



Same sex acts involving older men. An ethnographic study

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ABSTRACT

For many men in modern Western societies it is not uncommon to have anonymous same-sex acts in cruising places with a varying frequency depending on different factors, e.g., their biographical history, marital status, religion, and age. This paper looks at generational differences in the Italian gay community and specifically contrasts both space and patterns of interaction of two cohorts of men (older men and younger adults) in cruising bathhouses. The meaning of adult development and aging of sexual minorities is little understood in Italy. For the first time in history, a generation of self-identified gay men is approaching retirement, and yet we do not understand what well-being and successful development in old life mean in this community. Moreover, the aging processes among gay men who are already in their retirement years, many of whom are still “closeted,” remain invisible. The ethnographic report, based on two years of participant observation, reveals the culture of the bath and the social and sexual spaces of older and younger gay men and their self-definition and relationship to the “gay community”.

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Introduction

The gay community is typically thought to be monolithic both in terms of political and social attitudes as well as general demographic composition. Within the gay community is represented at all in popular culture, it is depicted as a young man's world and the image of homosexuality that appear (infrequently) in advertising, the media and other forms of popular representation are generally dominated by younger men (Drummond, 2009). The gay community, however, is not all under 30 and despite the progress made in terms of visibility, older gay men are largely absent from this picture (Gokhale, 2007; Nash, 2002). Ironically, when they are included in the picture, it is typically in reference to being a sexual object (“Daddy” or “silver Fox” in the eyes of younger gay men, or about the seemingly never ending quest to stay youthful (and young) in the gay community (Dowd, 2012; Kennedy, 2008). Moreover, two apparently mutually inconsistent stereotypes of homosexuality are still operating

with the broad culture. On the one hand older persons are perceived as asexual; on the other hand, older gay men are perceived as sexual perverts and predators (Kelly, 1977; Rosenfeld, 1999). As Friend (1980) suggests, such contradictions may free individuals from role constraints; such stereotypes, however, continue to operate in how these individuals are perceived, thereby restricting access to prospective sex partners and, by extension, influencing personal beliefs and self-concept.

It should really come as no surprise that there is lack of research on how age structures and factors into gay life. In general there is lack of research on sexual minorities, and when we do get social scientific glimpses into the lives of gay men there is a tendency to examine only one small sliver of gay life. Unlike other minority groups that have been studied in more depth and more breadth over longer periods of time, we are only now beginning to get more systematic understandings of gay life. In many studies, sexual orientation is the independent variable and how this variable intersects with others including religion, political disposition, ethnicity, race and even age, is left to the footnotes of ‘deserves further attention in future research.’ Brown (2009) correctly notes a type of “double silencing” of older gay men who are excluded both from popular constructions and theories of queerness surrounding

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the LGBT community as well as gerontological theories of the elderly. Accepted in neither the gay nor senior communities, older gay men are thus doubly theoretically absent.

In particular, issues of sexuality in general offer an interesting juxtaposition of heterosexuals and gay men. Schlesinger (1995) writes that perspectives on sexuality and the elderly have been framed by myths declaring that older persons are sexually undesirable, are not desirous of sexual expression, and are not capable of sexual expression. This view that sex is not for the old has prevented the study of sexuality and aging from attaining mature status in the gerontological literature. In contrast, the very notion of a gay gerontology raises the issue of sexuality directly.

This paper contrasts both the setting and patterns of social interaction of two generation-cohorts: older men and young adults-patronizing *public sex venues* (PSVs) in Milan, Italy. I made an ethnographic study of two bathhouses over two years as an observing participant in each setting: in particular, this study focuses on sexual acts rather than sexual identities. (Styles, 1979; Tedlock, 1991). I designed this research led by an idea expressed with particular effectiveness by Mills (1959, p. 225) in *The Sociological Imagination*:

The hardest thing in the world is to study one object; when you try to contrast objects, you get a better grip on the materials and you can then sort out the dimensions in terms of which the comparisons are made. You will find that shuttling between attention to these dimensions and to the concrete types is very illuminating.

Homosexuality in Italy is under-studied, and the existing literature on gay bathhouses is not focused on issues of ageing, but some information can be found in two large studies: the national survey conducted by the Istituto Cattaneo of Bologna (Barbagli & Colombo, 2001) and the study of the gay population in Turin conducted by the Department of Social Science, University of Turin (Bertone, Casiccia, Saraceno, & Torroni, 2003). The researchers identified harassment, bullying in schools, and hate crimes as part of older gay men's everyday life in the past. The available information about homophobic violence—in terms of physical or verbal attacks—was part of the experience of many gay men. According to a recent survey, half of older gay men felt less safe in the past because of their sexuality (Cartabia, 2007). The older generation was born in the 1950s. These men were already marginalized by the time of the emergence of Italian gay organizations. Men in this generation were careful not to attract attention and avoided the larger community. According to the research of Rossi Barilli (1999), many of these men had no name for their same-gender attraction. They learned through word of mouth about particular settings, such as bars or bowling alleys, that were “safe” for finding other similarly seeking same gendered relationships. Political activity was difficult for this generation because homosexuality was subject to strong social sanctions. In other words, most of the older Italian gay men have been closeted and do not live openly as gay and have not been involved in gay politics (Rossi Barilli, 1999).

As the situation of gay men was completely different in the UK, US and Northern Europe (Rosenfeld, 2003), I briefly add that the peculiar and specific Italian social attitude towards sexual identity issues is strictly related to the historical legacy of Italian legislation, characterized by negation rather than repression of

homosexuality. Same-sex relations, as well as homophobia, remain invisible to state regulation. The only relevant exception is legislative decree no. 216/2003 implementing Directive 2000/78/CE, where sexual orientation is mentioned as one of the grounds of discrimination. Generally speaking, the Italian legal system lacks documents, statistics, and case law concerning discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. Moreover, there is no recognition of same-sex partnerships at the national level and no access to adoption for same-sex couples. Several LGBT organizations are mobilizing for the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships and against homophobia and discrimination, including speaking out against the influence of the Catholic Church in hampering new legislation on these issues (Bertone, 2008).

Italian men who are presently young may not have come of age in the epoch following the emergence of gay rights and public recognition of minority sexual life ways (Rossi Barilli, 1999). These men often live in cities where legislation protects them from at least overt discrimination. They frequent visible public spaces such as bars and bathhouses in recognized gay neighborhoods. However, while enjoying enhanced tolerance and even legal protection for their same-gender desire, this generation has also borne the burden of knowing that sex with other men can lead to seroconversion and they have been exposed to discourses about AIDS since the elementary school years to the present.

As acknowledged as historically significant in the social organization of the gay community (Chauncey, 1994), there has been no other large ethnographic study of the gay bathhouse. More recently, Bolton and his colleagues (Bolton, 1995; Bolton, Virsik, & Mak, 1999; Horn (1998), Styles (1979), Tattelman (1993), and Tewksbury (2002) all have shown that socio-sexual transactions within these controversial settings may be quite intricate.

This study is additionally complex because of the norm of silence that characterizes the sexual activities of the gay bathhouse. Delph (1978) was particularly concerned with those non-verbal cues that elicit particular responses from another. Little has been written regarding modes of ethnographic study within settings in which speech is largely absent. Silence is a form of communication that conveys meanings in symbolic forms, reflecting reciprocity of perspectives based on taken-for-granted reality and shared perspectives (Cicourel, 1964). Oral communication is usually permitted only in certain areas of the PSVs (most notably the periphery) and prohibited within those (primarily innermost) areas where sex takes place (Somlai, Kalichman, & Bagnall, 2001; Van Lieshout, 1995). In those few locations where verbal negotiation is sanctioned, it is necessarily brief and takes the form of ambiguous questions (“Do you have the time?”) and sexual innuendo (Corzine & Kirby, 1977; Somlai et al., 2001; Tewksbury, 1996; Troiden, 1974), often “couched in the rhetoric of play” (Troiden, 1974, p. 212). Thus study of the sexual life of the bathhouse, with its norm of silence, requires more than the usual attention to gesture, posture, and other subtle aspects of non-verbal communication and is made all the more difficult because of the dark settings in which such communication must take place.

As most gay men value the beauty and vitality of youth and 40 is the transforming age when it is presumed that one is no longer attractive (Harry & DuVall, 1978; Weinberg, 1970), I examined the dramatic age segregation in the gay community

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