

Who's Afraid of Growing Old? Gay and Lesbian Perceptions of Aging

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ABSTRACT. This article is a study of how gay men and lesbian individuals perceive the aging process. The findings indicate that gay men have more negative views of how gay society views growing older and how they view their own growing older than do lesbian respondents. Gay men were also found to be more ageist, have a greater fear of negative evaluation by others, and give more importance to their own physical attractiveness. Implications for social work practice with elder homosexuals are addressed. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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As the “baby boomer” generation of Americans grows older, more social workers will be needed to care for their physical and psychological needs (Kelchner, 1999). This aging of America will also include the aging of a generation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals. Practice with LGBT individuals is challenging because of the great diversity within this group. It will be important for social workers and other caregivers

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to have an understanding of the unique perspective that LGBT elders have on their own aging. Moreover, the generation of LGBT individuals currently entering old age differs in many important ways from previous generations. Many members of this generation led the struggle for civil rights following the Stonewall riots of 1969 and have lived openly as gay and lesbian people, often disclosing their sexual orientations both at home and in the workplace (Dobrof, 2001).

Social work practitioners need to be prepared to offer culturally competent skills and services in their work with elder LGBT individuals, an issue not sufficiently addressed in the gerontological literature (Cruikshank, 1990). Practitioners will especially need to understand the meaning of being old within the homosexual community. Before the Stonewall riots, older homosexuals were often portrayed by popular literature and in films as lonely, deviant, and pathetic individuals with little motivation or reason to live (Morrow, 2001; Russo, 1987). This perception was held not only by heterosexual society but was also internalized by the homosexual individuals themselves (Schope, 2002).

A lot has changed after three decades of gay liberation, but has there been a change in how gay society views older gay men and lesbians? And do gay men and lesbians look at their own aging differently? Those attending the SAGE (Senior Action in a Gay Environment) Conference at Fordham University in 1998 saw major differences between older gay men and lesbians. One participant recalls that many older gay men appeared overwhelmed and even depressed when addressing issues of aging. In contrast, "the lesbians seemed confident, addressed ageism directly . . . [they] were inspiring, courageous, and their energy galvanized the audience" (Kooden & Flowers, 2000, p. 27). Many practitioners at the Conference indicated that this difference in attitude toward aging has had very serious consequences, with many young gay men rejecting safe sex behaviors because, after all, who wants to become an old gay man.

This study addresses several important questions for social work educators and practitioners working with older homosexuals. Specifically, do gay men and lesbians perceive the aging process differently and, if so, how can understanding these differences better prepare educators and practitioners to be of assistance to LGB clients and the LGB community?

LITERATURE

Gay Men and Aging

A decade into gay liberation, much of the research sought to demystify the negative stereotype of the lonely, tragic, older homosexual through interviews

with a few openly proud gay men. Yet even these authors often conceded that the lonely, tragic older homosexual did exist. One author suggested that much of the misery was perhaps self inflicted. Older gay men, lamenting the loss of their ability to compete for sex, often came to see their loneliness as the earned consequence of their earlier promiscuity and sinfulness (Kimmel, 1979). Others felt that the belief among gay men that growing old is intolerable was promoted by heterosexual society mainly to discourage young gay men from choosing a homosexual lifestyle (Berger, 1982a).

Much of the literature on gay male aging can be grouped around two competing theories: *accelerated aging* and *crisis competence*. The theory of *accelerated aging* contends that gay men view themselves as older at a time when heterosexual men do not. This echoes the commonly accepted statement that a gay man is old when he turns 30 (Berger, 1982b). Gay men who come out in their late twenties or in their thirties may even feel like they have jumped right from adolescence to middle or old age. Gay men may interpret aging inappropriately because they lack the “markers” such as the birth or graduation of a child that guide perceptions of age for heterosexuals (Kooden & Flowers, 2000). In his early study of forty-three gay men, Friend (1980) found that almost all the respondents described themselves as “old” even though most were younger than 65. On the other hand, other authors counter that there is no real evidence that gay men feel “old” sooner than heterosexual men and that, like heterosexual men, older gay men cope well once through the common “mid-life” crisis (Berger & Kelly, 2001; Harry, 1982).

Crisis competence theory argues that gay men are actually better able to cope with aging than heterosexual men. Having reconstructed their social and sexual identities through the coming out process, older gay men may develop skills that allow them to adjust to the aging process (Friend, 1991). Some older gay men have reported that growing older is exciting and satisfying and that they are not only “surviving” but also “thriving” (Kertzner, 1997). One study of elder gay men found that 68% of the forty-one respondents felt being gay helped them accept the aging process (Quam & Whitford, 1992).

While many find comfort in the *crisis competence* theory, others suggest that the current trend to link minority status with resilience may not be accurate (Kimmel, 2002). Gay men not only have the same difficulties as heterosexual men as they grow old, they additionally have to continue to deal with societal oppression (Getzel, 1997). Moreover, gay men in the closet may be actually happier and more satisfied in old age than gay men who have had a difficult time coming out (Adelman, 1990; Ehrenberg, 1997). Happiness for older gay men may result from doing the hard work of steering clear of “storms” rather than weathering them (Lee, 1987). Older gay men who never

came out also may find their elder years easier because they are more likely to have continued contact with their families (Altman, 1999).

If one accepts that gay men view growing older gay in negative terms, what factors might contribute to this perception? Many authors argue this perception of older gay men perhaps derives from an exaggerated importance of sex within the gay community, with gay men placing a strong emphasis on physical beauty and youth, both in whom they are attracted to and with respect to evaluating their own self worth (Herzog, Newman, & Warshaw, 1991; Seiver, 1994; Silberstein et al., 1989). An early study found that men with graying temples, often seen as having character in the heterosexual world, were seen as repulsive to many in the gay world (Laner, 1978). Many authors further suggest that young men rarely form friendships with older gay men because they believe older gay men are only interested in obtaining sex from them (Lee, 1987; McDougall, 1993). Moreover, this may not be explained away as simply a male quality. In a recent study, older gay men were found to seek younger partners even more than did heterosexual men (Silverthorne & Quinsey, 2000).

Gay male perception of being old has, according to several authors, changed with the coming of gay liberation. In the 1940s and 50s, older gay men were highly respected because they controlled an elaborate network of private parties and young gay men needed an older sponsor to gain access to this virtually hidden world. But gay liberation replaced the private parties with large dance bars where youth, not experience or resources, became dominant (Lee, 1987). Many argue that both younger and older gay men need to start defining "beauty" in more than a physical way. Yet, gay men helped create this culture based on youth, so some believe that they now should not be surprised that their own aging has lessened their ability to compete. "Face it girls," one author writes, "there is nothing quite so unattractive as a bitter old queen" (Long, 2001, p. 113).

The negative perception of older gay men may have major consequences within the gay community. Cruising for a sexual partner is very often a game where mere prolonged eye contact suggests interest. Older gay men, knowing this, may retreat from community and social events because even their innocent eye contact is either cruelly rejected or not returned at all by younger men (Grossman, 1997; Weeks, 1981). Feeling this rejection, older gay men often retreat into isolation, in some ways fulfilling the negative stereotype (Ehrenberg, 1997; Quam, 1993). This isolation also may result in despair, leading many older gay men to seek counseling from social work practitioners (Baron & Cramer, 2000). Many authors suggest that older gay men tend to have support networks consisting of only other older gay men, making adjustment to aging more difficult (Jones, 2001; Kimmel, 1992; Whitford, 1997).

Other authors, however, have found that older gay men have better support networks than older heterosexual men and as a result experience less anxiety and depression over aging (Dorfman et al., 1995).

Lesbians and Aging

Some authors have suggested that aging for lesbians might be different from aging for gay men. In fact, little or no reference to the existence of *age acceleration* exists in the literature on elder lesbians. While some older lesbians have reported that they feel “invisible” at social events (Tully, 1989), one study found that only 15% of 74 older lesbians felt that they had ever been discriminated against by younger lesbians (Almvig, 1982). Moreover, several authors state that rather than being rejected, older lesbians are more likely to be welcomed, respected, and even “treasured” by younger lesbians. Often older lesbians see this as patronizing and insist that younger lesbians need to stop placing them in the simplistic heterosexual role of “grandma” (MacDonald & Rich, 2001). Many older lesbians react sternly when someone simply compliments them on “not looking their age” because looking older should not be the cause of shame. Healy (1994) argues that “rather than being finished and over the hill, many of us feel more free than ever before . . . we will not accept being fossilized, one of the most insidious forms of ageist insult” (p. 116).

Crisis competence theory is also rarely discussed in the literature on lesbian aging. Several authors suggest that “poisonous environments” have forced lesbians to learn early how to be more resourceful and to develop stronger coping mechanisms (Healy, 1994; MacDonald & Rich, 2001). In her study of more than one hundred lesbians, Sharp (1997) found respondents who dealt well with their homosexuality also coped well with aging. Most studies have found that lesbians feel positive about being homosexual and aging (Almvig, 1982; Kehoe, 1989). One study of seventy-eight lesbians over 50 found that 80% had *somewhat* or *very* positive attitudes about their own aging (Deevey, 1990). Those lesbians who are anxious about aging may be fearful of ending up financially poor and, without ties to family, in homophobic nursing homes (Tully, 1989). Friend (1987) adds that lesbians may deal with fewer crises through the life span because heterosexual society is less obsessed with oppressing lesbians than it is in persecuting gay men.

If one argues that lesbians are more positive about growing older than are gay men, does youth and beauty play a different role in lesbian society? Some authors have noted that lesbian parties and community groups, like those of gay men, often are attended mainly by younger lesbians, reducing the number of places where older lesbians can comfortably “come out” (Almvig, 1982). This should not necessarily be interpreted as a sign of bias against older lesbi-

ans. Many lesbians in middle age are in partner relationships and have a strong network of friendships (Tully, 1989). Several authors suggest that lesbian friendship networks tend to include women of many ages. Moreover, Kehoe's (1986) study found that two-thirds of lesbian respondents older than 65 had been in cross-generational relationships, with the age differences between partners ranging from 20 to 53 years. Continuing to confuse the issue, a more recent study found that most lesbians stated a preference for partners of their same age or even older (Silverthorne & Quinsey, 2000),

Much of the literature on lesbian aging focuses on the variety of "body types" that are acceptable to lesbians. Most authors emphasize that good looks and youth do not play the same role among lesbians as they do for gay men (Fallon, 1990; Kimmel & Sang, 1995; Seiver, 1994). Over half the older lesbians in Almvig's (1982) study reported that they felt as attractive or even more attractive than they did when they were younger. The author suggests that most lesbians accept growing older, develop a comfort with their natural attractiveness, and abandon their need for "make-up, high heels, and lady like posture" (p. 74). A study of thirty-eight female adolescents found that lesbian respondents were more satisfied with their "body image" than were heterosexual females (French et al., 1996). The acceptance of one's own body, regardless of weight, is seen by many authors as part of the overall feminist movement against idealizing thin women (Schoenfelder & Wieser, 1983) and that acceptance of diverse body types may spare lesbians the "midlife crisis" so common for older gay men (Kooden & Flowers, 2000).

However, the results of two recent studies question the perhaps politically correct assertion that lesbians are relatively unconcerned about physical appearance. Heffernan's (1996) study of over two hundred lesbians found that body esteem was significantly related to self-esteem and that 63% of the respondents felt physical attractiveness was *very* or *fairly* important in choosing a partner. Another study found that younger lesbians were as fixated about their weight as were younger heterosexual females (Saewyc et al., 1998).

Hypotheses

Most of the literature on gay aging has been written by practitioners discussing their experiences with LGBT clients. Some empirical studies are available but few have really explored the role of physical appearance and age as factors creating negative or positive perceptions of growing older among gay and lesbian individuals. Based on the literature, this study will examine the following four hypotheses:

1. Gay men will report that one is old at a younger age than will lesbians.

2. Gay men will perceive the aging process more negatively than will lesbians.
3. Gay men will be more fearful of negative evaluations by other gay men than lesbians will be of other lesbians.
4. Gay men will place more importance on personal appearance than will lesbians.

METHODS

Data Collection

The data were collected from gay and lesbian individuals who live in a small Midwestern community with a large university. The anonymous four page questionnaire was distributed among specific university groups (i.e., LGBT faculty and staff organization, the LGBT student organization) and among participants at the 2002 Gay Pride parade. Questionnaires were returned by mail to a university mailbox. Respondents were assured of anonymity as no means were used to track respondents. The final sample consisted of 183 respondents, with 74 gay men and 109 lesbians. This represented a return rate of around 63%. The average age was 34.4 years for gay male respondents and 39.9 years for lesbian respondents. Around 94% of the respondents were White and 93% were either in college or had graduated from college, which reflects the nature of the university community.

Measures

The first hypothesis was tested using questions specific to gay aging. This section began with the question "If you are a gay man, describe your perception of how 'gay male society' feels about aging." A similar question was used for lesbians. The second question asked how the respondent felt about his or her own aging. For both questions, respondents were given five possible answers ranging from *terrible* to *fantastic*. *Terrible* and *tolerable* were considered negative perceptions of aging, with *good* and *fantastic* categorized as positive perceptions. Two additional questions asked at what age did the respondent consider a gay person of the same sex no longer young, and at what age did the respondent consider a gay person of the same sex no longer dateable.

The second hypothesis was tested using an Attitude Toward Aging (ATA) scale that measures specific aspects of ageism (Pillemer & Albright, 1996). The ATA consists of twelve questions and included items such as "I fear getting old," "most older people are not isolated," and "being around old people is

depressing.” This instrument uses a 4-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* (4) to *strongly disagree* (1). Total scores could range from 12 (lowest ageist) to 48 (extremely ageist). The ATA scale had an internal consistency of .76.

The third hypothesis was tested using a brief version of the Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale (Watson & Friend, 1969). For this study, the twelve items were slightly altered in order to measure fear of negative evaluation by the respondents’ gay peers. Thus “I am usually worried about what kind of impression I make on people” was changed to “I am usually worried about what kind of impression I make on gay people of my same sex.” The FNE uses a 5-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *extremely* (5) characteristic of the respondent. Thus, scores could range from 12 (not afraid of negative evaluation) to 60 (very afraid of negative evaluation). Watson and Friend reported an internal consistency of .90 for their brief FNE scale.

The last hypothesis was tested using two subscales from the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ) developed by Cash (1990). Both subscales were reported by the authors to have high reliability (Alpha = .75 to .90) and validity (correlated with several health and body instruments). The first subscale, the Appearance Evaluation (AE), consists of seven questions measuring the respondents’ evaluation of their own appearance. Examples of AE questions include “I like my looks just the way they are” and “My body is sexually appealing.” The second subscale, the Appearance Orientation (AO), consists of twelve questions measuring the respondents’ evaluation of how important it was for them to look good in public. The AO consists of items such as “Before going out, I usually spend a lot of time getting ready” and “I am self-conscious if my grooming isn’t right.” Both subscales used a 5-point scale ranging from *definitely agree* to *definitely disagree*. Thus for Appearance Evaluation, scores could range from 7 (not pleased with one’s appearance) to 35 (extremely pleased with one’s appearance). For Appearance Orientation, scores could range from 12 (how appear in public is unimportant) to 60 (how appear in public is extremely important).

Data Analysis

The age of the respondents is an important variable when examining ageism. It is perhaps even more important to the current study because of the changes in social and personal attitudes toward homosexuality brought about after the Stonewall riots of 1969. The first two questions of the first hypothesis were tested using chi-square analysis. To test for a relationship between age and the responses, two age groups were created roughly using the theory of age acceleration. Gay and lesbian respondents under 40 were categorized as members of a *younger* generation (52 gay men, 53 lesbians) and those 40 and over were categorized as members of an *older* generation (22 gay men, 56 les-

bians). The remaining questions and hypotheses were tested using independent t-tests with Pearson correlations to determine if age was significantly related.

FINDINGS

Gay and Lesbian Perceptions of Aging

As seen in Table 1, gay men felt gay society viewed growing older more negatively than did the lesbian respondents, giving support to the first hypothesis. The difference between gay men and lesbians was found to be significant ($\chi^2 = 78.5$, $p < .000$). Among gay men, almost 84% indicated that gay society viewed growing older negatively. Of those respondents, a majority felt that gay society viewed growing older as *terrible*. A very small percentage of gay men felt gay society viewed aging positively. Moreover, this negative perception of how gay society views aging crossed the generations, with 88% of younger gay men and 73% of older gay men being negative. Among lesbian respondents, 41% felt lesbian society saw aging as positive, with only a fifth of the lesbians saying it was seen negatively. Moreover, while older lesbians were slightly more positive, the difference between younger and older lesbians was not significant.

Gay men also were found to be significantly more negative than lesbian respondents in their attitudes about their own growing older ($\chi^2 = 16.8$, $p = .001$). Around a third of the gay men perceived their own aging in negative terms. However, almost 40% of the gay men saw their own growing older in positive terms. There were only slight differences between younger and older gay men and they were not statistically significant. Lesbian respondents were even more positive, with almost 60% seeing growing older in positive terms, with around a third of those respondents saying aging was *fantastic*. No significant differences were found between younger and older lesbians.

Further support for the first hypothesis was found in responses to the question about when a homosexual becomes old. Gay male respondents believed that one turns old at a much earlier age (38.8 years) than did lesbian respondents (48.4 years) and the difference was significant ($t = 4.5$, $p < .000$). Older gay men indicated that one turns old at 44 while younger gay men set the age at 37, with the difference being significant ($t = -2.6$, $p = .012$). No difference was found between younger and older lesbians on the question of when someone turns old.

TABLE 1. Gender Differences on Aging Questions by Percentages

HOW GAY SOCIETY VIEWS AGING					
	TERRIBLE	TOLERABLE	ACCEPTABLE	GOOD	FANTASTIC
MALE (n = 74)	45.9	37.8	14.9	0.0	1.4
Younger males (n = 52)	50.0	38.5	9.6	0.0	1.9
Older males (n = 22)	36.4	36.4	27.3	0.0	0.0
FEMALE (n = 104)	3.8	18.1	37.1	32.4	8.6
Younger females (n = 51)	5.9	21.6	37.3	27.5	7.8
Older females (n = 53)	1.9	18.3	36.5	32.7	8.7

HOW GAY PERSON VIEWS OWN AGING					
	TERRIBLE	TOLERABLE	ACCEPTABLE	GOOD	FANTASTIC
MALE (n = 74)	5.4	28.4	27.0	33.8	5.4
Younger males (n = 52)	5.8	28.8	26.9	34.6	3.8
Older males (n = 22)	4.5	27.3	27.3	31.8	9.1
FEMALE (n = 104)	0.9	11.0	32.2	38.5	18.3
Younger females (n = 51)	0.0	11.3	34.0	30.2	24.5
Older females (n = 53)	1.8	10.9	29.1	45.5	12.7

Gay men were also much more conscious of age when considering who is “dateable” than were lesbian respondents. Interval data, however, was not available for this question because most lesbians refused to specify a year that one is no longer dateable. Instead, most entered comments such as “until one is dead” and “one is never too old to be dateable.” A few lesbian respondents put in ages such as 120 or 150 years, while others simply rejected the question as offensive. Based on the quantitative and qualitative data, over 84% of lesbian respondents indicated that individuals were still dateable after 65 years of age. Surprisingly, there was no significant difference between older and younger lesbians, with over 80% of both groups responding that someone was dateable after 65.

Gay men had less trouble stating an age at which someone was no longer dateable, which averaged 59 years, but with a wide standard deviation of almost 27 years. While older gay men indicated that gay men were dateable at a slightly older age, they were not significantly different from younger gay men. The standard deviation for both age groups was over 25 years, indicating that gay men did have major differences about who is dateable, but respondent age was not a determining factor.

Ageism Among Gay and Lesbian Individuals

The findings support the second hypothesis, that gay men are more ageist than are lesbians. Gay men had a mean of 26.5 ($SD = 4.8$) on the Attitude Toward Aging scale, while lesbians had a mean of 23.9 ($SD = 5.1$) and the difference was significant ($t = -3.4, p = .001$). No relationship was found between age and scores on the ATA for either gay men or lesbians. Also, on the specific question whether one fears growing old, there was no significant difference, with both gay men (mean = 2.6) and lesbians (mean = 2.5) indicating that they are fearful.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

The findings support the third hypothesis that gay men are more fearful of the negative evaluations of other gay men than lesbians are of other lesbians. Gay men had a mean of 34.0 ($SD = 9.6$), compared to the lesbian mean of 28.9 ($SD = 9.3$) and the difference was significant ($t = -3.6, p < .000$). A weak but significant negative relationship was found between age and FNE scores for both gay men ($r = -.21, p = .019$) and lesbian respondents ($r = -.25, p = .002$). Younger gay men and lesbians therefore tended to be more concerned with how gay society perceived them than did older gay men and lesbians.

Perception of and Importance of Personal Appearance

The findings on the Appearance Evaluation subscale, measuring comfort with one's own appearance, failed to support the fourth hypothesis. Gay men had a mean of 23.1 ($SD = 5.2$) and lesbian respondents had a mean of 22.8 ($SD = 5.7$) and the difference was not significant. No relationship was found between the age and scores on the AE for either gay men or lesbians.

The findings on the Appearance Orientation subscale, measuring the importance of appearance in public, did support the fourth hypothesis. Gay men had a mean of 41.7 ($SD = 8.6$) and lesbians had a mean of 37.9 ($SD = 8.5$). The difference was significant ($t = -3.0, p = .003$). A significant but weak negative

relationship was found between age and AO scores for gay men ($r = -.39$, $p < .000$), indicating that younger gay men tended to be more concerned about their appearance in public than did older gay men. No relationship was found between age and AO scores for lesbian respondents.

DISCUSSION

Based on this study's findings, gay men believe that gay society views growing older in negative terms. Regardless of how the gay man himself perceived his own aging (only 5% saw it as *terrible*), almost half of the respondents indicated that gay society saw being an older gay man as *terrible*. So while gay men work to sustain positive self images in the face of societal homophobia, that work likely becomes more difficult as one ages due to gay society's own negative attitude toward older gay men. With the finding that a gay man is considered "old" by age 39, the struggle against ageism begins early for most gay men. The news, however, may not be all bad for older gay men. In an unexpected finding, some young gay men stated that they were willing to date men who were older. It appears that while gay men are quick to label someone as "old," that does not mean that they are not willing to date or interact with such a person. This finding seems to contradict the perception that gay society is prejudiced against older gay men. Yet, it may be consistent with the idea that while gay society has a bias against older gay men, the respondents themselves are divided in their actual behavior towards older gay men.

Lesbians, as predicted, view growing older in a more positive light than gay men. Only one-fourth of the lesbian respondents said that lesbian society viewed aging in negative terms and one-fourth of the respondents themselves viewed aging as *fantastic*. Moreover, one becomes "old" according to the lesbian respondents at the age of 49, which was 10 years older than the age felt by the gay male respondents. Perhaps the most dramatic finding of the study was the unwillingness of most lesbian respondents to even answer the question concerning when someone becomes too old to date. The very question was considered politically incorrect, and the respondents were very emphatic in letting the author know this, reinforcing the finding that many lesbians reject the idea of judging others on the basis of age.

Older lesbians, thus, are more likely to be accepted at lesbian social and political events than older gay men are at gay events. It may be that older lesbians, less burdened by challenges to their self esteem, have changed how lesbian society overall perceives the aging process. The feminist movement started quite early its efforts to reshape lesbian society in a way that rejected

what were seen as male-based judgments and biases. Nothing similar to the feminist movement has existed for gay men. Nevertheless, both gay men and lesbians indicated that they are afraid of growing old. Perhaps many gay men and lesbians, without children or supportive siblings, look ahead with some anxiety to the possibility of being alone in their old age.

Having found that gay men tend indeed to be more ageist than lesbians, the FNE, AE, and AO findings become even more important. Gay men in this study were more afraid of negative evaluations by other gay men than lesbians were of other lesbians. Moreover, this fear was relatively constant regardless of the age of the respondent. Being more afraid of the perception of others would also explain the exaggerated importance of one's physical appearance by gay men. While both gay men and lesbians were evidently "satisfied" with their own appearance, gay men were significantly more concerned how others would evaluate their physical appearance than were lesbians.

This emphasis on public appearance may simply be a response to the finding that gay society is more judgmental than lesbian society with respect to age. Another reason for a higher concern for physical appearance by gay men may be the varied network of gay bars which cater much more to gay male customers. The bar scene is the center for intense searching by gay men for sexual partners, with the initial contacts clearly emphasizing looks over personality. Lesbians even in the larger cities rarely find the bar scene as an important setting for meeting partners. Instead, strong network of social groups usually exists among the lesbians. Very telling is the fact that older lesbians in the community studied in this project have created social organizations with names such as the OWLS and the CRONES. One could hardly imagine older gay male organizations named in a way that gay men would likely interpret as derogatory.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are not very hopeful for gay men as they face the aging process. With gay male society indicating a bias against their older members, many gay men are or eventually will find themselves alone. The common assumption has always been that gay and lesbian persons "recreate" new families from close friends to help buffer the absence of parents, siblings, and children. But many gay men and lesbians saw their support networks reduced with the devastating arrival of AIDS. Further research examining the extent of social support among homosexuals perhaps would help explain if the fear of growing older is tied to an early loss of family and the inability to form or maintain new friendship networks.

This fear of ending up alone calls for a re-evaluation of what is important in gay relationships. It seems unlikely that the dominance of youth and beauty will disappear any time soon. This suggests that older gay men should be very diligent in building strong supports with other older individuals. Yet, some younger gay men reported that they were at least willing to consider dating older gay men. Perhaps this indicates also a readiness to become members in older gay men's support networks? This discrepancy between attitude and behavior by gay men points to another area important for future research.

The sample for this study was not randomly selected and most of the respondents were probably openly gay since the distribution was at gay identified groups and events. Nevertheless, this study gives some support that the reactions of practitioners and educators at the SAGE Conference in 1998 to the differences between older gay men and older lesbians were valid. Older gay men who feel isolated and abandoned by gay society will need to challenge how they are viewed by other gay men. They may in addition need to question their own motivations for retreating from social events and community activities. Social worker practitioners, educators, and community workers will be needed to assist LGBT individuals and the LGBG community in this effort to reintegrate elder gay men into gay society. But as the situation currently stands, while some older lesbians express anger when they are patronized and treasured by younger lesbians, older gay men would most likely be glad to trade places.

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