

**Queer(ing) Vicarious Memory:  
Lessons from an LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Community Project**

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Accepted for publication in *Journal of Applied Research on Memory and Cognition* on 4/13/24.

The citation for the version of record is:

Weststrate, N. M., Morris, K. A., Moore, L. L., & Greteman, A. J. (2024). Queer(ing) vicarious memory: Lessons from an LGBTQ+ intergenerational community project. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 13(2), 181-184.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/mac0000181>

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**Author Note**

This work discussed in this article was supported by an *Award for Creative Activity* from University of Illinois Chicago, a *Faculty Enrichment Grant* from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a CoGen grant from *Innovation 80*, and a *Large Research Grant on Education* from the Spencer Foundation.

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**Abstract**

In this commentary, we support and expand the framework of vicarious memory presented by Pillemer, Thomsen, and Fivush (2024) by refracting it through the prism of an LGBTQ+ intergenerational community project—a community project that places storytelling at its heart. By doing this, we *queer* Pillemer et al.’s model and argue that opening channels for storytelling is uniquely important for LGBTQ+ communities. Given that LGBTQ+ generations have, for an array of reasons, been kept apart from each other, our community project brings to light important issues around *access* to vicarious memory. We consider this lack of access a form of epistemic injustice that we, as community-engaged scholars, seek to understand and resist. Building on Pillemer et al.’s proposals, our LGBTQ+ community project invites questions about the impact of vicarious memory at different developmental stages, the possible detriments of transmitting maladaptive narratives, and the potential impacts of vicarious traumatization.

*Keywords:* vicarious memory, intergenerational storytelling, narrative, LGBTQ+, community-engaged research, multidisciplinary research

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### **Queer(ing) Vicarious Memory:**

#### **Lessons from an LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Community Project**

In their target article, Pillemer, Thomsen, and Fivush (2024) provided a conceptual analysis of vicarious memory with the goal of developing an overarching framework that would organize and advance the field. Relative to personal memory, they argued that vicarious memory has received insufficient attention in the literature, despite it being fundamental to optimal functioning across the lifespan. The authors described the benefits of vicarious memory for (1) successfully adapting to new and challenging circumstances, (2) establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, and (3) enriching identity development. We enthusiastically agree that vicarious memory closely resembles personal memory, and that opportunities for encountering other people's stories is uniquely important for human flourishing.

Our belief in the importance of vicarious memory has deepened through our work facilitating a community project that fosters LGBTQ+ intergenerational social connection. Within this project, making space for encountering others' stories is something that we intentionally do, and after observing countless storytelling episodes, we can attest to its transformative nature. In this commentary, we augment the framework presented by Pillemer and colleagues by refracting it through the prism of our LGBTQ+ intergenerational community project. We like the metaphor of a prism because any light that enters it, comes out slightly different on the other side, conveniently in the form of a glorious rainbow. Similarly, our project helps to see things in different ways. In other words, we do the work of *queering* their framework (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019), and, in doing so, support and expand their proposals, particularly as they apply to the sharing of vicarious memories intergenerationally. Pillemer et al. argued that the relative importance of personal and vicarious memory may be situation and domain specific.

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We add to these conditions by proposing the importance of vicarious memory might also be *community specific*. Adopting their functional perspective, we argue that vicarious memory sharing is especially important to marginalized communities and specifically important to the well-being of LGBTQ+ people and communities (see also Weststrate et al., 2023; Weststrate, McLean, et al., 2024).

### **LGBTQ+ Generations Kept Apart**

The intergenerational sharing of vicarious memories often occurs within the context of families (Fivush, 2019; McLean, 2016; Pratt & Fiese, 2004; Weststrate, McLean, et al., 2024). Indeed, in their target article, Pillemer, Thomsen, and Fivush focused substantially on the role of families in transmitting vicarious memory. The privileging of the family ecology, however, obscures an important aspect of LGBTQ+ social realities—that families of origin are rarely spaces in which younger and older LGBTQ+ people can access vicarious memories relevant to their LGBTQ+ identities and experiences. In fact, we can probably assume that for LGBTQ+ people, access to helpful, identity-relevant vicarious memories is severely limited within family contexts (Russell & Bohan, 2005). Thus, by queering Pillemer et al.’s framework, we invite important questions about *access* to meaningful vicarious memories.

For LGBTQ+ people, the problem of access to vicarious memory, however, extends well beyond families of origin. Research shows that, in general, any type of contact across LGBTQ+ generations is rare (Weststrate et al., 2023). There are several reasons for this. First, LGBTQ+ elders have been referred to as the “invisible generation” due to pervasive stigma that has kept them in their closets (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2016). We are only just now welcoming our first generation of “out” elders in the public sphere. Second, LGBTQ+ older adults may avoid contact with younger people because they fear being seen as an “old gay pervert.” This stereotype is a

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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. Third, LGBTQ+ elders and youth occupy spaces that are age-segregated and often inaccessible to each other (e.g., bars, youth programs). Finally, in the 1980s and 90s, the AIDS crisis decimated LGTBQ+ communities, leading to tragic loss of life among our elders, robbing LGBTQ+ youth of many community historians, kinkeepers, and storytellers. Thus, LGBTQ+ people provide a vivid example that not all marginalized communities have equal access to the adaptive benefits of vicarious memory.

Consequently, one is left to wonder where LGBTQ+ people gain access to the benefits of vicarious memory. LGBTQ+ people cannot trust that schools will fill this gap. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2024), by the end of 2023 there were 28 bills on legislature floors that sought to censor the teaching of LGBTQ+ curriculum in schools with so-called “Don’t Say Gay” laws. Four months into 2024, there have already been 52 curriculum censorship bills introduced to state legislatures. Compare this with only 7 states where LGBTQ+ content is required to be taught, accounting only for an estimated 25% of LGBTQ+ youth ages 13-17 (Movement Advancement Project, 2024).

The most accessible space for LGBTQ+ people to access vicarious memory might be in the media (e.g., TV, films, social media, websites). However, we know that, while at times validating and educational, media representation for LGBTQ+ people can be both limited in the number of narrative possibilities it provides, relying on one-dimensional stereotypes and trauma-saturated storylines (McInroy & Craig, 2017; McLaren et al., 2021).

### **The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project**

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We—a multidisciplinary group of LGBTQ+ scholars representing developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, social work, and educational philosophy—have been troubled by this generation gap and its implications for sharing memories and knowledge. Deciding to do something about it, since 2019, we have been facilitating *The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project* ([www.generationliberation.com](http://www.generationliberation.com)) in collaboration with a local LGBTQ+ community center in Chicago. Each academic year, we bring a new cohort of approximately 15 youth (18-25) and 15 elders (60+) together for biweekly meetings. At each meeting we promote intergenerational engagement through storytelling, dialogue, collaborative artmaking, and shared meals. Each meeting is structured around a theme that is important to LGBTQ+ lives. By now, we have facilitated over 100 dialogues with over 120 younger and older adults.

At its heart, our project seeks to understand what happens when two generations, who rarely get the chance to interact, come together into sustained engagement. From the beginning, our project has fundamentally been about promoting the transmission of vicarious memory across LGBTQ+ generations. While we don't think of our project as an "intervention"—over the decades, LGBTQ+ people have been intervened upon enough by psychology and psychiatry—we do engage in activities that intentionally stimulate storytelling. We do this quite explicitly. At the beginning of every meeting, we invite 3-5 storytellers to share a 5-minute story in order to ground the topic in real-life experience. In the latest iteration of the project, over the course of several weeks in the Fall semester, we had participants collaboratively write and refine one story to share at private Storytelling Showcase in December. In the Spring semester, small group work shifts toward collaborative artmaking around a theme determined by the intergenerational community. Through the artmaking process, stories are shared, and then reflected in the culminating artwork, which is presented at a public Art Show. You can learn

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more about the project at our website or in our publications (e.g., Greteman et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2022, 2023; Weststrate, Greteman, et al., 2024).

### **Lessons Learned through Queering Vicarious Memory**

Our experience with *The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project* offers unequivocal support for several of Pillemer et al.'s central claims. In our project, we saw how through sharing vicarious memories, younger and older LGBTQ+ adults helped each other navigate new and challenging circumstances. For example, storytelling from elders about living through the height of the AIDS crisis helped younger LGBTQ+ participants navigate uncertainty and fear around the COVID-19 pandemic and, later, the Monkeypox virus. The elder participants would often remind us, "This is not our first pandemic." Although the pandemic was retraumatizing for many of our elders, they were eager to share strategies for staying safe and proud to inform youth that LGBTQ+ activism during the 1980s and 90s was central to advancing vaccination policy in the United States. Relatedly, we saw how stories from elders about activism (e.g., Gay Liberation Movement, AIDS activism), helped younger participants both make sense of and resist the historic rise of anti-LGTBQ+ legislation in the last few years that have disproportionately targeted young trans and nonbinary people. In the other direction, we saw how storytelling from the younger participants about their experiences with gender diversity, particularly with respect to emerging possibilities around trans and nonbinary identities, helped elder participants come around to using gender-affirming pronouns and even embracing this new era of gender expansion as an extension of their fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

The role of vicarious memory was also important in generating deep mutual understanding between differently positioned members of our community, be it due to generation, sexuality, gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. Among LGBTQ+ people, these



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differences can sometimes be experienced as divisions, and sometimes those divisions are profound. One particular point of conflict across generations has been the use of the word “queer” in our project. Right from the very first session, and many times since, the different generational understandings of the word queer has emerged as a conflict. Younger participants didn’t understand nor appreciate that the word queer had been used as a slur against several of the older adults, and older adults couldn’t understand how the term could be reclaimed as an affirming identity. However, sharing memories about these different experiences with the word queer has helped, over time, elders and youngers to not only accept the legitimacy of these different claims, but to even change their own relationships to it.

Finally, the sharing of vicarious memories has been absolutely essential to the identity development work that happens in our community. For instance, in our project, we visit a local LGBTQ+ archive, which helps stimulate memory sharing between and within generations. Through such memory sharing, younger participants gain access, often for the first time, to the rich cultural histories of LGBTQ+ communities—histories that are often erased, silenced, or distorted in families and public discourses (e.g., education, media). The elders bask in the glory of transmitting a rich cultural heritage to the youngers, who experience a range of emotions, from awe and wonder to regret that they are only now receiving the stories of their people and chosen family. Elders, on the other hand, relish the chance to collect vicarious memories from the youth, and, in doing so, get invited to participate in new and emerging LGBTQ+ cultures, language, knowledge, and practice. For many elders, this is the sweet fruit borne of their hardships.

In addition to validating the main claims of Pillemer et al.’s model, our community project also points to ways in which the model could be expanded or nuanced. Pillemer et al. nod

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to several of these issues—relevance of vicarious memory to different ages and developmental stages, the potential impact of dysfunctional memories, and the risk of vicarious traumatization—in their section limitations and new directions. We add to them here.

### *Queer Time*

Although the Pillemer et al. focused the discussion of benefits of vicarious memory on children, we appreciated that they named its continued relevance for people navigating later developmental periods. For LGBTQ+ people, we note that chrononormative understandings of developmental time and the cultural life script do not always apply as they would to cisgender heterosexual people (Farrier, 2015; Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2005). There is considerable diversity within LGBTQ communities concerning when developmentally significant events occur, and while our default tendency might be to think of older adults as helping younger adults navigate developmental milestones, this can be reversed, or just different, for LGBTQ+ people. In our community project, we have several older adult participants who have newly come out as trans and who benefit in extraordinary ways from the hearing the vicarious memories of younger adults who have been living as trans or nonbinary for much longer than they have and who effectively do the work of “eldering” these older adults. Indeed, due to the newness of their LGBTQ+ identities, some of our older adults don’t feel they have any relevant memories to share with younger participants. This invites us to queer our conceptions of developmental time and to think more seriously about “passing up” vicarious memories generationally. Fundamental to our project is the belief that sharing of vicarious memory across generations is mutually beneficial and multidirectionally impactful. We work hard in our project to ensure younger and older participants have equal opportunity to share their stories, and require that they see themselves as both teachers and learners during their time with us. In fact, older adults have been asked or have

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chosen to leave our project because they felt they didn't have anything to learn from the youngers.

### *Too Many Cautionary Tales*

Pillemer et al. point to the potential maladaptive impact of vicarious memory. They refer to the downsides of sharing deeply troubling, or even traumatic, family stories. Given the unfathomable oppression that LGBTQ+ people have faced over the years, traumatic stories are abundant in our community. We have written elsewhere about the overreliance on trauma as a narrative frame for LGBTQ+ lives (Weststrate, Greteman, et al., 2024). While there are clear benefits to hearing cautionary tales from elders, this runs of the risk of young people assuming these are the only legitimate storylines for their lives. Some youth have described themselves as imposters or “not queer enough” because they haven't suffered (Russell & Bohan, 2005). The prevalence of these cautionary tales (or “disaster storytelling” as mentioned in the target article) erases or obscures the joy that can be felt next to adversity, such as the joy of activism during the AIDS crisis (Hilderbrand, 2006). In fact, our community project has shown us that queer joy and queer heartache are interdependent and inseparable, and together form the basis for queer thriving (Morris et al., 2022; Weststrate, Greteman, et al., 2024). We would like to see future research, especially among marginalized communities, focus on the ways in which transmitting vicarious memories that center joy can open up broader and more diverse lifeways.

### *On “Trigger Warnings”*

Finally, and related to the previous point, something that we've been grappling with, and plan to write about in greater depth later, concerns vicarious traumatization. Pillemer et al. point to the extensive literature on the risks of vicarious trauma. Recent events in our community project have invited us to complexify our understanding of something that is usually thought of

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as uniformly bad. After our Storytelling Showcase in December 2023, some of our younger participants expressed that we should have provided “trigger warnings” for some of the elders’ stories. Our initial response to this request was to push back on it. We were clear from the outset of our project, that our community is a brave space and not a safe space (Arao & Clemens, 2013)—that our space requires resilience on behalf of storytellers and listeners. Moreover, providing content guidance might inadvertently lead to elders censoring their truths. An elder might think, “Maybe I shouldn’t tell my stories if my life now needs a trigger warning.” We’re in the process of thinking through what the “educational ask” is of this call for trigger warnings (Greteman, 2019), and how we, as facilitators, find the line between a story that is too harmful to hear—vicariously traumatizing—and just difficult to hear, but generative.

### Conclusion

We have found it helpful to conceptualize the work and importance of memories—both personal and vicarious—as dynamic. Over the first five years of *The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project* we have witnessed how limited access to vicarious memories exposes legacies of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Kid et al., 2017) and how the opportunity to dialogue across generations aids in claiming forms of epistemic agency. Epistemic injustice is a concept proposed by feminist philosopher, Miranda Fricker (2007), to articulate injustices related to knowledge and knowing. She defined hermeneutical injustice, in particular, as the lack of access to interpretive meaning-making frameworks needed to make sense of one’s life. We find it necessary to recognize the interplay between epistemic injustice and epistemic agency as dynamic and malleable. It is important, we have found, to acknowledge LGBTQ+ people’s right to queer knowledges and contemplate ways to intervene upon the circumstances that obstruct

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such access, so that LGBTQ+ people across generations can learn from one another and access the benefits of vicarious memory.

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