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Summary

In December 2024, the Australian Bureau of Statistics released its first ever estimate of the LGBTQ+ population in Australia ([link to ABS LGBTQ+ population estimates](#)) the media at the time concentrated on the headline number of 4.5% of Australians aged 16 and over. Previous estimates by independent parties have estimated that the LGBTQ+ community is anywhere from 8% to 11% of the population. When you dig a bit deeper into the data, almost 10% of Australians between the ages of 16 and 24 identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community while only 2% of people between the ages of 55 to 64 identify as LGBTQ+. These estimates will be tested at the next census.

Lesley Traverso, one of ALBEI's Directors, has reflected on the results and explores the possible reasons.

This marks the first entry in a series of occasional thought leadership articles covering various topics related to the LGBTQ+ community and board diversity.

We are always eager to hear your thoughts on topics that interest you. Please visit our website at www.albei.org.

Why does the LGBTQ+ population in Australia decrease by age?



Lesley Traverso, Director, ALBEI

I was curious about the recent stats released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on the number of self-identified members of the LGBTQ+ community in Australia. The figures were broken down by age cohort which raised more questions – why are there fewer in the older age groups? Is it deeply embedded social stigma, is it a result of higher mortality in the 1980s, or something else? What are the implications in general and, given we are focusing here on older age groups, is there a correlation/causation as to why there are few 'out' LGBTQ+ people in our boardrooms?

So, I went hunting around the library to see what I could find in academic papers that might explain it. How we form our identity and how, or if, we articulate it to others is one of the key aspects to consider when trying to answer these questions. In a US paper from 2019, Bower et al^[1] indicated that *'sexual identities are socially constructed, fluid and continually evolving through social interaction and meaning making'*. To unpack that statement, we'll see how each of the elements may play a part in influencing the ABS statistics.

There are many socio-historical factors that impact an individual's social identity and how that individual goes on to interact with their various life environments. This in turn influences their level of enthusiasm for being 'out' in any or all of those life environments. For example, research indicates that older men have self-identified later than younger generations, who now have more inclusive support networks.

There has been a change in the narrative of identity indicating a shift in the way that we think about sexuality, so that being gay is a part of human existence not a descriptive narrative^[2]. So, with that being the case, is being 'in' or 'out' of a metaphorical closet an appropriate metaphor? To label sexuality in that way indicates it is a binary focused one-time process, and thereby negates the concepts of fluidity, diversity and a temporal context.

One of the key indicators of whether someone is open at work is the level of belonging and social support that they feel.^[3] Perhaps when an individual reaches the boardroom, they

are faced with a need to be 'apart' or somehow separate from the collective entity that is the business, in order to lead and make decisions appropriately? Lose that sense of belonging and you lose the support network to feel comfortable with full disclosure.

Is there a fear of backlash from overseas trading partners? Countries with draconian laws against homosexuality may not wish to deal with organisations that have a gay board member.[\[4\]](#) With the very recent executive orders by the new President of the USA and with many US companies pulling back on DEO initiatives we are already seeing pressure in Australia to downplay board diversity, in all its forms.

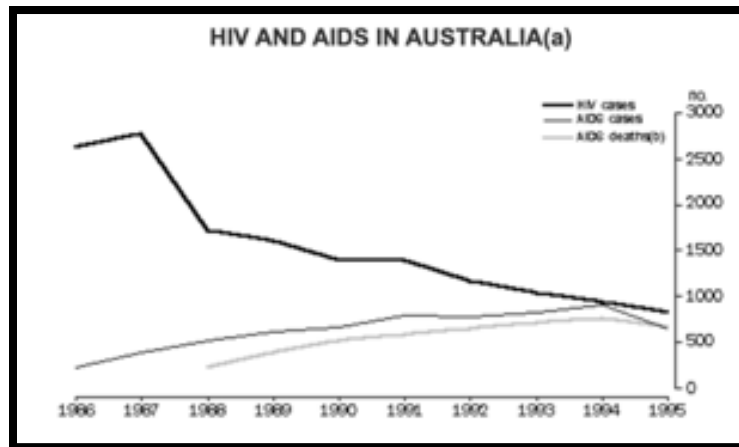
However, there is a potential for personal conflict. Research indicates that there is more psychological commitment to the organisation if one is open[\[5\]](#), so how does that sit with the board member, who is supposed to be the most committed of all to the organisation, but still can't be open about their sexuality? Does being 'in the closet' influence business decisions? Are we to conclude that all non-out gay board members are less committed to their organisations than their out or heterosexual peers? That seems unlikely, so is there then something else at work here to change a person's comfort level with being gay when they enter the boardroom?

If we accept (as per Foucault and Butler[\[6\]](#)) that sexual identity is performative, when does the board director get the opportunity to enact this narrative performance? It is a reiterative process, so do they need to reinforce at every board meeting or public AGM? What about the reactions, is a gay board member less acceptable to the majority than a gay office worker?

There is often an assumption that 'coming out' can be a negative experience for both the outer and the recipient, but it can also be a very positive one, with people being able to channel their energies into their work rather than protecting an identity.[\[7\]](#)

In ALBEI's discussions with senior directors on this issues, we have heard a significant range of views as to what 'coming out' actually means. From those who say nothing at all on the issue, to those who are open in the boardroom, but closed elsewhere to those who are fully 'out and proud'.

Another direction I considered was if the deaths from HIV in the 1980s influenced the numbers of out gay men in the boardrooms in the 2020s? I am not forgetting women here, just exploring one specific direction for the moment, (notwithstanding the fact that there are far greater numbers of men than women in boardrooms today). We are not just talking mortality numbers here but also the effect that time had on an individual's choice of their narrative of identity. As Tester[\[8\]](#) comments – *'nearly all gay men today, regardless of their HIV status, or when they came out have been impacted in some way.'*



Source:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/455cdc7e9de1185fca2570ec001b1378!OpenDocument>

The highest incidence of HIV infections was in 1985, when our 60-year-old of today would have been 21. Over 16,000 new cases were identified between 1984 and 1992, of which 85% were from male-to-male transmission. The graph above shows HIV and AIDS in Australia between 1986 and 1995, when our potential board member of today would have been in his 20s and 30s. If we relate this information back to how people construct their identities and then how they form their own narrative, it is easy to see that a whole generation who would now be ready for the board room may have their enthusiasm for being openly gay impacted by the AIDS crisis. So, our cohort may not only have been reduced numerically, but also have all the negative connotations of being gay in their youth seared into their psyche.

Food for thought.



Sources:

[1] Bower, K.L., Lewis, D.C., Bermudez, M., Singh, A.A. (2019) 'Adding grey to the rainbow: a narrative analysis of generational identity through stories and counter-stories of older gay men.' *Ageing and Society* (2021) 41, 957-979

[2] As above

[3] Griffith, KH., Hebl, M.R., (2002) ' The Disclosure dilemma for gay men and lesbians: "coming out" at work' *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2002) Vol 87. No.6. 1191-1199

[4] McPhail, R., McNulty, Y., Hutchings, K. (2016) 'Lesbian and gay expatriation: opportunities, barriers and challenges for global mobility'. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 27, 382-406

[5] Ward, J., & Winstanley, D. (2005). *Coming Out at Work: Performativity and the Recognition and Renegotiation of Identity*. *The Sociological Review*, 53(3), 447-475.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2005.00561.x>

[6] Ward and Winstanley as above