

My research agenda is focused on the experiences of LGBTQ midlife and older adults, particularly the experiences of women and bisexual individuals. I am especially interested in how members of the LGBTQ community shape and perceive their social networks and intimate relationships. I view sex and sexuality as an important aspect of older women's lives that informs their health and interpersonal experiences across diverse sexual identities and life stages. In examining the lives of bisexual older women and the sexual experiences of older women generally, I utilize a life course perspective, conceptualizing later life as an accumulation of earlier life experiences. I position myself as a critical feminist gerontologist, an approach that holds researchers accountable for critically assessing the state of our fields and literature, challenging privileged assumptions that operate and are maintained in academia, with the goal of promoting equity in health and well-being of all people. My research agenda supports these goals by gaining an in-depth understanding of how social networks and sexuality shape the lives of older women and older bisexual individuals and by recognizing that these social processes are influenced by socially constructed assumptions about sexuality and bisexuality that must be illuminated and critically examined.

My most recent projects are inspired by these goals. For my general exam, which I passed with distinction, I completed a review of theories used to conceptualize the sexuality and sexual lives of midlife and older women in order to identify the dominant and counter theoretical narratives that inform the field. Through this project, I recognized the importance of using theory to form interdisciplinary bridges, to frame the influence of both biological and socially constructed experiences and meanings, and to examine how lives unfold over time. I am using these theoretical lessons in framing my dissertation by bridging the life course perspective with critical feminist perspectives on social constructions of sexual identities and LGBTQ communities. Through my dissertation I will examine older bisexual men and women's experiences with intimate relationships, family, and broader social networks, paying particular attention to the framing of their bisexual identities and how that identity mutually informs and is informed by their social experiences. As social support comprises one of the strongest protective factors for mental and physical health among LGBTQ older adults, my project aims to promote health equity by creating an in-depth understanding of how bisexual older adults perceive their available social support in relation to their sexual identity.

### **Research Experience**

In the past decade, I have worked on three large longitudinal studies, including the *Family Transitions Study* (PI: Brenda Volling), the *Health and Retirement Study* (PI: Jacqui Smith), and most recently, *Aging with Pride: The National Health, Aging, Sexuality and Gender Study*<sup>1</sup> (PI: Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen). As an active member of these teams, I played a wide variety of research roles, worked with diverse team members, and gained experience with the inner workings of longitudinal studies. For more than two years, I have worked on *Aging with Pride*, the largest national study of midlife and older LGBTQ adults, funded by the National Institutes of Health/National Institute on Aging. As a part of this study, I have participated in all aspects of

<sup>1</sup> Funded in part by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Institute on Aging (NIA), R01 AG026526, Fredriksen-Goldsen, PI.

research design and implementation, qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, and in-person interviewing including biomarker collection. I have also contributed to the project's writing and dissemination by conducting systematic literature reviews, conducting analyses, and writing and presenting findings and implications for practice. Most recently, I coauthored five publications that are in press or under review, three of which are under review for a supplement to *The Gerontologist*. Working on this project has provided me with valuable skills related to securing funding, collecting and managing longitudinal data, creating and maintaining positive working relationships with community research partners, and distributing findings in both academic and practice-based environments. As a member of this team, I have developed a solid understanding of key factors contributing to the health and well-being of LGBTQ midlife and older adults', with a focus on racial and ethnic minorities, gender differences, and sequences of life events.

### **Future Directions**

My dissertation project lays a foundation for studying the social lives of bisexual older adults by reviewing relevant literature and creating a holistic conceptual understanding of how bisexual identities and social experiences might inform one another in the lives of bisexual individuals, both in later life and across the life course. Informed by this background literature and theoretical framing, I will analyze qualitative data from in-depth interviews with midlife and older bisexual men and women gathered through the Aging with Pride study. My dissertation will draw on my strengths in gerontological and feminist theory, qualitative data analysis, and a critical approach to promoting health equity.

I have chosen to focus my research on bisexual individuals because as a marginalized population, they exhibit significant physical and mental health disparities compared to heterosexual, gay, and lesbian populations, while also lacking crucial social support. Within queer communities, bisexual individuals often occupy a less stable or valued social position, marginalized from both heterosexual and LGBTQ populations by anti-bisexual stereotypes including expectations of promiscuity and denial of their sexuality as a real or stable identity. These challenges and their impacts appear to last into later life, as bisexual older adults report higher rates of internalized stigma, more concealment of their sexual identity, and lower levels of social support compared to lesbians and gay men.

My future research will create an in-depth theoretical and empirical understanding of how social networks operate in the lives of bisexual individuals of a variety of ages, aided by partnerships with queer communities. As a bisexual woman, I have an understanding of the context of bisexual individuals lives and as an active participant in LGBTQ advocacy and community organizing, I am well positioned to participate in and access LGBTQ communities as research partners to examine the experiences of bisexual individuals. My long-term goals include becoming an expert in the social lives of bisexual individuals with a particular focus on older bisexual adults. In order to fully conceptualize the social lives of older adults, I will also continue to work on theory-building and empirical research related to the sexual lives of older women, to better understand how sexuality and sexual relationships fit into broader social networks. This research will inform culturally competent health and social services for marginalized older adults.