



Cultivating psychological well-being amongst older gay men: A qualitative exploration

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There is growing interest in the psychological well-being (PWB) of older gay men given recognition of a nexus of experiences unique to this population including years of sustained discrimination, living through the HIV/AIDS crisis, and navigating the challenges of aging (Oginni, Mapayi, Afolabi, Obiajunwa, & Oloniniyi, 2020; Pereira et al., 2020; Slater, Godette, Huang, Ruan, & Kerridge, 2017). The implications of years of sustained interpersonal (homophobia) and structural (heteronormativity) discrimination is well documented in the literature (Chan, Ku, & Yan, 2024; Petruzzella, Feinstein, Davila, & Lavner, 2020) and increasingly recognized as necessitating specific strategies and marked perseverance to aid well-being (Handlovsky, Bungay, Johnson, & Oliffe, 2020); Lyons et al., 2022; Lyons et al., 2021). Discrimination manifests in myriad ways that compromises PWB for gay men including childhood experiences of anti-gay bullying (Hart et al., 2018; Lin, Chang, Chen, & Yen, 2022) trauma stemming from stigma, neglect and internalized homophobia (Berlin et al., 2023; Mericle, Carrico, Hemberg, de Guzman, & Stall, 2020; Perry et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2021) living in the absence of human rights protection amidst debates pertaining to whether gay men were deserving of basic human rights (Halkitis, 2019; Hammack, Frost, Meyer, & Pletta, 2018; Page, Ayoub, Arranz, Montes, & Paulin, 2022) and theoretical positing of the harms of discrimination by way of minority stress theory (for a comprehensive review see Amato and Émond (2023).

Further, regardless of HIV status, gay men who are currently above the age of 50 years old are aging in a context strongly shaped by the collective trauma of HIV/AIDS (Forstein, 2013; Rosenfeld, Bartlam, & Smith, 2012; Schulze, 2015). In particular, the pre-HAART era

(pre-highly active anti-retroviral therapy) – spanning approximately 1981–1996 – marked a devastating time for gay men. During this period, there was no effective treatment for HIV/AIDS, nor organized public health response until the infection broached heterosexual communities mounting one of the most formidable grassroots movements through gay men effectively catalyzing their own community-based response to combat the devastation of HIV/AIDS (Forstein, 2013; Schulze, 2015). Further, discourses that positioned gay men as responsible for and even deserving of the HIV/AIDS epidemic were rampant (Forstein, 2013; Schulze, 2015). Experiences of internalized homophobia – negative feelings related to one's sexual identity (Herek, 1996) – were exacerbated by the intersections of HIV/AIDS-related challenges and anti-gay discourses and HIV stigma was relentless, extensive, and greatly internalized (Forstein, 2013; Schulze, 2015).

There is increasing evidence that the devastation of the pre-HAART period of HIV/AIDS has left a lasting legacy and has influenced PWB among older gay men. For example, many in this group have connected the effects of the HIV/AIDS to an enhanced sense of appreciation for health and well-being (Harris, Emlet, Pierpaoli Parker, & Furlotte, 2018), guilt surrounding survivorship (Murray & Adam, 2001), and an emphasis on the importance of social connections and supports (Dakin, Williams, & MacNamara, 2020; Pate, DeShong, Stafford, & Nadorff, 2023; Saunders & Carr, 2022). Further, the longstanding impacts of discrimination related to gay sexual identity and HIV/AIDS are aggravated in the context of aging, which introduces additional barriers to PWB; namely, diminishing social networks (Emlet, Harris, Furlotte, Brennan, & Pierpaoli, 2017; McLaren, 2022) the emergence of

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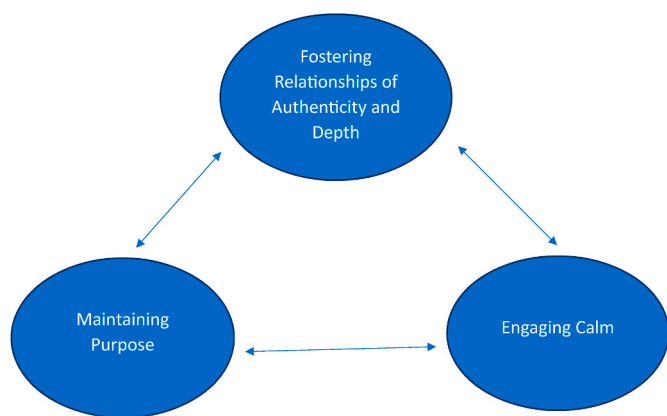


Fig. 1. Social processes integral to cultivating psychological well-being amongst older, gay men.

age-related challenges (Handlovsky, Bungay, Johnson, & Olliffe, 2020; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2009; Millard et al., 2014) and the concept of ‘mattering’ (see Wight, LeBlanc, Meyer, & Harig, 2015). Given that population ageing is a global phenomenon, promoting psychological wellness in older adults is a public health priority (Harper, 2014); however, information specific to how older gay men cultivate PWB is conspicuously absent.

PWB, an evolving construct explored extensively in the field of social psychology, is described as broad, complex, and multi-factorial, capturing emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of a person’s life – namely the presence of meaningful relationships and a sense of purpose (Chan et al., 2024; Schulte et al., 2015; Pressman, Jenkins, & Moskowitz, 2019). Despite ongoing debates, PWB is overarchingly understood as an evaluation of a person’s affective state as well as their overall functioning (Pressman et al., 2019; Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2019). Consequently, much of the extant literature pertaining to the PWB of older gay men is predominantly quantitative, utilizing a variety of scales to identify key obstacles to well-being with some insights into supportive factors (Porter, Brennan-Ing, Burr, Dugan, & Karpiak, 2017; Sharma & Subramanyam, 2020; Shippy, Cantor, & Brennan, 2004). For example, Sharma et al. measured PWB in terms of loneliness, sexual impulsivity, and depressive symptoms, and found internalized homophobia and fear of aging to be most associated with increased depressive symptoms. Porter et al. (2017) used structural equation modeling to explore HIV stigma and PWB. Given the unique challenges faced by older gay men amid contexts of aging, there remains a dearth of qualitative research that has explored how men go about promoting PWB, informed by recognition of within-group diversity along such axes as gender, age, and ability (Author et al., 2017; Bowleg, 2013; Parent, DeBlaree, & Moradi, 2013). In this study, we drew methodologically on tenets of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) to explore how men go about promoting their PWB given the unique circumstances of their social locations. The question that informed this study was: how do older (50+) gay men cultivate PWB?

1. Methods

1.1. Design

This study was conceptually informed by constructivist grounded theory (CGT), an approach commonly used to explore problem-solving practices with an emphasis on social processes and contextual circumstances (Charmaz, 2006). Employing a CGT approach situates exploration such that discovered reality is recognized to arise from the interactive processes and their temporal and structural contexts (Charmaz, 2006). CGT methods are inherent to building in and acknowledging key contextual features explicitly with data collection and

analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The tenets of CGT employed in this investigation include: concurrent data collection and analysis, emphasis on understanding unique contextual circumstances within participant experiences, and researcher reflexivity to guide analysis and account for complexity and variation in the data (Charmaz, 2000).

1.2. Sample

Ethical approval was obtained from the harmonized review board via the British Columbia Provincial Ethics Platform (H22-01799) and the University of Montreal (2021–1263). Recruitment was aided by several community-based organizations, in addition to snowball techniques whereby participants shared the recruitment material with peers and others within their social networks. The recruitment flyer and word-of-mouth advertisement sought gay men 50+ to participate in individual conversations pertaining to their perspectives on PWB and how they go about promoting PWB. Sample questions asked include “can you tell me a little bit about what you believe to be essential to PWB?”, “has your perspective on PWB changed over time? If so, how has it changed?” and “can you share a bit about the kinds of things you do to navigate challenges that might diminish your PWB?”

A total of 26 men were interviewed who self-identified as gay, were 50+ years of age, (range = 51–81 years; mean = 65 years), spoke English, and were residing in southwestern British Columbia, Canada (i.e., Vancouver Island/Gulf Islands and Vancouver/Lower Mainland region of British Columbia). Most participants were retired ($n = 16$) white ($n = 24$), and nearly half reported a chronic health condition ($n = 15$). Semi-structured 1-h interviews were conducted via Zoom between August and October 2022. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by an experienced transcriptionist and the first author (Table 1).

Participants provided informed verbal consent prior to the interview and transcripts were stored on a secure password-protected server at the University of Victoria. Within the secure server, audio recordings and transcript files were also encrypted with a second password to further maintain participants’ anonymity. Transcripts were anonymized by way of removing any identifying information and participants were provided a pseudonym. Prior the interview, participants were informed that they could stop the interview process at any point throughout the interview without any consequences. For their contributions, participants were provided a 30\$ (CAD) honorarium.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

	Qualitative Sample
Characteristic	$n = 26$
Age, in Years	
Range	51–81
Mean	65
Ethnoracial Identity n (%)	
White/Caucasian	24 (92)
Southeast Asian	2 (8)
Employment Status n (%)	
Employed	9 (35)
Unemployed	1 (4)
Retired	16 (61)
Self-Disclosed HIV Status n (%) ^a	
Positive	5 (19)
Negative	21 (81)
Reported Health Issues (excl. HIV)	11 (42)
None or Acute Conditions	15 (58)
Chronic Conditions	

^a Note 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.

1.3. Analysis

As per CGT methods, data analysis and collection were simultaneous, and attention was paid to social processes and contextual circumstances that influenced men's experiences. Analysis began with a broad read of each transcript to provide an overall sense of the information (Charmaz, 2006) followed by open coding to identify descriptive categories using active language, or 'gerunds' -i.e., verbs ending in 'ing' (Charmaz, 2006). Some examples include 'getting closer to my family, 'working in Indigenous communities', and 'being in nature'. Memo writing, a key component of CGT, was foundational throughout this process (Charmaz, 2006), and used to query how codes related to one another and more overarchingly, how they related to cultivating PWB. Further, memo-writing facilitated accounting for contextual circumstances such as living through pre-HAART, dealing with profound loss, experiences of discrimination and social location (i.e., the sample comprised predominantly educated, white men). The CGT tenet of reflexivity was employed systematically during analysis - i.e., the researchers reflected on their own social locations and assumptions drawing on the tool described by Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) and we paid close attention to the intersections of gender identity, sexual identity, and age. Through memo writing, recurrent themes were systematically identified in the transcripts, and the data reached saturation with the identification of three temporal processes that provide an account of how older gay men cultivate PWB. As comparisons and contrasts between themes were made amongst the research team, three high-order processes were generated related to strategies older gay men use to promote PWB. To facilitate accurate depictions of experiences and in line with a CGT approach (Charmaz, 2006; Sandelowski, 1986), feedback from participants was elicited twice during the analysis stage via emailing a succinct summary document. Participants were encouraged to express any concerns or thoughts before moving forward with any academic or community knowledge translations. Participants who replied did not express any concerns with the summary content and concurred that the information was consistent with their experiences.

1.4. Findings

Through the process of analysis, it became increasingly evident that how older gay men go about cultivating PWB is informed by the intersections of complex contextual dynamics rooted in interlocking systems of oppression that shaped - and continue to shape - how this subgroup of men cultivate well-being. The influence of discrimination on how PWB is cultivated cannot be overstated, nor the collective trauma of living through the HIV/AIDS crisis. Temporal dimensions along with the influence of what is recognized as maturation is understood to substantially inform how older gay men experience PWB. Having weathered tremendous adversity throughout their lives contributed to introspection and personal reflection pertaining to meaning and purpose in their current context as older men. Inherent to the process of maturation and navigating years of sustained discrimination was a noted emphasis on identifying conditions that bring about a sense of peace, a focus that had not been prioritized in youth and early adulthood but contributed greatly to men's sense of PWB. Ultimately, three social processes were identified as integral to the cultivation of PWB among older gay men over time, shaped by intersecting structural determinants, interpersonal and structural discrimination, and maturation: (1) fostering relationships of authenticity and depth, (2) maintaining purpose, and (3) engaging calm (Fig. 1).

1.5. Fostering relationships of authenticity and depth

Fostering relationships of authenticity and depth mitigated the harms of interpersonal, intrapersonal, structural, and HIV/AIDS-driven discrimination. Participants experienced tremendous loss, suffering and grief during the pre-HAART period which was compounded by

discrimination and informed by power dynamics. In particular, a complex convergence of factors-including the political far right fuelled by Evangelism in North America - greatly contributed to the construction of HIV/AIDS as a moral failing that effectively positioned gay men as deviant and responsible for HIV/AIDS paving the way for utter public health inaction (Barlow, 2015; Kayal, 1985). The depth of relationships proved to be a fundamental resource to address the tremendous adversities faced amidst the pre-HAART era due to the support derived from these connections, and this continues to be the case in men's lives. Participants also described how close relationships mitigate the challenges related to aging, specifically the reality of shrinking social circles due to the passing of partners, friends, and other loved ones. Ultimately, men emphasized the derived support, comfort, and often unconditional love that these relationships provided. Andrew, age 67, expressed:

Talking to, [...] picking the right friend or family member to talk to about certain things over the years. That is definitely a crutch that has helped many times as well. I have what I would call "a good friend" who is a phenomenal, phenomenal person, that even though he's a couple years younger than me, he's like my guardian angel sort of thing, even though I don't believe in angels (chuckling). But you know what I mean.

Deriving emotional support from a key confidant has been fundamental to Andrew's PWB, such that the friend is identified with the language of *guardian angel*. Positioning a person in this way - as a deity guarding one's safety - highlights the protective role that dialogue and the provision of emotional support hold for promoting PWB. The utility of emotional support - in the context of facing challenges - is evident in Andrew's use of the term *crutch*, to know that someone is present and available amidst challenges, a resource that can be accessed without reservation over an extended period of time. The role of emotional support in PWB is important to consider in light of participants' acknowledgment of the considerable effort required to maintain relationships as they aged; however, the expended effort was unquestionably substantiated due to the tremendous benefits gained in relation to promoting PWB.

Many participants shared previous and/or ongoing challenges with mental health and/or substance use, and the tremendous benefit they derived from addressing these issues via organized peer support groups - some of which were tailored for gay men and other sexually and gender diverse people. In many cases, mental health and substance use challenges were understood to be, at least in part, prompted by the damaging emotional impact of ongoing discrimination, and the helplessness of subjugation by dominant heteronormative processes that some men endured amidst HIV/AIDS because the crisis unleashed myriad opportunities for unfettered hatred during that time. Emphasis was placed on the concept of shared experience as central to the benefits gained from support groups. The comforting value of hearing others' experience as they navigated similar challenges and struggles was validating for participants and contributed to alleviating feelings of hopelessness and sadness. The group context - most importantly, the sharing of like-experiences in a group setting - fostered a sense of crucial support because men no longer felt alone in their struggles. Some participants described these groups as a fellowship, a composite of people working through similar issues that represented a vital support network, as articulated by Ken, 66 years old:

Yes, and if there is anything that is missing or needs nurturing, then if there's no fellowship, you are by yourself ... You're on your own. But if you have a fellowship of sorts, whether it's the [name of support group] or [name of support group], then you are not alone. And it can be not strictly for a gay man, but for any segment of society ... as long as you are being nourished, and contribute, it's good.

Ken articulated the benefit of group membership to eradicate the sense of loneliness and facing challenges in isolation. Not only did the fellowship provide the invaluable support of working through

challenges, but also a space for connection and shared experience that corroborated individual struggles and offered protections through the network of individuals, many of whom maintained familiarity with the harms of discrimination, loss, and suffering.

Many participants highlighted the importance of maintaining connections, particularly in light of COVID-19 social distancing. As such, having connections of a more superficial nature – sharing, small talk and simply interacting – were recognized as valuable to one's well-being. However, relationships of authenticity and depth were crucially important to promoting PWB; i.e., relationships that delved beyond friendly chatter and encompassed deeply personal dimensions with room for mutual vulnerabilities and trust. Many participants disclosed that depth and authenticity meant the opportunity to truly be yourself, share your struggles and innermost thoughts in a dynamic where the other person does the same. Nate (aged 65) sheds light on reciprocity for sharing vulnerabilities as a gateway for PWB:

[...] Having a meaningful connection to somebody means that it that you have a relationship that isn't just superficial, that isn't, you know just talking about the weather, that's good too. I mean, it's really important to have a lot of connections to people, but it's uh being able to be vulnerable with people and having people be vulnerable with you as well, you know, it's shared vulnerability.

Nate articulated the foundational role of vulnerability in punctuating the prosaic day-to-day and in sharing deeper, more intense experiences and/or feelings, which in turn helped foster and consolidate a relationship of greater meaning. Further, the emphasis on shared vulnerability is of crucial importance because being vulnerable supports equally giving and taking in the context of the relationship – being witness to someone's vulnerability while expressing your own, and doing so in an equitable manner ensured an enriching connection where both parties derived and received meaningful support.

Men articulated the fundamental importance of in-depth and authentic relationships and how the role of these connections in contributing to PWB has been informed by maturation combined with the impacts of social and historical discrimination and/or collective trauma from the pre-HAART period of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Participants articulated how the accessibility of authentic relationships with friends, partners and family members aided in surmounting challenges such as dealing with loss and interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts while drawing on the utility of shared experiences in and out of group fellowships to work through mental health challenges.

1.6. Maintaining purpose

Participants talked at length of the benefits derived from supporting others and giving back to communities through advocacy work and volunteerism. As a function of maturation, purpose was a concept of great relevance as most men were retired and/or working part-time and expressed the desire to feel productive whether this be via caring for a person or animal or contributing to community development through volunteerism. Actively engaging in these stated pursuits supported a sense of accomplishment because many participants had defined purpose in relation to their careers. Romano, aged 52, expressed the importance of giving back to community and the accomplishment he gains by doing so:

I get a lot of satisfaction in touch—touching people's lives. The, the work I do, whether it's paid or not, you know, I like to make a difference in my community and in my world, whatever that looks like. So you know, at the end of the day, and like I said, I have a lot of stuff on the go, for me it's that sense of accomplishment.

For Romano, accomplishment was deeply linked to the idea of contributing to positive change through his active participation in

community efforts. Of note is that accomplishment is not contingent upon financial compensation—the motivation to engage in community work is not fuelled by financial incentive, but rather, due to the possibility of offering some degree of support to others.

Many participants described being involved in advocacy work throughout their lives, particularly in relation to 2SLGBTQ + human rights. As gay men growing up and maturing in an inherently heteronormative society, compounded by the collective trauma of HIV/AIDS, the dynamics of which predisposed men to myriad challenges, many participants were involved in initiatives to resist the injustices they experienced and/or witnessed in their communities. Consequently, many participants shared their continued involvement in advocacy work for 2SLGBTQ + groups and how this contributed not only to a sense of pride and purpose and redressing the subjugation they experienced and witnessed, but also facilitated socialization and inclusion. As articulated by Logan, age 66, involvement with advocacy work specific to experiences he sustained connected him with others who had gone through similar oppression at the hands of homophobia as a means to operationalize advocacy:

She hooked me up with other purge survivors of the [name of advocacy group] which I joined. And then the rest is history. Suddenly I'm a part of [... it], advocating for others too—what we're trying to scoop up now is anybody like us. That says, listen, we've got the story here. Come and talk to us. You can come and, you need to get help [...]. And all of a sudden in 2017, I could turn around to myself with help, with therapy and so forth, and now knowing the full history.

Logan garnered a profound sense of purpose through advocating for a not-for-profit organization and supporting others who were affected by the Purge.¹ Being able to acknowledge past harms and further advocate for and support other people with lived experience was crucial to cultivating PWB for Logan, including being able to help himself and seek professional and counselling-related services.

Several participants also communicated recognition that the activities inherent to maintaining purpose served to cultivate their wellness by shifting the focus away from negative emotions. Some participants explicitly described volunteer work as a means to channel energy into positivity versus dwelling in a negative emotional space. The pursuit of actively channeling energy to helping others is recognized as greatly rooted in the unique experiences of this group of men; in particular, the formidable grassroots mobilization efforts amidst pre-HAART. Gay men were tasked with developing their own supports during the HIV/AIDS crisis amidst no organized public health responses, a process that served to consolidate essential services in addition to the identity of a community. Joel (age 51), articulated how focusing his efforts on giving to others served to detract from his own mental health challenges and establish a sense of purpose:

When I'm struggling you know, I'm self-centered. Like, even if it's anxiety, anxiety, anxious thoughts. You know, that [...] to me is [...] a lot of self-centered stuff. When I'm helping, or I go, break that kind of cycle, and, and why being helpful is so important, or helping somebody or doing something that, you know, someone doesn't even need to know that it was me.

For Joel, helping others represents an opportunity to shift the emphasis from himself to something external, which was facilitative to disrupt what he identified as a negative thought pattern. By diverting attention away from himself to the pursuit of helping others served to alleviate his mental health challenges, along with fostering his sense of

¹ A period where latent and discriminatory practices targeted queer people in Federal positions and/or in Canadian Armed Services; this included the illegal firing and harassing of queer folks (LGBT Purge Fund, n.d.; Robinson & Kimmel, 1994).

purpose and meaning-both of which were conducive to his PWB. Helping others is therefore understood as an established practice developed over time that was deeply consolidated in the pre-HAART period.

The process of maintaining purpose is of key importance to the PWB of older gay men. With most participants ceasing to actively engage in their careers and exist in a state of retirement, consideration of one's identity and what holds meaning became integral to experiences of wellness. Men articulated the utility of providing support to an individual, community, or group, or simply contributing to something to derive a sense of accomplishment and meaning. For many men, these efforts represent a continuation of the advocacy work they were dedicated to throughout their lives that was greatly incited amidst the pre-HAART crisis.

1.7. Engaging calm

A process of key relevance for men's PWB was engaging in myriad pursuits that established a state of calm and facilitated staying in the present moment. Some participants highlighted the importance of exercise to engaging calm, but of particular emphasis was the capacity of the activity to institute a sense of calm; this was frequently achieved via activities such as gardening or creative endeavours including painting and writing. The propensity for engaging calm is understood as greatly informed by experiences of trauma and adversity that men endured; i.e., that finding ways to be in a state of calm was conducive to addressing emotional distress spurred on by the intersections of historical and ongoing discrimination and the trauma of the pre-HAART period. Charlie, aged 57, shares how his long-standing meditation practice has been greatly facilitative for his PWB:

And Buddhism is something that I've been involved with since I was, I started meditating I think when I was 21. A friend of mine in university had depression. He went to [meditation group] in Toronto and, I went with him to learn how to meditate and I never stopped ... It's a form of concentration. You're saying the mantra over and over and over. And it stabilizes the mind. And it is great for anxiety, you know. And as a student, I had a lot of anxiety. As a gay person, I had a lot of anxiety. So, I was really devoted to doing this.

Charlie communicated how the intersections of the pressures he experienced as a university student and as a person with a stigmatized sexual identity manifested anxiety, and how being introduced to the practice of meditation through Buddhism was tremendously beneficial for his PWB, a benefits is still derived now as an older adult. The involvement in a deliberate practice with the purpose of inducing a state of calm was inherently valuable to alleviating anxiety evidenced by 30+ years of drawing upon meditation because it "stabilizes the mind". Charlie highlights that the aspect of focused concentration through verbalized by the mantra is greatly facilitative to establish calm and has been a practice he can readily access and engage in to support his wellness.

A component of engaging calm often involved being in nature – articulated as spending time outdoors either alone, with others, or with pets. The outdoor environment was described as healing and soothing through the quiet offered by walking through a forest, and simply accessing fresh air. The restorative characteristic of trees was explicitly identified by a number of participants who ascribed an intangible quality to trees as simply bringing about peace and calm, as indicated by Maxime, 74 years old:

So, I really like trees and of course beautiful views. It is calming. They [trees] have a, even a concept, mostly in Japan, I think, where they do, tree bathing, what do they call it? Nature bathing? Where it does centre you ... Yeah, I like my feelings when I'm in the tall trees.

Maxime described the calming effect brought about by trees and discusses this in relation to his well-being. He recognized the propensity of trees to induce calm, allowed him to ground himself, and as expressed

by him, to feel centered; these elements contributed to the positive effects on his feelings.

Another avenue to promote well-being was creative engagement and/or having hobbies. Creative endeavours varied considerably across participants based on their interests but brought about joy and served the purpose of mitigating negative emotions by promoting a positive affective space. Several men described the capacity of creative outlets to create a situation where they entirely lose themselves in the pursuit of the endeavour - an inherently positive experience - as expressed by John, 60 years old:

My grandmother was an amazing woman who did, who taught me how to use oil paints, so anything creative or artistic has always been, it's a way for me to just be in another place and be out of my own head. So, writing, music, art, all those things feed me, they give me stuff. I went through a painting phase. But painting is not cheap [...] and it adds up.

For John, staying creative in terms of writing, playing music, or by engaging in other forms of self-expression through art allowed him to be deliberate in a specific creative process, which not only served to establish a positive headspace, but also nurtured his well-being described as 'being fed' and/or being given something. For John, engaging in a creative pursuit is a valuable resource when addressing negative emotions, to channel his mental energy into something else entirely, something constructive via a creative process. Of note is John's recognition of social location and how for him as an older person, the finances required to engage in some of the creative endeavours were a noted barrier. He addresses the fact that artistic endeavours often require financial resourcing particularly in the case of visual arts where supplies are needed (e.g., paints and canvasses), which he identified as costly. Creative endeavours are recognized as greatly beneficial to well-being due to the calming effect they are articulated to induce, however, they are recognized to not always be available to older adults who are increasingly challenged by the rising cost of living.

To reiterate, maintaining a sense of calmness was achieved through various means such as meditation –promoting a state of calmness, and reduction in anxiety– and being in nature –promoting calmness and feeling centred. Others equally engaged in creative practices such as drawing, writing or playing music in order to promote a positive headspace. These components were integral to cultivate well-being among study participants.

2. Discussion

This study drew on CGT methods to appreciate the intersecting processes of interpersonal and structural discrimination - embedded within unique historical circumstances-to explore how older gay men go about cultivating PWB. As such, it was possible to recognize how contextual dynamics, often composed of interpersonal and structural discrimination, immensely shaped experiences amidst the HIV/AIDS crisis and ultimately inspired and continue to inspire tremendous strength and capacity. This unique context has deeply informed the development and implementation of three temporal processes that comprise how older gay men cultivate PWB. The processes demonstrate how collective experiences shaped by interlocking forms of discrimination bear great relevance to how PWB is operationalized and the subsequent implications for resources, programs and research designed to enhance the well-being of older gay men.

Fostering relationships of authenticity and depth was identified as a central process to cultivating PWB with an emphasis on mutual vulnerability. Being vulnerable facilitated being open and removes artifice to establish a foundation for genuine engagement, free of any sense of performativity. The concept of mutual vulnerability is identified in the literature as facilitative to PWB, with roots in social inclusion and in-group dynamics (e.g., [Herring, 2016](#); [Perkins & Repper, 2020](#)).

Relationships are recognized as a form of social capital, which is defined as the social networks that participants find themselves imbedded in (Amati, Meggiolaro, Rivellini, & Zaccarin, 2018; Prandini, 2014) and greater social capital has previously been associated with heightened perceived social support and enhanced well-being in the general population (Lee, Chung, & Park, 2018) and increasingly within 2SLGBTQ + communities (Dakin, Williams, & MacNamara, 2020; Pate et al., 2023; Saunders & Carr, 2022). For older gay men, the group setting is noted to be particularly facilitative due to the ability for sharing and validating of experiences, which represented a key support for men who sustained relentless discrimination throughout their lives. Community-based resources could focus efforts on developing group-based resources for older gay men as a means to foster PWB noting that essential to the success of a group-based resource is a peer-based approach to elicit the perspectives, needs and preferences of older gay men to inform planning and development (Author et al., 2020; Bates & Berg, 2014; Im & Rosenberg, 2016; Thupayagale-Tshweneagae & Mokomane, 2014; Thupayagale-Tshweneagae & Mokomane, 2014). Drawing on the processes generated by the older gay men in our study to cultivate well-being could be used as an evidence-based scaffold, while community members guide the planning and implementation of a peer-based resource; this helps to establish a supportive community dynamic and ultimately forges ongoing relationships rooted in authenticity and depth, accounts for power relationships, and ensures that community members inform and guide the group process, vision and focus (Nkimbenz et al., 2022; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010; Wright et al., 2017).

The concept of purpose, and specifically maintaining purpose amidst aging, was pivotal to cultivating PWB. The relationship between purpose and PWB has received growing attention, often described as ‘meaning in life’ (Brown et al., 2023; cf. AshaRani, Lai, Koh, & Subramaniam, 2022) – defined as the extent of meaning one acknowledges in their life (see Li, Dou, & Liang, 2021; see also Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009). This conceptualization resonated with participants, and how they engaged in various social and advocacy settings to garner purpose or meaning in their everyday lives. Meaning in life has been found to reduce psychological distress by enhancing resilience and combatting loneliness (Brown et al., 2023; Mohseni, Iranpour, Naghibzadeh-Tahami, Kazazi, & Borhaninejad, 2019; Steger et al., 2009) although there is a notable absence of content specific to older gay men. Our findings draw attention to the importance of examining purpose amongst older gay men who maintain unique contextual experiences and understand men’s commitment to remaining actively engaged in pursuits as partly rooted in the historical significance of the contributions made to grassroots efforts amidst the HIV/AIDS crisis – a well-documented phenomenon (Forstein, 2013; Schulze, 2015). Our findings support the scholarship that emphasises how *purpose* is understood and promoted is not homogeneous among older adults and should be understood as a function of contextual experiences within complex social systems (Hupkens, Machiels, Goumans, & Derckx, 2018). To support men’s efforts, local organizations could develop tailored and inclusive volunteer opportunities that are guided by the perspectives of older gay men, in addition to creating additional roles and opportunities for men to exercise their commitment to advocacy. Our study highlights the need for additional research into the concept of purpose with older gay men to guide organizations as to what opportunities can be made available to involve older gay men to support PWB. Further, the potential for intergenerational activities/mentorship is another concept that may link to purpose with older gay men as they help younger generations redress discrimination-especially in the current context as we see a rise of anti-2SLGBTQ + discourses. It is worthy to consider the value of intergenerational activities as another concept warranting further investigation in relation to the PWB of older, gay men.

Another key process in cultivating PWB was identified as engaging calm, comprised a range of activities geared towards quieting the mind such as being in nature, creative pursuits such as writing and painting, exercise (namely yoga), and activities such as meditation. The options

available for engaging calm were often a function of one’s socio-economic status – participants with more financial resources had access to gym memberships or yoga classes, while with fewer financial resources relied on alternatives such as walking outdoors or meditating. The capacity for engaging calm to promote PWB is well established in the literature, with works situated within various contexts demonstrating how nature (Author et al., 2022; Gagliardi & Piccinini, 2019), engaging in physical activity (Kendrick, Hughes, Coutts, & Ardzewjewska, 2021; Lyons et al., 2021), and engaging in creative activities (Greaves & Farbus, 2006; Leckey, 2011) support PWB; although, less research specifically addresses the issues of older gay men. The potential role of community organizations and resources is highlighted once again with an attention to socio-economic status. In the context of inflation and raising cost of living in Canada and elsewhere, options for engaging calm must be accessible and could harness additional means to support men’s wellness such as a community walk, drop-in yoga, meditation or art class led by an older gay volunteer. Peer-based resources provide possibilities for older men to become active in their communities via volunteering or even part-time work, maintaining a key position in developing accessible and meaningful activities to engage calm (Cahill, Valadéz, & Ibarrola, 2013; Wright et al., 2017) (Table 2).

3. Limitations

A key limitation of this work is that the sample is comprised of predominantly white, financially secure men and thus not representative of all older gay men in southwestern British Columbia and elsewhere. The contextual tenet of CGT enabled consideration of how discriminatory processes were embedded in experiences situated at the intersections of age, gender and sexual identity. However, research that forefronts race due to recognition of the relationship between race and socioeconomic status is needed to better understand the roles of income, race and racism (implicit, explicit, and structural), stigma and discrimination, and culture, on opportunities to promote PWB. The study is also limited to predominantly urban locales and thus experiences of men in other geographic locations – particularly rural settings – are likely to differ. In specific, some rural communities may be less supportive of 2SLGBTQ + communities, thereby affecting satisfaction with neighbourhood, safety, and the promotion of PWB among sexual and gender diverse people. Research representative of men from various provinces and rural areas is indicated to understand how PWB is cultivated in different settings. A final point that must be addressed is the fact that the participants who took part in this investigation, despite having been subject to tremendous adversity over the course of their lives, speak from a place of contentment and gratitude. Understanding the

Table 2
Overview of processes.

Social Process Integral to Cultivating PWB	Recommendations
Fostering Relationships of Authenticity and Depth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based development of group activities and resources • Collaboration of research and community-led initiatives to plan, develop and implement peer-based resources; i.e. community members inform and guide the group/resource process, vision and focus
Maintaining Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further investigation into the heterogeneity of how purpose is understood and experienced by older adults, and specifically with older gay men • Development of community-based intergenerational activities/mentorship (linking older and younger gay men) to combat and redress experiences of discrimination
Engaging Calm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement of community-based resources in developing and implementing accessible opportunities for older, gay men (e.g. community walks, drop-in yoga)

intricacies of how it is possible to overcome such entrenched and persistent adversity warrants investigation with implications for supporting other groups who have been subject to subjugation and oppression.

4. Conclusion

Our work was the first study, to our knowledge, that examined how older gay men cultivate well-being within a Canadian setting. Given the historical and social envelope that these older gay men lived through, tailored, trauma-informed interventions are needed to cultivate PWB such as: increasing meaningful social connections through social gay-friendly clubs; creating purpose through advocacy or volunteering, community-led initiatives; and engaging in calming strategies through creative or physical means, such as painting or nature walks with or without a social element; with this, ability and social location must be considered. We might be thoughtfully reminded of the recent pre-HAART history for HIV/AIDS and the hangover of discrimination and oppression that many older gay men carry. These embodiments transgress time, and ideally lobby strength, yet they demand reconciliation that is most likely found within the milieus shared in the three findings. While it is tempting to report these strength-based practices as naturally occurring there needs to be continued attention to the structures and systemic inequities to aid PWB in this underserved group.

Ethics statement

The project was approved by the British Columbia Provincial Ethics Platform (H22-01799) and the University of Montreal (2021–1263).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anthony Theodore Amato: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tessa Wonsiak:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ingrid Handlovsky:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Olivier Ferlatte:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Hannah Kia:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **John L. Oliffe:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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