**Pathways to Queer Thriving in an LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Community**

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# Abstract

LGBTQ+ people and communities continue to survive and thrive within the context of complex and unrelenting personal, structural, and collective traumas. Psychological research has examined this adaptive capacity through frameworks of resilience and posttraumatic growth. Through multidisciplinary engagement, we have come to see some limitations of these frameworks when applied to LGBTQ+ communities. In the first half of this paper, we reconceptualize resilience and posttraumatic growth as *queer thriving* and offer the Möbius strip as a metaphor to challenge and expand normative ideas around direction, trajectory, timeline, and outcomes of positive change through adversity. In the second half of this paper, we explore pathways to queer thriving within an LGBTQ+ intergenerational community project—an *ethnographic experiment*—that we have co-facilitated since 2019. We view generational divisions in LGBTQ+ communities as both a reflection and form of trauma. In our ethnographic experiment, LGBTQ+ younger and older adults have the rare opportunity to heal this division by coming together for storytelling, dialogue, and artmaking around themes and issues important to their lives. In this paper, we present three ethnographic vignettes that powerfully illustrate the potential for queer thriving through intergenerational social connection. We conclude by emphasizing the importance of mixed-disciplinary, community-engaged, and descriptive approaches to examining resilience and posttraumatic growth within marginalized communities.

*Keywords:* queer thriving, resilience, posttraumatic growth, LGBTQ+, intergenerational

**Public Significance Statement**

Generations of LGBTQ+ people have been kept apart for too long. In this paper, we explore

pathways to *queer thriving* through sustained LGBTQ+ intergenerational engagement. We

present findings from an LGBTQ+ intergenerational community project that utilizes storytelling,

dialogue, and artmaking to heal divisions in LGBTQ+ communities and promote queer thriving.

**Pathways to Queer Thriving in an LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Community**

**It Hasn't Gotten Better**

Some people—not queer people—are surprised to learn that LGBTQ+ lives are *still* constructed in a developmental landscape saturated by trauma. Those people are even more surprised to learn that, recently, circumstances for LGBTQ+ people have gotten much worse. According to the Human Rights Campaign's latest State Equality Index, in 2022, there were 315 anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced into state legislatures across the United States (HRC Foundation, 2023). That's more than double the number of pro-LGBTQ+ bills introduced. Of those anti-LGBTQ+ bills, 29 were signed into law. The American Civil Liberties Union (2023) has reported that, by the end of the 2023 legislative session, the number of anti-LGBTQ+ bills had reached 510 with 84 having been passed into law. In a historic move, on June 6, 2023, the Human Rights Campaign declared, for the first time ever, a national state of emergency for LGBTQ+ Americans (HRC Staff, 2023). Most of the anti-LGBTQ+ bills target transgender, non-binary, and gender-expansive people, particularly youth, in the areas of medical care, athletics, and bathrooms. Several other bills attempt to censor or erase LGBTQ+ knowledge, histories, culture, and practices from being taught, or even mentioned, in schools or made available in books held in public libraries.

Responding to these circumstances, for four years, we—a multidisciplinary group of queer scholars representing developmental psychology, educational philosophy, cultural anthropology, and social work—have been facilitating a community project that seeks to improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people through LGBTQ+ intergenerational engagement. In this article, we explore pathways to resilience and posttraumatic growth—what we reconceptualize as *queer thriving*—through the prism of our LGBTQ+ intergenerational community.

To do this, we first review the meaning of trauma in LGBTQ+ communities, and how frameworks of resilience and posttraumatic growth have been applied to these communities by psychologists, pointing out some limitations of these approaches. Next, we advance our notion of queer thriving (see also Greteman, 2018, 2021) as a reconceptualization of posttraumatic growth within the context of ongoing queer trauma. Through our community project, we have come to see that queer thriving involves *processes* of reclamation, resilience, and resistance within the context of supportive relationships. We then describe our community project in detail and present three ethnographic vignettes that illustrate three *pathways* for queer thriving as they have manifested within dynamic LGBTQ+ intergenerational interactions. These pathways include storytelling, dialogue, and artmaking. These vignettes highlight the need to intentionally create culturally safe ecologies for marginalized communities impacted by systemic forms of discrimination. Finally, we advocate for mixed-disciplinary, community-engaged, and descriptive approaches to resilience and posttraumatic growth that both challenge and enrich psychological methods.

**Recognizing LGBTQ+ Trauma While Also Resisting It**

LGBTQ+ people experience a range of personal, structural, and collective traumas that are complex, multilayered, pervasive, and chronic (Alessi et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2020; Meyer, 2003). In this section, we briefly review different types of traumas and adversities that LGBTQ+ people can face. But first, despite this being a paper about trauma, we begin by calling attention to the over-reliance on trauma as a way to interpret and construct LGBTQ+ subjects. It is imperative for us to emphasize—and resist—the ways in which this master narrative of queer trauma can inadvertently narrow both how LGBTQ+ people are viewed and how they view themselves and the possibilities for their lives. LGBTQ+ people live diverse and multifaceted

lives that require an expansion of narratives not solely rooted in victimization, trauma, or danger. Already two decades ago, Rasmussen, Rofes, and Talburt (2004) argued, "The complexity of queer youth's subjectivity, agency, sexuality, and cultural practices is flattened by a dominant framing of them in terms of danger and victimization" (p. 7). This persistent framing risks the normalization of trauma for LGBTQ+ people in such a way that may discourage a sense of criticality and agency around it (Brown, 2003; Caprioglio, 2021). Solely filtering LGBTQ+ lives through the lens of trauma can oversimplify the experiences of LGBTQ+ people and undercut the very resilience and posttraumatic growth we hope to foster, and erase the great joys that can be found within and next to traumatic experiences, such as the joy of activism during the AIDS crisis (Hilderbrand, 2006).

Psychology, in particular, has perpetuated the LGBTQ+ trauma narrative through an unbalanced focus on psychological deficits, such as traumatic stress, depression, and suicide (Drescher, 2010; Herek, 2010). Our intention is to shift the emphasis from LGBTQ+ people as *traumatized* to the circumstances that frame LGBTQ+ lives as *traumatizing,* and to the ways in which LGBTQ+ people manage to thrive despite this. This is consistent with broader calls in psychology for asset- or strength-based approaches (Silverman et al., 2023), which doesn't mean that we should ignore trauma, but that we should expand the scope of focus beyond deficits to include an examination of LGBTQ+ strengths developed through trauma (Riggle et al., 2008, 2011; Vaughan & Rodriguez, 2014; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010), and to carefully contextualize both strengths and deficits in relation to trauma and pathogenic social structures (Meyer, 2014).

So, though we resist the master narrative of queer trauma in some ways, we recognize that trauma is nonetheless part of the past and present social realities of LGBTQ+ people. We understand that this is a complicated and even contradictory position—to both recognize the

reality of pervasive trauma and to resist it as the central framing of LGBTQ+ lives—but we believe these can exist in the same place. Trauma cannot be ignored, but it also cannot be all that we see. Please bear that complexity in mind as you read the next sections.

*Manifestations of LGBTQ+ Trauma*

Queer trauma is multilayered and experienced at personal, collective, and structural levels. At its core, the trauma experienced by LGBTQ+ people is rooted in ubiquitous heterosexism, allosexism, and cisgenderism. These social conditions manifest externally in the form of anti-LGBTQ+ microaggressions, harassment, discrimination, and violent victimization, and are psychologically internalized by LGBTQ+ people as felt stigma and shame, expectations of rejection, fears of discrimination, concerns about concealment and disclosure, and worries about safety and security. Sobering recent data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (2017-2019) indicates that LGBTQ+ people are nine times more likely to be victimized by violent crime than non-LGBTQ+ people (Flores et al., 2022), reminding us that homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and other anti-LGBTQ+ phobias persist.

Collectively, trauma has also resulted from living through or vicariously encountering widespread shared adversities like the ongoing ravages of the AIDS crisis beginning in the 1980s, police harassment and brutality such as bathhouse and bar raids (e.g., Chicago's Fun Lounge police raid in 1964), violent riots and uprisings (e.g., San Francisco's Compton's Cafeteria riot in 1966), hate-motivated murders of LGBTQ+ people like O'Shae Sibley, Tasiyah Woodland, and Camdyn Rider, just three of at least 31 documented in the United States in 2023 alone, and mass shootings such as Orlando's Pulse Nightclub in 2016 and Club Q in Colorado Springs in 2022.

Structurally, LGBTQ+ lives are shaped by severely oppressive social policies that have, repeatedly and in dynamically shifting ways, decimated the health, well-being, and very personhood of LGBTQ+ people across time. These policies have criminalized same-sex behaviors (e.g., anti-sodomy laws valid until 2003) and health statuses (e.g., HIV-specific laws still active in several States). They have led to the dismissal of LGBTQ+ people from jobs because LGBTQ+ people were said to be a threat to the safety of children and national security (e.g., Executive Order 10450 in 1953 and the ensuing Lavender Scare). They have designated homosexuality as a psychiatric illness, only removed from the DSM in 1973. And they have forced LGBTQ+ people to serve silently and invisibly in the military (e.g., Don't Ask, Don't Tell from 1994 to 2011). In some cases, it was the absence of supportive policies that dealt the most devastating blows to LGBTQ+ people, such as the lack of government recognition and action in the beginning years of the AIDS crisis. The utter exhaustion wrought by fighting these never-ending attacks on LGBTQ+ rights and personhood is a form of trauma in itself, leading to what some have called "queer battle fatigue" (Morris et al., 2022; Wozolek et al., 2015).

### Consequences of Trauma for LGBTQ+ Health and Well-Being

It probably comes as no surprise that the circumstances just described have led LGBTQ+ communities to demonstrate substantial health disparities when compared to non-LGBTQ+ people (Hatzenbuehler, 2014; Meyer, 2003, 2015). These disparities are so severe that, in 2016, LGBTQ+ communities were officially recognized by the NIH as a U.S. health disparity population. Compared to cisgender heterosexual older adults, LGBTQ+ older adults show poorer mental and physical health; higher risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, and certain types of cancer; higher levels of smoking and excessive drinking; and higher prevalence of disability (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013; Zelle & Arms, 2015). Economic disparities are

equally alarming (Emlett, 2016), with even wider gaps for LGBTQ+ people of color who are

multiply marginalized (Cyrus, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges

(Heslin & Hall, 2021), in part due to increasing levels of social isolation and traumatic reminders

of the AIDS crisis (Santo, 2020).

Despite the ubiquity of the "it gets better" refrain within LGBTQ+ communities, and

much to the dismay of the older LGBTQ+ participants in our community project, the data on

health and well-being paint a concerning picture for LGBTQ+ youth, among whom depression

and anxiety are serious issues (Russell & Fish, 2016). LGBTQ+ youth are at significant risk for

suicide (Hatchel et al., 2021), especially among certain racial-ethnic groups due to intersecting

marginalities (Bostwick et al., 2014). All of these concerns are much more prominent among

LGBTQ+ youth than among cisgender heterosexual youth (Marshal et al., 2011). Perhaps most

alarmingly, it seems that some health disparities are *growing* rather than shrinking among

LGBTQ+ youth (Meyer et al., 2021; Russell & Fish, 2019). And so, we wonder, how much

better has it gotten?

It should be noted that while each of the above forms of adversity or trauma have been

shown to impact LGBTQ+ people and communities across the lifespan, they are experienced in

different ways, in different proportions, and under different conditions by different people. We

must remember that LGBTQ+ communities are not monolithic. The experience of trauma is

compounded for LGBTQ+ people who experience intersecting and interlocking oppressions

along the axes of sex, gender, race, ability, social class, and age (Cyrus, 2017; McConnell et al.,

2018), not to mention that trauma can be experienced *within* LGBTQ+ communities by multiply

marginalized members, who must contend with racism, ableism, sexism, classism, and other

forms of harms perpetrated by other LGBTQ+ people (Kelly et al., 2020). In working with

LGBTQ+ people to develop an LGBTQ+ intergenerational community, a challenging and important task has been understanding these different histories of adversity and trauma while finding ways to navigate them together.

**Limitations of Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth Frameworks for LGBTQ+ People**

In this special issue, we've been invited to "rethink" resilience and posttraumatic growth. In this section, we "queer" these concepts by looking at them through the lens of LGBTQ+ lives and experiences, challenging various assumptions and limitations rooted in cisheteronormativity (Browne & Nash, 2016; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). We argue that resilience frameworks are useful for construing LGBTQ+ lives when they are applied in culturally informed ways. Next, we pose three challenges to dominant models of posttraumatic growth and advocate for reconceptualizing posttraumatic growth as *queer thriving within trauma*.

**Queering Resilience**

Appropriately so, resilience is a dominant theme in psychological research involving LGBTQ+ people—a theme we believe should continue to be applied in culturally informed ways. There are several resilience frameworks in the broader literature, which tend to agree on an approximate definition of resilience as a systems concept that entails (a) the ability to positively adapt to, recover, or "bounce back" from the impact of trauma and/or (b) the ability to sustain well-being in the face of adversity (Masten, 2007). Resilience is often measured as a personal resource or capacity that varies in magnitude between people and across situations, and is often treated as an intervening variable that buffers the impact of potentially traumatic experiences on health or well-being.

When applied to LGBTQ+ communities, efforts have focused on identifying personal and social factors that bolster resilience. In Ilan Meyer's (2015) influential minority stress model, he

identified both *individual resilience* factors, which include, for example, adaptive coping skills, self-acceptance, self-esteem, and positive sense of LGBTQ+ identity (Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016; Meyer, 2003, 2015), and *community resilience* factors, which include access to social support, LGBTQ+ community connectedness, positive LGBTQ+ role models, endorsement of LGBTQ+ cultural values, and engagement in LGBTQ+ activism (Abreu et al., 2021; Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016; Ramirez-Valles, 2002; Scheadler et al., 2022). Researchers have examined these resilience factors in relation to personal traumas (e.g., hate crimes, conversion therapy; Meanley et al., 2020; Singh & McKleroy, 2011), structural traumas (e.g., anti-LGBTQ+ policies; Russell et al., 2011) and collective traumas (e.g., AIDS crisis, Pulse nightclub mass shooting; Jackson, 2017; Lyons & Heywood, 2016).

In general terms, resilience frameworks provide an affirming and empowering lens through which to interpret LGBTQ+ experiences; however, their application to LGBTQ+ communities has been critiqued in several ways. As Meyer (2015) articulated, "A focus on resilience can lead to a 'blame the victim' attitude: By noting that individuals *can* be resilient we risk expecting that individuals *ought to be* resilient." (p. 211, emphasis in original). In other words, resilience frameworks tend to "internalize responsibility for survival within the individual" (Jordan et al., 2021, p. 1). Meyer (2015) argued that privileging individual resilience over structural change can minimize society's responsibility for uplifting LGBTQ+ people. That is, models emphasizing individual resilience can sometimes fail to adequately acknowledge the complex structural inequalities that make it both necessary to be resilient *and* difficult to be resilient (Meyer, 2015). Structures need to change, not just people's ability to withstand them. Robinson and Schmitz (2021) pointed out that resilience frameworks can push LGBTQ+ people toward assimilating into and reinforcing a dominant social order that excludes LGBTQ+ people

in the first place. If LGBTQ+ people can learn to withstand structural oppression, do oppressive structures really need to change? *Resilience* does not always do the work of *resistance*, which is necessary to transform oppressive social structures (Jordan et al., 2021). Colpitts and Gahagan (2016) further questioned the utility of dominant resilience frameworks for LGBTQ+ people because those models are based in the experiences of non-LGBTQ+ samples and, in turn, cisheteronormative standards of health and well-being. They argued that these models should not be uncritically extrapolated to LGBTQ+ people without the consideration of unique LGBTQ+ health needs or the contexts and cultures that frame LGBTQ+ lives. For LGBTQ+ people, resilience factors can be specific to the community (e.g., LGBTQ+ community connectedness, positive LGBTQ+ identity). Engagement in an LGBTQ+ intergenerational community project like ours is one such example of a unique resilience factor for LGBTQ+ people, as you will see.

**Queering Posttraumatic Growth**

Whereas resilience is conceptualized as a resource or capacity that can help a person maintain or return to pre-trauma levels functioning, posttraumatic growth is an outcome of successful coping with trauma, entailing some degree of positive personal transformation that can be said to originate in the experience of trauma itself (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; Tedeschi et al., 2018; Weststrate et al., 2022). In our community project, we were interested in how LGBTQ+ people might grow through sustained LGBTQ+ intergenerational engagement— an engagement that would intentionally, and also inevitably, require thinking and working through various personal, structural, and collective traumas embodied in the room. However, like resilience, through multidisciplinary discussion, we have come to see how the notion of posttraumatic growth can also be problematic when applied to LGBTQ+ communities.

The dominant psychological model for conceptualizing and measuring posttraumatic growth was proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) based on their clinical work with trauma survivors. They argued that posttraumatic growth occurs in five domains: (1) personal strength, (2) relating to others, (3) new possibilities, (4) appreciation of life, and (5) spiritual and existential change. In their model, they articulated several factors expected to facilitate or forestall posttraumatic growth (e.g., rumination, emotion regulation, social support). To measure posttraumatic growth, people are asked to self-report the degree to which they have experienced positive change in each of the five growth domains as a result of a given trauma (see also Boals & Schuler, 2018).

For LGBTQ+ people, we resist this model, and others like it, for several reasons. First, we take issue with the language of both "posttraumatic" and "growth" for describing positive change among LGBTQ+ people. We argue that the very notion of *post*-traumatic growth for LGBTQ+ people is an impossibility, given that the experience of trauma is unrelenting and ubiquitous. For LGBTQ+ people, the question should be reframed in terms of how positive changes can be promoted *through*, *within,* or *next to* trauma, not *after*. We also take issue with the word growth, because, frankly, it has been used in unkind ways toward LGBTQ+ people. To "grow" into a "healthy" adult requires meeting milestones of normative development. Such growth has a specific direction, trajectory, timeline, and end point. For sexual and gender identity, normative development implies cisheterosexuality. LGBTQ+ people have landed in asylums, hospitals, prisons, and confessionals, all meant to help get them "straightened out" and back on track for such "normal" or "healthy" development. People—too often parents—are quick to point out to questioning youth that any deviation from the path to cisheterosexuality is "just a phase" that they will, hopefully, "*grow* out of." These ideas are deeply damaging and

even *traumatizing* to LGBTQ+ people. Such phrases powerfully illustrate how in the everydayness of LGBTQ+ life, the very concept of growth is leveraged against one's LGBTQ+ personhood. We acknowledge our critique of the term growth has conflated posttraumatic growth with normative developmental growth, and, for some readers, this may amount to no more than a matter of semantics. However, we believe that humanizing language, as opposed to traumatizing language, is a basic criterion for cultural safety when working with marginalized communities (Curtis et al., 2019).

Setting aside semantics for substance, our second critique concerns the assumption that growth only occurs in five or any limited number of researcher-prescribed domains (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). We question the outright applicability of these growth domains to LGBTQ+ people. This is not to say that LGBTQ+ don't grow in these ways, but there are, perhaps, different ways of growing that are missed in this model and others like it. Just as there are resilience factors specific to LGBTQ+ people (Meyer, 2015), there might also be LGBTQ+ specific forms of growth. It's an empirical question. Unfortunately, there are few studies that look at posttraumatic growth among LGBTQ+ people. One example is a study by Vaughan and Waehler (2010), who developed a self-report measure of "coming out growth." The process of coming out can be highly stressful and sometimes experienced as traumatic. Through a review of the literature, and echoing Tedeschi and Calhoun's model, the researchers proposed five domains of growth: (1) honesty/authenticity, (2) identity, (3) mental health/resilience, (4) relational/social, and (5) advocacy/generativity. We can already see from these domains that positive changes among LGBTQ+ people might be quite different than the general population. We find Vaughan and Waehler's work helpful for thinking about potential forms of growth; however, one limitation of self-report questionnaires is that they inherently restrict the ways that growth can be

expressed. We believe that, ethically, LGBTQ+ people should be able to define their own growth

in their own words, at least until there is more research on this topic that engages directly with

LGBTQ+ communities. Narrative and other open-ended approaches could be especially useful

for describing ways in which LGBTQ+ people perceive their own growth (Blackie et al., 2023).

Our third critique concerns the outcome-oriented nature of posttraumatic growth models.

We're not sure the most interesting or appropriate question to ask LGBTQ+ people concerns

how much they've grown or changed from trauma. There is something about this outcome-

oriented framing that implies a linearity, stability, or even finality that doesn't seem to reflect the

lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people, who are constantly navigating old and new traumas in a

constantly evolving sociocultural landscape. As we elaborate in the next section, we believe the

*process* of adversarial growth—which we reconceptualize as *queer thriving*—is very much

dynamic, nonlinear, contextual, fluid, and ongoing. So, it might be more interesting for us to ask:

How are LGBTQ+ people doing the work of queer thriving? When are moments when queer

thriving is possible and becomes visible? How do LGBTQ+ people support each other through

the process of queer thriving? These questions, and others like them, are at the heart of our

LGBTQ+ intergenerational community project. Before describing our project, we will say a little

more about the notion of queer thriving.

## Toward A Conceptualization of Queer Thriving

Concerned about frameworks in education that adopt a deficit perspective and position

LGBTQ+ youth as "at risk," Greteman (2018, 2021), one of the authors of this piece, proposed a

shift in our language and thinking toward *queer thriving*. While important work has been done

on the survival of LGBTQ+ people, open questions remain about what happens upon and after

survival. Psychological frameworks of thriving are useful because they tend to define thriving in

holistic terms rather than compartmentalizing it into rigid domains and recognize that thriving

involves contextual, dynamic, and process-oriented states of being (Brown et al., 2017; Kern &

Sun, 2021; Su et al., 2014). One of the major tenets of queer theory is the rejection of binaries

(Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990) because they tend to oversimplify human lives. With queer

thriving, we move the conversation away from the idea that a person grows or does not grow

following adversity toward an exploration of how LGBTQ+ people manage to thrive within

trauma.

Our reconceptualization of posttraumatic growth as queer thriving does not prescribe

domains of growth, because ways of queer thriving, like LGBTQ+ identities, are multifaceted

and potentially unlimited. We can say that queer thriving involves general forms of thriving

common to many marginalized communities, such as the joy of finding and communing with

'your people,' the sense of possibility and purpose that comes with attending your first protest,

and the sheer relief at discovering you're not alone in your difference after all. But we resist the

temptation, at least at this time, to propose a model outlining the *specific contents* of queer

thriving. We view queer thriving as subjective, embodied, and phenomenological, which means

that LGBTQ+ people should be free to define the meaning of queer thriving for themselves. This

is, again, an ethical position rooted in a history of psychology proposing to know what is best for

LGBTQ+ people without first centering their voices and perspectives (Drescher, 2010; Hegarty

& Rutherford, 2019; Herek, 2010). In other words, LGBTQ+ people don't need *another*

prescription from psychologists, in this case, for queer thriving.

Importantly, our reconceptualization of queer thriving does not make assumptions about

direction, trajectory, timeline, or end points of positive change. In our community project, we

have learned important lessons about "queer time" (Halberstam, 2005) and the dangers of

chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010)—that is, interpreting LGBTQ+ lives through the lens of cisheterosexist conceptions of time, the life course, and psychological change. This speaks to the fluidity of queer thriving. What we think we know about queer thriving is constantly challenged by the dizzying evolution of LGBTQ+ lives and experiences, which is in lockstep with an extraordinarily dynamic social, political, legal, and cultural context. The broader ideological setting dictates, to some degree, the meaning of queer thriving at a given time and place. Thriving through the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s is likely to be both similar and different than thriving through our current wave of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation.

The meaning of "queer time" became clear to us in a group discussion among community project members when we were deciding on the name for a public art exhibition in April of 2023. A 74-year-old lesbian in our project, Helen, pointed out that LGBTQ+ lives take on "different shapes of time." She elaborated that LGBTQ+ lives are nonlinear, spiral even. She then wondered aloud if the shape of LGBTQ+ lives is most aptly described by the Möbius strip, which, paradoxically, has only one side and one edge and forms a never-ending loop that is non-orientable and has no distinguishable direction of movement (depicted in Figure 1). We think queer thriving may be similar to the Möbius strip, and we offer not a model, but a new metaphor to think about how LGBTQ+ people thrive within trauma. Taking the Möbius strip metaphor seriously, we see queer thriving as a process that has no universal shape or parameters by which to easily define or measure how well someone is "doing it." There is no consistently discernable direction, as clockwise becomes counterclockwise and back again as the strip is traversed. There is no beginning and no end, just a dynamic state of thriving and trying to thrive. Like the Möbius strip, queer thriving poses a significant challenge to psychologists' penchant for precise

conceptualization and operationalization. Amorphous as this is, this limitless and fluid vision of

queer thriving is what we strive to understand and promote in our community project.

**Processes Supporting Queer Thriving**

For now, we think it is most appropriate to focus our energies on understanding the

*processes* that might support queer thriving rather than asserting a precise definition of the

contents of such thriving. Our community project has provided a glimpse into some content

possibilities, and in just a moment we'll provide three ethnographic vignettes that will richly

demonstrate what such thriving can look like. But, first, let's take a look at processes.

As we described earlier, queer thriving is inextricably linked to, and intertwined with,

trauma. LGBTQ+ people do not thrive in spite of trauma or after trauma, they thrive through it

and with it, often in ways that embraces or reclaims trauma as a source of strength. Therefore,

the first process involves *reclamation*. In discussions about queer joy, our project participants

described that queer joy exists not on its own, but always in relationship with hardship and

struggle—there is no queer joy without queer heartache (Morris et al., 2022). To do this—to hold

the good with the bad—queer thriving requires *resilience*. The role of resilience in supporting

thriving isn't unique to LGBTQ+ people, however, we've learned that a crucial resilience factor

in LGBTQ+ communities is social support, which has led us to conclude that queer thriving is an

inherently *relational* process. It's something LGBTQ+ people do together. The courage to thrive

requires the support of a community who dares to thrive together, which may involve the

creation of intentional spaces to support thriving through LGBTQ+ social connection. This is

why isolation is such a profound challenge for LGBTQ+ people, especially older adults (Kim et

al., 2017). Finally, queer thriving requires *resistance* (Jordan et al., 2021; Robinson & Schmitz,

2021). Such resistance may involve rejecting cisheteronormative models of development, the

reframing of limiting narratives commonly told about LGBTQ+ people that emphasize pathology

and risk, and the deconstruction of socially imposed divisions within LGBTQ+ communities—

for example, along the lines of generation, race/ethnicity, or gender—that prevent LGBTQ+

people from supporting each other. Such resistance also involves leaning into a long history of

activism to change structures and systems, such as laws, policies, and institutions, to support

queer thriving. For example, activism directed at curriculum bans in schools that prevent young

LGBTQ+ people from accessing the very knowledge needed to survive and thrive. Thus, we can

provisionally offer that queer thriving entails the joint processes of *reclamation*, *resilience*, and

*resistance*, all embedded within the context of supportive *relationships*. These processes

manifest in diverse ways, some of which we will speak to in our vignettes.

**Pathways to Queer Thriving through LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Engagement**

In a country that seems determined to diminish the light of LGBTQ+ people, LGBTQ+

communities have demonstrated extraordinary capacity for surviving and thriving in the face of

personal, structural, and collective adversity (Lyons & Heywood, 2016; Russell et al., 2011). As

we have just explained, through our engagement with LGBTQ+ communities, we have come to

see that queer thriving is never accomplished alone but in relation with others (Mereish & Poteat,

2015; Morris et al., 2022, 2023). In our work, we focus on fostering relationships within and

across generations. Yet, for decades, LGBTQ+ generations have been kept apart. In some of our

other research, we've learned that meaningful and sustained LGBTQ+ intergenerational

interactions are very rare (Weststrate et al., 2023). The generational divide between LGBTQ+

people is both reflective of trauma and a form of trauma itself (Bohan et al., 2002; Russell &

Bohan, 2005). This goes far beyond the simple fact that families of origin—which are

complicated for all sorts of reasons—rarely have LGBTQ+ people of multiple generations living

together. Even chosen families are rarely intergenerational. There are several explanations for

why LGBTQ+ generations have been kept apart. In part, it's a numbers game. Nearly an entire

generation was lost to AIDS and internalized stigma keeps many of our surviving LGBTQ+

elders deep in their closets. Internalized stigma also prevents some of our out elders from

interacting with youth. LGBTQ+ older adults may fear being seen as an "old gay pervert"—a

harmful vestige of the "grooming" and "recruitment" rhetoric that has been weaponized against

LGBTQ+ communities for decades, both maliciously and falsely portraying LGBTQ+ adults as

dangerous to youth. This rhetoric has been engaged anew in the current wave of anti-LGBTQ+

legislation. Then and now, LGBTQ+ teachers have been actively policed by and kept out of

schools. Generations have also been kept apart by spaces that are forbidden to one another, such

as bars and youth groups. Thus, intergenerational connection may be both especially lacking and

especially important for LGBTQ+ people. LGBTQ+ younger and older adults have both

expressed a strong desire for more contact (Weststrate et al., 2023). At the same time, fostering

such connection requires the intentional creation of affirming spaces for LGBTQ+ generations to

come together. This has been the goal of our ongoing community project, which, to our

knowledge, is one of the first of its kind and the first to be rigorously studied.

### *The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project*

In 2019, we set out to design a community project that would bring LGBTQ+ generations

together into meaningful sustained interaction with the goal of promoting queer thriving.

Partnering with the senior services program at the Midwest's largest LGBTQ+ community

center, we have brought together five cohorts of LGBTQ+ older (60+ years) and younger (18-30

years) adults—one cohort per year—for storytelling, dialogue, artmaking, and shared meals in

*The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project* (www.generationliberation.com). Each year

our project brings together 15 younger and 15 older adults to engage in 3-hour biweekly sessions on Monday afternoons over 9 months from September to May, in addition to several special events (e.g., informal social gatherings) and educational fieldtrips (e.g., LGBTQ+ library and archive, art gallery visits). The participants commit to attending, ideally, all sessions over the 9 months. This enables sustained engagement, which we have found to be critical. The younger participants are students enrolled at an art and design college and the older participants are primarily recruited through our partner LGBTQ+ community center. Project participants are diverse with respect to their sexual and gender identities, race/ethnicity, and social class. Each year, approximately half the cohort identifies are trans or nonbinary and half as members of a racialized community. Many of our participants, especially the elders, struggle with housing and food insecurity with several of them living in a government subsidized LGBTQ+ housing complex for older adults. Students receive course credit and, with a new large educational grant from the Spencer Foundation, we are able to compensate our older adult participants.

Five years into the project, we have now held over 100 sessions with over 120 older and younger adults. The regular programming of the project takes place in the communal spaces of the LGBTQ+ community center, which is a converted police station where years earlier several of our elders had been booked for various contrived reasons (e.g., cross-dressing or "degenerate disorderly conduct") meant to humiliate and control. A plaque hanging on a wall near the door tells this story in just a few words, "From a place of discrimination to a home of honor." For these elders, this powerful reclamation of space is a form of queer thriving in itself.

Each session, the time is spent exploring LGBTQ+ identities, experiences, and cultural-historical events through the lenses of our different generational and social positions. Each session has a theme that is responsive to the interests of the participants. For example, an

especially popular and contentious theme includes an examination of genders in the past, present, and future. In this session, we explore the complexities of gender, gender identity, gender expression, and gender representation across place, time, and generation. We create space for participants to share about their own gender journeys, how their gender is lived and embodied, and where they see gender in their everyday lives—elsewhere we've described our project as embracing an "embodied queer pedagogy" (Greteman et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2022). Prior to each session, we assign something to watch, listen to, or read. For the session on gender, we've used the documentary film "Disclosure" and a podcast called "Gender is Complicated for All of Us." Each session follows a standard format. First, we start with storytelling, in which 3-4 participants share a 5-minute story to the entire group about the theme. Second, we break into two medium-sized groups for facilitated dialogue, which we distinguish from discussion and debate. We provide questions for the groups to work through together. Finally, the last portion of the session is dedicated to artmaking in small groups of 4-5 participants. In the most recent cycle of the project, artmaking was used to explore shared stories of queer joys amid difficulties, which culminated in an art exhibition called "Iridescent Footprints: Stories and Glories of our Lives," which was open to the public and had over 200 attendees. The use of storytelling, dialogue, and artmaking as core modalities of intergenerational engagement is intentional and evidence-based. We view these as the *pathways* to queer thriving in our community. Our use of storytelling is grounded in the literatures on narrative identity and narrative therapy (McAdams & Janis, 2004), where stories are viewed as central to human development, flourishing, and healing. Our use of dialogue draws upon models of intergenerational learning (Sánchez & Kaplan, 2014) and inter-group dialogue (Zúñiga et al., 2012) as forms of transformative

pedagogy. Finally, our use of artmaking is supported by research and practice in art education (Archer-Cunningham, 2007; Blackburn Miller, 2020; Greene, 2000).

Drawing from cultural anthropology, methodologically, we conceptualize our community project as an *ethnographic experiment* (Rabinow & Stavriankis, 2013). Ethnography allows for in-depth and sustained engagement between LGBTQ+ subjects in naturalistic contexts, while centering collaborative exploration between researchers and community members and destabilizing hierarchies of expertise (Biehl & Locke, 2017). In doing so, ethnographic experimentation shares conceptual space with methods such as participatory action research (McIntyre, 2008) and field social psychology (Power & Velez, 2022). Rather than studying a field site that already exists, with ethnographic experimentation, researchers and community members create the field itself (Estalella & Sánchez Criado, 2017). This is necessary when the field site of interest— LGBTQ+ intergenerational communities—do not or rarely exist. The meaning of "experiment" differs from its traditional usage in psychology, referring instead to the creation of the new field site, observing what happens in that created space, and iteratively and collaboratively redesigning it to meet the goals of the project.

The rich data amassed through this project includes extensive video and audio recordings, ethnographic notes and summaries, reflective journals, and products such as artwork generated by our participants. Sometimes our data even includes brusque text messages from aggrieved participants about how we facilitators, yet again, managed to mess something up! We also use more conventional psychological methods, such as semi-structured interviews and questionnaires administered at the beginning, midpoint, and end of each year, assessing changes in sense of LGBTQ+ community, social support, identity, collective continuity, and more. We discuss the

impact of participation, primarily in qualitative terms, in other publications (e.g., Greteman et al.,

2021; Morris et al., 2022, 2023).

Importantly, not everyone can enter easily into the collaborative creation of such field

sites. Within the context of our project, we have found it important that the co-facilitators

identify along the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Like most marginalized communities, there is a troubled

history between LGBTQ+ people and institutions, and researchers, specifically, have done more

than their fair share of harm to LGBTQ+ communities (Drescher, 2010; Hegarty & Rutherford,

2019; Herek, 2010). Trust is a crucial part of the community work that we do, and trust is

facilitated by shared experience and identification. We are very interested, however, in having

conversations about how non-LGBTQ+ researchers can enter into such contexts in generative

ways, which we certainly think is possible, particularly when frameworks like cultural humility

(Lekas et al., 2020) and cultural safety (Curtis et al., 2019) are engaged.

### *Illustrating Queer Thriving Through Ethnographic Vignettes*

In this section, we share three ethnographic vignettes that illuminate queer thriving as it

dynamically manifested within LGBTQ+ intergenerational interactions. Each vignette will

demonstrate one of the pathways that have become central to transformation in our community

project—storytelling, dialogue, and collaborative artmaking.

**Finding Forgiveness Through Storytelling.** Each intergenerational meeting begins with

storytelling on that week's theme. We find that starting our sessions with storytelling helps to

ground our dialogues in real-life experience and reminds the group that the themes we take up

touch members of our group in deeply personal ways. The stories also give the group something

to react to and build from in the dialogue portion of the session that immediately follows

storytelling. Our use of storytelling acknowledges the long-standing oral storytelling tradition

that has been used by LGBTQ+ people to transmit histories, knowledge, cultures, and practices needed for surviving and thriving. This has been necessary in a world that continues to erase, censor, and distort LGBTQ+ experiences and lives.

HIV/AIDS has been a topic engaged each year of the project. The ongoing realities of HIV/AIDS, not to mention the histories of the AIDS crisis, are sadly often unknown by younger generations. Many older LGBTQ+ adults avoid talking about their experiences with HIV/AIDS because of the trauma they continue to experience around them. We have learned over time that engaging in storytelling and dialogue around participants' experiences with HIV/AIDS can be both difficult and even traumatic for speakers and listeners *and* a source of queer thriving.

During the first year of the project, Marti, a 77-year-old White feminist "non-separatist" lesbian, shared a story about volunteering at a county hospital in Chicago that had an AIDS ward in the mid-1980s. A silence fell over the room as she described the ward filled with White and Black gay men fighting desperately to live. They were in their late teens and early twenties. The nurses tried to get them to sign Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) forms, but they refused. They were still fighting. A nurse noticed Marti's willingness to sit with these young men who were dying alone, abandoned by society and their families. She asked Marti to help convince them to sign DNR orders as an act of humanitarianism. That was how, Marti explained, she became "a grim reaper." Two years into the AIDS crisis, Marti abruptly stopped volunteering at the AIDS ward. "Someone was dying all the time," and she "couldn't cope with it." She also refrained from befriending gay men, saying "I was worried that they were just going to up and die on me, and I couldn't handle losing more friends." Marti's deeply felt guilt and shame about a decision she made over 30 years ago, was palpable. With her head in her hands, she confessed, "I'm not proud of the fact that I was burned out on helping and bailed… I wasn't strong."

Marti's confession was immediately met with expressions of care and appreciation by four gay men her age, three of whom had been living with HIV for decades. "You have to forgive yourself," said one, "you did what you could." Another, who had watched all of his friends die, reminded Marti that it was the "lesbians who came and helped us" when no one else would. A third validated Marti's decision, noting "you had to take care of yourself—we all did, or we wouldn't survive."

George, a 65-year-old Filipino American gay man who now volunteers as a mentor to HIV+ youth, noted that the AIDS crisis is not over:

> My personal experience is still that 40 percent [of gay men] shy away from me when I disclose to them about my status. And the young folk are too cavalier about it with the improvements of medicine and whatnot. [A local hospital] just sent me 8 people who are young and diagnosed.

George turned to the young adults in the room, many of whom were visibly upset to learn how HIV/AIDS had impacted the elders and shocked to learn about its prevalence among people their own age. "It's the most important thing to educate yourself," he said.

We share this vignette as a way to illustrate thriving among people living *within* trauma due to systemic oppression and discrimination. Most of the older adults in the room that day live difficult lives as a direct result of discrimination and lack of legal and societal support. Many are poor and living with significant health issues in a broken healthcare system. Some are isolated and live alone, while also accessing senior services programs and living in senior housing where chosen families have picked up where biological families failed them. More than half of the younger adults in the room are low income, food and housing insecure, struggling to accept their gender and/or sexuality, and navigating mental illness. They grew up with little access to LGBTQ+ people,

history, and culture. Several have revealed that they never envisioned themselves living

past 35 years old because of the hardships of being LGBTQ+ and the lack of possibility

models.

Through storytelling around HIV/AIDS in our intergenerational community, participants

taught each other about LGBTQ+ histories and present-day health concerns that often go untold.

Younger adults expressed deep sadness and anger that they "were never taught about any of

this"—an example of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) that our project seeks to address. None

had learned about histories of HIV/AIDS in school or understood that it was still a threat today.[1]

Most had not realized that older adults in the group were living with HIV. The elders became

teachers, reclaiming their experiences with adversity as sources of wisdom for their community.

Younger adults reclaimed a history and lineage that had been kept from them, and knowledge

about its continuity in their lives today.

Marti has retold her story to different audiences several times over the first four years of

the project. After keeping her experience at the AIDS ward a secret for decades due to shame,

like the Möbius strip, Marti continues to circle back to this story, as she realized its value for

younger generations, and *her value* to her community both as an "angel of death" in the 1980s,

as she described it, and as a source of knowledge today about the severe homophobia and fear

that existed around people living with and dying from HIV/AIDS in the early years.

The topic of HIV/AIDS took on special significance for project participants in the first

few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then again later with Monkey Pox, as elders who

had lived through the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s used storytelling as a way to process

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[1] For students in Illinois public schools that now include instruction about HIV/AIDS in their curriculum, Illinois law still stipulates that "No pupil [in public schools] shall be required to take or participate in any class or course on AIDS" (105 ILCS 110/3).

and navigate a resurgence of trauma as they found themselves, again, within a health pandemic that the government would not acknowledge or act to combat. Sharing stories offered a way for participants to claim epistemic agency and thrive as a community. As elders and youngers experienced a historic moment of widespread trauma together, they had the opportunity to make joint meaning of it and find ways to strategize around it. In Marti's words, "if anything comes out of all that we're doing [in the project], it's that we are not done, and we won't be erased"—a powerful reminder that opportunities for collective resistance are central to queer thriving.

**Growing Sideways at Any Age Through Dialogue.** Following our storytelling segments, we invite participants to break off into smaller dialogue groups, each with a co-facilitator and ethnographic notetaker. This is often a space for processing emotions evoked by storytelling, but also a space to dive deeper into the session's theme. Intergroup dialogue is based on principles of mutual exchange and reciprocity—people learn about themselves as they learn from and about others who are different from them (Zúñiga et al., 2014). The objective is to explore commonalities and differences both across and within groups without necessarily seeking consensus or agreement on any issue. In fact, we have found the most generative exchanges to involve some level of inter- and intra-generational tension and disagreement.

To keep the dialogue constructive, we have a couple guiding principles. First, we remind participants that this is an intergenerational *dialogue*, not a monologue. We find this reminder is especially necessary for our elders, who, after years of invisibility, enjoy being seen and heard. This is compounded by their severely unmet need for generativity and wisdom-sharing due to limited access to younger people. Second, we help participants to see that dialogue is not the same as debate. With dialogue, the goal is shared understanding—although not necessarily agreement—arrived at through collaborative exploration.

In our project, as we mentioned earlier, gender identity has been one of the most difficult topics for intergenerational understanding. Members of the older generation grew up with very different definitions of gender and strict societal (and sometimes literal) policing of gender norms. Members of the younger generation are growing up in a moment of gender exploration, expansion, and possibility. Given these different developmental contexts, gender is often encountered by participants in the project as an insurmountable barrier to intergenerational connection.

Phyllis, a 72-year-old Black lesbian, community activist, and retired college teacher, participated in our project for 9 months from September 2021 to May 2022. Several months after her final dialogue meeting, Phyllis spoke at an LGBTQ+ storytelling event held at a local bar. Although the event was unrelated to our project, during her story, Phyllis reflected on her experience in our intergenerational community:

> In my early 30s I came out to myself… It took me two coming out groups to figure it out… You know when you finally come out you have all that "I came out" energy and so right away I helped co-found a lesbian brunch group that's still going 25 years later.

> Last year I joined the [LGBTQ+ Intergenerational] Dialogue Project. As it began, "70-year-old Phyllis" thought she was clear on her identity. I was the Black lesbian I saw in the pretty strapless wedding dress doing a bad version of the Wobble seven years ago [at her wedding to her late partner]. Then, every two weeks our dialogue meeting would begin, and we'd start with our introductions: name, age, pronouns. These introductions were met with grumbles and complaints by our older participants—"I can't remember these pronouns," "I've always been a girl," "this is ridiculous"—these complaints came from gay and lesbian cisgender folks like me… The young folks listened; they may have been exasperated but they were polite. During the conversations, we shared our stories.

> Then I began to think about my gender identity. I thought about the occasions when I'd been misgendered. Store clerks who'd called me sir. It hurt. I started wearing earrings. I do it compulsively; I even have them in my wallet—my "oops I forgot" pair. Without them I do not feel completely dressed. Maybe they would [help people] know I was female. Some of my friends thought I was a stud or a butch. While I'm not frilly, I was speechless.

> [When I began the Dialogue Project] I thought I was a "simple lines," modern, practical Phyllis doing my thing. Now I'm exploring how the binary—he and she—has not served me well. Now there may be language to clarify my gender identity. Which of course I *did not know* needed clarification. I watched earlier as my parents struggled and went from "colored" to "negro" to "Black" to "African American" and maybe back to "Black" as the language morphed to reframe and recognize our new standing in society.

> My mind has shifted as the language [for gender] has expanded. I do not know what to call where I fit in. But I do know that the binary is too limiting. I've always thought that I was a life-long learner. Never did I understand that that included the coming out process to be over, and over, and over again.

Phyllis' journey through gender illustrates pathways of transformation that queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) has described as "growing sideways." Instead of conceiving of growth for LGBTQ+ children as necessarily "growing up" in a linear trajectory toward full stature, marriage, and reproduction, Stockton theorized growing sideways as nonlinear growth involving "odd lingerings, wayward paths, and fertile delays," with no prescribed end point—a type of growth that resists the press of normativity.

Many participants in the project have developed in ways that might seem circular and even backwards within normative frameworks. Take, for example, trans elders who entered cisgender, heteronormative marriages and had children before transitioning later in life and, sometimes, losing their families as a result. The process of coming out is usually, for LGBTQ+ folks, what one elder described as "a never-ending experience" that occurs over and over throughout the lifespan, and changes depending on context (e.g., deciding who to come out to in the medical field). Twenty-three-year-old participants can become "elder" guides for "old baby gays," or, participants in their sixties or seventies who are just now coming out.

Phyllis' journey through gender has been meandering, thoughtful, laborious, and joyful. She described it as having no ending, much like the Möbius strip. At 72, Phyllis was surprised to learn that, by joining our project, she'd be entering a new phase of identity negotiation. This has

certainly required resilience, as both Phyllis and her fellow participants repeatedly made the decision to keep showing up to dialogue meetings, committed themselves to staying in the room together when conversions became difficult, and allowed themselves to be vulnerable.

This identity journey—a wonderful example of queer thriving—is inherently relational. Phyllis' journey has been traveled *through* the conversations, relationships, laughter, and trust that she has experienced with younger LGBTQ+ adults who modeled new possibilities for her at 72 years of age. We invited Phyllis to come back in October 2022 as a guest storyteller to share her story with a new cohort of LGBTQ+ project participants. The enthusiastic response from younger participants to Phyllis' story revealed a sense of validation for their own gender journeys and surprising joy in being recognized as valued teachers and sources of knowledge in our community. Notably, Phyllis is not the lone elder on a journey through gender. Over the last few years, several older participants in the project have expressed similar sentiments as they ponder the ways they might have identified differently had they grown up today.

**Creating New Communities Through Collaborative Artmaking.** In most intergenerational meetings, storytelling and dialogue are followed by artmaking in small intergenerational groups. We have found that collaborative artmaking can serve as a powerful form of dialogue that functions in a way that is very different from formal dialogue. As participants work together to conceive, research, produce, and display creative work, they communicate with each other through both the act of creative expression and casual, informal conversation that often gets into the nooks and crannies of personal thought and experience that the formal, themed dialogues cannot reach. Further, artmaking gives our younger participants, who are students at an art and design college with a range of talents and skills, a chance to step further into leadership and teaching roles. Completed artwork, shown in an end-of-the-year

exhibition at our partner LGBTQ+ community center, serves as a way for participants to communicate with LGBTQ+ audiences in the greater urban area.

In fall of 2022, a group of three younger and two older adults created a "fibers piece" over the course of seven weeks. The group consisted of individuals with very different backgrounds and life experiences: Isabel (a 22-year-old White queer woman from a rural area), Lonnie (a 57-year-old Black transman, community health activist, and native Chicagoan), Sage (a 22-year-old White queer and trans person from Appalachia), Pam (a 65-year-old White queer married woman and founder of an LGBTQ+ intergenerational housing initiative), and Yoav (a 26-year-old White Israeli gay man exploring newfound freedom living in the United States). The process took them to each other's homes, and involved the conception of an idea, determination of mediums and materials, and a great deal of tea, laughter, and hard work to get it done.

They described the final piece (depicted in Figure 2) as "focusing on our journeys to queer radical self-love and acceptance." Their artists' statement read:

> In our discussions this semester, we repeatedly returned to the ideas of self-acceptance and queer joy and the journeys we have gone through as individuals and as a part of the wider tapestry that is the LGBTQIA+ community. This piece aims to be a culmination and intersections of those ideas, our journeys personal and as part of a whole weaved together into one piece. While this piece is not technically a quilt, it takes inspiration from the rich history of quilt making in LGBTQIA+ activism. Each member made 3-5 "squares" that were thematically and structurally sewn together, illustrating the ways that our journeys to radical queer joy and self-acceptance are inherently connected to one another. We intentionally did not include a backing, leaving gaps between the pieces to symbolize future growth and those stories that are often left out of the narrative. Through this project we were each tasked with physicalizing moments or themes of self-love and queer joy. This sharing and brainstorming became intrinsically part of the project, as did the skills development we went through to teach members the basics of various fiber arts. The emphasis on the group aspect of the project was woven into the tapestry from the beginning and fostered a deep sense of community between the five members.

Through the making and sharing of this art piece, the group (whether consciously or not) actively countered legacies of discrimination, exclusion, and division that continue to oppress

LGBTQ+ people. Their focus on radical self-love and queer joy pushed back at negative

representations of LGBTQ+ lives in popular culture and scholarship. They taught each other and

reclaimed pieces of history such as the AIDS quilt and the word "dyke" for themselves in the

present day. By proudly coming into, and embracing, who they are, they dared to thrive in a very

public way.

What was perhaps most significant in this artmaking experience, was their work in

forging new models for what LGBTQ+ communities can look like and be. LGBTQ+ people

encounter oppression not only in their interactions with dominant society—deep divisions and

striking inequalities exist *within* LGBTQ+ communities along lines of race/ethnicity,

socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, and geographic location (Morris et al., 2023). These

divisions reflect the power of social structures such as systemic racism, sexism, and ageism.

Rarely do situations arise in which LGBTQ+ people as differently situated as the five members

of this group come together to search for connections and form relationships across these

divides.

In a presentation about the group's final piece, Yoav remembered "thinking about where

we connect and don't…. you don't see the connections until it's all together." Members of the

group took turns describing elements on panels such as a passion fruit "because we're all fruity,"

a body with sports bandage and tape [binding], a pink sparkly puffy "dyke" banner, sage leaves

representing a chosen name, the words "practical femme" embroidered on a blank cloth, a

butterfly tattoo to mark the beginning of a journey in living as one's true self, and the double-

meaning of a pink triangle reclaimed by an Israeli gay man in chiffon fabric as two heritages in

one (i.e., Nazi persecution of LGBTQ+ people and 1980s activism during the AIDS crisis). The

connections between different panels and experiences, held together by sage leaves or bits of thread, sometimes precariously and with gaps in between, propose new possibilities.

Experiences like this one do not simply bolster individuals' resilience in the face of adversity and trauma. They effect change in the community through the bridging of deep social divides and the act of teaching and learning from each other as resistance. Many participants in *The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project* have gone on to do activist work in areas such as LGBTQ+ eldercare and civil rights, violence against trans women of color, and LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum. In building new relationships and communities, they find their voice and agency and decide how they want to thrive, queerly.

**Takeaways for the Psychological Science of Resilience and Posttraumatic Growth**

**Importance of Mixing Disciplines**

Conventional psychological methods are often too narrow and decontextualized to capture the nuance, complexity, and challenges that manifest in situ when LGBTQ+ generations come together and, sometimes, worldviews collide. A key element of *The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project* is the collaborative multidisciplinary team of scholars, representing developmental psychology, educational philosophy, cultural anthropology, and social work. A range of concepts have emerged to describe such collaborative scholarship, including interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and even antidisciplinary. While each of these captures slightly different ways of engaging work across disciplines, we see ourselves as engaged in *mixed-disciplinary* work. By this, we see that our work asks us to bring our disciplines into the mix, leveraging the strengths of diverse theoretical and methodological paradigms all at once. For example, our project draws knowledge about human development from psychology, ethnographic methods from cultural anthropology, group practices and conflict

resolution strategies from social work, and analytical approaches from philosophy. Through

mixing, we are able to see queer thriving in a kaleidoscopic manner, not limited by one set of

assumptions or methods.

At times, our disciplinary backgrounds come into conflict. But just as we ask our

participants to "stay in the room," so do we. This means that as collaborators we sit with and talk

through disciplinary language, and its varied ways of being used, to find possible compromises

or shifts in our individual understanding. This is visible in our conversations about "growth,"

which is common parlance among developmental psychologists, but critiqued and resisted by

queer theorists. The point of such discussion is not to decide one way or the other, but to think

through what such different conceptualizations allow us, as a mixed-disciplinary team, to see.

Another important example of this work is one of our early disagreements around the

conceptualization of our community project as an "intervention." For the developmental

psychologist, the math was simple: Psychologists identify problems needing solving and design

interventions to remedy those concerns. Other members of the team challenged this framing

because, to them, it implied the problem that needed solving was inherent to LGTBQ+ people—a

type of pathologizing reminiscent of psychology and psychiatry's historical treatment of

"disordered homosexuals and transsexuals" (Drescher, 2010; Herek, 2010). It was important to

us—developmental psychologist included—that we resist and not reproduce the deficit model

endemic to psychology and instead reaffirm our commitment to an asset-based approach

(Silverman et al., 2023). Through discussion, we agreed that our intervention was not on

LGBTQ+ people, but, rather, on the circumstances that have caused damage to LGBTQ+ people

and the circumstances that continue to keep generations apart. Thus, we reconceptualized our

intervention as a *community project* that would, we hoped, promote queer thriving.

While such conversations may at first glance appear to be merely semantic, the time we spent staying in the room with one another showed us the relationships between words used in our disciplines and their consequences for how ideas, issues, and inevitably people are framed. They allowed a more textured understanding of what we were experiencing as co-facilitators of the project, as well as ways into interpreting what we were seeing participants encounter. Such work, we might see as an "intervention" on our own disciplinary formations and understandings, allowing us, as scholars, to expand—grow sideways—in how we relate not only to our disciplines but other disciplines we encounter as well.

**Importance of Community Engagement**

While psychologists have been studying LGBTQ+ resilience and posttraumatic growth for several years in their labs, it was important to our mixed-disciplinary team to recenter *community* in this work, especially because our project sought not only to understand but to promote queer thriving—and such work happens in communities not labs. This move toward a community-engaged approach was an ethical decision and consistent with a common refrain we hear from LGBTQ+ elders—"nothing about us, without us, is for us." Understandably, there is little trust between psychology as an institution and many LGBTQ+ older adults who remember what it was like to be pathologized by our field (Drescher, 2010; Herek, 2010). In a sense, our community-engaged approach is an attempt to correct, if not heal, past harms done by researchers to LGBTQ+ people, which applies similarly to other marginalized communities. Another advantage of a community-engaged approach is that it responds to and incorporates the *context* in which LGBTQ+ people are surviving and thriving. Psychology's pathology is that it emphasizes the self over society in developmental discourses (Rogers, 2018). A person-in-

context model is necessary for promoting thriving among people who are systemically

marginalized by their environments (Silverman et al., 2023).

**Importance of Descriptive Work**

Our ethnographic vignettes demonstrate, we think, just how much we do not yet know

about the depth and richness of a concept like queer thriving. Researchers need to invest more

time and effort working with communities to understand their unique relationships to constructs

like resilience and posttraumatic growth. This needs to augment, and in some cases replace, the

status quo in psychological research. We cannot continue to use measurement tools that were not

designed for understanding resilience and posttraumatic growth in LGBTQ+ communities, nor

can we simply measure resilience and growth as stable individual difference variables devoid of

context. Thriving is much, much messier than that, especially when contexts of development, at

least for LGBTQ+ people, seem to be changing from day-to-day in our current sociopolitical

moment. How are psychological measures accounting for or responding to such profound social

and cultural change? How do our concepts of resilience, posttraumatic growth, and thriving need

to evolve to maintain relevance to LGBTQ+ lives across time?

Work with marginalized communities requires that researchers cultivate a sense of

humility and first ask the question about what thriving might mean for a particular community,

especially before attempting to intervene upon it. Like our ethnographic experiment, this entails

an extensive exploratory and descriptive effort that, once again, centers the voices and

experiences of LGBTQ+ people. This aligns with broader calls in psychological science to

prioritize description before attempts are made to explain, predict, and intervene (Cooper, 2016),

which is especially important with marginalized communities who are so rarely held in mind

(and heart!) when tools and approaches are developed.

**Conclusion**

We are grateful for this opportunity to uplift the voices and experiences of LGBTQ+ people in a time of great uncertainty and fear. Within the context of persistent trauma, scientific investments in both understanding and promoting pathways to queer thriving are a crucial direction for our collective agenda, as is promoting pathways to thriving in all marginalized communities. In our project, we see the vast potential of such an endeavor. We conclude by emphasizing how personally transformative this community work has been for us as facilitators, researchers, and LGBTQ+ people, as we, ourselves, have thrived alongside, and in relationship with, our younger and older LGBTQ+ participants.

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**Figure 1**

*The Möbius strip has only one side and one edge and forms a never-ending loop that is non-orientable and has no distinguishable direction of movement and provides a metaphor for conceptualizing queer thriving*



*Note*. From *A Möbius Strip* [Illustration], by Index-0, 2017, Wikipedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Möbius_strip.png). CC BY-SA 4.0.

**Figure 2**

*Photograph of the fibers piece constructed by five members of our LGBTQ+ intergenerational community, depicting their collective journey toward queer radical self-love and acceptance and hanging on the wall of the LGBTQ+ community center*