Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS)
University of Southampton

RECRUITMENT CYCLE for studentships starting: <u>October 2025</u> (Cohort 2)

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STUDENTSHIP PROJECT TITLE

Understanding how the shift to online communities has influenced the social networks and wellbeing of older gay men: An interdisciplinary resilience perspective.

OVERVIEW

Drawing on an interdisciplinary resilience perspective, this project uses biographical interviews, discourse analysis and social network mapping to understand elasticity and brittleness in social networks of gay men and how, underpinned by a shift to online communities, networks of older gay men have changed over time with implications for wellbeing.

SUMMARY

Studies globally report that older gay men have poorer mental health and wellbeing, including higher rates of depression, loneliness and suicide compared to their heterosexual counterparts. According to minority stress theory, poorer mental health

and wellbeing in older gay men can be explained by the experience of living through difficult social situations as part of a marginalised group vulnerable to discrimination, which creates multiple stigma-related stressors that accumulate over time.

This project will explore changes in social networks, dominant discourses, and communities over time to enhance our understanding of elasticity and brittleness in the social networks of gay men. Analyses will aim to identify how the shift to online communities influences resilience in social networks, and shapes wellbeing in gay men.

The project will recruit older gay men and use biographical qualitative interviews, discourse analysis and social network mapping to reconstruct changes in the communities of gay men over time. A purposive sampling approach will be used to recruit older gay men from urban and rural areas in North and South England.

The development of theory to enhance our understanding of how the shift to online communities influences resilience in social networks could inform social change to improve the wellbeing of gay men.

Applicants will benefit from extensive experience and research methods expertise of the multidisciplinary teams in the Ageing & Dementia and Health Work Research Groups in the School of Health Sciences; team members have backgrounds in, anthropology, medical sociology, sociology, psychology and economics.

PROJECT CONCEPT

Rationale:
Globally studies report that older gay men, commonly defined as aged 50 years and over, have poorer mental health and wellbeing, including higher rates of depression, loneliness and suicide compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Lyons 2016; McGarty et al 2021; Malik et al 2023). There is growing attention for the need to better understand the reasons for the higher prevalence of loneliness and mental health problems in this minority population.

Studies have shown that multiple factors, shaped by constellations of historical, social and cultural changes over time, lead to experience of polycrisis and contribute to poorer mental health and wellbeing in older gay men. These include stigma-related stress related to histories of discrimination, including the collective trauma of living through the AIDS epidemic, and more recently contemporary discourses around Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and associated stigma, and how these are playing out in gay communities and society at large (Calabrese 2020; Jurček et al 2022; Handlovsky et al 2024). According to minority stress theory, poorer mental health and wellbeing in older gay men can be explained by the experience of living through difficult social situations as part of a marginalised group who are vulnerable to discrimination, which creates multiple stigma-related stressors that accumulate over time (Meyer 2003).

Less is known about how the structure of social networks and their change over time shape the development of resilience within these networks to manage stigma-related stress, and the implications this has for mental health and wellbeing of older gay men. Resilience has been defined as a process of positive adaptation to adversity and

provides a dynamic, multidimensional construct that takes account of processes acting on individual, social, community and structural levels (Ungar 2011; de Lira et al 2018). Studies have shown that older gay men's social networks are diverse (Kim et al 2017) and that emotionally supportive networks, particularly close friendships, enhance mental health (Lyons 2016). Building resilience through emotionally supportive networks and communities has also been found to mitigate stigma-related stress and systematic discrimination by providing protective resources for mental health, wellbeing, and a sense of community belonging in older gay men (Lyons 2015; Handlovsky et al 2018; de Lira et al 2018).

However, there has been a lack of attention in the literature given to understanding how the growing importance of online communities, i.e. community members interacting online through social media, the internet, and mobile apps (Wellaman and Gulia 2018), has influenced resilience elucidating both elasticity and brittleness in the social networks of older gay men and implications this has for mental health and wellbeing. Digital media has become routinely incorporated into everyday life, mediating existing relationships and identities, creating new ones, and opening opportunities to address deficits and leverage support in on and offline interactions (Wellaman and Gulia 2018; Allen et al. 2020). But it has also generated multiplex relationships and created new tensions that require substantial investment in relational work to manage and negotiate reciprocity, trust, attachment on and offline (McEwen and Wellman 2013; Quan-Haase et al. 2017). For example, there is evidence that online communities in the form of increased use of gay dating apps are having a negative effect on the mental health of subgroups of gay men (Zervoulis et al 2019). The high level of complexity in communities are formed and maintained on and offline, underpinned by technological change, alongside historical changes in dominant social discourses about sexuality, gender/masculinities, gay relationships and sexual disease prevention, provides a polycrisis in everyday communities for older gay men, with implications for the social production of identities and wellbeing.

By taking a historical approach in this study to understanding how changes in the resilience of social networks of older gay men are shaped by this technological change, we will explore what makes these networks vulnerable or robust and implications for mental health and wellbeing; how people are mobilising their networks in response to this shift; and what is missing. This could also shed light on the potential for building greater resilience in the cultures and social networks of other minority groups in the UK.

Key objectives:
1) To explore how the communities and social networks of older gay men have changed over time.
2) To understand how changing discourse, legislation and policy relating to gender/masculinities, sexuality, gay relationships and sexual disease prevention over the last 40 years have shaped the communities, social networks and wellbeing of older gay men.
3) To understand how the shift to online communities has influenced changes in social networks and resilience through elasticity and brittleness in these networks.

4) To understand the implications that the shift to online communities has for mental health and wellbeing in older gay men.
5) To understand how the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity has influenced changes in resilience in the social networks, mental health, and wellbeing of older gay men.

Methods:

The project will use longitudinal qualitative biographical interviews, discourse analysis and social network mapping methods (Frank 1995; Fairclough 2013; Spindel et al 2024) to explore changes in communities, social networks, and dominant discourses over time; analyses will aim to elucidate how changes in social networks and resilience in these networks have been shaped by the shift to online communities, and the implications for mental health and wellbeing. A purposive sampling approach will be used to recruit up to 20 gay men living in two geographical regions, Leeds and Southampton, representing diverse regions in relation to socio-economic status, urban and rural areas and ethnicity. Recruitment will be through a national voluntary gay men's support organisation and a large public sector organisation and employer of a diverse workforce.

Wider implications of this proposed research:

This project will develop theory to understand how the shift to online communities has influenced resilience through elasticity and brittleness in social networks and implications for mental health and wellbeing in older gay men. This will shed light on the potential for building greater resilience in the cultures and social networks of other minority groups in the UK.

Please explain how this project represents a contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies.

The proposed project will draw on 3 distinct theoretical approaches- anthropology, discourse analysis and social network research- that sit within 2 core UKRI disciplines (humanities and the social sciences) to conceptualise social and cultural change. Anthropological approaches and discourse analysis will be used to elucidate cultural change within communities in the context of change in dominant discourses and associated legal and policy changes over time; (ii) social network analysis within sociology will be applied to understand accompanying change in social relationships including change in emergent social structures and implications for wellbeing.

This project sets out to better understand resilience through elucidating both elasticity and brittleness in social networks which are responding to cultural, social, and technological change. Disruption in how gay communities are formed and maintained, underpinned by technological change (a shift to online communities), has been accompanied by historical change in dominant discourses pertaining to AIDs/disease prevention, sexuality and masculinities, providing a polycrisis in everyday communities for older gay men. The proposed studentship will develop theory about how networks of

gay men have changed over time, identify elasticity and brittleness within networks, and explore implications for wellbeing.

Gay men form a minority group vulnerable to discrimination, with high rates of suicide and poor mental health. By taking a historical approach to understanding changes in the resilience of social networks of older gay men, this study could also shed light on the potential for building greater resilience in the cultures and social networks of other minority groups.

Please list and describe any specific/additional technical training or support to undertake and successfully deliver this project.

The PhD student would undertake generic skills through the Doctoral Training Centre, including skills in effective communication skills, presentation skills to range of audiences, knowledge exchange and academic writing.

In addition, the student would undertake bespoke training courses in biographical methods available through the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and in social network methods and analysis (qualitative) (LSE, Oxford, Exeter). They will also have training in engagement in research of hard to reach and marginalised groups.

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