



Gay men in early midlife: Intergenerational accommodation for approval, reclaimed status, and distinctiveness



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ABSTRACT

This study draws upon interview data and a communication accommodation theory framework to explore how early midlife gay men manage their age identities vis-à-vis younger gay men. Face-to-face interviews with forty gay men (aged 40–53) in four U.S. cities, followed by open and axial coding of the data, revealed a new grounded theory of gay midlife intergenerational accommodation. The model includes various forms of communicative convergence and divergence that are enacted in the interest of gaining approval from younger outgroup members, reclaiming lost social status, and achieving positive group distinctiveness. Similarities and extensions to communication accommodation theory are discussed, as are the theory's implications for understanding gay midlife.

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1. Introduction

Though significant efforts have been made over recent decades to research identities characterized by male sexual orientation, and attitudes toward gay men generally (e.g., Cox and Gallois, 1996; Etcoff, 2000; Fox, 2007; Herek, 1988, 2002), little work has addressed intergenerational communication in gay male culture. This is an important research arena given unique social and cultural challenges that often accompany gay men's age transitions (see Hajek, 2012; Hajek and Giles, 2002). This research takes an intergroup perspective on intergenerational communication (e.g., Giles et al., 2002, 2012; Hummert, 2012), and defines *intergroup communication* as individual communicative behavior based on perceptions of self and others as belonging to different social categories. This is an appropriate approach for the study of gay men's lives, given the high salience and group-based nature of their sexual and age identities that play significant roles in communication and psychological well-being (see also, Hajek, 2014, 2012; Hajek and Giles, 2002). The present study uncovers how and why some gay men in early midlife strategically use communication accommodation with younger gay men to manage their age identities. Following introductions to literature on gay male aging and social identity, the reader is guided through the components of a new, grounded theory of gay midlife intergenerational accommodation. The study concludes with discussions of the implications of the findings for understanding midlife gay men's lives, and advancements offered to communication accommodation theory (CAT: see for example, Soliz and Giles, 2014; Giles et al., 1991).

1.1. Gay men at midlife

Definitions of what constitutes “midlife” is socially constructed, and is therefore varied across cultures. Boundaries for middle age in the United States range from about age 40 to age 64 (e.g., Bennett and Thompson, 1991; Hunter, 2005; Kertzner,

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2001; Minnigerode, 1976). The present study focuses on gay men in early midlife and living in the United States, aged 40–53, who were born between 1960 and 1973. Just as definitions of gay midlife may vary across social or cultural groups, so can the lived experience of it. Researchers have suggested that older gay men may be better able to face realities of aging due to frequent loss of family support earlier in life (Friend, 1991), and that they may have more awareness of responsibility for themselves (Pope and Schultz, 1991). However, others have found psychological stress among gay men in their late 30s, given gay male culture's focus on youth (Gagnon and Simon, 1973), a reduced sense of well-being (e.g., Riggle et al., 2009), and higher anxiety about aging than any other age group (Harry, 1982). Gay midlife has also been associated with a "crisis" that may involve challenges associated with searching for meaning in a heterosexist society (Kimmel and Sang, 1995), internalized homophobia, and/or identity concealment (e.g., Wight et al., 2012). Although midlife men have experienced greater visibility and acceptance than have older generations, they nonetheless came of age as stigmatized individuals (e.g., Gorman and Nelson, 2004). Cohler and Galatzer-Levy (2000) have suggested that the transition to midlife for gay men may be unique, given the gay culture's emphasis on youth, and the influence of AIDS, with its contributing to the experience of "finitude" and "personalization of death" (p. 250). The men in this generation came to terms with their gay identities during the early years of the AIDS epidemic, and were within a few years' age of the older men who were decimated by it.

Kertzner (1999) found in his interviews with thirty gay men aged 40–51, an absence of socially-defined markers to delineate their aging process. Concerning such delineation, Zak (1998) has contended that gay men might not know where midlife is, because most are not fathers of teenagers or college graduates, nor are they grandfathers, and that the absence of those roles and associated relationships may prevent gay men from comparing themselves to their own fathers for a bearing on their life course. The importance of such markers is reflected in Kimmel's (1978) view that the "development of a positive identity involves a sense of the future course of that identity..." (p. 114). Interestingly, the body of literature on gay midlife experience has shown limited concern for how midlife gay men shape and express their age group identities through communication (see, however, Kooden and Flowers, 2000). In response to this paucity of research, Hajek (2014) extended and amended a social identity theory framework in the exploration of how some midlife gay men managed their age identities through the use of linguistic labels, intra-generational talk among peers, and intergenerational talk with younger gay men. Among his findings were that some men had a propensity to assimilate with younger men in various ways, and/or desired to creatively self-enhance in the interest of achieving some degree of positive midlife group distinctiveness. The motives underlying these behaviors share commonalities with the mechanisms of communication accommodation theory (CAT: see for example, Soliz and Giles, 2014; Giles et al., 1991), therefore raising the question as to whether midlife gay men may use communicatively accommodative behaviors such as convergence, divergence, and underaccommodation, in the management of their age identities as well. That question led to the current study, and it is in this vein that the following theoretical framework is introduced.

1.2. A communication accommodation perspective

Although this study utilized a grounded theory approach to discover a unique model of gay midlife intergenerational accommodation, it began with a communication accommodation theory framework in mind (e.g., Soliz and Giles, 2014; Giles et al., 1991). Grounded theory techniques were used, given Strauss and Corbin's (1990, p. 51) view that grounded approaches are appropriate for research that extends or amends existing theory (such as CAT), and/or that uncovers how such theories apply to new and varied situations. The CAT framework explains the adjustment individuals make to increase, decrease, or maintain social distance in their interactions with others, including their motivations for doing so, which may include gaining social status, others' approval, or a sense of positive distinctiveness as a member of a social identity group. One accommodation strategy often used by social identity group members is *convergence*, which is the adaptation of communicative behavior in order to become more similar to an outgroup member or fellow ingroup member, the latter being in the interest of building ingroup solidarity. Individuals may also, or alternatively, use a *divergence* strategy, which involves the accentuation of communicative differences from those typical of an outgroup member, or, less frequently, a fellow ingroup member. A third accommodation strategy, *maintenance*, is similar to *divergence*, and is marked by the persistence of one's communicative behavior regardless of the behavior or communication style of an outgroup or fellow ingroup member.

Though CAT has been used to inform much qualitative intergroup research (see Gallois et al., 2012; Wetherall, 2012), its use in the present study with interview data and a grounded theory methodology constitutes a somewhat unique approach. The theory's concepts and strategies—and the proposed causal links among them—framed interviewees' experiences very well, and offered rich insight. Additionally, CAT's concepts were considered a good fit for the current social context because, according to Gallois et al. (2012), not only should intergroup research be theory-driven, the CAT framework is "sufficiently broad to handle real-life contexts" (p. 41). Furthermore, research has shown CAT to lend itself usefully to context-specific extension and adaptation (e.g., Baker et al., 2011), and such is the expected outcome with a grounded theory methodology. It was in the spirit of these factors that CAT concepts and strategies were selected as a starting point to explain intergroup communicative behavior at the intersection of "midlife" and "gay" identities. From a CAT perspective, possible threats to midlife gay male social identity due to advancing age and/or discrimination from younger gay men (e.g., Hajek and Giles, 2002; Hajek, 2014) may lead some midlife men to engage in particular communicative strategies to manage their compromised identities. Threats to midlife gay men may include the perceived loss of social status that had been derived from being a part of the youth-oriented gay culture, decreased opportunities for integrating with that culture, associated feelings of alienation, and a lack of respect from younger gay men. The midlife men may consider convergence to younger gay men to be

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