

Making the invisible, visible: older lesbian, gay and bisexual victim-survivors' "lived experiences" of domestic abuse

Sarah Wydall, Rebecca Zerk and Elize Freeman

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the use of coproduction to create a film "Do You See Me?", to amplify the voices of a "hard to reach" group: older lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) victim-survivors of domestic abuse (DA).

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative methods were used as part of the co-production, which included two practitioner focus groups and 14 narrative interviews with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning persons or the community (LGBTQ+) victim-survivors.

Findings – Despite differences in gender, sexualities, roles and "lived experiences" across stakeholders, there was a shared aim to ensure victim-survivors had a sense of ownership in this endeavour. Consequently, a positive reciprocity existed that helped to foster effective communication, allow for capacity building and subsequent knowledge exchange. The collaboration produced a nuanced meta-narrative making visible the "lived experiences" of LGB victim-survivors' perceptions of perpetrator behaviours.

Originality/value – To the best of the authors' knowledge, this paper is original in two ways, firstly, providing insights into the "lived experiences" of an invisible group; older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors, and secondly, in involving them in the co-production of a film. The paper aims to reveal how interdependencies that developed between stakeholders helped to disrupt understandings, develop new ways of knowing and build levels of trust. Group interactions helped to dismantle hierarchies, so those with experiential knowledge: the survivors, had greater control throughout the research process. The paper is significant in providing a critical reflection on the ethical, methodological and resource challenges involved in co-production. It also makes recommendations for researchers and funders about the value of using co-production as a method to engage with hard-to-reach groups.

Keywords LGBTQ+, Heteronormative, Co-production, Domestic abuse, Choice, Inclusion, Age, "Lived experiences"

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

"Do You See Me?" is a six-minute film, the product of a collaboration involving multiple stakeholders. The co-produced film was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and commissioned by Dewis Choice, as part of an awareness-raising resource about the "lived experiences" of older lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) victim-survivors. Dewis Choice is a Welsh-based initiative that aims to transform the response to domestic abuse (DA) in later life. The title of the film was chosen by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning persons or the community (LGBTQ+) stakeholders to highlight the marginalisation of their "lived experiences" as victim-survivors of DA and in response to the Women's Aid 2016 campaign film "Do You See Her?", which focused on older women's experiences of DA in the context of heterosexual relationships. Thus, the title, "Do You See Me?" reflects both the systemic and experiential invisibility of older LGB victim-survivors of DA and directly challenges heteronormative assumptions about the nature of victim-survivors' relationships in

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later life. The film's script is a composite narrative of four LGB older people's "lived experiences" of DA. Drawn from a series of interviews with 14 older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors, the script gives insights into DA, including experiences of coercive control, from the perspective of victim-survivors aged 55–75 years old. Four LGB participants chose to commit to filmmaking, the final element of the co-production. The process and outcome of the co-production helped to capture voices seldom heard in current discourses on "lived experiences" in DA and/or safeguarding literature.

Numerous partners contributed to supporting the researchers to access and engage with older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors throughout the 41-month period. However, the actual co-production involved a subset of four highly committed stakeholder groups who collaborated with us before, during and after the funding period; firstly, LGBTQ+ professionals from non-government organisations (NGOs) who supported LGBTQ communities in Brighton and London; secondly, the filmmaker Christian Gordine and an LGBTQ+ film crew; thirdly, the research team and volunteers from Dewis Choice, based at Aberystwyth University and fourth, 14 LGBTQ+ older victim-survivors, four of whom chose to commit to making "Do You See Me?". The film was screened by Warner Bros UK and HBO Max during Pride Month in 2022.

This article will first discuss language and terminology and provide a background context to current definitions, legislation and policy in England and Wales. We then provide a précis on how "Do You See Me?" evolved, from emerging findings from Dewis Choice, a co-produced research initiative. An account will be given of the stages in the co-production including challenges in accessing diverse "lived experiences", capacity building and managing resources. A further consideration was ensuring all LGBTQ+ stakeholders had a sense of ownership. The script is presented with details on how older victim-survivors gave input into all aspects of filmmaking. Finally, the limitations and strengths of the project are discussed, with recommendations provided on undertaking co-production as a form of knowledge construction.

A word about language, definitions and policy

The acronym LGBT is often used to collectively describe a range of sexualities and genders, that fall outside of normative societal constructs of heterosexuality and cisgender. Lesbian, gay and bisexual are definitions of a person's sexual orientation. The term transgender refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the gender assigned to them at birth (Raj, 2020), which incorporates the diversity of transgender people in terms of, gender identification and sexuality. The term queer, sometimes seen as the addition of a "Q" to the LGBT acronym, has been reappropriated by some LGBT people to describe relationships that fall outside of heterosexual practices and gender norms (Raj, 2020). Although some individuals are less comfortable with the term queer, associating it with past experiences of homophobia (Brontsema, 2004), others argue it is necessary in understanding relationships that may not fit monogamous heteronormative models (Hammack *et al.*, 2019). The addition of a plus sign "+" denotes inclusion of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

It is worth noting that the LGBTQ+ acronym risks homogenising the experiences of individuals under the umbrella LGBTQ+ term when falling outside of normative sexual and gender societal constructs, this acronym may be the one commonality they share. Homogenising LGBT people is problematic in limiting understanding of the specific and diverse experiences, needs and barriers faced by each group in the context of DA, which is crucial in developing legislation, policy and practice that offers protection (Freeman, 2022).

The use of collective acronyms and references to specific groups and individuals varies throughout this article to reflect the groups represented throughout the co-production process including LGBTQ+ focus groups, narrative guided discussions and filmmaking.

DA responses across the UK have developed in line with global strategies to end all forms of gendered violence against women and girls, underpinned by the large body of research on female victimisation and male perpetration within intimate relationships (Dobash *et al.*, 1992; Walby and Towers, 2018). Over the past decade, the development of DA legislation, strategy and policy across the UK have aligned with the UK's progress towards ratifying the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and girls, the Istanbul Convention, 2014.

Given the disproportionate levels of female victimisation by male perpetrators, positioning DA under a gendered framework is understandable. However, a focus on gender that is too narrow, risks creating gaps in the response to victims-survivors who fall outside of, what has been termed by some as the "Public Story of DA" (Donovan and Barnes, 2020; Donovan and Hester, 2015). The "Public story of DA" frames victim-perpetrator dynamics through a very narrow heteronormative lens (Cannon and Buttell, 2016; Wydall, 2021). The restrictive, gendered and ageist focus on younger female victimisation and male perpetration consequently excludes sectors of the victim-survivor population, limiting the effectiveness of safeguarding and DA responses. Furthermore, assuming a heterosexual male-female binary inadvertently overlooks the experiences, rights and needs of other marginalised groups of victim-survivors including those at the intersections of older age, sexual orientation and gender identity (Donovan *et al.*, 2022; Freeman, 2022).

In accordance with the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, developments in DA legislation and policy are inclusive of all victim-survivors and perpetrators regardless of gender and sexuality. For example, the [Domestic Abuse Act, 2021](#), applicable to England and non-devolved areas in Wales, introduced the first cross-party statutory definition of DA for England and Wales as:

A single incident or course of conduct between those who are aged 16 years or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members. DA consists of physical or sexual abuse, violent or threatening behaviour, controlling or coercive behaviour, economic, psychological, emotional, or other abuse. (Home Office, 2022)

The statutory guidance accompanying the Act explicitly states that the definition is inclusive of all victims regardless of age, sexual orientation, gender identity or reassignment. In addition, the guidance acknowledges the increased risk to older victim-survivors with protected characteristics, including older LGBT people. However, as noted above, many of the current DA frameworks, which pre-exist the act, are primarily informed by the body of research focusing on female victimisation in heterosexual relationships. New frameworks will need to be implemented that reflect the diversity of victimisation to effectively translate the aims of the Act into practice.

DA service provision in England and Wales has been criticised for not meeting the needs of older victim-survivors (McGarry *et al.*, 2014; Wydall, 2021) or victim-survivors who are LGBTQ+ (Hudson-Sharp and Metcalf, 2016; Donovan, 2022). It is not surprising that uptake of services amongst these groups falls far below the referral rate of younger heterosexual victims (Magić and Kelley, 2018, 2019; SafeLives, 2018). Furthermore, the limited recognition by help-providers towards victim-survivors where older age and LGBTQ+ intersect is also concerning, given perpetrators do not discriminate on account of age, gender and sexual identity. The invisibility of older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors in generic and specialist LGBTQ+ DA service provision and in justice responses evidences the need for increased awareness of the specific barriers and enablers to support for these groups amongst practitioners, community members and policymakers.

Dewis Choice, a co-produced initiative

Dewis (meaning "choice" in Welsh) is a co-produced initiative aimed at promoting rights-based, person-centred responses to DA in later life. A central tenet of Dewis Choice is that

older people who experience DA are best placed to raise awareness about it, thus since 2015, co-production has been used by the team as the primary vehicle to transform the response to DA in later life.

As an initiative, Dewis provides a service designed by older people, that offers intensive, long-term support from crisis intervention through to recovery for individuals aged 60 years and over. The team at Dewis also capture longitudinal and cross-sectional data about older victim-survivors' "lived experiences" of their help-seeking and justice-seeking journeys. The data are used to identify gaps and generate new avenues of research that can be used to highlight discriminatory practices. One such area identified by the researchers was the invisibility of LGBTQ+ victim-survivors in later life.

Age discrimination

DA in later life is often positioned under an umbrella term "elder abuse" that marginalises older victim-survivors. Our research findings show that "elder abuse" discourse is ageist and gender-neutral, this "othering" in part, contributes towards discriminatory responses by professionals (Wydall *et al.*, 2018). The research conducted as part of the Dewis Choice initiative draws attention to the importance of framing significant harms as DA, not elder abuse, to ensure greater equality of opportunity for victim-survivors aged 60 years and over when accessing services.

A cross-cutting theme noted in earlier studies by the researchers was the paucity of robust demographic data and qualitative data at an individual level for people aged 60 years and over experiencing DA (Wydall, 2021). For example, analysis of disaggregated secondary data from the "Evaluation of the Access to Justice" study (Clarke *et al.*, 2012; Clarke *et al.*, 2016) and aggregate data sets across local authorities in a Pan Wales study: "Crimes against and abuse of Older People in Wales" (Wydall *et al.*, 2018; Wydall and Zerk, 2017), assumed a heterosexual "female victim, male perpetrator" binary. Secondary data from data management systems and other sources also consistently failed to record gender and rarely recorded the sexual identity of older victims and alleged perpetrators (Wydall *et al.*, 2018).

As an initiative, the team has drawn attention to a tendency by policymakers and service providers to homogenise the DA experiences of three generations of older people aged 60 years and over (Clarke *et al.*, 2016; Wydall and Zerk, 2017). By using co-production, and giving voice to older survivors' "lived experiences", the researchers at Dewis challenge misconceptions about the nature and forms of DA in later life. This has been achieved by using an intersectional approach highlighting the diverse lived experiences of victim-survivors in later life. An intersectional approach to understanding DA acknowledges that the multiple identities ascribed to an individual by society, and through self-identification, are instrumental in their experiences of, and responses to, DA (Crenshaw, 1991). With the aim of being transformative in this exercise, the research team wanted to make visible the sexual and gender identity of older victim-survivors. Researchers identified that co-production was the most egalitarian method to achieve this aim, *working with*, rather than *acting on behalf* of older people. Thus, resources were allocated to community engagement to co-produce the awareness-raising film and accompanying activities.

Since the inception of the Dewis initiative, many of the co-produced activities have involved victim-survivors working with other stakeholders to challenge discriminatory practices, in these instances, care was taken to ensure older survivors were central to the aims and outcomes of the co-production. The team had wrongly assumed they had given attention to ensuring, where possible, diverse representation across three generations of older survivors. However, our own heterosexism regarding "diversity" did not become visible to us until we questioned gaps in our disaggregated data set from the Dewis Choice service. The number of referrals of older LGBTQ+ survivors was disproportionately low and other

partners were unable to provide data given the apparent lack of formal help-seeking for this demographic. Furthermore, from conversations with external partners who referred into Dewis, it was apparent, that providers were not asking older survivors questions about gender and sexual identity, and if disclosures of DA were taking place at all, this demographic detail was not recorded on the referral form, as requested. From a research perspective, this gap limited recruitment opportunities for participation in co-production that could reflect the diversity of experiences within and across three generations of older LGBTQ+ survivors.

Thus, for the team at Dewis, the initial challenge was accessing such a hidden group, and working out how to pursue our ethos of co-production to give voice to diverse older LGBTQ+ “lived experiences”, widening the lens to examine how intersections of gender and sexual identity influenced intersections of older age and other potential protected characteristics. In 2018, to improve awareness, the Dewis Choice team attended an “Opening Doors” conference on LGBTQ+ and later life. We met a filmmaker, Christian, a gay male. Christian’s commitment to raising awareness about the “lived experiences” of older LGBTQ+ people was clear. Christian offered to support our idea to co-produce a film and engage in LGBTQ+ discussion groups.

Using co-production to make “Do You See Me?": a critical reflexive account

Globally, co-production is becoming one of the most appealing mechanisms to bring about positive change across public services, policy and social research (Bovaird, 2007, 2008; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Kara, 2017; Loeffler, 2009). Co-production is an “assets-based” approach that builds on the skills, experiential knowledge and networks that individuals and communities possess. By promoting ownership and voice, co-production aims to offer stakeholders greater control at each stage of the process, recognising that those who are affected by a problem are best placed to help solve it (Durose *et al.*, 2013). Co-production is a process that aims to be collaborative, with individuals given the opportunity and resources to act as their own catalysts for change. This, however, places an emphasis on the contribution made by the beneficiary to achieve a shared goal. For beneficiaries to be able to meaningfully contribute, those who facilitate spaces where the co-production occurs need to instil a genuine sense of belonging and ensure equity of voice to all parties (Tuurnas, 2021).

Co-production in research fits neatly with ever-increasing demands on academics to innovate, create and be seen to be transforming ideas into “products” for the public good (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Ersoy (2017) says the idea is to facilitate equal relationships, where researchers and people previously framed as “participants” termed “collaborators,” engage in a reciprocal exchange towards an end goal. However, it could be argued with the rise of neoliberalism and the State’s reluctance to provide adequate resources to respond to a growing range of societal challenges, the rise of co-production as a democratising method to effect change is merely another strategy that “responsibilises” individuals and community groups.

At a micro level, examining the power differential across diverse stakeholder groups, it is important to acknowledge that those who hold one form of power influence the nature and the quality of research processes and outputs, as they control the financial assets and the subsequent timeframes allocated to complete a range of objectives. Hence, researchers with finite costings awarded to them by their funders are dependent on those with another form of power “participants with experiential knowledge” as collaborators as “experts” sharing their privately held views and experiences in more public domains. Ensuring that a transparency exists is crucial so that collaborators are aware of their value and contribution at all stages of ethical research practice. Thus, the onus is on researchers to relinquish power and act as “ethical enablers” when undertaking co-production in research.

On the macro level, however, researchers have more resources to be able to speak “truths to power” about the processes at play and the outcomes, intended and unintended, of the endeavour (Kara, 2017). To maintain research integrity, despite performative pressures and temporal constraints in academia, the researcher’s aim is to be transformative through in-depth collaboration, influencing and evidencing positive change. However, the reality is that the outcome of co-production may often be perceived as tokenistic, with limited medium to long-term change and such exercises being little more than an extended consultation process involving activities that do not necessarily translate into statutory commitment to resource long-term sustainable change.

Thus, it is not difficult to see that creating the spaces in which co-production emerges and gathers pace, can work to disrupt and unsettle researcher norms and these shifting power relations may produce new knowledge precisely because a different type of interdependency emerges during the fieldwork. Such levelling up challenges traditional research practices, whereby participants are data retrieval sites with limited involvement in other stages in the research process.

Feminist scholars, when working with community groups, especially those experiencing multiple oppression, have devised a range of empowering and inclusive methods to promote an ethical, mutual exchange to counter traditional research practices (Downes *et al.*, 2014; Oakley, 2013). Co-production emulates these approaches as it encourages a more meaningful reciprocity where researchers need to reflect on ethical and methodological issues more organically, as events emerge or erupt, and seek the opinions of the collaborators (Beebeejaun *et al.*, 2015).

We believe, that whilst co-production is messy and demanding, given the multiple dynamics at play from early beginnings and introductions, through to key events and outcomes, it does if appropriately resourced, allow us to engage with research practices “beyond text” according to Beebeejaun *et al.* (2014). In addition, co-production, by giving increased autonomy to participants, ameliorates researcher concerns about the constraints of more traditional research tools which can sometimes appear to lack “real world” meaning and bring limited benefits to those that shared their lived experiences. Co-production also challenges us to revisit the processes of traditional research ethics and meanings of social justice across a carousel of research practices and conventions. We need the temporal resources to fully equip participant-collaborators to be in a position to direct the process and outcomes of co-production. In addition, we are reliant on learning from a wider range of collaborators to help us construct additional outputs as forms of knowledge construction beyond academic articles which extends our reach, and experience and develops us as researchers.

The rest of the section outlines the process of co-production from initial stages through to the production of “Do You See Me?” including an examination of the collaborative process and a reflective account of some of the challenges. We provide insights into the LGBTQ+ practitioner’s commitment to exploring intersections of age in a DA context. The filmmaker’s and LGBTQ film crew’s inclusive approach aimed at empowering older LGB survivors on location is also discussed, when cultivating a sense of belonging and voice on the film set, thus making survivors “lived experience” of DA visible.

Making the invisible visible: the co-production of “Do You See Me?”

When adopting an intersectional lens to DA in later life, a gap that emerged from research by the team was the invisibility of older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors as a demographic group. It is estimated that 25% of lesbian women and gay men, over 30% of bisexual people and 50% of transgender people experience DA (Interventions Alliance, 2021). However, there are no consistent large-scale data on the prevalence of DA victimisation affecting LGBTQ+ people across the life course, nor work with a specific focus on later life. Thus, little is known

about multiple layers of marginalisation affecting victim-survivors of DA at the intersections of older age, sexual orientation and gender identity. Although, as researchers we were used to accessing “hard to reach groups”, we were concerned that gaining access to LGBTQ+ survivors, especially those aged 60 years and over and securing their commitment to engage in such a time-consuming venture, would be extremely challenging.

Positioning ourselves: as outsiders, enablers and supporters

Discussions after the LGBTQ+ conference led the team to engage in a critical appraisal of the Dewis initiative and the extent to which the service and research process was inclusive of older LGBTQ+ people. To engage meaningfully with a new area of work, we felt we needed to learn more about older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors of DA, current policy and practice; the backdrop of their cultural and socio-political history, the nature of relationships in later life and their “lived experiences” of help-seeking. As noted earlier, we became aware of our own heterosexism when we had failed to see that our other co-produced activities excluded older LGBTQ+ survivors. To access and engage with older LGBTQ+ survivors, we first had to acknowledge our own prejudices, unconscious bias and “skewed” ways of understanding DA in later life.

The researchers were primarily cisgendered heterosexuals, thus as researchers we understood DA through a predominantly heteronormative gaze. However, alongside the filmmaker, Christian, we were working with four student volunteers, three of whom were queer, bisexual and transgender. Conversations with the team involved highlighting the importance of reducing our real and perceived power as cisgender, heterosexual academics in fieldwork settings. The next steps involved enlisting the help of the LGBTQ+ community and key “By and For” LGBTQ+ organisations. As researchers we were able to secure stakeholder commitment to making the film. These groups engaged with us in a highly reciprocal process, so all stakeholders present gained new knowledge about older LGBTQ+ survivors of DA and drew on each other’s skillsets.

A supplementary table highlighting the range of co-produced activities and the timeframes across the 41-month collaboration can be found in appendix one.

Older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors: a chasm, not a gap in the literature

A review of the literature suggests older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors are significantly underrepresented in research on DA. The reasons for this may be twofold. Firstly, academics, funders, commissioners and service providers have influenced the focus and direction of research, resulting, with a few exceptions, in a cis-gendered, heterosexist, ageist perspective on DA perpetration and victimisation. Secondly, as few services cater for LGBTQ+ victim-survivors aged 60 years and over, accessing such a “hard to reach” group is a barrier to building an evidence base to inform service provision and policy development (Donovan *et al.*, 2022; Donovan and Barnes, 2020). The lack of research evidence about older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors is highly problematical, resulting in restricting new knowledge formation and limiting current “ways of thinking” about DA policy and practice.

It was the aim of the researchers that the process of co-production would create opportunities that would provide original insights about the lived experiences of older victim-survivors. This work would contribute to the scant research in this area, using non-traditional research methods to facilitate survivor’s voice. We hoped that through engaging with LGBTQ+ practitioners in the preparatory stages, we would instil in stakeholders, a sense of confidence in us as a team of facilitators in the co-production. As our lived experiences as individuals were from a heterosexual perspective and our expertise was as researchers on DA in later life, we were aware that our “ways of knowing” were quite different from the LGBTQ+ stakeholder groups we were engaging with. Fieldwork preparation formally began with meeting the filmmaker and LGBTQ+ professionals who had

strategic or operational roles in “By and For” LGBTQ+ organisations. These meetings cemented the idea to host two focus groups as co-production exercises to explore understandings of the intersections of DA, LGBTQ+ people and older age. We also hoped the process would generate contacts with gatekeepers to help us gain access to older survivors of DA.

Conducted in two cities in the UK, the focus groups were facilitated by a gay male consultant who specialises in DA in LGBTQ+ relationships. The focus groups consisted of 28 practitioners (across different specialisms). Although focus group compositions provided a cross-section of voices representing LGBTQ+ and LGBT victim-survivors, none of the representatives were aged 65 years and over, which was a noticeable limitation. Professionals’ perceptions of barriers and enablers were restricted by a lack of knowledge about older people’s “lived experiences” of DA, which is unsurprising given the low visibility of older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors accessing services. Practitioners, who knew little about how the intersection of older age influences help-seeking, were mindful that they may be making false assumptions, and this had an impact on the depth of the focus group discussions.

The spaces created for discussion aimed to create a non-hierarchical safe space for sharing and learning. As a research team, we kept a low profile, we were conscious that we did not want to influence the direction of the discussion. Using co-production as a method to “make visible” older LGBTQ+ survivors involved in-depth work over time with diverse groups. The process helped stakeholders acknowledge how power differentials may fluctuate and, depending on group composition, who feels able to contribute to conversations and the influence of the environment where interactions took place. The two focus groups were audio-recorded with full transcripts sent to all participants for in-depth comment. This was to try to avoid imparting a “hegemonic gaze” over the qualitative data, filtering out or selecting what we thought was relevant as a group of academic heterosexuals. This process provided the LGBTQ+ stakeholders with opportunity to add additional individual perspectives free from scrutiny of peers, (see supplementary table in [Appendix](#) for further information).

Although the focus group findings are the subject of a forthcoming article, it is important to highlight three themes that were relevant to the meta-narrative in the film, that suggested that older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors were more isolated than other cohorts who experience DA. These themes, discussed below, highlight age discrimination, heterosexism and an assumption by practitioners that DA, including coercive and controlling behaviours, only feature within a heterosexual male-female binary.

The invisibility of older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors

Focus group participants felt that the hidden nature of this demographic group was because, in some cases, older LGBTQ+ people who had been “out” at earlier stages in their life, were no longer “out” in all contexts due to a fear of discrimination. The perception was that there was a societal assumption that all older people were heterosexual and that sexuality was not a feature of later life. The view was that generic providers were ageist and assumed DA was a heterosexual matter occurring in younger age-groups, this reduced opportunities for a dialogue with older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors where disclosures of DA could occur. Heteronormativity and heterosexism were important themes in the data accounting for the hidden nature of DA in this context and the invisibility of the older LGBT victim-survivors:

I think [...] whatever we think about services, they are really heteronormative, they are really heteronormative [emphasis added]. And for older LGBT to engage in a service that doesn't reflect her. Think about support groups [...] so you go into a carer's support group and the carers [...] are talking about husbands and wives [...] using that kind of language. [...] And it becomes exclusionary, you get excluded. (Lesbian, female)

There was a view that a pervasive heteronormativity within services, and assumptions about relationships in later life, created a sense of difference and otherness which was felt to be oppressive and exclusionary. This meant that people had to make two disclosures in settings where potential discrimination could occur, firstly, a disclosure that they were LGBTQ+, and secondly, that they were being abused by their LGBTQ+ partner.

The perceptions were that older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors were more likely to conceal DA as a private matter on account of age and accompanying generational norms and values. Thus, forms of help-seeking were likely to involve informal, self-help strategies, e.g. counselling support by the individual. This individualised approach to help-seeking may be compounded further by historic experiences of widespread discrimination and for some criminalisation, for example, the sexual practices of gay males were subject to criminal prosecution prior to 1967 ([Sexual Offences Act, 1967](#)) in England and Wales.

Falling outside the public story: DA in older LGBTQ victim-survivors

Professionals felt that even for LGBTQ+ victim survivors under 45 years old, stakeholder's understandings about relationship dynamics did not always recognise the abuse as DA:

Domestic abuse is seen as predominantly a straight [heterosexual] thing. And man against a woman. I think that still filters into our own community. We have worked with people who have been to the police, and they have been told by a counsellor, it couldn't have been domestic abuse because it can't happen between two men [...]. A lot of the services are geared towards people who identify as female. (Bisexual, female)

It was felt that heterosexist views on LGBTQ+ DA also failed to acknowledge coercive behaviours existing within relationships that fell outside of heterosexual gendered power imbalances. Thus, DA perpetrated within LGBTQ+ relationships were often framed as situational couple violence. The perception was that, describing DA as a single incident served to minimise the severity and seriousness of the situation, invalidating LGBTQ+ people's lived experiences of DA involving patterns of coercive and controlling behaviours. Although participants' understanding of DA was based on victimisation of younger LGBTQ+ people, they observed how issues affecting older LGBTQ+ people such as hidden identities, fears of discrimination, increased isolation and societal assumptions of sexuality in later life could impact on the experience of victimisation.

"The stonewall," accessing potential LGBTQ+ victim-survivors as collaborators

It was agreed by all stakeholders that a combined effort would be made to access older LGBTQ+ victim-survivors and explore with them whether they would be interested in co-producing a short film. LGBTQ+ stakeholders worked together with the researchers to engage with older people with limited success. Even when introductions were sent by LGBTQ+ gatekeepers, there was silence. We surmised that the stonewall was partly because there may be political sensitivities about how LGBTQ+ communities may be perceived negatively by other sectors in society. A different tactic was adopted to gain access, Christian volunteered to use his film and theatre networks to reach out to older LGBTQ+ people. Fortunately, as our funders allowed for an iterative and organic development of our co-produced activities over a three-year period, the temporal pressures often experienced by researchers from funders were not an issue. This helped to counter the potential demands on the time taken to gain access to this "hard to reach" group.

Challenging "ways of thinking", building trust and building capacity

In the extended period where Christian was seeking access to potential participants, the researchers gave him guidance on interview techniques and access to specific DA literature. Christian reciprocated by increasing the researchers' understandings of LGBTQ+ issues, and

the process of filmmaking. As a group, we explored political, ethical, methodological and logistical aspects of the process and outcomes. We also decided to safeguard against our heteronormative influence, thus direction would be passed to LGBTQ+ stakeholders. Christian also acknowledged his increased awareness of his relative power as a young gay male when compared to other more marginalised LGBTQ+ individuals. Christian, when he felt fully equipped as a qualitative researcher, would coordinate the fieldwork and subsequent filmmaking. Stepping back from the fieldwork as researchers was easier than we anticipated because there were high levels of communication between Christian, ourselves and other stakeholders. Time was also spent learning each other's use of language, terms and varied meanings, disciplinary jargons, diversity and differences (Lach, 2014). Significantly, the shared aims of the activity ensured all challenges concerning the collaboration were discussed in a transparent way, and space was created to explore ideas. The interdependency between groups grew and stakeholders became more open in questioning their own knowledge, and each other's. For example, one of the senior researchers noted:

I had a very good understanding of heterosexual women's experiences of domestic abuse which included older women. This work has made me reconsider my alignment with the political ideological framework of 'Violence against Women', because it only provides a framework for some victims. (Senior researcher:2)

Thus, the process of co-production challenged how the senior researcher positioned DA within a theoretical feminist framework, so they began to explore queer theory to find alternative explanations beyond a feminist theoretical framework (Buttell and Cannon, 2015; Morrison, 2003). Over time, a strong collective sense of social justice helped cement relations across the team.

The narrative interviews

The filmmaker, Christian, was aware of the hierarchical structures within the LGBTQ+ community and the need to prevent a "hierarchical ordering of expertise" (Durose and Richardson, 2016, p. 39). Christian spent months building trust with potential participants exploring the ways in which they could contribute to the film, given their other commitments. Nineteen months after fieldwork began, Christian had collected 14 LGBTQ+ narratives of victim-survivors. The older LGBTQ victim-survivors voiced their experiences of growing up and growing old in a society that had previously discriminated against them because of their LGBTQ+ identity. They also shared how coercive and controlling behaviours affected later life. None of the participants were in contact with the perpetrators. However, many commented that they were reluctant to engage in new intimate relationships because of past experiences. Four, who were LGB, stated they had time to commit to co-producing the film. We ensured that the participants understood that Christian wanted to maintain the integrity of their narratives, this ethos stemmed from his position as an independent filmmaker and an LGBTQ+ activist. He also highlighted the ethical approach taken, giving control to the participants. The ability of Christian to create an empowering research environment for disclosure was also noted by the researchers. The LGBQ film crew were also trained on ethical practices, co-production techniques, safeguarding and DA and introduced to the four participants as co-collaborators.

Making the invisible, visible: "Do You See Me?"

This section provides the qualitative narrative data from the four LGB accounts of DA reflecting the order of the composite script for the film "Do You See Me?".

The voices captured in the film are drawn from audio-recorded narrative interviews from a sample of four participants aged 55–74 years from across the UK. The script presents the voices of John, a gay, white man aged between 69 and 74 years; Nina, a bisexual, cisgender woman from a racially minoritized group, aged 59–64 years; both of whom are

from traditional working-class backgrounds; Maggie, a white, cisgender lesbian 69–74 years; and David, a gay, white male, aged 55–59 years, both from traditional middle-class backgrounds.

The film was shot in various rooms in an empty house in London. The house was interesting in that, over time, different rooms and fixtures depicted different historical periods in the 20th Century, the collaborators could choose where the actors were positioned to reflect their own sense of belonging. The use of light and space in rooms portrays individual older LGB people from different social groups as active agents alone, seated, standing, moving towards or facing away from the cameras. The footage was deliberately chosen by the survivors to depict the whole person, rather than partial body shots and the images. The music score, script and acting intend to convey a sense of isolation, without representing older victim-survivors as passive or “othering” their “lived experiences” of DA (Table 1).

The script excerpts, as chosen by the LGB collaborators, highlight the patterns of coercive and controlling behaviours and forms of DA experienced pre- and post-separation. John, for example, discusses how the perpetrator isolated him from other social contacts, the verbal and physical abuse and how, over time, he lost his self-esteem and confidence.

Maggie shares how stalking behaviours and manipulation by the perpetrator in group settings, after separation, heightened her sense of isolation. She talks about the encroachment of the perpetrator of her social spaces, including her place of work. These rich narratives could not be misinterpreted as situational couple violence. Furthermore, Nina shares the male sense of entitlement, misogyny and verbal and sexual violence by her partner, and how the perpetrators’ tactics to control her increased when he was aware she was leaving him for a woman.

Table 1 Co-produced script for “Do You See Me?”

John	I'd never actually had a proper relationship before and he was the first one that actually showed any real interest . . . For the first six months before I moved in with him, he didn't actually hit me, but he would be really offensive and really verbally abusive to me
Maggie	I was in a relationship with somebody who was emotionally abusive and who was quite a lot younger than me
David	My longest relationship became abusive towards the end, it was basically the ignoring, living his life in orbit with me but as if I wasn't there
John	And then after about a year or so that's when he started getting pretty violent and we would argue a lot and I would get hit, and I would get really upset and storm off as I say and then he'd come around a couple of days later begging me to take him back and stuff . . . and I did
Nina	I was with my ex-partner for 25 years, he knew I was bisexual from the beginning but what he couldn't accept was that I was going to leave him for a woman. He called me, 'a dirty lesbian slag, you're filthy' and he forced me to have sex
Maggie	She became very possessive; she was jealous of any time I spent with other people. I knew that I needed to leave the relationship . . . After we had officially split up, she was being more and more demanding of me emotionally, going to things I was going to go to and then bursting into tears, and made me feel professionally embarrassed
John	He pushed me to get rid of all my friends. I didn't have the confidence to get back in touch with them, so I was totally on my own
Maggie	I was really depressed and I felt like there was nowhere where I could go to or be where she wasn't going to pursue me, and that all my friendship circles and activities had been invaded by her. . . and I really felt in despair actually and that is abuse
John	I found it hard to tell people what happened . . . someone asked me why I stayed with him . . . I don't even know that. I think it was because of my lack of confidence
Maggie	I've been very wary about getting into any other relationships, it's led to me being more isolated
David	I just became more and more depressed, anxious, the depression became suicidal. I have this memory of . . . of asking myself why nobody is approaching me when I have stepped over a parapet, and I am standing on the edge of a bridge? Why are these people driving past ignoring me?
Nina	Being of a certain age you are more invisible, you're dismissed . . . you know abuse is a funny thing you get used to it
Maggie	If you are feeling frightened, if you're feeling persecuted, intimidated, those are really valid feelings, and you must seek help

Source: Table by author

Thus, there were similarities to DA in heterosexual relationships given the trajectory and cycle of violence and control by perpetrators. However, the intersection of age also made the survivors feel more invisible, as though they had less value than their younger counterparts, as conveyed by David when contemplating suicide. LGB victim-survivors also shared the emotional impact of DA including anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. Supporting the findings from the focus groups, key themes drew attention to the hidden nature of DA within older LGB communities, a deep sense of social isolation and the range of tactics perpetrators used across the course of the relationship. The script also documents structural ageism and perceptions of limited access to both informal and formal support. It is interesting to note that all the collaborators wished to forefront a sense of self and identity to unknown audiences, thus, they choose actors and the use of their own voices in the film.

Production

Addressing power dynamics, facilitating voice and meaningful participation took time, significant preparation and ongoing discussions throughout the process. Central to the ethos of genuine participation was a mutual understanding that older victim-survivors were active agents in shaping the key message of the film. Indeed, as [Thomas-Hughes \(2018\)](#) observes, co-production methodology “is continually re-imagined, meeting the beliefs, needs and wants of those involved in the research” (p. 232). Whilst the narratives highlighted coercive and controlling behaviours, something the researchers were able to recognise, this feature was at first underused in the script development:

The director was keen to keep in elements of the victim's story that had a shock factor [...]. It was a balancing act to create something that was impactful but did not feed into [an idea] that domestic abuse was [only] physical and sexual violence [...]. Upskilling the director in domestic abuse and coercive control was a continuous process throughout. (Senior researcher:2)

Fortunately, the researchers were able to discuss this issue openly and temper the conventions of the medium to convey subtleties within the narratives. The effectiveness of communication and shared goals across stakeholders was also evident from the researcher's perspective when they visited the set as an observer:

Throughout the process, the research team and film crew were open to learning and were open to being challenged. There was no fixed ideology, and at times individuals even challenged their own constructions of knowledge. [...] the director and film crew gained a better understanding of domestic abuse and shared this knowledge within their communities. (Senior researcher:2)

Ethical considerations and research limitations

Such dynamic methods do not easily fit into traditional research governance processes shaped by a biomedical paradigm. Whilst national health service ethical approval granted for aspects of the research process which involved victim-survivors from Dewis, the final four contributors to the film went through standard ethical procedures according to British Psychological Society ([Oates et al., 2021](#)). Using non-traditional, iterative, methodologies also presented ethical dilemmas given some participants were perceived to be “vulnerable” and DA is considered a “sensitive” topic. Throughout the co-production process, participants' consent was “fluid, temporal and situational” ([Thomas-Hughes, 2018](#), p. 237). Participants were able to be flexible in their involvement and were given power over how their input was used throughout. The researchers adopted a feminist framework aiming to ensure ownership and agency over all aspects of the process, treating participants with dignity and respect was key to this. Fully informed consent was crucial, and this meant adopting a continuous and dynamic process of “slow ethics” regarding informed consent, with the proviso that once the film was released it would no longer be possible to exercise

the right to withdraw. As challenges evolved, new elements of informed consent were detailed as collaborators wanted to use their actual voices as part of the narrative:

[...] providing a detailed consent form that allowed the collaborators to exercise considerable control over what they were consenting to as part of the research process, production, and dissemination. This consent form was more descriptive and specific than any consent forms we have compiled in the past. (Senior researcher:2)

A key limitation of the process was ensuring diversity; however, it was difficult, both geographically and logistically, to facilitate all the collaborators' input at the film location site. Whilst Christian felt there was some diversity across the four collaborators, he was realistic about the subsequent outcome:

[...] Since we were exploring an already very hidden issue in a somewhat already hidden demographic, adopting diversity in our process was often hard. We had to work with what was accessible to us [...]. Allowing the participants to have final say over their own stories was incredibly important to our process. [...] to make sure they felt that they were not only listened too but involved. (Christian, filmmaker)

After filmmaking there were political concerns, not from the LGB survivors involved, but from LGBTQ+ activists about disseminating the film beyond LGBTQ+ communities into the wider public domain. LGBTQ+ groups are understandably sensitive to sharing their experiences outside their (own) diverse communities as there is the potential for harm, misrepresentation and discrimination. However, the research findings, and the views of the survivors involved, support the need to raise awareness to wider audiences to inform systemic change and challenge heterosexist and ageist misconceptions.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper demonstrates the value of working with diverse stakeholders, acknowledging their expertise and different “ways of understanding,” that collectively contribute to the unfolding challenges of co-production. Older LGB people, an LGBQ film crew, BTQ volunteers and cisgender heterosexual researchers, engaged in an ambitious, collaborative project, over a 41-month period, with the aim of “making visible” an invisible group of survivors; the product of which is the film “Do You See Me?”.

Research methodologies increasingly involve negotiating complex, cross-disciplinary ideas and meanings to co-create new knowledge, with the aim of influencing positive change. These approaches require considerable flexibility from funders for researchers to fulfil their obligations to external stakeholders, particularly those central to the collaboration. The researchers were fortunate in securing funding from a source with a community-based ethos, which was willing to allow researchers and other stakeholders space, time and the movement of resources to meet the needs of all parties. The co-production process also served to draw stakeholders' attention to the scant literature available to inform policy and practice.

As noted earlier, co-production has considerable appeal as a mechanism to generate research with impact, yet, across the academic landscape, there appears to be diminishing opportunities to ensure the processes required to create meaningful outcomes are authentic, rather than tokenistic. Many funding options are constrained by financial priorities and pressure on researchers to meet timely outputs, which can supersede research quality. In these instances, participants, partners and researchers can feel a begrudging sense that the research idea, while compelling in theory, is less satisfying and productive in practice. Thus, having funders with an awareness of the time and negotiation required to build trust and shared reciprocity across diverse groups was crucial to meeting the research objectives. This is especially relevant where research is “discovery orientated” and involves marginalised groups.

This unique study demonstrates the potential need for the wider application of less traditional research approaches like co-production. It also suggests researchers should engage in a deeper exploration of alternative methods and that greater attention be given to the added value of collaborations outside academia. Limiting researcher presence in focus group activities, narrative interviewing, filmmaking and building capacity, to enable stakeholders to act as “researchers”, allowed survivors “a safe space” in which to share “lived experiences” and provide creative input alongside other LGBTQ+ stakeholders. Thus, this activity helped to widen the lens on DA in later life to include the intersections of diverse LGBTQ+ survivors, thereby increasing the visibility of extremely underrepresented groups.

It is a recommendation of this exercise that researchers give greater ownership to participants as “collaborators” when engaging in co-production. Collaboration needs to be facilitated by those directly able to relate to participants who may feel the most marginalised. For the research team, relinquishing power and passing direct control to LGBTQ+ stakeholders was vital. For the 14 older LGBTQ+ survivors, the filmmaker, as a gay male, was relatable given his own lived experiences. The survivors also had time to learn about the aims of the exercise and were free to choose how and when they contributed to the study. This flexibility allowed for a sense of ownership to develop, it also enabled deeper participation and creative input. However, we acknowledge that, for the researchers, relinquishing power precluded the ability to observe first hand any subtle power dynamics in the interactions between Christian and the stakeholders.

As researchers, acknowledging outsider status, whilst acting as ethical enablers, appeared to have a positive impact on processes and outcomes. This was reflected in the researchers’ and collaborators’ thematic analysis of the script, which generated different forms of “understandings” of the topic area. This ensured the film’s narrative was true to the subjective experiences of the participants and explored abuse beyond the “shock factor” of a “single incident” approach in which DA is portrayed solely as physical violence.

The exercise undoubtedly encouraged a deeper reflection of power imbalances, and a more conscious positioning of self and how we situate others involved in research practices. Reciprocal and continuous learning across all stakeholder groups helped to maintain a sense of integrity and cement our focus on ensuring informed choice. Through a range of interactions, the transparency of discussions disrupted entrenched thinking patterns, thus, challenging working practices and theories about DA. This was instrumental in constructing new knowledge.

The research also highlighted the value of engagement with highly motivated, non-conventional research partners, such as the filmmaker and the LGBTQ+ NGOs from “By and For” organisations. These groups and individuals provided alternative avenues for access, new learning opportunities and the production of new knowledge. These activities took the research in serendipitous directions, without which “Do You See Me?” would not have been produced. As the filmmaker undoubtedly influenced the process and outcomes, it could be argued that a heteronormative gaze was replaced by a gay male gaze, given the filmmaker’s central role as a research partner, mediator and creator. However, evidence from the film script suggests that he created a highly enabling, inclusive environment. This was also reflected in older survivors’ attendance at screenings and conferences long after the research took place. The final film “Do You See Me?” created a moving and sensitive composite narrative that challenges perceptions about DA experienced by older LGB survivors.

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Appendix

Table A1 Highlights the range of co-produced activities and the timeframes across the 41-month collaboration

<i>Development of idea and scoping exercise</i>	
January 2018	The researchers had initial conversations with director and explored the potential of using film to tell stories of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in LGBTQ+ relationships. Researcher provided DVA training to the director to increase his knowledge of DVA, particularly coercive and controlling behaviour. Although the training began at this stage, it was an ongoing process throughout the entire collaboration.
February–April 2018	The researchers worked alongside the director to develop three film treatments. The director explained to the research team the purpose of a treatment i.e. communicating themes, tone and visual development of an idea.
April 2018	The researcher recruited an LGBTQ+ facilitator that specialises in DVA to facilitate the practitioner focus groups. Facilitator worked closely with researchers to develop the agenda and research questions for the focus groups.
June 2018	Key stakeholders hold knowledge about older LGBTQ+ victims were invited to participate in the practitioner focus groups. The researchers, director and volunteers took part in a scoping exercise looking at existing films that explored LGBTQ+ and DVA and DVA/safeguarding and older age
<i>Preliminary research</i>	
July 2018	The first practitioner focus group was held which involved two volunteers from Dewis Choice, 10 practitioners. The facilitator, researchers, volunteers and the director gave reflexive accounts on their learning and engagement in the focus group. Following the focus group session, participants were given the opportunity to provide additional written comments
September 2018	The second practitioner focus group was held which involved three volunteers and thirteen practitioners. The facilitator, researchers, volunteers and the director gave reflexive accounts on their learning and engagement in the focus group. Following the focus group session, participants were given the opportunity to provide additional written comments
October 2018–November 2018	The researchers and director conducted thematic analysis of the practitioner focus groups. Key themes were feedback to the facilitator and practitioners involved
November 2018–December 2018	Dewis Choice Support Workers facilitated narrative interviews between their LGBT clients and the director
December 2018–January 2019	The researchers and the director developed and finalised one of the film treatments using the analysis from focus groups and preliminary interviews. Development of consent forms and website for “Do You See Me?”
<i>Recruitment and filming</i>	
January 2019–June 2019	The director began further recruitment of older LGBTQ+ collaborators for co-production. Researchers worked with the director to build his research capacity including ethical practices, interview techniques
June 2019	Researchers worked alongside the director to develop interview schedules for collaborators. Earlier discussions between the director and collaborator were used to inform the design alongside the gaps in knowledge that were identified in the practitioner focus group sessions
July 2019–October 2019	The director conducted narrative interviews with collaborators. Research support and emotional support was provided by Dewis Choice
November 2019–December 2019	Researchers and the director produced initial script and edited audio files to align with the script
<i>Post-production and film release</i>	
January 2020	Co-production with collaborators took place this involved script development and giving input into the film production
February 2020	The director and film crew shot “Do You See Me?”. At this stage, collaborators were involved in the film and stage direction Delays were caused in post-production due to Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdown measures imposed by UK government

(continued)

Table A1

April 2020	The director and film crew started the post-production stage that included grading, sound design, composition, graphics. The final script was translated into Welsh
May 2020– July 2020	The director worked with the collaborators to produce an initial edit of the film and to finalise the script. Researchers and volunteers' provided feedback on the initial edit and imagery used
October 2020	The director and film crew finalised post-production and translation of the script into Welsh was added
January 2021– April 2022	Researchers and the director developed a media and communications strategy exploring multiple avenues for release. Input into the strategy was given by collaborators, volunteers, journalists, social media activists and policy leads at key organisations
June 2022	Online release of "Do You See Me?" on World Elder Abuse Awareness Day 2022 and film at a Warner Bros and HBO max event in London for Pride Month

Source: Table by author

Table A2 Conducted in two cities in the UK, the focus groups were facilitated by a gay male consultant who specialises in domestic violence and abuse (DVA) in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning persons or community. The focus groups consisted of 28 practitioners (14 participants in each area) and focus group participants were invited to select more than one category to describe gender identity and sexual orientation

<i>Demographic composition of focus group participants</i>	Number of participants
<i>Professional background</i>	
Domestic abuse specialists	12
Professionals from LGBTQ+ voluntary and community services for older people	10
Health and social care professionals	3
Mental health professionals	1
Specialists on ageing	1
Housing professionals	1
<i>Gender identity</i>	
Female	13
Male	14
Transgender female	1
Queer	1
<i>Sexual orientation</i>	
Lesbian	5
Gay	8
Bi-sexual	4
Queer	1
Heterosexual	9
Preferred not to say	1

Source: Table by author

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