Realities of Gay and Lesbian Aging

Raymond M. Berger

Social workers have little accurate information about older gays and lesbians. This article presents the findings of an interview study of 18 homosexual men and women aged 40 to 72. The author makes recommendations about the provision of social services to this group by professionals and peers.

In recent years the social work profession has directed attention to the special needs of men and women who are homosexual. However, almost no knowledge has been available to social workers about the needs of a group within the gay and lesbian community that is most vulnerable to social, economic, and psychological forces and, therefore, most likely to come to the attention of social workers. This is the group of older gays and lesbians, people aged 40 and over, who, by conservative estimate, number one and three-quarter million persons in the United States. The purpose of this article is to report findings from in-depth interviews with eighteen older homosexuals in a preliminary attempt to identify the characteristics and needs of this group.

In the absence of research and public discussion, misinformation and stereotypes about older gays and lesbians have thrived, even among social work professionals. Although the gay rights movement has helped in part to counter inaccurate information about homosexuals who are older. Some common stereotypes are that the older homosexual has no family ties and few friends, is isolated from other homosexuals, is depressed and unhappy, seeks sexual gratification from children, and with age becomes increasingly effeminate (in the case of men) and increasingly cold and cruel (in the case of women). The author's study examined those notions and identified the unique needs, as well as strengths, of older gays and lesbians.

SAMPLE AND METHOD
The study defined an older homosexual as any individual who was self-identified as gay or lesbian and who was 40 years of age or older. The age of 40 was chosen on the basis of research among homosexuals that indicated there was universal agreement that a person of this age was no longer young. Respondents in the study ranged from 40 to 72, with a median age of 54. (See Table 1.)

Drawing from the small available literature on this group and discussions with older homosexuals, the researchers designed an interview schedule, pretested it, and modified it for clarity. All questions were open-ended and covered the following topics: social life, involvement with the homosexual community, involvement with family, love relationships, "coming out," sex life, intergenerational attitudes, discrimination, and perspectives on growing older.

The study was carried out in an urban area with a high concentration of the elderly. The author and a female research assistant located respondents through announcements at meetings of homosexual organizations and through placing advertisements and articles about the study in newsletters of homosexual religious and political groups. To reach men and women who did not frequent these organizations, each older person enlisted for the study was asked to recruit older friends who did not attend activities in the homosexual community. These friendship networks contributed six older respondents.

A word about the sample is in order. For both conceptual and logistical reasons, no research on homosexuality has achieved a representative sample. Conceptually, a representative sample has not been possible because of the absence of a clear-cut definition of homosexuality. The presence in this study of several respondents who had lived exclusively heterosexual or homosexual lifestyles at some points in time attests to this problem. Therefore, for this study, the self-attrition of homosexuality was chosen as the most valid definition. From a logistical viewpoint, research samples of homosexuals have been biased in favor of white, affluent, well-educated respondents (due to problems of recruitment); despite efforts to recruit minorities, this study was no exception. Although occupational status ranged from low (stock clerk) to high (bank president), all respondents were white. (Demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.) Another sampling limitation was the bias in favor of homosexuals who had participated in at least one gay or lesbian community organization. These homosexuals were most accessible to the author but may be atypical of the population as a whole. As noted, however, six of the eighteen respondents did not participate in homosexual organizations, which en-
hances the representativeness of the sample. Nevertheless, it is probably the case that a truly representative sample would have incurred an even greater proportion of respondents who were not participants in homosexual organizations. Therefore, one should not assume that the results of this study apply to all older homosexual men and women.

A final sampling issue, which was recently brought to light by a noted researcher of homosexuality, concerns the refutation of stereotypes. Because stereotypes are by definition universal hypotheses about populations, any members of the population who do not correspond to the stereotype challenge it. A biased but diverse sample of the population is sufficient to refute stereotypes, as long as the findings are not interpreted as demographic representations of older homosexuals in general.

Interviews—conducted by the author (a male in his late twenties) and by a female research assistant in her mid-thirties—took place in respondents' homes, at a university office, and in other settings such as a bar. To maintain the natural flow of the interview, which lasted from one and one-half to two hours, the order of topics was usually determined by the respondent. All interviews were taped with the respondents' permission.

"COMING OUT"

Although recent research has shown that homosexuals and heterosexuals are more alike than has been commonly assumed, homosexuals experience a unique life event, usually in their adolescent or early adult years. This is the process of "coming out," of beginning to think of oneself as homosexual, which has an impact on self-concept and personal adaptation, as well. All the interviewees felt that coming out was one of their most significant life experiences. Because definitions of coming out vary, the interviews began by asking, "What does coming out mean to you?" Three related definitions emerged: Certain respondents believed that coming out referred to the first sexual encounter with a person of the same sex. Others felt it referred to revealing one's homosexuality to others. These might include only family or close friends or might extend to the general community. The third definition focused on self-recognition and self-acceptance. As expressed by one woman in her mid-forties, coming out means giving in, becoming your sexuality. It means feeling good that you are gay, not feeling you are something you shouldn't be, not caring. It is the most beautiful thing in the world.

With one exception, all respondents went through a lengthy and usually painful process of self-doubt before finally accepting their homosexuality. One woman in her early forties recalled an unhappy marriage and a struggle of many years: "I knew I was attracted to women, but I didn't know what was wrong with me." Only after the birth of a child and her husband's death did she pursue relationships with women. A man in his fifties described his reaction to the realization that he was gay thus, "I felt like there was a constant threat over me. I could be caught at any moment. I knew what I wanted, but I didn't feel comfortable pursuing it."

These findings illustrate the complexity of coming out and establishing a homosexual identity. This process involves a number of elements—awareness of same-sex arousal, sexual experiences, reactions of others, and self-concept as a homosexual—that often interact from early adolescence into old age. For instance, several respondents engaged in sexual behavior with members of the same sex for many years without regarding themselves as homosexual; other respondents claimed that they knew they were homosexual from an early age, even in the absence of actual sexual experiences. To add to this complexity, not all gays and lesbians experience the same aspects of coming out or experience them in the same way over time. However, despite the complexity of describing coming out, the present study did ask respondents to identify two specific components of the process in themselves.

The first question asked respondents to describe their initial sexual experience with a person of the same sex. One of the most prevalent misconceptions about homosexuality is that young persons are seduced by older persons. However, only three of the respondents (all male) had had an early sexual encounter with an older adult, and in two of the three instances the respondents had been willing participants. All other first same-sex partners were peers, most commonly school buddies. The men had had their first homosexual experiences at a younger age than the women (a finding that agrees with other studies of differences between homosexual males and females). All the men except one had had their first homosexual experience by the age of 17, whereas the women had not had their first experience until their late teens or twenties.

The second question asked the respondents to remember when they had first realized that they were attracted to members of the same sex. By the age of 27, all the men and women who had realized they had had this attraction, with all but two coming to this realization by their early twenties. Although self-reported data are subject to respondents' inaccurate recall, most respondents associated their early same-sex feelings with particular experiences and relationships that fixed those experiences in time.
COMMUNITY

Association with other homosexuals is an important part of self-acceptance. Not only does it relieve the sense of being "the only one in the world who is different," it also exposes the individual to a set of beliefs that counter prevalent negative social attitudes. Most of the men and women interviewed began to meet and socialize with other homosexuals around the time that they recognized their own homosexuality. In late adolescence or early adulthood; however, there were four notable exceptions. Two men and two women had heterosexual marriages from early adulthood to middle age, at which time they decided to abandon their spouses in favor of homosexual relationships. Two of these respondents were in their forties, one was in her late fifties, and one was in his sixties when this decision was made. All these individuals had been aware of homosexual feelings early in life, yet, in response to social pressures and from lack of self-awareness, chose heterosexual lives and in fact had had no homosexual contact for as long as thirty years. Ultimately, their heterosexual lives proved unsatisfying. There are no data on the number of individuals who change sexual orientation late in life, but the presence of such persons in this study suggests that the common assumption that such choices are always made early in life is not accurate. Social workers need to be aware of the existence of this phenomenon.

As noted earlier, one popular misconception about older homosexuals is that they are isolated from both heterosexuals and other homosexuals. In fact, none of the respondents in the present study fit this stereotype. In most urban areas, a variety of places are available for homosexuals to meet. These generally fall into two categories: (1) those primarily oriented to sexual contact, such as bars, bathhouses, and "cruising areas" in parks and at beaches, and (2) those oriented to social, civic, or religious purposes, such as gay rights organizations, social clubs, and gay churches. Both of these types of settings are populated by younger men, but the civic and particularly the religious organizations have attracted many older homosexual men and women.

All but six of the respondents (four men and two women) participated in a civic or religious organization, with the gay churches being the most popular. The sexually oriented settings revealed a different pattern, with all but two of the men and none of the women frequenting them. The social worker serving older homosexuals should be aware of the resources available for meeting others, and the differential use of these resources by men and women.

The degree of support that older homosexual men and women derive from other homosexuals has been underestimated. All the respondents spent at least half their social life with other homosexuals and five men and two women socialized exclusively with other homosexuals. A common pattern was the presence of two sets of friends: a heterosexual set associated with work or business and a homosexual friendship clique.

LOVE AND FAMILY

Homosexuals, like heterosexuals, usually strive to meet social and sexual needs by coupling with another individual. In the homosexual community, that individual is called a lover and generally shares a home and a social and sex life with the partner. At the time of the interviews, all the women and five of the men had a lover, with the length of the relationships ranging from six months to eighteen years. Most had been together for several years. Given the small size of the sample, it is impossible to conclude that lesbians are more likely than homosexual men to maintain long-term relationships, although some of the literature suggests that lesbians are more oriented to personal relationships than are gays. Although five of the men were without a lover at the time of the interviews, all the men except one had had a lover in the past, in many cases for years. The one man who had never had a male lover continued in a heterosexual marriage of thirty years while pursuing sexual contacts with men. Several of the men and women followed a pattern of love relationships that among homosexuals has been described as serial monogamy, that is, a succession of sexually exclusive relationships. In any event, social workers serving this group would be wrong to accept the stereotype of older homosexuals as loners.

The respondents were sexually active people. All reported having sex at regular intervals ranging from once every other month to daily (except for one man in his seventies who was incapacitated by surgery). When the respondents were asked about how their sex lives differed now from when they were younger, an interesting contrast emerged between the men and women. The men consistently answered in terms of the frequency of sexual activity, whereas the women answered more often in terms of the quality and interpersonal aspects of the situations. Five men and four women said that they were less sexually active, whereas two men reported more sexual activity. Several men and women stressed that sex was more meaningful to them now, even if it occurred less often.

Six of the men and six of the women said that they were satisfied and—in some cases very satisfied—with their current sex lives. All those who had a lover maintained regular sexual relations with the lover, except for one man who had terminated sexual relations with his lover and sought brief sexual relationships with younger men. Among the men with lovers, sexual monogamy was not the rule: among the women it was strictly followed.

Despite recent efforts by some conservative groups to link homosexuals with the dissolution of families, homosexuals do have many family ties. Most of the respondents had regular contact with family members, including parents, siblings, and, in the case of those who had been married, children. Some of the respondents had openly discussed their homosexuality with family members: others had never discussed it but assumed that family members knew about it. Some had kept it a secret until their parents' death or were no longer close enough to surviving family members to make it worthy of discussion. In some instances, family members had been highly supportive: One mother had attended her son's holy union to another man at a gay church; one younger sister had served as a con-visitant; and one son had supported his 65-year-old father in the decision to leave his wife to live with another older man.

Some parents had pressured the re-
respondents to marry many years earlier, and three respondents had experienced severe social and emotional consequences because of unsupportive family members. One male respondent’s wife, in response to her husband’s relationship with a man, had informed her husband’s employer. Two of the women had endured lengthy legal battles initiated by parents who, on learning of the respondent’s homosexuality, had sought custody of the children. Although an extreme reaction by family members is atypical, it illustrates the vulnerability of homosexuals to severe social consequences.18

INTERGENERATIONAL ATTITUDES

A recent study by the author found that older homosexual men with many younger friends adapted more successfully to aging than did those without younger friends.17 In light of this, the present study assessed respondents’ beliefs and attitudes about younger homosexuals. The majority (five men and five women) believed that younger homosexuals held negative attitudes toward their seniors. Such remarks as the following exemplify this belief:

Young gays feel about old gays the same way I felt about them when I was young. They are relics. They’re worn out.

Young gays are bored by us. They’re not interested in inviting us to join along.

A minority believed that age was not a barrier to arousing the interest of younger homosexuals, as indicated in the following:

There is a curiosity about older people. [Younger people think] “Gee, you lasted a long time, maybe we can too.”

Eight respondents believed that negative perceptions of young homosexuals are prevalent among older homosexuals. One older lesbian epitomized this attitude:

I think young gays are fine for each other. For myself I don’t find too many young people hold my interest. I find them superficial and selfish and I’m not willing to give too much of myself.

Other respondents enjoyed the company of younger homosexuals and some actually preferred them to their elders:

The younger gays are more honest and open about who they are.

They look up to me as someone they can learn from.

DISCRIMINATION

Older homosexuals are particularly vulnerable to unfair discrimination because they are jeopardized twice: once for being homosexual and again for being older. Therefore it is not surprising that half the respondents described instances of discrimination in employment, housing, and child custody. Several had experienced multiple instances of discrimination relating at certain times to age and at other times to sexual orientation. For instance, one woman lost her son after a lengthy court battle in which the judge decided that, as a lesbian, she was an unfit mother. Years later she was denied a sales job on the grounds that a younger (and presumably more attractive) woman would have greater success with male customers. Three men had been court-martialed for homosexual acts while serving in the army in the late 1940s and 1950s. One man in his sixties described the irony of primarily worrying about the consequences of others learning of his homosexuality, only to discover that he was repeatedly turned down for jobs because he was too old. The prevalence of discrimination in this sample, given its small size, is striking. More attention needs to be paid to this issue.

GROWING OLDER

The men and women in the study represented a special resource for understanding the process of aging for homosexuals. Their responses to the question, “What makes a gay man or woman adjust well to growing older?” provided insightful suggestions.

Respondents repeatedly stressed that adaptation to aging was no different for heterosexuals and homosexuals. As one older man expressed it, “A person who hasn’t adjusted well to other aspects of life won’t adjust well to aging either. Being gay is just the icing on the cake.” An older lesbian said, “Being old is a state of mind. It has nothing to do with sex preference.”

A sense of security—crucial to successful aging—can be fostered by developing interests outside of work, by maintaining friendships and family relationships, and by putting money away to guarantee a secure retirement. Several respondents advised associating with people of all ages, lending credence to the finding that socializing with younger people is associated with successful adaptation for this group. By doing this an older person will keep up with new ideas and be stimulated to change and develop. Attitudes toward aging itself were seen as crucial. It is important to accept the limitations of decreased physical stamina rather than to try to fight them, but at the same time, it is crucial not to dwell on one’s increasing age. As one man expressed it, “Fear the calendar off the wall.”

An important prerequisite for successful aging suggested by the respondents was the development of self-awareness. First, the older person must transcend his or her own immediate concerns or, as one respondent said, “Don’t make the assumption that you are the center of the universe. Learn to get out of the spotlight.” Second, the older person must come to accept him or herself, which means truly coming to terms with a homosexual identity. One lesbian in her late fifties described the process of accepting her homosexuality:

Before the last couple of years, I felt dejected, like I was ready for the rocking chair. Since then I have been more or less in the “homosexual community of thinking” and I’ve felt a new lease on life. I can finally be me.

Respondents talked about some of the worst aspects of growing older. Facing one’s mortality—the realization that one can never recover lost time—was mentioned frequently. One man reflected, “You suddenly realize that your time is limited. It’s like being forced to leave a party before the other guests.” Many respondents mentioned problems of poor health or body changes: the loss of one’s
senses, pain, limitations in physical activity, and lack of energy. Poor finances in retirement were also a major concern. These concerns are the same as those experienced by all older persons: the data on growing older, like the data on love relationships and family, suggest that older homosexuals have much in common with older heterosexuals.19

The older men and women in this study also talked about the joys of old age. One advantage of being older is that one has made all the mistakes and learned from them. One has a certain wisdom that others recognize. Friends seek advice, listen, and afford the older person special privileges. Several respondents said that they were relieved because all the battles were behind them; as one man stated, “I’ve gone through all that, and thank God I don’t have to face it again.” Better self-understanding, less worry about what others think, and more self-confidence were some other rewards of aging, as was the ability to reminisce about past good times.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The major finding of this study—that stereotypes about older homosexuals are not accurate—signals the need for social workers, especially those serving older persons, to become aware of the realities of homosexual aging. As discussed earlier, because twelve of the eighteen respondents were recruited through religious and political organizations, this study was less likely to include the isolated older person. Nevertheless, the lives of the men and women in the study challenge the stereotype of the older homosexual as isolated and depressed. Although the social reclusiveness does exist, this study suggests that most older homosexuals function in networks of friends, lovers, family, and community institutions. Social workers should use these networks as resources in interventions on behalf of older homosexuals. In almost every urban area, the gay and lesbian community offers settings that may be used by older homosexuals, although social workers must become aware of which settings welcome older persons and which do not. Resource development for older homosexuals is an important activity in which a few social workers have been involved.20

Most older gays and lesbians prefer to associate with peers of a similar age and have active sex lives with age-appropriate partners. The quality of the older homosexual’s sex life with a lover is just as vital to a homosexual couple as it is to a heterosexual couple. Some homosexuals, however, especially those who are more open about revealing their sexual orientation, prefer to associate with younger homosexuals. They should be encouraged to do so, because such association may help these individuals in adapting to aging.

Discrimination in housing and employment is a major problem among older homosexuals. There is a need for case advocacy as well as legal and policy changes, all of which activities are appropriate for social work.

Although a comprehensive consideration of how social services should be organized to meet the needs of this group is beyond the scope of this article, the author would like to raise three questions that must be addressed: (1) Who should organize and staff social services for older gays and lesbians? (2) What kind of services should be offered? and (3) How can social workers be sensitized to the needs of older homosexuals?

Should services be offered by professionals or by lay persons; by homosexuals or heterosexuals?; by young and old or by peers of a similar age only?

It seems to the author that trained professionals have a great deal to offer and that their skills ought to be applied to developing and improving services for older gays and lesbians. It is also the case that peer services for older persons have enjoyed great popularity and apparent success, as exemplified by programs such as the national Retired Senior Volunteer Program. There is certainly truth in the idea that “those who have been there” are best able to serve their peers.21 Yet another advantage to service by peers is that it also offers something to the service provider. For many older homosexuals, it offers an important social role to replace roles lost because of retirement and the deaths of friends and significant others. For the older homosexual in need of services who finds it difficult to relate to younger persons, the older peer may be the best answer.

This does not mean, of course, that younger people—professionals and nonprofessionals—do not have a role. Younger persons ought to be involved—after all, they will eventually join the ranks of older persons—but there is a tendency for younger persons to dominate the leadership. For this reason, one organization of homosexual men in San Francisco excludes individuals under 40 from regular membership (although it involves them in some activities). As services for older gays and lesbians emerge, the issue of control will be important. A challenge for those organizing such services will be the active participation of older persons, not only on advisory boards, but in the day-to-day decision making of the groups.

The issue of heterosexual participation raises the much-discussed question of integrated versus separatist services.22 It is the author’s observation that homosexuals are experiencing in the 1980s what blacks and other minorities learned in the 1960s: No one else seems able and willing to provide the kind of services needed. Mainstream agencies have simply not recognized the existence of older gays and lesbians, much less directed programs to their needs, and recent cutbacks in social services spending make it less likely that they will do so in the near future. It is not surprising, then, that the professionals and nonprofessionals involved in organizing services for older homosexuals have generally been homosexual themselves and that this will probably continue to be the case.

What kinds of services are needed by older gays and lesbians? The author’s research suggests that they need the same services as all older adults: health care, income maintenance, transportation, social and recreational outlets, and emotional support. Many older homosexuals cur-
rently receive and benefit from these services. But service providers need to be better informed and more sensitive about the unique situation of older homosexuals. For example, how many social workers are ready and able to help a middle-aged or older person in the transition to a newly acquired homosexual identity, a phenomenon that occurred to four out of eighteen respondents in this study. How many friendly visiting services would be able to respond to a client's request for a gay visitor?

Social workers can only be sensitized to the needs of older gays and lesbians through exposure and information. More comprehensive descriptive research is needed to find out the characteristics and needs of this group, and this research, as well as the small amount of research currently available, must be publicized and receive the attention of professionals, particularly those who work with the elderly. Professionals themselves need to be exposed to older homosexuals. Panel presentations, speeches and workshops that include older gays and lesbians who are open about their sexuality need to occur in agencies serving older persons. This requires, of course, that older homosexuals themselves become more assertive about their right to be served with dignity.

According to the men and women in this study, the issues involved in adaptation to aging are essentially the same for heterosexuals and homosexuals: need for activities, friends, and sufficient finances, and concerns about health and sexuality. An additional element for older gays and lesbians is acceptance of themselves as homosexuals, an acceptance that is sometimes not fully integrated until later in life. As more information becomes available about older homosexuals, this process will be facilitated.

Raymond M. Berger, Ph.D., is Associate Professor, School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Notes and References

6. A copy of the interview schedule is available from the author.
10. For research showing that homosexuals and heterosexuals are more alike than has been commonly assumed, see Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg, Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), pp. 60-61; and William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, Homosexuality in Perspective (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1979), chap. 5.
14. Kelley and Johnson, "Deviate Sex Behavior in the Aging."
15. Bell and Weinberg, Homosexualities.
20. Social workers have been involved in the development of social services for older homosexual men and women in Los Angeles, Miami, and New York City. One of the most successful organizations is the SAGE Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE) in New York City. The National Association of Lesbian and Gay Gerontologists is based in San Francisco.
21. For a description of SAGE, a peer-oriented service group for older gays and lesbians, see Berger, "The Unseen Minority," p. 240.

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