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Imagining bisexual futures

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Imagining bisexual futures: Positive, non-normative later life

Shortened title: Imagining bisexual futures

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Author biography

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Abstract:

Gerontologists have long noted that people find it hard to imagine themselves growing old. Previous research has also shown that, despite the increased variability and diversity of (post)modern life courses, people still tend to project normative life courses, centring around marriage, childbearing and grandchildren. It has been argued that this tendency, combined with the scarcity of representations of older queer people, creates particular difficulties for younger queer people in imagining later life positively. This paper presents findings from a study where members of a bisexual community used creative methods to imagine their futures. Predominantly, they created positive and non-normative futures.

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> "All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up,
> imagine them […] If we don't, our lives get made up for us by other
> people" (le Guin, 2004, p. 208)

Introduction

It is a commonplace that people often disassociate themselves from being old, even when they would normally be categorised by other people as 'old' or 'older' on the basis of their chronological age (Jones, 2006). Gerontologists have explained the phenomenon in a variety of ways: in the 1960s and 70s through the concept of 'denial of ageing', whereby membership of an older age category was predetermined and the claim not to be old was a form of false consciousness (e.g. Bultena & Powers, 1978). From the 1970s and onwards, a focus on ageism and age discrimination (Bytheway, 1995, 2005) attributed the difficulty to the ways in which ageist societies devalue older people and later life (Nelson, 2005), and enabled more social constructionist understandings of the nature of age and ageing (e.g. Featherstone & Wernick, 1995; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). In the 1990s, Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) identified a common trope of a 'mask of ageing': someone looking at themselves in the mirror and feeling as if the mask of an older person had appeared on top of their true face. In this period and since, a small body of discursive gerontological work began to conceptualise age status as highly locally variable within talk and so determined by immediate rhetorical purposes (Coupland & Coupland, 1991; Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991; Jones, 2006; Nikander, 2002)

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Since even people who would generally be categorised as 'old' or 'older' (on the differences and politics of these and related terms, see the debate: Andrews, 1999, 2000; Bytheway, 2000; Gibson, 2000), often do not imagine themselves to be old, it is, perhaps, not surprising if younger people rarely imagine that they will ever age themselves. However, it is argued that an unwillingness to imagine the future and oneself as older can have a variety of negative consequences, both at a more macro societal level (e.g. inadequate planning and provision of care services [Pickard, in press] and environmental degradation and public health problems [Adam, in press]) and at a more personal level. It is clear that many younger people worry about growing older (Neikrug, 2003) and some expect old age to be miserable (Lacey, Smith, & Ubel, 2006). Lacey et al. argue that this expectation can lead to poor decision making in the present because a future aged self is not valued, as well as reinforcing inter-generational conflict and misunderstanding. Similarly, Moody (1988) argues that negative visions of old age as a time of tragedy, decline and loss can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Imagining future life courses

There is a small literature on what happens when researchers ask people (usually school, college and university students) to imagine the future course of their lives into old age. Two themes emerge from this that are of relevance to this study. One is overtly discussed in the literature: whether or not old age is imagined in predominantly negative ways. The other is very seldom addressed: whether a heterosexual identity provides a foundation for imagining later life.

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It is clear that, while younger people often have negative and homogenised visions of old age (Kimuna, Knox, & Zusman, 2005; Mosher-Ashley & Ball, 1999; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006, 2007; Scott, Minichiello, & Browning, 1998), they often imagine that their own old age will be more positive (Bulbeck, 2005; Patterson, Forbes, & Peace, 2009). Two of the earliest studies, conducted in the 1970s, in Australia (Summers, 1970, cited in Bulbeck, 2005) and the UK (Pahl, 1978, cited in Crow, Hatton, Lyon, & Strangleman, 2009), have been partially replicated more recently. Both original studies asked older school children to imagine their futures and found that they envisaged predominantly the kinds of traditional life courses that others might expect for them, according to their social class, gender and educational attainment. Data from the partially replicated UK study are not yet available, but Bulbeck (2005) reports that participants in her study had raised aspirations, envisaging markedly more optimistic futures than the 1970s students. She notes that many of the 21st century students are unlikely to be able to achieve their visions.

These studies also find that imagined future life courses very commonly include marriage and having children. These life course features, while available to some non-heterosexuals, can be considered aspects of a heteronormative life course (Goltz, 2008; Warner, 1991; Watson, 2005). Young women in Bulbeck's (2005) study were even more likely to specify marriage as part of their imagined future than young women in Summers' 1970 study. Bulbeck also noted clear gender differences in what participants imagined. Young women imagined further education, travel, career, marriage and family, whereas young men imagined material comfort (including being

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a good provider for imagined wives and children), sexual prowess and leisure activities of sport and cars.

Patterson et al. (2009) found that the 100 16-18 year old New Zealanders in their study all imagined remarkably similar life courses, featuring attending university, travelling overseas, meeting a life partner, getting married and having children and grandchildren. Aged 80, they saw their life focus as enjoying past achievements, with their predominantly optimistic accounts of old age contingent on past success in building relationships and acquiring material goods. Gordon et al. (2005) report that almost all of the young women (aged 11-15) from the UK in one of their studies imagined that by the time they were 35 they would be married or (a much smaller proportion) in a long-term live-in relationship, and also have children. Phoenix interviewed university student athletes and found that they almost exclusively imagined a conventional life course after university, featuring much reduced participation in sport, career, marriage, children and eventually grandchildren (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006, 2007, 2008). It is clear that biological or adoptive family play an important role in providing templates for life courses and ageing (Hockey & James, 2003). Phoenix and Sparkes (2006) also found that same-sex older family members were a particularly important resource for university student athletes attempting to imagine their own ageing.

Although highlighting the normative status of marriage and having children, none of these papers specifically discuss the sexual orientation or identity of their participants. While it seems unlikely that all were heterosexual, the life courses imagined are

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overwhelmingly heteronormative. Since most of the participants in the above studies were school-age and schools often have particularly homophobic cultures (Guasp, 2009), this raises two questions. Firstly, how do those school-age children who do identify as non-heterosexual imagine their futures? Secondly, how do non-heterosexual adults imagine their future life courses? The first question is beyond the scope of the present study but the second is its broadest focus.

Imagining queer ageing

The arguments introduced earlier about the importance of enabling people to imagine their own ageing and later life have particular salience in relation to queer[i] people. It is clear that the commercial gay scene, in particular, is predominantly youth-centred and even hostile to older age, which may be defined as beginning as early as around age 30 (Goltz, 2008; Ward, Jones, Hughes, Humberstone, & Pearson, 2008). Older queer people are particularly culturally invisible (Ward et al., 2008) which means that they are rarely available as role models for younger queer people. Saxey (2008) argues that the prominence given to 'coming-out' stories, which are almost always portrayed as something occurring in earlier life, means that older queer people are also invisible in literature

Perhaps the most visible figure of an older queer person is the self-loathing, isolated, sexually predatory and closeted older gay man (Berger, 1996; Hostetler, 2004). While research suggests that this bears little relation to most older gay men's experiences, its influence is argued to increase the tendency of young gay men to fear ageing (Goltz, 2008). Lesbian communities are generally claimed to be less ageist than gay ones

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(*ibid*) but in a previous study, we found that many older lesbians reported finding lesbian spaces increasingly unwelcoming and inaccessible as they aged, and lesbian communities largely age stratified (Ward et al., 2008). This suggests that younger lesbians may also be lacking in role models for queer ageing.

While a body of research literature now exists on the experiences of ageing for lesbians and gay men, there is hardly any empirical work on bisexual ageing, although Weinberg et al.'s paper on mid-life bisexuals suggests some useful starting points (Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 2001). As will be demonstrated below, the age profile of people attending BiCon, and of the bi-identified community in general in the UK, is somewhat older than that of the commercial lesbian and gay scene, but is still relatively youthful. Data on the age profiles of trans communities is hard to come by but we know that rates of relationship breakdown with birth family are very high (Whittle, Turner, & Al-Alami, 2007), which might suggest that one source of potential role-models for ageing is much reduced. Phoenix and Sparkes (2006)'s finding about the importance of older same-sex family members for imagining ageing may not hold for queer people who have heterosexual and/or cis-gendered parents, as most do.

Sociologists have argued that contemporary western life courses have become much more variable and individualised, which might be thought to make it easier to imagine non-normative ones. Whether characterising current Western society as postmodern (e.g. Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) or as late-modern (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Leccardi, 2008), many sociologists argue that traditional

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constraints, obligations and consensuses about acceptable life courses have lessened, leaving individuals with both more choice and more personal responsibility to determine what happens over the course of their lives. This is argued to require constant self-monitoring and reflexivity as (at least some) individuals make choices, albeit constrained one, about whether or not to go through normative life course stages, such as getting married, having children and (especially for men) a long period of employment followed by retiring from paid employment.

Simultaneously, in the UK and elsewhere, social, legislative and medical changes have made traditional life course events, such as marriage and having children, more available to queer people, through civil partnerships, fertility treatment and surrogacy, and rights to adoption (Eaglesham, 2010). While debates continue as to whether these changes challenge or re-inscribe heteronormativity (see, for example the special issues of *Feminism and Psychology,* (2003), 13 (4) and (2004), 14(1) on marriage and civil partnerships) they certainly create a greater range of possibilities for queer people's life courses.

Thus, for queer people, normative life course features have become more available at a time when they are becoming less normative. This might be hypothesised to have two opposing possibilities for the ways that queer people interact with these weaker but still common life course norms. It could make it easier to resist those norms altogether since, for example, there may be less expectation that individuals (of any sexuality) will have children. Likewise, practices such as polyamory (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Barker, 2004; Haritaworn, Lin, & Klesse, 2006), which may involve

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an intentional rejection or problematisation of conventional marriage, may be becoming less stigmatised. Conversely, these changes to the strength and availability of norms might lead to a redefinition and appropriation of those norms, as in the concept of 'family of choice'(Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001) and the eliding of civil partnership with marriage. Which, if any, of these strategies do queer people use when they are imagining their own futures?

There is one empirical paper which asked queer people to imagine their own ageing and later life. Goltz (2008) ran a semester-long series of 'generative pedagogical focus groups' for undergraduates at a US university, aimed at imagining queer futures using creative methods such as writing, drawing, making up songs and dancing. Seven people, aged between 19 and 29 attended, four of whom were male, of whom three identified as gay and queer and one as queer and attracted to women, and three of whom were women and identified as queer and lesbian or bisexual[ii]. Goltz' study brings together the overt and unstated themes from previous research, asking (in effect) whether sexuality affects the capacity to imagine a positive later life. He found marked differences between the futures envisaged by the men and the women. The men imagined overwhelmingly negative later lives of isolation, loneliness, bitterness and early death. They did not imagine long term relationships or having children. The women imagined much happier futures, focused on long-term coupledom and having children but mainly limited to domesticity. Thus, in my terms, they could be argued to be redefining and appropriating life course norms. Goltz argues that the extent to which the participants were able to imagine happy later lives was dependent on the

extent to which they were able to imagine quasi-normative heteronormative life courses.

Identifying normativity in non-normative space

Changes to the form and strength of normative life courses create additional challenges for the analyst in identifying normativity in data, since normativity itself is more variable. In this paper, I draw on my previous work on the concept of 'counter-narratives'(Jones, 2002, 2003), which used analytic concepts from critical discursive psychology (Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998) and positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) to think about the interplay of canonical and non-canonical narratives. Here, I shift my focus to normativity and non-normativity but continue to conceptualise it as existing at both a general and a local level, and as being both a participants' concern, visible in data, and an analyst's category, to be verified by reference to evidence beyond the immediate data.

But first, a word about how I am theorising 'normativity'. By stating that some life courses are normative I do not mean that subscribing to them is in any sense proper, desirable or virtuous. Rather, I mean simply that some life courses are commonly treated *as if* they were proper, desirable and virtuous. My interest in the normative is grounded in an ethnomethodological concern with people's everyday sense making practices (Garfinkel, 1984), recognising that, as competent social actors (Heritage, 1984), people already know what a life course is 'supposed' to look like. When they talk (and create images, in this study) about their own life course, they do so in relation to normative life courses, whether by endeavouring to make the events of

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their life match up to what they perceive to be the proper, desirable, virtuous sequence or by resisting and rejecting those normativities. In different contexts, what they treat as the normative events and sequences may vary, as I discuss below.

Many theorists have argued that some personal narratives draw on normative or dominant ways of framing a topic (e.g. Antaki, 1994; Bruner, 1987, 1991; Mishler, 1995; Talbot, Bibace, Bokhour, & Bamberg, 1996). How such normative narratives are to be identified within data is rarely discussed but Talbot et al. suggest one characteristic. They argue that "the propositions implicit in master narratives or dominant discourses are widely accepted as self-evident" and because of this "narrators who cast their own account in terms deriving from such a discourse are free to present their personal story as a description of events that is isomorphic to 'reality'" (Talbot et al., 1996, p. 226). To rephrase this in relation to the current study, this suggests that imagined futures that participants are positioning as normative might be identified when they treat their account as unremarkable, unproblematic and as not needing extensive explanation. Correspondingly, imagined futures which participants are positioning as non-normative might be identified when participants treat them as requiring defence or extensive elaboration.

Thinking about normativity as something that participants themselves are aware of and attend to in their talk has much to recommend it. Elder (1992) argues that people are often very aware of life course norms, and monitor their own progress against those norms. Paying attention to what participants themselves position as normative or non-normative enables a subtle and nuanced analysis of the complexities of what

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constitutes the normative at different discursive moments. However, limiting

discussion to normativities which participants themselves make relevant would not

allow the analyst to consider the overall discursive climate in which particular

imagined futures may be more common, more institutionalised or more untroubled

than others.

As I have argued elsewhere (Jones, 2002, 2003), the metaphor of discursive resources

as a stream is a helpful one. If we imagine that what people imagine about their

future life courses makes up a stream of water, it is clear from the literature reviewed

above that the overall normative flow is in one particular direction (relationship

formation leading to marriage, followed by children and then grandchildren).

However, within the stream there are local currents and eddies which mean that at

some points water is flowing in different directions. Over all, the conventional life

course is normative. In some particular local contexts, such as at BiCon[iii], the flow of

the stream might be different from the general trend and life course features that

would be highly non-normative elsewhere may be treated as normative. Evidence for

the broader normativities of BiCon can be inferred from the demographic information

in the BiCon survey and seen more directly through formal BiCon processes and

mechanisms, such as the Handbook, especially the Code of Conduct section (e.g.

http://www.bicon2010.org.uk/static/hb/Handbook.pdf) and the records of the Decision

Making Plenaries (e.g. http://bicon.org.uk/archive/bicon2008/dmp_minutes_2008).

They can also be identified from previous academic studies of BiCon (Barker, Bowes-

Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy, & Brewer, 2008; Bowes-Catton, Barker, & Richards, in

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press). In addition, the way in which research is designed and implemented creates its own normativities, to which participants also respond.

In this paper I use data created by members of the bisexual community imagining their own ageing at BiCon to add to theory about the basis on which normativity can be identified in data. I also ask whether Goltz' finding (that the ability to imagine positive futures is dependent on imagining quasi-normative reproductive life courses) holds true for the participants in this research.

Participants

The current study drew participants from people who attended BiCon in August 2010 (with the exception of participants in the pilot study. See endnote 1). It is not claimed that either the research participants or people who attend BiCon are in any sense representative or typical of people who identify as bisexual, still less of people who behave bisexually. As can be seen in Table 1, they are an unusual group demographically, so it seems unlikely that they are. Rather, the study recruited from BiCon attenders because they are a group of people who do (predominantly) identify as bisexual and about whom we have demographic information already. This makes it possible to compare participants in the 'Imagining Bi Futures' workshops to the wider group of people who attend BiCon.

BiCon has surveyed BiCon attenders through an extensive questionnaire since 2004, typically getting response rates of about a third of participants. The data from these surveys is not yet fully analysed, but some has been written up in academic

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publications (Barker et al., 2008) and in bisexual community publications such as

Bisexual Community News. In writing this paper I have also examined the raw data

from the 2008 survey in order to obtain relevant information not yet in the public

domain. The demographic information from the surveys reported in these publications

(BiCon 2004 and BiCon 2008 respectively) is presented in Table 1 alongside the

demographic information about participants in the current study.

Table 1:

	Bicon 2004 (n=92)	Bicon 2008 (n=105)	Bi Futures 2010 (n=33)
Bisexual*	85%	85%	97% (32)
Age	17-61	19-60 (av 33.7)	20-66 (av 37.5)
Female**	47%	62%	61% (20)
Male**	36%	26%	18% (6)
Trans/genderqueer**	19%	10%	21% (7)
White ethnicity	99% ?	67% +?	76% +? (25)
Degree	80%	59%	82% (27)
Disability	36%	50%	27% (9)
-Mental Health	25%	39%	6% (2)

* This figure is a reponse to a yes/no question 'have you ever described yourself as bisexual'. More nuanced accounts of sexual identity are elicited elsewhere in both the BiCon survey and the Bi Futures questionnaire
** The question about gender identity in the BiCon survey offers 10 options and 'other, please specify'. These include a 7 part Lickert-style scale of female to male. Answers 1-2 and 6-7 on this scale are coded as 'female' and 'male' respectively. While the demographic questionnaire was free response, I used an analogous metric to categorise those responses which were not straightforwardly 'male', 'female' or 'transgender/genderqueer'.
? Since I have not seen the original data from the 2004 BiCon survey, I cannot account for a figure of 99% white ethnicity from a sample of 92 respondents.
+? White ethnicity seems to be systematically under-recorded.

It can be seen that participants in the present study were more likely to identify as

bisexual than BiCon attenders in general - all but one participant had done so at some

point in their lives, and almost all described themselves as such now, sometimes with

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the addition of 'queer' or 'pansexual/panromantic'. This is perhaps not surprising, given that the workshop was titled ' "When I get older": Imagining your bisexual future', even though the workshop description said that it was open to people of all sexual identities. Participants in the study were somewhat less likely to identify as male and markedly less likely to state that they had a disability, although this last is perhaps an artefact of the different ways in which the question was asked.

Participants in the current study were also asked two paired questions 'current romantic/sexual relationships' and 'are you poly?' and ' do you have children?' and 'do you expect or want to have children?'. These do not correspond exactly to the questions asked in the BiCon survey. In particular, the free-response form I used means that answers should be understood as volunteered and variable, and so likely to lead to under-reporting.

Table 2:

	BiCon 2008 (n=105)	Bi Futures 2010 (n=33)
Currently single	17%	27% (9)
Married	9.5%	15% (5)
Civil partnership	2.9%	3% (1)
Polyamorous	54%	58% (19)
Non-monogamous	33%	
Currently have children	1.9 -3.8% *	18% (6)
Definitely expect or want to have children	(question not asked)	6% (2)

*Unclear because of two ambiguously worded questions

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The main difference between participants in this research and people who attended BiCon in 2008 is thus much higher rates of parenthood[iv] and somewhat higher rates of both marriage and singledom.

Notwithstanding these differences between participants in this research and people who attended BiCon in 2004 and 2008, both groups have high rates of life course features which are non-normative, such as being bisexual, poly or transgender/genderqueer. Does this affect the types of future life courses which are imagined?

Methods and analysis

Data were collected during three one hour workshops attended by 33 people in total (Pilot: n=6, at BiReCon: n=21, on 3rd day of BiCon n=6). Workshops were recorded and had a three part structure which initially focused on negative visions of old age, using the phrase 'when I fear growing older, I imagine' as a stimulus for discussion. This was followed by a focus on positive visions of old age, including an adaptation of a reading from the book *Growing Old Disgracefully* (The Hen Co-op, 1993). Participants were then instructed to make a picture of how they imagined their own old age or later life, using materials supplied[v]. They were told that it didn't matter whether they create a positive, negative, realistic or mixed picture of their later life. While participants were creating their images I talked to as many of them as I could, asking them what they were representing. When people finished their images they wrote a brief description of what the picture showed and filled in a brief demographic

questionnaire. Finally there was some whole group discussion, more substantially in the smaller groups than in the larger one due to time constraints.

The data thus consist of: audio recordings of the whole group discussions and my conversations with people as they were making their images; written descriptions of the images and filled-in demographic questionnaires; and the images themselves. In this article, for reasons of space, I focus on the pictures and accompanying written and verbal picture descriptions, rather than the group discussions.

Bowes-Catton et al. (in press) have argued that creative methods are particularly well suited to research being undertaken at BiCon, since similar creative activities occur in other parts of the event. Participants may experience creative methods as playful and disinhibiting when representing issues which might otherwise be experienced as problematic or difficult (Gauntlett, 2007). Certainly participants in the present study did not show or report difficulty or reluctance.

The images are theorised here mainly as a stimulus for discourse, rather than as analytic objects in their own right. Some are, however, reproduced here in order to explain the discourse and to warrant at a simple level the claims made about what was represented. Clearly there is much more that could be said about the images themselves.

The qualitative data was initially analysed thematically, looking for patterns in the images and their descriptions, in relation to life course features and whether the future

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imagined was broadly positive, negative or mixed/neither. It was then analysed in
more detail, looking particularly for participants' orientations (Stokoe, 2000) to
normativity and non-normativity and how participants positioned their own imagined
future (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). While the concept of participants'
orientations is taken from types of discourse analysis (Antaki, 1994; Potter, 1996;
Wetherell, 1998) and conversation analysis (Jefferson, 1988; Sacks, 1995), the current
work is not located within these traditions.

The data from the demographic questionnaire was collated quantitatively and then
compared to the imagined futures, looking particularly for relationships found by
other researchers between future life course features and demographic characteristics
such as age and gender. While percentages are cited, the sample size is of course
small and within subgroups (such as age band and type of future imagined) it is
sometimes very small, so all the quantitative findings need to be treated as indicative
only.

Since the present study is social constructionist in framework (Burr, 1995), I do not
conceptualise the futures imagined as predictors of what is likely to happen but as
providing data about the discursive resources available to research participants on a
particular occasion. The accounts produced are thus understood not as a stable
imagining, which tells us how participants imagine their future, but as a highly
context-dependent account produced in a particular social, historical and, especially in
the current study, temporal-spatial setting. The accounts may, however, themselves

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influence the future if participants change their behaviours in the light of having taken part in the workshop, as several reported to me subsequently.

Findings

The imagined futures that participants produced overwhelmingly did not resemble the heteronormative life courses found by other researchers working in this field. Neither were they the gloomy visions of an isolated life outside society produced by the gay men in Goltz' study. Rather, participants predominantly imagined positive later lives with highly non-normative life course features.

As might perhaps be expected from a group with such high rates of current poly practice (58%) and even higher rates of past experience or willingness to consider poly in the future (a further 15% n=5), the normative life course feature of finding 'the one' (Patterson et al., 2009) life partner and settling down to happy monogamy is much less common in this data than in the other studies. Many people imagined poly futures or futures which might be either monogamous or poly – often using the formulation 'my partner(s)'. Imagining a poly future may entail a higher degree of uncertainty about the future than imagining a monogamous future with an existing partner, since the people with whom you will age may not all be known. Adding to this a bisexual identity means that the gender of future partners is also not known. As Bunny (all names are self-chosen pseudonyms) said of the future partners shown in her picture:

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"I deliberately drew that they are a lot less detailed than I am, because I can't imagine other people's futures and I don't know what gender they would have, so I deliberately left them kind of fairly vague, you know, because I didn't think I could specify"

Only 6 people specified that a current partner would be in their future. It might have been anticipated that this greater degree of uncertainty about the shape of the future would create difficulties in imagining it but it does not seem to have done so.

While rates of parenthood are much higher in this study than in participants at BiCon 2008, 27 respondents (82%) still do not currently have children. In response to the question 'do you want or expect to have children' only two participants answered with a simple 'yes'. Two stated that while they did not want or expect to have children themselves, future partners might have children. The remaining 8 (24%) gave somewhat hedged answers to the question, such as 'maybe' (n=3), 'yes, but I wouldn't want to do it alone', 'sometimes but not often' and 'would like to but it is unrealistic'. Thus this is overwhelmingly a group which does not have, and does not envisage having, children.

Less than a third (n=10) of the imagined futures mentioned current or future children. Previous researchers have found clear gender differences in the extent to which people imagine having children, but these were not found in this data. Very similar low proportions of men (33%, n=2) and women (30%, n=6) mentioned the possibility of having children. Previous studies have not covered genderqueer/trans people; in

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this study 29% (n=2) imagined the possibility of having children. Thus, across all gender categories, around 70% of respondents did not imagine having children.

However, despite this relative absence of the quasi-normative reproductive life courses imagined by the 'lesbians' in Goltz' study, participants in this study imagined largely positive and meaningful later lives.

Pictures 1 and 2 show V.V.'s picture which has a 'lift-the-flap' form. As she was drawing it, V.V. explained:

V.V.   This is my bell-tent which I already have. And I am just going to, I am going to draw the edge of the, my girlfriend's bus, she has got a van, this girlfriend who I haven't got yet

Rebecca   Okay, yes, this imaginary girlfriend

V. V.   Who is going to be able to bring all my stuff to camp for me

Rebecca   Excellent, yes, set it up.

V. V.   And I have hot sex in the end

Rebecca   Of course

             [both laugh].

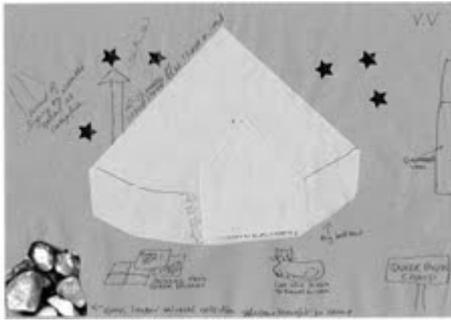Image 1

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Image 2

It could certainly be argued that 'two old women having hot sex on a summer's night' (a phrase written on the drawing, under the flap) is not part of the normative life course which might suggest that old women should be heterosexual and focusing on their grandchildren. But the play of local and general non-normativity in this talk about V.V.'s imagined future is also more complex than that. The laughter in both their voices throughout this extract (not transcribed), the joint laughter at the end, and perhaps the clichéd phrase 'hot sex', suggests that they are not treating V.V.'s 'personal story as a description of events that is isomorphic to "reality"' (Talbot et al., 1996, p. 226). Rebecca's responses to V.V.'s description could be seen as potentially offensive – she reformulates 'this girlfriend who I haven't got yet' as 'this imaginary girlfriend' which might position V.V. as a fantasist. However, V.V. doesn't seem to treat her remarks as offensive and the conversation ends with Rebecca's agreement 'of course' and their joint laughter. It seems likely that the local norms of BiCon,

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which include a general sex-positive culture (Barker et al., 2008) contribute to them

co-producing this positive but non-normative imagined old age.

As he was drawing his picture (Picture 3), I had the following exchange with Purple

Person:

Rebecca   What are you drawing?

Purple Person I am drawing myself half naked in a nursing home

Rebecca   [laughing] Oh yes, okay

Purple Person Because I imagine that there will be LGBT nursing homes in the future

                where you can have a supply of strippers

Rebecca   And these are condoms? Yes

Purple Person Condoms, there's strippers, the entertainment's sort of there, you know

Rebecca   Okay, yes. Not bingo

Purple Person You know it hasn't, it hasn't turned into something that I wouldn't

                enjoy. So I have actively been sort of talking to some of my nurse

                male friends and trying to plant the seeds, so that these guys might sort

                of set something up

Rebecca   Yes, yes there's one in Berlin

Purple Person I think there's one in Australia

Rebecca   Okay, yes

Purple Person But that's where I am going to be. The quicker I am in there the better,

                because I would love it

[…]

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Rebecca   And would the staff need to be queer as well or just queer friendly?

Purple Person They would have to be, yes, I mean one of my fears was because I

                     read an article about a lot of LGBT older people having to go back into

                     the closet when they went into homes

Rebecca   Yes, yes

Purple Person And that's unacceptable so. I want to make something happen

Rebecca   Excellent, great, thank you very much [laughs]

Image 3

While non-normativity can be seen here in what is imagined, in comparison to the

reality of current nursing homes, non-normativity can also be seen to be something

that Rebecca and Purple Person draw attention to in their talk. Purple Person positions

his imagined nursing home in explicit contrast to existing ones, a positioning Rebecca

picks up and elaborates when she says 'not bingo'. In this way, they do not treat

Purple Person's imagined future as normative. However, Purple Person's last

comment 'that's unacceptable' could be argued to reposition his imagined future as

normative. 'That's unacceptable', is an absolute statement. This is particularly clear if

we consider alternative formulations he could have used here, such as 'I think that's

unacceptable' or 'I really don't want that'. 'That's unacceptable' treats his dislike of

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the idea of older LGBT people having to go back into the closet as isomorphic to reality.

Image 4

Anthony Thrift (Picture 4) imagines a future life course that, in some respects, is much more heteronormative, focusing as it does on reproduction and family life. However, his imagined family set up is poly and he continually orients to this as non-normative, repeating the words 'fantasy' and 'ideal', as can be seen in the following exchange as he was drawing:

Anthony Thrift	basically the idea of what I am aiming for, own own home, better well paid job and of course still with my boyfriend, and girlfriend and have lots of kids..
Rebecca	Oh yes one, two, three, four..
Anthony Thrift	Lots of kids, I have three brothers and a sister, I guess that's enough, otherwise there'd be more. So yes.
Rebecca	So is this a kind of co-parenting set up with all three of you as parents?

2

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Anthony Thrift	Yes as I say this is totally… ideal. probably complete fantasy but who knows, you know I've known..
Rebecca	It is done.
Anthony Thrift	It's done, it was actually my boyfriend who introduced me to the whole poly bit as well because I already told him about the ideal fantasy I had before we started actually dating and he went 'by the way I am polyamorous'. Oh it does happen.
[…]	
Anthony Thrift	So yes, as I say, this is totally like the ideals, what I am aiming for, so you know. Aim high and obviously aiming for something and it keeps you going.

In the picture itself (Picture 4), though, there are no orientations to non-normativity in what he represents and this is typical of the data. Rather, participants and researcher position the imagined futures as non-normative through their talk while the pictures are being made (and also sometimes in the general discussion, which is not analysed in this paper).

There were some much more normative future life courses, including 10 scenarios (30%) which made no explicit mention of bisexuality or polyamory in the imagined future (not in the picture, the picture description or in the talk while drawing the picture). For example, Picture 5 shows Elena and her husband sat by a beach, watching wildlife and a sunset. Such a scenario is entirely compatible with normative life courses and with the idea of later life as a time for enjoying past achievements

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articulated by Patterson's (2009) respondents. Elena was one of the oldest participants in the research and in the general discussion made a strong claim to speak from a position of being currently old. She talked about recently becoming monogamous after many years of being poly, due to her ill health. This suggested the possibility that there might be a relationship between the age of participants and the normativity or not of the future they imagined. As has been seen, existing research has largely been based on young people who imagined normative futures. Is it perhaps the case that the positive non-normative futures imagined in this data are related to the predominantly middle-aged age profile? Analysis in these terms is difficult because of the small sizes of some age bands (especially age 45-54 n=2 and age 65+ n=1) but does not support this hypothesis. Normative and non-normative future life courses are evenly spread across all age groups.

across all age groups.

Image 5

While these 10 accounts look more normative, in that they did not mention bisexuality or polyamory, only four of these featured having children, suggesting once more the extent to which these visions of the future differ from those found by other researchers.

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Only one imagined future, drawn by Phoenix (Picture 6), seemed to fit Goltz'
participants' negative and gloomy imagined futures. She wrote:

 "I drew my expected reality and what I expect I would dream of having/being. In my
reality I am alone. Anonymous in a tower block with only my cats for company. I am
dreaming of escaping the city to some beautiful place near a forest where I have many
friends nearby and a loving partner, possibly children and extended family. The book
and birds represents a dreamed success in academia. This is what I expect to dream in
the future as I age – NOT necessarily now."

Image 6

Interestingly, in contrast to Goltz' participants who imagined negative futures,
Phoenix gender identity is not male[vi]. It should also be noted that her imagined future
is dual, containing within it a positive future imagined to be imagined by her future
self.

It should be emphasised that I do not claim that negative future life courses were not
imagined during these workshops. They were clearly articulated during the group

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discussion 'when I fear growing older, I imagine' and they can be seen to be being

warded off in the remarks such as this one by Bunny after she had made her image:

"I couldn't draw the things that were bad. We have a list, [woman's name] and I have

drawn a list of the things that we wouldn't allow to happen to either of us if we ended

up in a care home. So mine was no polyester viscose dresses, no pink nail varnish, no

perm and no cups of tea. That's very important."

Bunny's description of a feared future that she could have represented reminds us of

the contingency of what was represented. It also, interestingly, shows that an

awareness of the contingency of the imagined future can be a participant's concern.

Conclusions

This is not, of course, to argue that the accounts produced in the workshops are

entirely or even predominantly non-normative. They are full of normative features for

imagined future life courses, such as successful happy romantic and sexual

relationships, and the notion of later life as a time of relative withdrawal from the

world when previous accomplishments can be enjoyed (Patterson et al., 2009). Rather,

my focus is on the way that the accounts produced do not follow the heteronormative

script of settling down to monogamy with one life partner, marriage (or perhaps civil

partnership), having children and eventually grandchildren. Goltz's study seems to

suggest that the ability to imagine positive future life courses for his predominantly

lesbian and gay study participants depended on the degree to which they resembled

conventional heterosexual life courses, particularly in relation to family life and

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having children. Why, then, were so many participants in the present study able to imagine positive futures without imagining monogamy, marriage or civil partnership, and children?

One factor may have been the structure of the workshop, which began with discussion of negative and feared visions of later life, moved on to positive, even idealised, visions of later life and then moved onto the section where participants created their images. While participants were instructed that they could represent any sort of future they wished, positive, negative, realistic or mixed, the sequential ordering of the activities may have meant that they approached the creative activity in a particularly positive frame of mind. Since I do not theorise the accounts that were produced as stable imaginings of the future, the fact that less positive versions of the future might have been produced on a different occasion is not significant. Indeed, since I understand the accounts to create as well as reflect participants' discursive resources, they can be understood as widening discursive resources for talking about the future for both participants and the bisexual and academic communities.

However, the fact that positive vision of older age were presented beforehand is, on its own, insufficient explanation, since Goltz and the participants in his research undertook an activity where they deliberately generated non-normative frameworks for meaningful future lives but their future narratives were hardly changed as a result (Goltz, 2008, pp. 16-21). This suggests that the availability of positive visions of non-normative future life courses is not, in itself, sufficient to enable people to imagine them for themselves.

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Likewise, it could be argued that the use of creative methods - in this instance, predominantly drawing - enabled participants to envisage positive non-normative futures, perhaps through the playful and childlike associations of the activity of drawing on coloured paper with felt tip pens and adding stickers. However, Goltz research also used creative methods.

Another possible explanation is that the positive non-normative futures produced by participants in this research were made possible by their greater age. Only 15% were aged under 25 and 55% were aged 35 or older, in marked contrast to previous studies. Perhaps from the perspective of the beginning of an imagined life course, it is harder to imagine its shape, so culturally available patterns are more drawn upon. While no patterns around age group and type of future were discerned in this data set, the numbers involved are small. Further exploration of this question might be productive.

It is clear that BiCon has its own local normativities, most obviously that bisexuality is taken as normative (Bowes-Catton et al., in press) but also including such biographically relevant features as high rates of polyamory and a generally sex-positive culture (Barker et al., 2008; Bowes-Catton et al., in press). In comparison to previous work with a different group of people discussing another topic which is often framed as non-normative (sex in later life) (Jones, 2002), there are relatively few orientations by participants themselves to the accounts that are produced being non-normative. There are several possible explanations for this. One is the contrast in my own positioning as insider or outsider (broadly: insider at BiCon, outsider when

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talking to older women about sex). Perhaps talking to, and producing pictures and descriptions for, someone who is positioned as like you makes it possible to assume more shared values and world view than talking to someone who is positioned as significantly different because of younger age. Another possible explanation is that at BiCon the very strength of the local norms means that people orient less to them and are more able to treat their otherwise dissident views and practices as isomorphic to reality. This would chime with Bowes-Catton et al. (in press)'s finding that people can paradoxically feel less bisexual at BiCon because they are able to take that aspect of their identity for granted.

Either way, it seems likely that the strong local normativities of BiCon, which are spelled out to all participants in the Handbook and elsewhere, played a major role in enabling the creation of positive non-normative futures. I have argued that these normativities are analytically visible both by reference beyond the data, for example, to the findings of the BiCon surveys, and within the data itself, as an issue which participants themselves treat as relevant. Since participants are so heavily cued into local normativities, it seems particularly apt to pay attention to the ways in which they invoke and respond to these normativities in the futures they imagine. As BiCon attenders, participants in this study are themselves dealing with the interplay of local and more general normativities as they negotiate the continuities and disjunctures of identity in a place which explicitly claims to be non-normative. Returning to my metaphor of normativity as a stream, I hope to have shown that this dual attention to normativities within data and beyond it can be a productive way of looking at the eddies and flows in the current of normativity.

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[i] 'Queer' is used here as an umbrella term to include all non-heterosexual and non-cis-gendered people.

[ii] Goltz unhelpfully collapses these categories in the rest of the paper into 'the gay men' and 'the lesbian women'.

[iii] BiCon is the main UK annual gathering for bisexual people: http://bicon.org.uk The six participants in the pilot workshop were not at BiCon when they imagined their futures. This convenience and snowball sample of bi-identified people had, however, all (except one person) previously attended BiCon, most of them several times. Several people remarked afterwards that it had felt like being at a mini BiCon. The visions of the future produced at the pilot workshop are indistinguishable from those produced at BiCon itself in all significant respects. They are therefore included in the analysis.

[iv] This may simply reflect changes in who attends BiCon since 2008, since recent BiCons have made consistent efforts to make BiCon more accessible to parents and their children.

[v] The structure and resources provided for the pilot workshop were slightly different.

[vi] She describes her gender identity on the demographic questionnaire as 'Cis-"female" – flexible presentation of my gender in day to day. I've often considered myself to not 'fit' the female types but I don't consider myself anything else specifically'.