Support Systems: An Aspect of Social Aging for the Homosexual Male

C.E. Tygart
California State University, Fullerton
Larry Stephens
Fielding Institute

ABSTRACT: In the United States, homosexual men in mid and late life have been viewed as isolates and without support systems. The capacity for these men to develop present and have access to future living patterns, based on support systems, has been found to have greater meaning than the labeling of their overall life style has suggested. Research data suggestive of this proposition is discussed.

Introduction

There has been a scarcity of literature suggesting age-specific support systems that are applicable to the older homosexual male. A few works have either alluded to their living patterns or have briefly referred to the general aspects of their aging. These efforts, with few exceptions, have dealt with alienation. This alienation has taken the form of their separation from the youthful aspects of gay life, from their families, or from society as a whole.

Several contemporary research efforts have shown an awareness of the particularized needs of this segment of the adult male population. These specific gerontological needs are seen as embracing a supportive, nonthreatening atmosphere in which to socialize and have residency. The necessity for these special support systems arises at a time in life when age-related deprivations are more pronounced. Additional studies focusing on such networks which provide life requisite services involving nutrition, health, and safety of one's personhood,
both physical and psychological, as well as social services, form an evolving research agenda for this special population. Significant others, offering ongoing emotional support, are perhaps the most limited resource of older persons. It has been thought that this is particularly true of older homosexual males.

Research, directed to gay support systems in midlife and beyond, appears to be limited primarily to a single work. This study was initiated by Chris Almvig in preparing for her masters program at the New York School of Social Science Research (Kimmel, 1979). She suggests that male homosexuals experience less from the trauma of aging than their heterosexual counterparts. This assumption appears to have its origin in the reality that generally, as single persons, most gay men have had to care for themselves across the life course without familial or companionate support systems. As a result, they are more prepared to meet the realities of aging in terms of meeting late life contingencies than are those men who have relied upon a spouse.

Kimmel (1979) reports that "much of the literature in gerontology has suggested that kinship supports are the basic source of aid in old age." These supports for the gay man for the most part have been thought to be nonexistent. When age-related gay supports are present they may be seen as an alternate form of the extended family based on nonsanguinity.

The importance of supportive kinship ties, formed within the nuclear family by the gay man while still young, with their impact on his support networking after 40 years of age, has not been considered. A related consideration, supportive friendship networks and their extensiveness for this population, has not received a systematic review from an erotic, emotional perspective.

Methodology

The study population is skewed to those men who participate in interactional situations oriented to gay socialization. "There is no such thing as a representative sample of lesbians and gay men. Researchers are sampling what is essentially a hidden or invisible population" (Morin, 1977). Until national or regional norms can be determined for homosexuals, all such studies will reflect only those involved. Realistically, the most objective approach to conducting research programs on this special population is to utilize homosexual organizations in which gay men have the greatest demographic