

Original Research

Then and Now: Formative Experiences and Generational Perspectives among Flemish LGBTQ Baby Boomers

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Abstract

Background: This paper proposes a generational approach to better understand the specific position and perspectives of older LGBTQ (Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) men. Generational theory and empirical research demonstrate that experiences and social contexts in adolescence and early adulthood are formative for sexual identity formation while also informing perspectives later in life. **Methods:** The paper discusses the findings of a qualitative project based on in-depth interviews with sixteen Flemish men belonging to the so-called “Baby Boomer” generation, i.e., born between 1945 and 1964. They came of age before “gay liberation”, exploring and establishing their sexual identities in a period of social invisibility. **Results:** First, the analysis focuses on the past, in particular the period of sexual exploration and identity formation, reporting findings on formative, often difficult experiences such as the first realization of same-sex attraction, first sexual explorations, coming out, first contact with other LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) individuals, participation in the LGBTQ scene and associations, and HIV/AIDS. Then, the focus shifts to the present, to discuss the progress the participants observe but also the problems they (still) experience, including the way they perceive intergenerational differences. **Conclusions:** Older LGBTQ men came of age in a radically different context, struggling to embrace their sexuality, which also informs their current position in LGBTQ culture. These insights are relevant for LGBTQ associations, policy makers and (mental) health practitioners, who could do more to address the specific position and needs of this older demographic.

Keywords: LGBTQ men; generations; Baby Boomers; sexual identity; interviews

1. Introduction

Not only is the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) community youth-oriented, but research also tends to prioritize younger individuals. Older individuals are often “forgotten” and treated as a homogeneous group [1]. However, older LGBTQ adults constitute a complex and diverse category, individuals encountering key historical moments and evolutions such as gay liberation at different times in life [2]. Those encountering gay liberation early in life also witnessed important subsequent changes in the public acceptance of same-sex sexuality as well as the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on their lives and communities [3]. This sets them apart from younger LGBTQ people, who tend to distance themselves from this older generation [4]. According to Russell and Bohan, this leads to a “gay generation gap”, based on the radical discrepancy between the experiences of contemporary LGBTQ youth compared to those of their elders [5]. Indeed, Vaccaro found that LGBTQ people of different generations perceived important intergenerational differences in relation to issues such as sexual identity development, coming out, and experiences of discrimination [6].

Adolescence is a key period for the development of individual identity [7], including sexual identity. The latter is not understood here as a process following fixed stages but rather as a social, narrative construction [8] based on cultural scenarios or sexual “scripts” [9]. This involves “iden-

tity work”, as individuals construct or “do” identity in relation to different contexts [10]. Rosenfeld studied identity work among older gays and lesbian women, who engaged with the sexual identity categories available to them at different times in life [11]. After gay liberation in the late 1960s, the older model of homosexuality as a stigma started to be replaced by a newer discourse considering homosexuality as a source of pride. Older LGBTQ individuals often constructed their sexual identities before gay liberation, and subsequently had to adjust to new models and discourses of homosexuality [12].

Based on these insights, the main objective of this paper is to better understand the identifications, experiences, and perspectives of a specific subgroup of the LGBTQ community, LGBTQ men, for whom HIV/AIDS was a specific health risk. To better grasp the particularities of this demographic, this paper adopts a generational approach. Mannheim [13] considered generations as a group of people not only sharing a period of birth, but more importantly a common location in historical and social contexts. For LGBTQ men, a key social context relates to the legal and social acceptance of same-sex sexuality. Hammack and Kohler [14] studied the implications of such changes in the life course and narratives of different generational cohorts of American gay men. Those coming of age in the 1950s experienced discourses of silence and sickness, while those coming of age in the 1960s saw the emergence of gay iden-



tity and community. Those coming of age in the 1970s witnessed the growth of the gay movement after the Stonewall riots in 1969, while those coming of age in the 1980s experienced the AIDS crisis as well as a new wave of stigmatization. Similarly, Bitterman and Hess [15] discuss LGBTQ generations as those coming of age in a similar period, such as the Baby Boom generation which came of age during the social revolutions of the 1960s, including sexual liberation. Elsewhere, Hammack *et al.* [16] discuss the health consequences of social changes and important historical events in the life course of gay men, drawing attention in particular to their timing in relation to individual lives. They distinguish two key periods in life: puberty, the period most gay men start to recognize their same-sex desire; and emerging adulthood (18–29) a period of sexual activity and community participation. Men born in the 1950s and 1960s were sexually active at the time of the emerging AIDS crisis from 1981, which impacted their sense of identity, sex, and health.

While invaluable, this research is limited in several ways. As the authors themselves recognize [16], more qualitative research is needed to better understand the individual's engagement with those contexts, while research in other countries is needed to better understand these experiences in other cultural contexts. To address these shortcomings, the current paper discusses the findings of a qualitative project studying Baby Boomers living in Flanders, Belgium. Using in-depth interviews, this paper investigates whether this shared socio-historical context led to similar experiences in the past, as well as shared perspectives in the present.

2. Materials and Methods

Like most research referenced above, the current paper is based on qualitative methods to better understand the experiences of older GBTQ men from their own perspective. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used, as these allow participants to tell their story in their own words, which leads to rich data [17]. Following Hammack and Cohler, a life course perspective was adopted, studying personal narratives which are connected to the narratives of social identity available in the broader cultural and historical context [18]. The participants were invited to tell their “life stories” [19,20], which as Plummer argues are constructions often following familiar patterns, such as the coming out story [21]. It is important to recognize the active role of the researcher in co-constructing these stories in the interview context [22], and to be reflexive about one's own position as a researcher while also creating a safe environment for the participants to tell their stories [23].

This paper is part of a broader project on the identities and experiences of non-straight men in Flanders, who were invited to participate after filling in an online survey which was widely advertised on social media. Eighty men were interviewed, sixteen of which were born between 1945

and 1964 (average age 62.5) so they belong to the Baby Boomer generation as identified by the Pew Research Center [24]. All Baby Boomers were white and of Belgian (13) or Dutch (3) origin, and most were highly educated, having either a master's (8) or bachelor's (5) degree. They were interviewed between October 2020 and January 2021, using Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. The interview duration varied between 1.5 and 2 hours. Participants signed an informed consent form and agreed to be quoted by an alias of their own choice. The interview guide started by asking for their current sexual and gender identification, after which the participants were asked to chronologically recount important moments of their lives in relation to their sexual identity. The researcher, a gay man belonging to Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), was open about his own sexuality and experiences to create a feeling of mutual trust.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically coded and analyzed using NVivo (version 1.4, QSR International, Burlington, Massachusetts, US). After a first round of inductive, open coding, these were subsequently synthesized to obtain a more systematic overview of recurring elements and narratives [25,26]. While the list of codes for the entire project was long and varied, the current paper focuses on those codes and elements that are most relevant to understand their generational experiences in relation to sexual identity exploration and expression, distinguishing between early experiences (“then”) and current perspectives (“now”). For the past, these include sexual identifications, first realizations of same-sex attraction, role models, sexual explorations, coming out, contact with the gay scene, and HIV/AIDS. For the present, the results presented here are based on the code “generation”, which grouped all reflections on current generational experiences and differences with other generations. While mental and physical health issues are discussed throughout the paper, it should be noted that the interviewer did not explicitly ask questions on the participant's personal mental and physical health, so the information on this topic was volunteered.

Before presenting and discussing the results, it is important to briefly reflect on the Flemish context. Flanders is the northern, Dutch-language region in Belgium, a country with a relatively good track record in relation to LGBTQ rights. It was the second country ever to open civil marriage to same-sex couples in 2003, also allowing adoption by same-sex couples in 2006 [27,28]. At the time of the research, Belgium occupied the second position on the ILGA Europe “Rainbow Map” which charts LGBTI human rights [29]. Although Belgium did not have a watershed moment like the Stonewall riots in 1969, the LGBTQ movement did start to grow in the 1960s, reaching more mainstream visibility from the 1990s. While the AIDS crisis did not hit the Belgian LGBTQ community as hard as major U.S. cities, it did affect gay men from the mid 1980s, leading to the renewed stigmatization of homosexuality but also activism

[30]. In social and media terms, homosexuality was rather invisible until the 1990s, after which it became increasingly normalized [31].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 *Then: Formative Experiences*

3.1.1 Sexual Identifications

At the time of the interview, fifteen participants identified as gay (“homo” in Dutch), and one as bisexual. For some (mostly younger) participants that was clear from the very start. For instance, Jonathan (born in 1962) said: “That has always been an obvious thing. I used to keep a notebook and when I was 14, I wrote: ‘I think I’m homosexual.’” For most, however, it took a longer time to realize and particularly to accept this. To Maupy (b. 1945), the oldest participant, homosexuality had a negative connotation and for a long time, he was married to a woman, only exploring his sexual attraction to men in his fifties. Chris (b. 1950) also realized his attraction to men later in life, when he was forty, stating that before that moment he was “indoctrinated”, and it did not come to his mind that he could be gay: “That just didn’t occur to me. I don’t know, it just didn’t occur to me that I could be different.” Several participants described the process as a “search”. After a long marriage, Geert (b. 1951) left his wife: “I did not say ‘I am gay’, I said ‘I’m going to look for myself’. And that’s what I did. I had to go and discover everything because I didn’t know anything.” Some needed therapy in this search, such as Frederick (b. 1954) who had to come to terms with his catholic upbringing and overcome a severe depression. He had the feeling he was living on two different tracks, a public, straight one and a hidden, gay one: “Those tracks were spreading further and further apart. And I had to pay a serious price for that, psychologically. I had a very serious breakdown. That was the decisive factor, realizing: ‘This doesn’t make any sense, certainly not for myself, but not for third parties either, to keep walking on two tracks.’” Similarly, therapy helped Tim (b. 1957) to accept the silence of his parents, who could not accept his sexuality: “Therapy is the best thing that ever happened to me in my life. (...) That was a relief, I finally got to tell it all. Wonderful, fantastic.” Coming to terms with his sexuality was an even bigger problem for Leo (b. 1958), who identified as bisexual. Like many other participants, he was married for a long time before he dared to explore his sexuality. For most, the road to their current, proud identification as gay or bisexual was long and full of struggle.

3.1.2 First Realizations

As indicated above, men of this generation generally took a long time to come to terms with their sexuality. This is in line with existing research which found that milestones in sexual identity development such as same-sex attraction and self-realization of sexual minority identity lie far apart among older sexual minority members [32]. Nevertheless,

most realized their attraction to men quite early in life, experimenting with other boys in primary school (until the age of 12) or falling in love with other boys in secondary school (between the ages of 12 and 18). For instance, Maupy (b. 1945), who only started identifying as gay in his fifties (see above), already experimented with boys in his catholic boarding school: “But that was unchastity, that was a mortal sin, and you had to go to confession.” Similarly, Geert (b. 1951) experimented with boys in his early twenties, but subsequently married and did not explore his sexuality until much later in life: “I was attracted to men, or to boys, but I didn’t really know anything about the context. For as long as I was married, I was never unfaithful.” Like others of his generation, Geert lacked the concept and terminology to name his sexuality. August (b. 1956) realized he was different in early puberty, but only learnt about homosexuality when he was about 18, when he found and read a book about homosexuality: “When I had read that book, I realized: that’s the way it is, and then I quickly started coming out.” Others learnt about homosexuality in a more negative way, through bullying. Tim (b. 1957): “When I was 12 there was a boy in my class who said: ‘Hey, that guy’s a faggot’. I didn’t know what a faggot was, but then I started thinking and said: ‘Yes, maybe I am a faggot.’” Overall, in a context of social silence about homosexuality, participants of this generation lacked the vocabulary to name and conceptualize their first realizations of same-sex attraction. Homosexuality was virtually unknown to them, and shrouded in an atmosphere of silence, sin, and guilt.

3.1.3 Role Models

Not only did the participants lack the concepts to name and address their sexual identity, they also did not know any other gay people growing up, which further added to their sense of isolation. Peter (b. 1958): “It was very difficult to get in touch with other gay people. So I didn’t dare talk to my parents about that. They probably didn’t dare talk to me either, although they knew about it. And then later they also saw that I was not interested in girls, but that was still a bit of a taboo in those years. As a boy, to really get in touch with like-minded people, that only succeeded when I went to university, when I was 18–19 years old.” If people in their environment were gay, this was only gossiped about, and often these were very “flamboyant” or “exuberant” gay men the participants did not identify with. For instance, Nederbelg said: “In my neighborhood there was a guy I met when going out, but he was very effeminate and it’s not like I thought: I belong with him.” Moving away from home, for studies or work, was often how participants were first able to meet other gay men.

Homosexuality was equally invisible in the media when they grew up. The only gay man many participants knew about growing up was Will Ferdy, a Flemish singer who famously came out on national television in 1970. Tim (b. 1957): “I thought that was something very courageous

at that time. It was great. And for me, it helped to come out of the closet later, much later.” Dutch participants sometimes knew of other media personalities, but those did not necessarily lead to identification, again because they were often flamboyant and stereotypical. For instance, Nederbelg said: “That actually held me back a bit, to come out, because I didn’t want to be like them.” Overall, men of the Baby Boomer generation lacked role models when they were coming of age, both in real life and in media.

3.1.4 Explorations

The period between the first realizations of same-sex attraction and eventual sexual identification as gay or bisexual was not only characterized by silence and denial, but also by explorations, with a lot of variation between the participants. Some, like Koen (b. 1963), did not dare to explore a lot, until they really came out: “I knew it from the age of 15 or 16, but I never really did anything with it. But you can’t remain in a grey zone indeterminately, so I thought ‘Now I have to make something of my life’ and then at 29 I went for it and also came out.” Others used cruising to explore their same-sex sexuality, such as Geert (b. 1951): “I heard that there were people walking around in the park, so I started looking there too, and this is how I discovered everything. (...) I wanted to get to know this world and try to identify with it. Which, in retrospect, I succeeded in doing.” Still others moved away from the parental home, typically for studies or work, which gave them more freedom to explore their sexuality. For instance, Nederbelg lived abroad for a few years: “And then I was like: okay, nobody knows me here, I can do whatever I want. That was actually a bit of experimenting.” For all participants, this process of exploration was furtive and uneven, a process of informal learning eventually leading to a firmer sense of sexual identity.

3.1.5 Coming Out

After the initial process of exploration and eventual self-acceptance most participants came out, but again the timing varied greatly. Some came out in their twenties, often after moving to another city. Jonathan (b. 1962) came out to his friends earlier but told his family later: “I waited until I was 23 because I wanted to tell my mother before the rest of them did. And I also didn’t feel quite sure about doing that when I was still at home.” Others waited longer to tell their family, often until their thirties or forties, for fear of the negative reaction. Some parents indeed reacted negatively, but others were quite accepting, such as Peter’s (b. 1958): “Actually that went quite easily. They said: ‘We’ve known this for a long time.’” However, typically after their coming out homosexuality was not addressed very often. Discussing the relationship with his sisters, Jozef (1954) said: “They knew about it, but they didn’t talk about it. They did know, but they didn’t talk about it, it was really taboo.” All participants agreed that homosexu-

ality was taboo and not accepted when they grew up. Chris (b. 1950): “At the time, it wasn’t talked about. (...) And if something was said about it, it was always pejorative. (...) That didn’t exist, it couldn’t be, it wasn’t possible, that was so the mentality.” Beside silence and stigmatization, some participants also experienced outright discrimination. For instance, Geert (b. 1951) experienced discrimination at work, as he was assigned to another job once his boss found out he was gay, and Jozef (b. 1954) was fired from his job in education after a colleague outed him. Overall, the coming out experiences of men in this generation prove to be uneven, both in terms of timing and in terms of response, ranging from acceptance to silence and outright discrimination.

3.1.6 The Gay Scene

In a context of limited social acceptance and invisibility, the gay scene was often one of the few safe spaces for LGBTQ men to encounter like-minded people. This involved LGBTQ associations as well as gay bars, which often overlapped as many LGBTQ associations had a bar or organized parties, mostly concentrated in bigger cities such as Antwerp and Ghent. Although Belgium did not experience a “gay migration” to bigger cities as the U.S. did [33], partly because it is a small and strongly urbanized region, many men did move to bigger cities to explore their sexuality. For instance, Jozef (b. 1954) and August (b. 1956) remembered frequently going out in Antwerp to the GOC, an LGBTQ association [30], as well as the infamous Van Schoonhovenstraat, as street hosting several gay bars and nicknamed “Vaseline Street” [34]. Tim (b. 1957) also had fond memories: “So I started living on my own, that’s the best thing that ever happened to me, to disconnect from home. And then I started going out more and more in Antwerp. I was in Antwerp almost every night, and gay life at that time was concentrated in Rue de Vaseline and gay saunas. I went to gay saunas an awful lot, and I had a lot of fun.” For Tim, as for others, going out was a process of self-exploration and affirmation: “We were still told that it was not normal. Until at a certain point, after my father died, I completely went for it, I said: ‘F*ck it, I’m going to live my life’. People didn’t recognize me, they said: ‘You have changed’, but really in a positive way, because before I was stuck, completely. I was really stuck for many years, I didn’t dare to express myself. And then I became an open book.”

While bigger cities like Antwerp had a long-standing underground gay night life [34], LGBTQ associations were only nascent when the Baby Boomers were emerging adults. Moreover, for several participants the threshold to enter such associations was high. Jos (b. 1963), explaining why he did not turn to LGBTQ associations, said: “No, because these are rather closed organizations. They are always in the backstreets, with badly painted windows. Always a bit obscure. (...). It’s not like you think: ‘Oh, I’ll

just drop in and get some information', no." Several participants only started visiting or volunteering in LGBTQ associations later in life, when they had already come out. Jonathan (b. 1962) described how he moved to Antwerp to meet people through LGBTQ associations but found out that they were very small at the time. However, he did become an LGBTQ activist himself, and went on to contribute to the growth of LGBTQ associations in the 1990s. Similarly, several participants became active in AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s, well into their adult years. For Leo (b. 1958), LGBTQ associations were essential to come to terms with his bisexuality, although he also encountered prejudice among gay men, who considered bisexuality as something "temporary": "I went to a kind of formation to come to terms with yourself, to give yourself a place, to give your sexuality a place. Even there, bisexuality was questioned as a real sexual orientation." Eventually, he became active in a bisexual association which hugely helped himself and many others he has talked to: "I've really had dozens of conversations with people who have that doubt: what am I suffering from? What am I? (...) When I tell them my story they say: 'Ah, I recognize that. That is exactly my story.' Or: 'Ah, that's good that I know that, now I know I am not the only one.'" Overall, the gay scene played a significant role in the lives of LGBTQ men of this generation, particularly gay bars and (mostly later in life) LGBTQ associations, which provided opportunities to connect and to come to grips with their sexuality, countering their sense of isolation and deviance.

3.1.7 HIV/AIDS

The participants were between twenty and forty years old when the HIV/AIDS crisis hit Belgium from the mid 1980s. For some this implied that they were still married and/or in the closet, others (just) started to get sexually active, while others had been sexually active for a longer time. Combined with their varied trajectories of sexual exploration, this implies that they encountered AIDS in very different ways. For all, AIDS contributed to the stigma around homosexuality, and made it harder to embrace their sexuality and/or come out. Tim (b. 1957): "Yes, being gay was connected to AIDS and that was very hard for me. (...) So, when I wasn't out of the closet yet, they already talked about AIDS, and you heard about that famous actor, Rock Hudson. We heard about that and then you have this inner tension, 'Yes, this could also happen to me.'" Similarly, Jos (b. 1963) said: "That didn't make it any easier to come out. On the one hand, because I was like 'Gee, you don't know what you're up against'. On the other hand because of the social label you may receive." Many heard about it through the media, which presented it as a gay disease but were also critical of the way it was treated, particularly in the U.S. Peter (b. 1958): "There was always the tone of 'Look, it's a medical horror story what those patients have to go through, but it's so much worse that they're condemned as sinners,

that they sought it out themselves, that it's the punishment of god and they are excluded.' And then there was a reaction of 'That is not acceptable on a human level. These people should be treated as patients.' I have the impression that this played a part in making it more public." Indeed, AIDS reporting paradoxically made homosexuality more visible, as Jozef (b. 1954) also remembered: "Well, because of HIV it was more in the open. Yes, at first it was seen as a gay disease. It was double, a bit negative, but it also made being gay more prominent."

Whether the participants did or did not get infected themselves (something they were not explicitly asked about) was a matter of timing and luck—also keeping in mind that it was a lethal disease at the time, as successful antiviral treatments only became available in the mid 1990s [16,30]. For many, it was a reason to be more cautious, particularly for the younger Baby Boomers such as Nederbelg (b. 1964): "Because I heard all those scary stories, I was very careful during those years and now in retrospect you say: 'Ho, I survived the 1980s and 90s.'" Others considered themselves lucky to have become sexually active later in life, such as Tim (b. 1957): "For me that was a bit of luck, that I came out of the closet so late, and I also started being active very late. I never had sex without a condom. Maybe that's been my luck." Several participants were involved in AIDS activism, so they were well-informed, although one participant also got engaged in AIDS activism because of his own positive serostatus, which activism and counseling helped them deal with. Other participants had partners, friends or colleagues dying in the 1980s, so for all, it was very much part of their life and their image of gay sex, jeopardizing not only their physical but also their mental wellbeing.

3.2 Now: Generational Perspectives

Despite variations related to their age but also their individual life course, the Baby Boomers interviewed for this project all came of age in a period when homosexuality was taboo and stigmatized, subsequently witnessing both the growing social visibility of homosexuality and its renewed stigmatization during the AIDS crisis. At the time of the interview, the participants were between 56 and 75 years old, and at the end of the interview they were asked to reflect on the current situation for LGBTQ people. Their answers emphasized how things are very different now, for themselves as well as for younger LGBTQ men, with many improvements but also ongoing as well as new challenges, which question a hard distinction between past and present.

3.2.1 It Got Better

The overarching sentiment expressed in the interviews is how things got better over the years, as homosexuality is more openly talked about. Maupy (b. 1954), the oldest participant, said: "Now it is natural if you say, 'I am gay' and you marry a man. In the past they said: 'You're

not well’.” Chris (b. 1950) agreed, saying: “Back in the day, it was a taboo. (...) I think that is very good that young people can be gay. It doesn’t hurt anyone, right? (...) It’s good that they can marry, that they can adopt children, why not?” Several participants expressed being envious of younger people being able to come out earlier and easier. Tim (b. 1957): “I’m actually very jealous of young people who can come out of the closet so quickly.” Several participants also refer to the freedom younger people have in not conforming to traditional gender norms. Jos (b. 1963): “Sometimes it’s almost jealousy that young people can come out more easily. (...) When I see my neighbor, he is so free in his expression, presenting himself to the outside world in a non-traditional way. That is beautiful, very beautiful, and very different.” Some also considered on how things could have been different for themselves. Tom (b. 1963): “I admire young guys who say: ‘At 14 or 16 or 18 I knew, and I came out.’ In some way I’m jealous of them. (...) How would my life have turned out if I had realized and accepted it much earlier? That’s something that keeps nagging me.” Tom, like others, reflected how young people nowadays have access to representations of LGBTQ people in media and can easily get in touch with others online: “It’s talked about all the time in the media. For them, it’s self-evident. (...) I think that many more people of our generation consciously or unconsciously stayed in the closet, for lack of examples.” He continued: “Young people, the 20 to 30-year-old, they have no notion of that. They were born in a country where anything is possible, where anything goes. (...) They probably don’t realize what they escaped from, including AIDS.”

Without using the term, Tom referred to a sense of generations, a theme that was also explicitly addressed by some participants. For instance, Peter (b. 1958) saw clear intergenerational differences and hoped for more intergenerational exchange: “I’m still from the generation... When I was young that was taboo, it was a very scary part of the private sphere, especially in the countryside. Whereas now, young people in their 20–25s grew up in a much more open society where it’s much more talked about and openly tolerated. Yeah, I do think it’s a big difference. And I hope that both those younger and older generations influence each other a favorably. That older people say: ‘Look it’s being talked about, in our time it wasn’t like that, it’s a good thing that it’s being talked about. And that younger people might realize that what is evident now was not evident at all in the past.’” Some participants also compared their generation with the ones preceding and following them. Koen (b. 1963) said: “I am a gay man of the generation of the 60–70s, who had to experience it differently than people now, 50–60 years later. But I have already experienced it more positively than people who were still 50 years older than me.” Felix (b. 1964) made a similar comparison, particularly in relation to AIDS: “I think I still belong to the pre-AIDS generation. I immediately had a steady relationship in ‘86, so

when it really started to break through, I was already off the market so to speak. So that’s one generation. Then I have a generation in my circle of acquaintances that’s just a few years older and they did experience those wild years, the 1970s and early 80s, so they did run more risk. That’s another generation. And then of course you also have the generation who didn’t give a damn and who were younger than me but also had to learn to live with it of course. And then you also have the freedom, the drag queens, all the things that are allowed now. Sometimes I’m a little jealous of the Millennials, that they can be that way.” What becomes apparent, in these responses as well as those of younger participants in the project, is that LGBTQ men indeed have a clear sense of generational difference, in line with Vaccaro’s findings [6]. However, we should keep in mind that these are perceived differences, as the interviews with younger participants show many parallels and intergenerational similarities [35].

3.2.2 It’s Still Hard

Despite the overarching narrative that things got better and that it is easier for younger generations, the participants also listed negative evolutions for themselves and/or younger LGBTQ men. In this way, they partly countered the contrast between generations by highlighting challenges faced by all LGBTQ men while also countering the contrast between the past and the present by highlighting continuing challenges. Firstly, several participants remarked that social acceptance is still far from perfect in contemporary Belgium and that discrimination is still rampant, which affects themselves but particularly younger LGBTQ men. Maupy (b. 1945): “It is accepted in our society, although many people still have a problem with it. You often see couples that are beat up, then you wonder why.” Similarly, Frederick (b. 1954) said: “I continue to be amazed how thin the layer of acceptance is. (...) I am sometimes amazed, despite all the information that is given about it, how sometimes young people, young parents, a younger generation still has trouble dealing with it.” Some participants even thought it has become harder to come out, counter to the overarching sentiment that younger LGBTQ men have it easier. Felix (b. 1964): “I often think that it is a lot harder for young people to come out, because ... My parents didn’t know any better. Whenever I heard them say something negative, I always thought: ‘He doesn’t know better.’ But the current generation can no longer say that. Just like them, their parents know about it. (...) So, when they still hear those negative comments... I often have the feeling that it must be even harder for them to come out.” Indeed, research shows that 42% of Belgian LGBTQ people indicate being harassed in the past year, more than the EU average of 38%, while 14% indicate they were attacked physically or sexually in the last five years, which is more than the EU average (11%) [36].

Secondly, participants lamented the demise of the gay scene, which helped them to explore their sexuality but is

increasingly disappearing [34]. This is something that affects themselves as well as younger GBTQ, as it takes away an important opportunity for social contact. Jos (b. 1963): “I notice that here in Antwerp too, if you look at how few gay bars there still are. (...) There was such a nice diversity, such a range of meeting places for gay people in Antwerp.” Not only did the number and diversity of bars and clubs decrease, but so did the intergenerational exchange that took place there. Paul (b. 1958): “Back then, if you had a party or a gathering, it was from 18 to 75 so to speak. (...) Now everyone has their own little groups.” Jonathan (b. 1962) agreed: “I think that the scene I entered was very diverse, a lot of backgrounds mixed. Much more diverse than now, where everything is divided.” He continued: “Everybody goes to their own place. If you’re into fetish, you must go to that place. While I still remember the first gay party I ever went to. (...) It was a gigantic gathering of about 3000 people together. (...) I had never seen so many gay people together. (...) And there were all kinds of people.” Indeed, research shows that the gay scene has radically changed over the past decades, both in Belgium and abroad [15,34].

Thirdly, several participants talk about the difficulty to connect to others, despite the broad range of social media and dating apps. Having experienced the gradual decline of the LGBTQ scene and the parallel growth of online platforms, they are nostalgic about earlier experiences in the scene as well as early online spaces. Although they got access to the internet well into their adult years, they eagerly adopted the opportunity to connect online, for instance in chat rooms and early dating sites. Jonathan (b. 1962): “I loved the fact that you suddenly found so much information, and I also loved to chat. Using MSN that was popular then, where you also found chat channels and suddenly started to talk to gay people all over the world. I thought that was wonderful.” Early dating sites were also a way to establish social connections. Taking about GayRomeo, Paul (b. 1958) said “It was dating, but also social contact. Facebook didn’t exist at the time, so people mostly used that for social contact.” However, most participants were disenchanted with dating apps at the time of the interview. Tim (b. 1957) called them “superficial”, adding: “It’s always the same, it’s only about sex.” He also commented on the difficulty to really connect: “Grindr and GayRomeo, there are so many profiles on there and then you think: how come so many people are single? (...). How come there are so many profiles but it’s such a bad match? They keep contacting each other, but it’s just about sex. And when it gets a bit serious, I have the impression that they stop.” Jozef, talking about the difficulty to really connect, put it even more bluntly: “We have never had as many media outlets as we do now, but I have never been as lonely in my life as I am now.” Marciano and Nimrod, in their research on older gay men using technology, observed similar experiences of alienation and estrangement [37]. Partly, this is a generational experience of men who encountered digital in-

novations later in life and developed a fraught relationship with them. However, younger participants in the project were similarly critical of social media and particularly dating apps [38].

This was also recognized by many Baby Boomer participants, leading to a fourth problem still complicating the lives of GBTQ men. Several participants stated that young people nowadays enter a much more complex world, particularly online. Felix (b. 1964) thought it is hard for younger people to “filter” all the information they get. Similarly, Paul (b. 1958) said: “I think that every gay person has doubts before coming out, thinking ‘Am I like this or like that or like that?’ Now young people from the age of 13-14-15 have a range of options. For us it was ‘Either you are gay, or you aren’t.’ (...) On the one hand that was hard, but on the other hand it was also easier, because it was this way or that, instead of a whole range.” Indeed, research on younger people discloses a broader range of sexual and gender identifications as well as a struggle to navigate their sexuality, also online [35,39]. While no participants described this as a “generation gap”, they did highlight the greater importance of digital media for younger LGBTQ people and the broader range of identities available to them, which presented both opportunities and new challenges.

4. Conclusions

This paper explored if and how men born in the same period shared similar experiences, living in similar historical contexts during the same life stages. GBTQ men belonging to the Baby Boomer generation, born between 1945 and 1964, came of age in a period when same-sex sexuality was taboo and invisible. From the 1980s, when LGBTQ activism started to emerge and same-sex sexuality became more visible, the AIDS crisis entailed a backlash and renewed stigmatization. In the 1990s, when the social and media visibility of LGBTQ people improved and homosexuality was increasingly seen as a source of pride, they were already adults who had to adjust to this new context and identity models. As this paper disclosed, adopting a generational perspective indeed helps to better understand the shared contexts and experiences of men belonging to this age cohort. The interviews with Flemish GBTQ men showcase strong similarities, both paralleling the social evolutions described in literature and following the familiar patterns of gay life and coming out stories [21]. The men talk about early realizations, following by a long period of silence, isolation, and struggle, ultimately leading to coming out aided by participation in the gay scene.

However, as also noted throughout the analysis, there is a lot of variation within this generation, not only based on the year of birth (e.g., a person born in the 1940s experiencing gay liberation at a very different time than a person born in the 1960s), but also on individual circumstances and timelines of sexual exploration and coming out. Despite these variations, they did experience a similar strug-

gle to come to terms with their sexuality, often with mental health consequences such as depression. They also had to navigate the physical as well as mental challenge of dealing with the (threat of) HIV/AIDS, a stigmatized and (initially) lethal disease that was strongly associated with gay men.

These earlier experiences and struggles also have an impact on their current mindset and mental health. While the interviewees highlighted how things got better, some did regret that they did not enjoy similar freedom growing up and they also emphasized continued experiences of oppression. The participants did not explicitly talk about a generation gap, but they did note on the radically different context for young LGBTQ people, who grow up in a more open but also an increasingly complex world. They also lamented the decline of the gay scene, which played an important role in their social and sexual lives and acted as a site of intergenerational contact. Although they eagerly adopted online tools to connect to others when these became available, at the time of the interview most participants were disenchanted with the lack of connection online, some also expressing feelings of loneliness. Overall, they perceived strong differences between past and present, and between their own experiences and those of younger generations, but the interviews also disclosed continuities as well as intergenerational similarities, which were also confirmed in the broader project including interviews with younger LGBTQ men.

For LGBTQ associations, policy makers and (mental) health practitioners, it is important to be aware of these generational backgrounds, experiences, and feelings, acknowledging age as one (of many) intersecting variables impacting the experiences and needs of LGBTQ individuals. LGBTQ associations, while rightfully focusing on the needs of younger individuals struggling to explore and express their sexuality, may forget the specific needs of older individuals. Similarly, policy makers and health practitioners may be (implicitly) “ageist” in envisioning sexual minority members as young (as well as white, able bodied etc.), disregarding the experiences of discrimination and disconnection discussed in this paper.

Further research is warranted to confirm these findings and address the limitations of the current research. To start, the research was effectuated in the specific national and cultural context of Flanders, Belgium, a Western country where LGBTQ rights are strongly defended. While this is a corrective to the focus on the U.S. in research on older LGBTQ individuals, research in other countries, including non-Western ones, is needed, to further explore intercultural differences in generational experiences. Second, the findings are based on a relatively small sample of sixteen men, most of whom are white and highly educated, a typical and hard to avoid but still problematical bias in LGBTQ research [40]. A larger sample specifically targeting demographics that are harder to reach would be important to identify further sources of diversity within this population.

It would also be interesting to compare men’s experiences to those of women of the same generation, to better grasp the impact of gender and to counterbalance the overarching focus on men’s experiences in LGBTQ research. Third, as mentioned in the methodological section, health issues were not the explicit focus of this research, so the insights on personal mental and physical health are based on information that was volunteered by the participants. This has the advantage of providing unprompted insights in the challenges facing older LGBTQ men, such as isolation, but research explicitly addressing these issues is needed to gain deeper and more detailed insights. Fourth, the qualitative findings of this inductive and explorative research could be used to set up large-scale quantitative surveys including different generations, which would allow to ascertain the prevalence of experiences and needs across the wider population of LGBTQ individuals.

Author Contributions

Not applicable.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Antwerp (SHW_20_78).

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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