maturation, however, is the shared collective trauma of living through the grief, loss and suffering of pre-HAART. The trauma of multiple losses brought on by the HIV/AIDS epidemic is recognized as in part informing the emphasis men currently place on human connection, that in light of such devastation, being connected to others, in particular other gay men, became prioritized in a more intensive and intentional way, as shared by Dan (age 59):

Oh yeah. No, I think it's-it's more, um people became a lot more valuable to me after living through all that (experiences during pre-HAART). Um, in a way, comfort became more valuable to me and comfort is in its broadest sense, not just like the comforts of home, and having comfortable things . . . but um, I, I think I realise that comfort is really about like the importance of people, and relationships . . . that became more increasingly important to me.

In reflecting on his experiences, Dan articulated that the multiple losses incurred had devastating effects but also ameliorated the contentment derived from nurturing connections with others. The fragility and fleeting nature of life became glaringly apparent for many during the pre-HAART period. This reality was described as frequently overlooked by young gay men today, who did not face the same trauma and extensive loss of life as those who lived through the first decade of the HIV epidemic.

The dedication men demonstrated to building and sustaining their connections cannot be understated, in addition to the specific challenges that arise in the context of aging. Men noted that in their older age, communities dwindle due to the literal loss of friends and peers along with the difficulties inherent to maintaining friendships over time. As such, the value placed on connection requires considerable focus and dedication to maintaining these connections and is motivated by the meaning these connections hold for men's contentment and consequently, quality of life.

Growing into and embracing identity

All participants discussed some challenges they faced growing up as gay men in an overwhelmingly heteronormative society; namely, interpersonal, and structural discrimination. Experiences of physical aggression, name-calling and rejection were common during men's formative years as was the ubiquity of anti-gay discourses from a variety of sources including faith communities, family members, and the media. The initial framing of HIV/AIDS as a "gay plague" served to aggravate the painful anti-gay discourses already entrenched in men's psyches and experiences, as described by Scott, 61 years old:

That was, you know, in terms of message from religion, message from family, and then from pandemic. Right? It was like, literally. Now it's like, oh my God, they were right! Right? . . . Oh my God, like, what-what if they were right? We really deserve to die.

For Scott and others, being constructed as deviant—to the point of deserving to die—by virtue of their sexuality was profoundly damaging and, for some, led to years of internalized homophobia, shame, and emotional turmoil. Such experiences were incredibly harmful and, in many cases, took years of focused exploration to readdress and remains a non-linear, ongoing path of healing for some.

Given the rampant discrimination men experienced in their lives, many participants kept their sexual identity concealed/selectively disclosed their sexual identity for years to avoid persecution. Unsurprisingly, given the years of endured discrimination accentuated by HIV discourses centered on deviance, true emancipation came in the form of openly embracing and proclaiming gay identity in all facets of life. That is, many men were open about their sexual identity in some areas of their lives (e.g., with friends, in the community) but concealed their identity in the workplace and/or from family members. The decision to come out in terms of sexual identity in all facets of life was described as liberating, and for others as a “rebirth.” For some men, taking part in affirming celebrations such as Pride events provided the vehicle for full expression of identity, as shared by Adam, 64 years old:

I went to my first gay pride parade um, probably in about 1984. I have to tell you, it was the most liberating experience! It was, it was, it was crazy! I, I still almost get goosebumps when I think about it now. It was . . . so validating. That there could be, there could be – I have no idea how many people. Now, now they get a million people out and it was probably like 300,000 at the time.

In recounting his journey of coming out, Adam highlights the immense support from within and beyond the gay community. Having such massive representation in sheer numbers was indicative of the support for sexual identity, and of emancipatory collective power. Men were cognizant of the benefits of actively engaging with other gay men and deriving support from these communities, such that events such as Pride, as articulated above, represented significant, identity-validating events.

For others, embracing sexual identity was greatly reinforced by acknowledgment of harm on the part of individuals within a variety of societal structures including popular media and workplaces. In some cases, having injustices depicted in contemporary films (in particular, films that depict the devastation of the pre-HAART era, with an emphasis on government inaction) was perceived as greatly facilitative as it offered acknowledgment and representation. For other men, rectification came in the form of institutional recognition of discrimination. Some participants talked about working within organizations historically imbued with homophobia. For an organization to be

accountable for harm was further validating to the process of embracing identity, as articulated by Martin, 65 years old:

Today, because I've got-I can go and get the plaque. I've got a, a letter signed by the (top authority in institution), saying we're sorry we treated you so poorly . . . one of the things you need is a public apology that's meaningful and true, that resonates for you . . . a healing process is not going to come until (the perpetrators) realize the harm they have done, apologize for it, and take tangible steps to fix that.

For Martin and others, experiencing formal acknowledgment of harm and wrongdoing from those in part responsible for the suffering was fundamental to experiencing contentment. Many men shared tremendous effort over time to resist the negative discourses and behaviors to which they were exposed, and that this remained an ongoing process. As such, the action of the perpetrators formally holding themselves accountable for mistreatment validated the men's individual efforts. Although the men came to embody and operationalize the perspective that contempt from others was *not* their issue, acknowledgment of this wrongdoing within societal structures was immensely valuable to experiencing contentment and thus to QOL.

Appreciating the capacity to do what brings joy

Accounts of experiencing contentment were often discussed in relation to participating in activities that brought about joy, which were diverse and informed by unique individual circumstances. Along with describing these activities, was a deep sense of gratitude for the joy that was manifest via participation. Within these discussions, however, the men highlighted two main caveats inherent to participation in activities: health and finances, and in some cases, both. With respect to health, many of the activities that the men identified necessitated a degree of physical mobility, and given the majority of participants were in their 60s and 70s, impediments to mobility were a reality for many. As such, the term "good health" was often used and defined as the capacity/ability of the body to engage in preferred activities. In this way, good health was, according to participants, deeply connected to one's quality of life: as a vehicle that enabled capacity, and thereby in many ways enabled the experiencing of contentment. For many, the reality of the passage of time and consequent physical limitations meant that activities required modification to ensure ongoing participation. Murray, age 69, elaborated on how physical limitations informed his decision-making:

Now I mean . . . not that I would complain but I did the shorter walk as opposed to the longer walk, and that's not like a major problem, as you know 'First World issues' but just to show that maybe I would have done something a bit more before, but I chose not to because of potential health issues.

Murray described how his orthopedic issues necessitated modifications to allow for participation which was intricately connected to his contentment. What was evident throughout Murray's and others' testimonies pertaining to the realities of aging and consequent activity modification, was a persistent undertone of appreciation for the capacity to participate at all. In Murray's case, he explicitly references "not wanting to complain," and "First World issues" as recognition of the opportunities that remain, and from which contentment is derived.

In addition to good health, finances were recognized as essential to do what brings joy in some cases. Many of the participants emphasized their gratitude for residing within the middle to upper-middle socioeconomic bracket that imbued comfort and stability in their current circumstance, which in turn secured the capacity to take part in a variety of activities. Other participants shared their gratitude for financial stability in spite of economic challenges rooted in living through the HIV/AIDS pre-treatment era. For some, the HIV/AIDS crisis markedly diminished thoughts of living to see older age. As such, little energy, if any, was dedicated to financial planning. This was particularly the case for those men who were diagnosed with HIV during the 1990s with no viable treatment options and little hope. As articulated by James, aged 65, the prospect of no future fueled a focus on existing in the now and depleting all available resources:

So I started working again in the 90's . . . mainly because I squandered everything that I had as assets and money-when you're dying. Right? So, you're not expecting you're going to live past 1995. So if you've got money in the bank, what are you going to do? It's not going to help anybody that's still alive when I'm dead. So I might as well spend it.

The lives of these men, however, did not come to the abrupt conclusion they anticipated; rather, and most specifically with the introduction of HAART, a faint but growing realization that survival was a distinct possibility. Consequently, these men began slowly piecing together a vision for the future—beginning with searching for, and securing, employment.

Throughout conversations, a strong undertone was evident that emphasized appreciating the capacity to do what brings joy. Whether tending to a garden, going for a walk, or traveling to an exotic locale, there was marked appreciation for the ability to engage in these activities, and the subsequent contentment derived. This was evident in how the men spoke candidly about what they look forward to, and how their age and experience contributed to appreciating the seemingly prosaic or unexciting, as articulated by Maurice (age 71),

I've got a good life . . . I'm waiting for that slice of homemade bread with garden-grown tomatoes and mayonnaise . . . and I have to practice piano yet today, so there is also that to look forward to.

This gratitude for the everyday is in part, understood as a function of maturation and aging—an appreciation for life—but is also recognized as greatly informed by witnessing and enduring tremendous hardship and loss. For many of these men, living through the HIV/AIDS crisis meant living amongst death such that it became an integral and inescapable part of life. For the participants, years later, despite the hardship and challenges that enduring the collective trauma of pre-HAART has incurred, these hardships also fuel a deep appreciation for life and the opportunities for joy that remain.

In sum, QOL is understood as comprised of three key processes that changed and evolved over time due to maturation and shared collective experiences as gay men. The processes are intricately connected: developing and cultivating meaningful connections greatly facilitated the process of growing into and embracing identity—particularly connections with other gay men that fortified and supported embracing sexual identity and harnessing emancipatory power amidst a heteronormative society. These two processes are also linked to appreciating the capacity to do what brings joy as connections/sharing experiences with other gay men were central to joyful activities, as well as the gratitude for these activities that is recognized as stemming from having endured tremendous collective adversity, hardships, and sorrow throughout (and following) the pre-HAART period.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how the sociohistorical context of pre-HAART has influenced older, self-identifying gay men's conceptualizations of quality of life. In doing so, we highlight how the men's contemporary perspectives of QOL are deeply informed by a lifetime of interpersonal and structural discrimination—and the subsequent emancipatory resistance—and further influenced in myriad ways by the shared/collective experiences of the pre-HAART period. Consequently, we developed a nascent conceptualization that illustrates how the discrimination, loss, and suffering incurred during the pre-HAART period and over time have informed the development of three key processes that constitute QOL and enable participants to achieve *experiencing contentment*. While there is extant quantitative literature that identifies barriers to QOL specific to older gay men such as depression and internalized homophobia (Oginni et al., 2020; Pereira et al., 2020) and work that has examined perspectives of successful aging amongst older gay men living with HIV (Emlet et al., 2017) we offer specific insights into the construct of QOL for this particular group of men. Building on the disability scholarship that critically examines the need for consideration of collective experiences of disadvantage amongst groups of people when exploring conceptualizations of QOL (Bigby & Beadle-Brown, 2018; I. Brown et al., 2013; R. I. Brown et al., 2015), our findings demonstrate that QOL is representative of the collective

oppressive and emancipatory experiences shared by older, gay men. Our findings highlight the lasting impact of the hardships incurred during pre-HAART, consequent resilience and the implications for QOL, and the importance of considering these elements in research, programs and practices aimed at promoting the well-being of older gay men.

In this study, we found that participants, despite tremendous adversity, present remarkably well in terms of their psychological well-being, highlighted by the recurrent expressions of gratitude. Gratitude is in part recognized as stemming from experiences incurred during pre-HAART and the appreciation for life that evolves because of intimate interaction with grief, loss and death. Further, gratitude is recognized as exemplary of the tremendous capacity, resilience and emancipatory power demonstrated by this group of men (Emlet et al., 2017; Handlovsky et al., 2018; Kia et al., 2020; Rabkin et al., 1993). This study adds to the body of literature supporting and calling for the use of strength-based approaches to inquiry that consider the positive factors in people's lives that become the emphasis of change processes (Zimmerman, 2013). There is growing resilience-informed research specific to gay men; however, resilience has been described as underused in the development of interventions and policies to improve the lives of individuals who do not adhere to heteronormative expectations (Herrick et al., 2011; Kurtz et al., 2012). Our findings support the need for more research informed by strength-based/resilience-informed approaches specific to older gay men to meaningfully support their well-being in the context of aging.

Meaningful social connections were identified as a central process in the men's conceptualizations of QOL. The value of social connections to the psychological well-being of older gay men is well-documented; in particular, the concept of emotional support (Lyons, 2016; Lyons & Pepping, 2017) which resonates with our finding of the significance of deep and meaningful connections. Further, work exploring successful aging with older gay men living with HIV highlighted how men engage in "pruning of social networks" (Emlet et al., 2017, p. 2141) as a means to eliminate relationships that did not support well-being and enabled fortification of fewer, more enriching relationships. Older gay men have been identified as more susceptible to loneliness as opposed to heterosexual men of the same age (Cox, 2006; Kuyper & Fokkema, 2010). Thus, the immense effort and intention put into sustaining social connections, along with the challenges inherent to doing so in light of aging, are crucial factors to consider in understanding the parameters of well-being. This is particularly important for this specific group of men considering the immensity of loss incurred over the course of their lives as their generation was the one who witnessed the greatest toll of death from HIV (Forstein, 2013; Schulze, 2015). Community organizations present opportunities for connection including conversation and healing with respect to multiple traumas experienced over many years. To ensure resources are meaningful, eliciting

the opinions and perspectives of older gay men in the planning and development of such resources is essential (Bates & Berg, 2014; Im & Rosenberg, 2016; Kia et al., 2020; Thupayagale-Tshweneagae & Mokomane, 2014). In essence, the assumption that older gay men are well-equipped to sustain social connections by their own accord is not entirely accurate and men would benefit from opportunities to connect and build connections.

The findings also highlight the importance of growing into and embracing identity to QOL. Despite societal progress in upholding equity and seeking to redress the harms imposed upon individuals who resist heteronormative imposition (Goh, 2018), discrimination remains an issue; most notably, in locations such as Vancouver, a locale with an international reputation for embracing equity and diversity with regards to sexual and gender identity (Murray, 2015). The participants highlighted progressive change, but acknowledged that interpersonal and structural discrimination remain an element of everyday life. Although many older gay men may not experience stigma/discrimination in the overt manner it was encountered at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, research that has explored older gay men's experiences within contemporary health settings highlights that this history continues to manifest as men's embodiment of resistance to it (Kia et al., 2019, 2020). In this work, accounts of contemporary heteronormativity within health systems were described and promptly addressed by disengagement, or advocating for health needs-reactions that exemplify the reality of contemporary discrimination as well as the reclamation of autonomous power by older gay men (Kia et al., 2019, 2020). Targeting particular institutions where heteronormativity is reproduced at the individual level such as health settings and workplaces is warranted. Interventions can include targeted efforts for employers and employees such as in-service educational support services and anti-discrimination workshops (Baker & Lucas, 2017; Gahagan & Subirana-Malaret, 2018; Morris et al., 2019). Institutional opportunities focused on ways to operationalize increasing equity, diversity and inclusion are growing, but must be further leveraged to target systemic discrimination.

The overwhelming expressions of gratitude and appreciation in participants' testimonies are another key finding and highlight a powerful process of collective emancipation in the face of tremendous adversity. As highlighted in the disability literature, normative understandings of QOL often do not apply to groups affected by intersecting processes of social exclusion, given the tremendous bearing that collective experiences of marginalization and subjugation have on QOL (Bigby & Beadle-Brown, 2018; I. Brown et al., 2013; R. I. Brown et al., 2015). Our findings here support the assertions of Emler et al. (2017) that the unique experiences of older gay men—namely membership in a community subject to marginalization and embodiment of the collective trauma represented by the pre-HAART period—warrant unique consideration when generating meaningful considerations of QOL.

Subsequent qualitative investigation into the construct of QOL with older, self-identifying gay men is needed to build on our preliminary findings.

There are several limitations to note. First, this was a cross-sectional study consequently limiting what can be known across time and location. In particular, study participation was not contingent upon where men were residing during the pre-HAART period (e.g., large urban cities vs. smaller townships) and thus much remains unknown about rural vs. urban impact. Future investigations that consider the impact of geographical location during the pre-treatment HIV period are needed to fully appreciate how men's contemporary constructions of QOL are impacted by these experiences. In addition, the sample of men was comprised predominantly of well-educated white men; consequently, the capacity demonstrated by these men can be interpreted as greatly facilitated by the privilege derived from social location. The need for additional investigations that explore the experiences of men from diverse ethnracial, and socioeconomic backgrounds is indicated. Lastly, we recognize that as a means to elicit the necessary information some of the questions were rather direct (e.g. "tell me a bit about what 'quality of life'" means to you? How would you describe that?"). As such, we recognize the potential for some bias to be introduced by the nature of employing questions of such a direct nature.

Conclusion

This study, to our knowledge, is one of the first to explore how the socio-historical context of HIV has influenced how older gay men conceptualize QOL. The insights developed here—including a preliminary theory that highlights the key processes and centrality of experiencing contentment to how men conceptualize QOL—provide opportunities to support the well-being of older gay men. In particular, the findings shed light on how living through the pre-treatment HIV period continues to play out in myriad and complex ways, but contemporary conceptualizations of QOL are also deeply impacted by the intersections of years of sustained discrimination and the context of aging.

Notes

1. Conversion therapy is a practice that aims to change an individual's sexual orientation to heterosexual or gender identity to cisgender; i.e., identifying with the sex assigned to them at birth (Yu, 2019).
2. Pre-HAART (Pre-highly active anti-retroviral therapy) marked a period (approximately 1981–1996) where there was no available treatment for HIV/AIDS, care was essentially supportive/palliative—to minimize pain and discomfort—and HIV was constructed as a gay illness. Post-HAART represents the period from 1996 onwards, when effective, viable treatment (HAART) was available for individuals with HIV/AIDS and the virus had breached heterosexual communities (Forstein, 2013; Schulze, 2015).

3. The Stonewall riots were a series of protests in New York City in the spring of 1969. The protests were incited by a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, where many gay and lesbian patrons congregated. The patrons resisted and this resistance is noted as greatly influencing and inspiring the gay liberation movement in the United States (Forstein, 2013).

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