

Need for authenticity drives gender transitions in later life

September 9 2014, by Neil Schoenherr

As we age, all of us begin to think about what makes us tick and what kind of legacy we want to leave.

For some, this manifests itself in the purchase of a motorcycle, a boat or an exotic vacation.

But for others, the issues of age and transition are a bit more contemplative.

Vanessa Fabbre, PhD, assistant professor at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, considers these issues in her paper "Gender Transitions in Later Life: The Significance of Time in Queer Aging," recently published in the 2014 print issue of the *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*.

The paper examines an existential perspective on time with a notion of queer time based on the [experiences](#) of older transgender persons who contemplate or pursue a gender transition later in [life](#).

Fabbre conducted a series of interviews with male-to-female identified persons over the age of 50. She also participated in and observed three national transgender conferences.

She found that an awareness of "time left to live" and a feeling of "time served" play a significant role in later life development and help expand gerontological perspectives on time and queer aging.

"Participants in this study are conscious of social expectations for older age, most notably that they are expected to transition into their retirement years as male," Fabbre writes in the study.

"Often, participants do not reject such expectations altogether; rather, they modify them to fit their developing sense of self. For example, it was common for several people I interviewed to carefully plan their final working years so that they could retire in male mode, while also preparing for their transition to living full time as their female selves after retirement."

This careful negotiation demonstrates, she writes, how older transgender persons integrate an awareness of time left with the realities of time served and create a uniquely queer path through a common life phase such as retirement.

How is time experienced differently by queer people versus straight people?

"While all people probably think about the realities of time left to live and what that means for their lives, many queer people experience unique constraints to their identity development that create a heightened sense of urgency to experience a sense of authenticity before death. I think all people have an innate drive to realize their full potential, but for those who don't fit society's expectations for gender and sexuality, the barriers for doing so are great and this influences their experience of time and decision making in later life."

Why make this decision so late in life?

"The older adults I interviewed for this study came to realize that the scripts that society gave them to follow weren't working for them. Faced

with a shrinking time horizon and the feeling of having 'done what they were supposed to do,' they engaged in a process of renegotiating these normative expectations and in doing so demonstrate the role this plays in identity development and well-being in later life. These life experiences expand the ways we all may find potential for growth and development in later life. They also expand notions of queer temporality by drawing attention to growing older in ways that do not follow heteronormative expectations."

How can this study inform those in the health care practice?

"As human beings continue to live longer lives, the understanding of the potential for development in later life will be increasingly important for expanding the knowledge base in the field of gerontological social work, she writes in the study. By recognizing the possibilities for identity [development](#) in later life from multiple perspectives, social workers may discover new possibilities for their profession to more effectively and holistically support the growth and well-being of those with whom they work."

More information: "Gender Transitions in Later Life: The Significance of Time in Queer Aging." Vanessa D. Fabbrea, *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*. [DOI: 10.1080/01634372.2013.855287](https://doi.org/10.1080/01634372.2013.855287)

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