



Internalized gay ageism, mattering, and depressive symptoms among midlife and older gay-identified men



Richard G. Wight ^{a,*}, Allen J. LeBlanc ^b, Ilan H. Meyer ^c, Frederick A. Harig ^a

^a Department of Community Health Sciences, Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

^b Health Equity Institute, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA

^c The Williams Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, School of Law, Los Angeles, CA, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 April 2015

Received in revised form

5 October 2015

Accepted 27 October 2015

Available online 31 October 2015

Keywords:

Gay men

Ageism

Homophobia

Mattering

Depressive symptoms

Minority stress

ABSTRACT

Objective: In this paper we introduce the construct of “internalized gay ageism,” or the sense that one feels denigrated or depreciated because of aging in the context of a gay male identity, which we identify as an unexplored aspect of sexual minority stress specific to midlife and older gay-identified men.

Methods: Using a social stress process framework, we examine the association between internalized gay ageism and depressive symptoms, and whether one’s sense of mattering mediates or moderates this association, controlling for three decades of depressive symptom histories. The sample is 312 gay-identified men (average age = 60.7 years, range = 48–78, 61% HIV-negative) participating in the Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study (MACS) since 1984/85, one of the largest and longest running studies of the natural history of HIV/AIDS in the U.S., who provided contemporary (2012/13) reports of stress experiences.

Results: We find that internalized gay ageism can reliably be measured among these men, is positively associated with depressive symptoms net of an array of other factors that may also influence symptomatology (including depressive symptom histories), and mattering partially mediates but does not moderate its effect on depressive symptoms.

Conclusion: Midlife and older gay men have traversed unparalleled historical changes across their adult lives and have paved the way for younger generations of sexual minorities to live in a time of less institutionalized discrimination. Still, they are at distinct risk for feeling socially invisible and devalued in their later years.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This study examines whether “internalized gay ageism”—feeling denigrated or depreciated because one is aging as a gay man—is associated with depressive symptoms among a sample of midlife and older gay-identified men. We further examine whether one’s sense of “mattering” affects any relationship between internalized gay ageism and depressive symptomatology. This study introduces the construct of internalized gay ageism and examines its role as a relevant minority stressor within a social stress process framework.

1.1. Ageism and homophobia

Ageism can broadly be defined as “prejudice and discrimination against older people based on the belief that aging makes people less attractive, intelligent, sexual, and productive” (Wilkinson and Ferraro, 2002). Thus, ageism, as experienced by older adults, is explicit, e.g., age discrimination in hiring practices, and implicit, e.g., biased attitudes and stigmas toward older persons (Levy, 2001). Ageism is socially tolerated for the most part (Levy and Banaji, 2002), which is surprising given the steadily and rapidly growing numbers of older persons in the U.S. (Hess et al., 2009). In the social stress process literature, ageism—age discrimination in particular—is considered one of the many forms of “discrimination stress” (along with stress experiences associated with gender, race-ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, etc.) that may exceed individuals’ adaptive capacities, leading to distress (Thoits, 2010). In addition, ageism has the potential to become a chronic social

* Corresponding author. Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles, 650 Charles E. Young Drive South, Box 951772, Los Angeles, CA 90095, USA.

E-mail address: rwight@ucla.edu (R.G. Wight).

stressor in the lives of older adults (Allen, 2015). Ageism is internalized to the extent that negative social stereotypes about aging become incorporated into the older individual's self-identification (Allen, 2015; Emlet, 2006; Kooden, 1997), representing a form of stress that can lead to negative physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., Allen, 2015; Levy et al., 2002; Sabik, 2015). Most forms of explicit age discrimination (e.g., in housing, employment) are illegal at the federal level in the United States but implicit and internalized ageism are normative and remain ongoing sources of stress.

In comparison, homophobia generally is defined as societal or interpersonal stigma and prejudice directed at gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons (Herek, 2004). Like ageism, it may become internalized to the extent that it influences how one sees and identifies oneself as a stigmatized member of society (Malyon, 1982). Internalized homophobia may be particularly germane to midlife and older gay men because these cohorts of men were pathologized in their younger years, before homosexuality per se was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973 (Krajcski, 1996). Their social identities also were tainted by AIDS stigmas when the AIDS epidemic emerged in the 1980s and gay men were subject to a negative societal response, regardless of their HIV serostatus (Herek and Capitanio, 1999). Internalized homophobia is one aspect of "sexual minority stress" (other aspects include feelings of sexual orientation stigma, experiences of discrimination, and sexual identity concealment [Meyer, 2003a, 2003b]). Like internalized ageism, internalized homophobia has been shown to negatively affect health (Newcomb and Mustanski, 2010). Unlike internalized ageism, homophobia appears to be declining in many parts of the U.S. (Altman et al., 2012) as part of the overall social enfranchisement of sexual minorities. Nonetheless, acceptance is far from universal and laws and policies discriminating against sexual minorities remain in effect in much of the country (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011).

Thus, ageism is commonplace but age discrimination is illegal. Homophobia appears to be declining, although discrimination against sexual minorities is widely institutionalized and they face enduring stigma (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010). Little is known about how the confluence of these two social phenomena – ageism and homophobia – may be jointly internalized among midlife and older gay men. A small body of work touches upon some of these issues. For example, it has been noted that some gay men may experience a sense of "accelerated aging," or the feeling that they are old even when they are relatively young because youth and physical attractiveness are disproportionately valued in the gay male community (Grant, 2010; Schope, 2005). Feelings of "accelerated aging" may mostly be applicable to gay men who are single and looking for sexual partners (Hostetler, 2012) or who are actively involved in gay sexual subcultures (Kertzner, 2001). Regardless, many older gay men endure a particular sting associated with natural aging processes because they often feel ignored within the gay male community (IOM, 2011).

In addition, there is a persisting stereotype of the "predatory older homosexual" who preys upon younger men and boys (Knauer, 2009). This view is partially a carry-over from laws put into place decades ago to segregate homosexual men from children and is based upon the discredited belief that there is an inherent pedophilia in homosexuality (Jacobson, 1998). Thus, midlife and older gay men came of age during a time when they may have been discouraged or legally prevented from interacting with young people based on the illusory correlation between being gay and a sexual attraction toward children. This enduring stereotype may blemish societal perceptions of mature gay men, complicating their social interactions, even within the gay community (Knauer, 2009; Wahler and Gabbay, 1997).

In summary, due to experiences of internalized ageism and homophobia, midlife and older gay men may be exposed to unique, previously unexamined sources of stress. Such experiences may exacerbate aging-related problems and place them at elevated risk for poor mental health. We hypothesize that the particular overlap between internalized ageism and internalized homophobia among midlife and older gay men generates "internalized gay ageism."

1.2. Social stress process: internalized gay ageism, mattering, and mental health

Social stress process theory posits that exposure to stressors leads to the experience of stress, which then may lead to distress or mental disorder (Pearlin et al., 1981). We conceptualize internalized gay ageism as a social stressor that is uniquely harmful to gay men's mental health. Moreover, internalized gay ageism is conceived of as a particular source of minority stress because it uniquely affects a stigmatized or marginalized population (Meyer, 2003b) – midlife and older gay men.

Prior studies show that psychosocial resources may ameliorate the negative health effects of multiple forms of social stress (Thoits, 2011), including sexual minority stress (e.g., Lehavot and Simoni, 2011; Szymanski and Owens, 2008; Wight et al., 2012). One's sense of "mattering" is such a resource. Mattering refers to the degree to which people feel they are an important part of the world around them (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981; Taylor and Turner, 2001; Elliott et al., 2004). Mattering, or at least the perception of mattering, is profoundly important to one's sense of self, and appears to be distinguishable from self-consciousness, self-esteem, self-monitoring, alienation, and perceived social support. A key differentiation between mattering and these other concepts is that it refers to one's subjective feelings of being *significant* to other people, feelings that may guard against existential despair (Thoits, 2011). People with a high sense of mattering feel that others think about them, seek their advice, or care about what happens to them. In contrast, those with a low sense of mattering feel that others do not share themselves meaningfully, do not listen, and do not find them interesting (Elliott et al., 2004). There is evidence to suggest that sense of mattering declines with age (Fazio, 2010), meaning that older individuals may not realize its benefits at a time of life when it would be most useful. Yet, mattering has received relatively little empirical attention in social stress research (Thoits, 2011).

Many midlife and older gay men feel they are socially invisible (Knauer, 2009) and dually stigmatized for both being gay and older (de Vries, 2014; Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco, 2010). Moreover, they face a gay subculture that celebrates youth, vigor, and physical beauty (Grant, 2010). They are also more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to live alone (Wallace et al., 2011). We contend that these day-to-day realities – isolation, invisibility, and devaluation – make mattering especially relevant to gay men as they age. Collectively they may diminish mattering in its two most fundamental forms: (a) reducing the degree to which these men feel they are the focus of attention from others; and (b) minimizing the degree to which their interpersonal relationships reward them with the feeling that they are important to another, or that another relies on them for the satisfaction of their own wants or needs (Elliott et al., 2004). Mattering may be an important psychosocial resource that acts as a mechanism through which internalized gay ageism influences mental health.

1.3. Conceptual framework

As shown in Fig. 1, we hypothesize a "focal relationship" between internalized gay ageism and depressive symptoms in our social stress process model. A focal relationship is the foundation

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7331262>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7331262>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)