

GENDER TRANSITION AS SELF-REALISATION IN LATER LIFE

Interview with a 72-year-old Trans woman in Wales

Author: Erick Jackaman

Abstract Trans experiences of ageing have, so far, been minimally explored in academic literature; however, older Trans people who have transitioned in later life have much to offer the fields of both Trans Studies and Cultural Gerontology. By drawing on an interview with Jenny-Anne Bishop, a 72-year-old Trans woman, this study suggests that Trans ageing experiences are not adequately accounted for by dominant cultural narratives of ageing, notably decline and age-defying narratives, and instead proposes Lacculle and Baars' (2014) framework of self-realisation as a suitable alternative. Concurrently, this study serves as an empirical illustration of how self-realisation as a framework for meaning attribution in later life can be applied.

I Introduction

Gender transition, as described by many Trans¹ people themselves, is a process through which Trans individuals are able to express themselves in a way that most aligns with who they see themselves to be (Craggs, 2017; Fisher & Owl, 2019; Mac & Kayiatos, 2019) and can thereby be understood as a form of fulfilment, of *self-realisation*, of “mak[ing] the best of [oneself]” (Laceulle, 2018, p. 94). As gender transition can occur at any point (and, indeed, multiple points) throughout one’s lifetime, “Trans people often experience nonlinear life-courses which include disruption, disjuncture, and discontinuity of time” (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019, p. 103). This is particularly pertinent for older Trans people who transition in later life, as “[they] may be an older person in most respects but ‘young’ in terms of [their] experience of living and being in [their] affirmed gender” (Age UK, 2019, p. 16). In this way, older Trans people who transition in later life disrupt the expected linearity of gender and age upon which the prevailing dominant cultural narratives of ageing rest (Siverskog, 2015), namely *narratives of decline* (Gullette, 1997) and *age-defying narratives* (Havighurst, 1961), as gender transition brings flourishing (rather than decline) that is orientated towards the individual’s present and future (as an older person), rather than attempts to relive one’s youth. Consequently, a new framework is needed to understand the experiences of older Trans people, including those who transitioned in their earlier years. This paper, therefore, by drawing on an interview with Jenny-Anne Bishop, a 72-year-old Trans woman living in the UK, proposes the framework of self-realisation as formulated by Laceulle and Baars (2014) as a way of understanding Trans ageing experiences. Concurrently, Jenny-Anne’s gender transition in later life will be shown to illustrate and exemplify Laceulle and Baars’ (2014) self-realisation framework as a way of attributing meaning to later life more generally. This will be achieved through an interdisciplinary and intersectional approach, combining the fields of Trans Studies and Cultural Gerontology.

2 Literature review

Trans experiences in relation to ageing have, so far, been minimally explored, with most of the few studies that do address Trans ageing focusing on health-re-

¹ Trans with a capital “T” has been used throughout this paper to signify its status as an identity label which is culturally and contextually specific.

lated care and concerns (Williams & Freeman, 2007; Persson, 2009; Ansara, 2015). Indeed, older Trans people have often been positioned as subjects with problems to overcome (Cook-Daniels, 2006), such as discrimination from health-care workers (Williams & Freeman, 2007) and healthcare workers not having knowledge about Trans experiences (Siverskog, 2014). As a result, older Trans people are often fearful of care situations due to their anticipation of hostility and discrimination. They also often face more obstacles than younger Trans people when pursuing gender affirming surgeries (Siverskog, 2015). It has also been suggested that Trans elders may be at a higher risk of social isolation compared to their cis counterparts (Williams & Freeman, 2007).

As will be demonstrated in this paper, however, Trans experiences of ageing are far from solely negative. Yet there remains a significant lack of studies on older Trans people with regard to meaning attribution in later life. One such study, conducted by Siverskog (2015), found that older Trans people, regardless of when they transitioned, disrupt notions of both failure and success in regards to ageing, as these narratives rest upon “assumptions of stable binary gender categories” (p. 4); for example, menopause is viewed as an indicator of decline for many cis women, while Trans women’s inability to menstruate becomes normalised as they enter later life. In this way, Siverskog (2015) identifies a need to address age and gender through frameworks that “do not take their starting-points in younger/middle age [or] linear gender” (p. 16). This paper, therefore, aims to address this current gap in the literature by presenting self-realisation (Laceulle & Baars, 2014) as a framework through which to understand Trans people’s experiences of ageing, moving beyond prevailing narratives of decline and of successful ageing.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Cultural narratives about later life

In order to present gender transition as a form of meaning generation in later life, it is first necessary to situate (Trans) ageing experiences within the dominant (Western) cultural narratives of old age, notably *decline* narratives and *age-defying/successful ageing* narratives, as identified by Laceulle and Baars (2014). Decline narratives have been widely recognised as the ways in which ageing is equated with inevitable and irreversible decay (Cruikshank, 2003; Gullette, 1997). As a result, older people are hindered from ascribing positive meaning to later life (Laceulle, 2018). In response, age-defying narratives have emerged to counter the negative messages perpetuated by narratives of decline (Havighurst, 1961), advo-

cating instead for the portrayal of older people as just as able as they were in their younger years. Paradigms of successful ageing, however, similarly restrict older people's ability to contextually attribute meaning to their own experiences of old age, as they rely upon living up to ideals of youthfulness, such as good health, high energy, productivity, and independence. Moreover, age-defying narratives further marginalise older people who fail to live up to these standards of health and ability. By only viewing older people as successful to the extent that they are able to 'defy' the negative effects of ageing, age-defying narratives actually serve to reinforce narratives of decline, as meaning is given to later life through youth-related value frameworks, suggesting that the later stages of life have no intrinsic value of their own (Laceulle and Baars, 2014). It can be understood, accordingly, that neither framework can successfully incorporate the experiences of older Trans people, as they rest upon linear expectations of gendered ageing in which youth is idealised; for Trans people who transition in later life, their younger years spent living as another gender are likely not viewed in this way.

3.2 Self-realisation

In response to the above oppositionally destructive narratives, Laceulle and Baars (2014) proposed the moral concept of self-realisation as an ideological foundation for the creation of a culturally empowering counter-narrative on ageing. In this context, self-realisation refers to human growth and flourishing throughout the life course, thereby placing later life within the context of one's entire life, rather than marking it out as a stage of its own. Indeed, self-realisation, within moral philosophy, is a continuous process of striving to "make the best of [oneself]" (Laceulle, 2018, p. 94); an ideal to which one is equally accountable at any point in life. In this way, the framework of self-realisation offers older people a way to attribute meaning to their lives in the present moment, without requiring them to relive their past or attempt to slow down their future.

Since Laceulle and Baars' (2014) initial publication, Laceulle (2018) has developed this framework further; however, this study will mainly draw from Laceulle and Baars' (2014) original proposition, which revolves around three key aspects. Firstly, Laceulle and Baars highlight *a search for meaning* as essential to self-realisation. Secondly, in order to attain, or maintain, a sense of meaning, they emphasise the importance of *temporal orientation*: the ability to locate oneself within one's life experiences and expectations. This involves contextualising and "morally legitimi[sing] our past existence and selves" (p. 40), as well as being able to imagine a fulfilling future. Lastly, Laceulle and Baars identify *social and cultural engagements* as integral to self-realisation, as this framework is based upon

“a view of the self that is embedded in social relations” (Laceulle, 2018, p. 104), thereby departing from neoliberal discourses revolving around self-development as an isolated act (Laceulle & Baars, 2014). Indeed, all three aspects involve continuous temporal and social (re)negotiation, which further emphasises that later life is not separated from one’s younger years, but is merely another part of life in which self-realisation, for example in the form of gender transition, can be practised.

3.3 Intersectionality

An intersectional perspective will also be used throughout this paper in order to address the specific issues faced by older Trans people. Intersectionality is a concept coined by Crenshaw (1989) that acknowledges the interaction of two or more categories of difference in relation to power. When discussing how age interacts with another axis of oppression, it is important to state, as acknowledged by Calasanti and King (2015), that “the jeopardy does not double with age, but alters in more complex ways” (p. 193). From this it can be understood that the challenges faced by older Trans people are not simply a combination of the experiences of (younger) Trans people and older (cis) people, but must rather be examined in their own right.

4 Methodology

4.1 Data collection

Data was collected for this research through an in-depth qualitative interview with one participant, Jenny-Anne Bishop, who gave consent for her real name to be used. Purposive sampling via the internet was used in order to find an older Trans person willing to share their experiences. The interview lasted 1 hour and 40 minutes and was conducted via video call software.

4.2 Participant

Jenny-Anne Bishop is a British (Trans) woman who lives in Rhyl, Wales. She was 72 years old at the time of the interview, which was conducted in December 2018. She is currently retired, but has worked in a variety of fields, from sales and marketing to chromatography and mass spectrometry. In her earlier working years, Jenny-Anne was legally married as a man and brought up a family; however, she has since divorced her first wife and has been with her current partner and wife, Elen, for 14 years. Together, they run a Trans Community House in the house attached to their own, and have an adopted adult daughter.

4.3 Data analysis

This study employs thematic analysis to analyse the interview with Jenny-Anne. Thematic analysis is a method for “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The most prominent themes (engaged lifestyle, gender transition, and discrimination) are elaborated upon in the following section.

5 Findings

5.1 Engaged lifestyle

The most prominent and recurring theme in the interview with Jenny-Anne was her active lifestyle. Having immensely enjoyed her working life, Jenny-Anne continues to be engaged in voluntary and community-based work and describes herself as living at “90 miles an hour”. Most notably, Jenny-Anne works with the Welsh health services, the All Wales Gender Identity Partnership Group, Diversity Role Models, Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service, the Parliamentary Forum for Gender Identity, TransForum in Manchester, and Unique in North Wales and Cheshire, as well as running a Trans Community House and being an elder in the church she belongs to. She is also frequently contacted for interviews with news and media outlets due to her recognition as a Trans spokesperson, and in 2015 she was awarded an Order of the British Empire for her services to the Trans community.

5.2 Gender transition

Jenny-Anne lived outwardly as a man for most of her life and now describes herself as a woman who “just happen[s] to be Trans”. Although Jenny-Anne did not live as a woman “full-time” until 2007, she has been out as a Trans person throughout her life, living as Jenny-Anne outside of work and family commitments for ten years prior to living “full-time” as a woman. There were many times in Jenny-Anne’s life when she was able to live as herself and engage in self-realisation; she described going “clubbing as myself” in the 70s and 80s, and having “some reserved time as me” when she was married to her first wife. She remembers thinking, at around 3 years old, “I ought to be like my sister”, and she was “much happier trying to present as female than male.” However, due to her parents’ lack of acceptance and a promise to her first wife that she would not transition while they were married, Jenny-Anne did not apply for legal gender recognition, which in the UK requires that you have lived full-time as your desired gender for two years, until 2010. This allowed her to marry her current part-

ner Elen, who is also a Trans woman. Same-sex marriage was not legal in 2010, and by gaining legal recognition as a woman Jenny-Anne was therefore able to marry Elen, who was still legally registered as male. Part of Jenny-Anne's decision to apply for legal gender recognition and to marry Elen was so that they would become each other's next of kin, a preparation in case of healthcare needs and end-of-life matters.

Jenny-Anne also stated that her decision to undergo gender confirmation surgery was partly influenced by the prospect of having to receive care later in life. She stated that she wanted her body to be "congruent" with her gender so that "healthcare workers have no excuse to be nasty about it". Through her volunteer work, she has seen that staff in care homes can be "quite derogatory about Trans people, particularly if they haven't had surgery". Her main reason, however, for undergoing gender-affirming surgeries was that she wanted to, mentioning that she had been considering them for most of her life. She has had several surgeries since starting to live full-time as a woman, including gender confirmation surgery, breast augmentation, voice surgery, and facial surgery. Jenny-Anne reported that she did not experience any resistance to undergoing these surgeries due to her age.

Life as an older (Trans) woman genuinely seems to be fulfilling for Jenny-Anne and, rather than approaching later life with apprehension, she continues to live a life of purpose in which she is at least as content, if not more so, as she was in her younger years. In her own words, "although I had a difficult life until I transitioned, since I've transitioned, my life as Jenny-Anne has just been so easy".

5.3 Discrimination

Throughout her life, Jenny-Anne has suffered from discrimination due to her Trans status, including losing her job several times. On one occasion, she was let go due to being stopped by a police officer who reported her to her place of work under the charge of "driving a company car dressed as a woman". Jenny-Anne believes that her transition cost her a quarter of a million pounds as a result of being put out of work on multiple occasions, which also meant losing seniority and pension rights. Furthermore, she lost her home when she transitioned, but stated that a benefit of transitioning at a later stage in life was being "well enough established that [she] could take that [financial] hit and survive". In this way, gender transition and ageing can be seen to have a nonlinear relationship, as transitioning at an older age is not necessarily less desirable or more difficult.

Jenny-Anne was also made to retire early due to transphobia in her workplace; a new employee did not want to work with her because she was Trans. However, rather than the new worker losing his job, she was made to retire early. Jenny-

Anne did not fight back against this discrimination, which she maintains was the right decision, as she kept the friendships she had at that job.

While Jenny-Anne did not experience resistance from healthcare professionals when seeking gender affirming surgeries, she mentioned that her GP is hesitant to refer her to an endocrinologist, despite Jenny-Anne believing that her testosterone levels are too low. She suggested that this is because her GP is not taking her Trans status into account.

6 Discussion

6.1 Transition as self-realisation

Taken as the “process of *moral self-development*, exemplified in the expression *becoming who you are*” (Laceulle, 2018, p. 95), self-realisation can be identified as a key part of gender transition. Indeed, gender transition can be seen as a form of self-realisation, as it is a process that can enable Trans people to live and develop in the ways that make them most fulfilled (as evidenced in the accounts of Trans people in Craggs, 2017; Fisher & Owl, 2019; Mac & Kayiatos, 2019). For Trans people who transition in later life, like Jenny-Anne, ageing and transitioning are inextricably linked, thereby providing a multifaceted perspective from which to explore the self-realisation framework in relation to meaning attribution in later life. Indeed, for Jenny-Anne, old age was not something to be dreaded, but rather to be celebrated, as it was only in later life that she was able to live full-time as a woman and undergo the medical interventions that she had spent most of her life thinking about.

6.1.1 Search for meaning

Living as a woman, and moreover as an out Trans woman – something Jenny-Anne was only able to do in later life – has provided Jenny-Anne with a deep sense of meaning. Not only has this allowed Jenny-Anne to find fulfilment personally, it has also led her to many of the voluntary and community positions that shape her engaged lifestyle. Her involvement in Trans community and activist endeavours has been made possible through both gender transition and ageing, as retirement has allowed her to dedicate more of her time to voluntary initiatives. Additionally, Jenny-Anne finds meaning in her “Trans family”: her relationships with Elen and their adopted daughter, which have become fundamental to her happiness, were only possible for Jenny-Anne in later life as she furthered her gender transition. In these ways, gender transition and the process of growing older have dually fostered a sense of meaning for Jenny-Anne in later life.

While it could be argued that a large source of meaning for Jenny-Anne is due to her active lifestyle and independence, thereby suggesting that she is upholding age-defying narratives, Jenny-Anne is not defying age in the traditional sense. She is not trying to maintain her pre-ageing (or pre-transition) lifestyle; indeed, her younger self was viewed as male by the outside world. Rather, she is engaging in meaning-making that has only become available to her through ageing (and gender transition), such as by taking on Trans volunteering roles. It is important to note, however, that the act of volunteering in Trans organisations is not specific to old age, nor does it necessarily represent self-realisation in later life, as a Trans person who engages in volunteering at an earlier age and continues to do so into older age could be viewed within the “successful ageing” paradigm. However, for Jenny-Anne specifically, this opportunity only became available to her in later life and, in this way, Jenny-Anne therefore can be understood as practising self-realisation rather than defying age.

6.1.2 Temporal orientation

When locating herself in the context of her life course, Jenny-Anne stated that she had a difficult time until she transitioned, but that her life now as Jenny-Anne has “just been so easy”. Thus, for Jenny-Anne, ‘young’ cannot be easily separated from ‘man’ in the same way that ‘old’ cannot be separated from ‘woman’; while this is a simplification, it is an important observation to discuss. Indeed, when describing positive aspects of growing older, Jenny-Anne noted that she is much more open to asking for help now, whereas in the past – when she felt herself to be the “breadwinner of the family” – she mentioned having “this stupid male idea” of always having to be right. Here, we see how her past attitude was affected both by living as a man (“stupid male idea”) and by being younger (“breadwinner”). Consequently, for Jenny-Anne, temporal orientation also involves a gendered orientation; the positivity she feels about old age is connected to living as a woman.

Nonetheless, neither self-realisation nor gender transition are linear or time-bound processes, and Jenny-Anne has been able to live as her preferred gender (such as when “clubbing as myself”) and thereby engage in self-realisation, at various points in her life. Throughout the interview, Jenny-Anne acknowledged these parts of her life as just as valid as living full-time as a woman, thereby “morally legitimi[sing] [her] past existence and selves” (Laceulle & Baars, 2014, p. 40). As well as looking back, Jenny-Anne is able to imagine a fulfilling future for herself, a vision that involves spending time with her wife, continuing her community engagements, and, even further forward, teaching other older people about Trans inclusion if she moves to a care home.

6.1.3 Social and cultural engagements

As stated by Laceulle and Baars (2014), “self-realisation discourse situates the individual in a dynamic interaction with [their] social and cultural surroundings” (p. 41). Jenny-Anne achieves this aspect of self-realisation through her dedicated involvement in social and cultural initiatives. Volunteering, in particular, presents Jenny-Anne as a moral actor, working with and for others as an engaged member of society. Furthermore, Jenny-Anne described a feeling of responsibility for trying to make things better for the Trans community, which she achieves through initiatives such as her Trans Community House, reaching out to other older Trans people, and even taking part in this interview. These engagements show a direct connection between the self-realising process of gender transition, ageing, and her contributions to society.

6.1.4 Limitations of self-realisation

As noted earlier with the example of Trans volunteering initiatives in later life, it can be difficult to determine the boundaries between self-realisation and age-defying behaviours as these vary from person to person in accordance with their specific life experiences. Indeed, while a valuable way of attributing meaning to later life, the self-realisation framework in relation to gender transition can also be used to obscure anti-ageing sentiments. For example, Jenny-Anne underwent four surgeries between 2010 and 2012. While these surgeries were directly linked to her gender transition, facial surgery and breast augmentation are also popular cosmetic surgeries for cis women who want to counter the bodily effects of ageing. The Trans narrative of self-realisation labels her facial surgery as ‘facial feminisation surgery’ rather than a ‘facelift’, which is more negatively connotated with achieving younger beauty ideals. Although undergone for primarily different motives, cosmetic transition-related surgeries should also be viewed critically in relation to ageing.

6.2 Intersectional perspective on Trans ageing

In the cases of discrimination that Jenny-Anne faced as an older Trans person, she attributed their cause to her Trans status rather than to her age; however, it is necessary to take an intersectional perspective in order to fully understand her experiences. Due to a transphobic co-worker, Jenny-Anne was made to retire early, even though her boss was supportive of her Trans identity. This suggests that, had Jenny-Anne been younger, she would likely have been kept on and her colleague made to leave instead. This did not happen because, as an older worker, Jenny-Anne was likely perceived as declining in value and, therefore, not worth keeping over her younger co-worker. However, had her colleague not been

transphobic, it seems certain that Jenny-Anne would have remained in her position until she wanted to retire at age 65. Through an intersectional perspective, the dual effects of both ageism and transphobia are made visible in the case of Jenny-Anne's early retirement.

In relation to healthcare, Jenny-Anne stated that she was finding it difficult to persuade her GP to refer her to an endocrinologist. She mentioned that this was because her GP sees her as "just an older woman on hormone replacement therapy [...] just getting on with her life." This reflects Siverskog's (2015) finding that Trans bodies challenge the notion of failure in regards to the gendered ageing body. While Trans women undergoing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) during their younger years could be perceived as 'failing' in relation to their cis counterparts, it is common for cis women to be on HRT in later life as well. For this reason, Jenny-Anne's GP does not find it particularly important for her to see an endocrinologist; however, due to having undergone gender confirmation surgery, Jenny-Anne's hormonal experience is different to that of a cis woman and, therefore, requires particular attention. Here, a medical condition (requiring HRT) that previously could have marked Jenny-Anne out as Trans is now rendered almost invisible due to her age. Through this, it can be seen that Trans experiences of ageing do not follow a linear path in relation to cis ageing experiences, and that an intersectional perspective is therefore needed in order to understand why Jenny-Anne's concerns were dismissed by her GP.

7 Conclusion

Through an exploration of Jenny-Anne's experiences of gender transition in later life, Laceulle and Baars' (2014) framework of self-realisation has been shown to successfully attribute meaning to old age. Indeed, gender transition itself is a process of self-realisation, which formed an important part of Jenny-Anne's flourishing throughout her life course. This was particularly evident in later life, when Jenny-Anne was able to live full-time as a woman, which empowered her to forge new loving relationships, take part in many community-based initiatives, and find fulfillment through self-expression. For Jenny-Anne, old age was met with excitement, rather than dread, which contradicts decline narratives of ageing; for her, ageing is inextricably linked to gender transition, and is therefore seen in terms of flourishing, rather than deterioration. Furthermore, Jenny-Anne's experiences are also in opposition to age-defying narratives, as meaning for her is not derived from reliving her youth – at which point she was mainly living outwardly as a man – but is instead gained through her current life situation as an

older woman. In this way, Jenny-Anne's experiences of transitioning in later life recorded here can be seen as contributing to the field of Cultural Gerontology, as this study highlights key limitations to both aforementioned cultural narratives of ageing: notably, that they both revolve around idealisations of youth and rest upon linear understandings of age and gender, which are not applicable to all populations (such as that of Trans elders). Furthermore, through offering self-realisation as an alternative, nonlinear, and nonhierarchical framework for understanding Trans ageing experiences, this study also serves as a poignant and empirical illustration of Laceulle and Baars' (2014) theoretical proposal of self-realisation as a framework for meaning attribution in later life. Cultural Gerontology, therefore, can benefit from further examining the self-realisation framework in regards to other ageing populations.

Trans Studies, likewise, can take this study as a starting point for further exploring Trans ageing in relation to (positive) meaning-making processes, rather than mainly focusing on the problems that older Trans people face (such as those described in Cook-Daniels, 2006). Through its interdisciplinary and intersectional approach, however, this study has also shown that it is necessary to further explore the ways in which ageing can separately and simultaneously invisibilise and problematise Trans experiences, as older Trans people are subject to the dual forces of both ageism and transphobia. Lastly, it is important to note that the older Trans population is not homogenous and that the experiences of this demographic will change over time. One possibility is that, fewer Trans people will transition in later life in the future due to greater acceptance and opportunities in their younger years. For this reason, it is crucial that Trans ageing is continually explored.

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