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# Social Support Networks of Gay Men

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*Although social workers and other helping professionals frequently stress the importance of social networks among gay men, there has been little empirical research to describe these networks. In the present study, the authors analyze data on perceived social support from 166 gay men recruited through gay community groups and social networks. Most gay men were found to have large and diverse social networks. Frequent communication occurs between respondents and network members, most of whom know of respondents' homosexuality. The most frequent and supportive network member was a close friend, and the most common type of support received was emotional. Those not in a committed relationship, and those living alone, are more likely to report feelings of loneliness and to talk to network members more often.*

Where do gay men find social support? According to social worker practitioners and social science researchers, gay men are embedded in networks of family and friends, and the concept of "community" plays an important role in the social creation and maintenance of homosexuality (e.g. Gagnon & Simon, 1967; Hidalgo, Peterson & Woodman, 1985; Shernoff & Scott, 1988). In the past two decades, both social scientists and lay writers have focused on the gay community as a source of social support. Despite this, there has been little research on the characteristics of social support among gay men. The purpose of this study was

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to describe the nature of perceived social support networks as reported by a community sample of adult gay men.

### *Social Support in the Literature on Homosexuality*

*Community* Homosexuals in America were not always viewed as members of a community. Early psychoanalytic studies of homosexuals were limited to individuals who had sought treatment for their sexual orientation (e.g. Bieber, 1962). These patients tended to be isolated from other homosexuals, and their sources of social support were friends or family members who were often unaware of the patient's homosexuality and unsympathetic to homosexuals. Prior to World War II, gay men and lesbians came together only in small and secret friendship cliques; the bars, social clubs and political organizations which define today's gay and lesbian communities were virtually non-existent (Berger, 1982).

In the 1950's, Evelyn Hooker, perhaps the first social scientist to gain access to the social friendship networks of gay men, began to study gay men drawn from the community rather than from treatment settings (Hooker, 1957; Hooker, 1958). She described the gay community as an amalgam of people, activities and places. Although the main gay community institution was the bar, Hooker described the community outside the bar as "a loosely knit extended series of overlapping networks of friends." (Hooker, 1967, p.180). These networks were of three types: small intimate cliques, larger cliques, and loose networks whose members met only on occasion. Hooker said little about the nature of social support provided within these networks.

During the 1960's, sociologists of deviance began to study homosexual men and women in relation to their community. Homosexuals were seen as acting out a social role or deviant career that existed only in the context of others' definitions. New definitions for the social role of 'homosexual' were made possible by a gay community subculture, which provided a distinctive and reinforcing set of values, behaviors and language. Thus, homosexuals looked to the gay community for support in the broadest sense: to provide an alternative, non-stigmatizing definition of their status, and to provide role models and a

"career path," as well as a range of social and sexual opportunities (Gagnon & Simon, 1967; Schur, 1965). In many areas of the country today, gay men and women have access to a large and diverse gay community which includes a variety of institutions from churches to social and political clubs and business leagues (Moses & Hawkins, 1982).

*Social Support* Today, despite the dearth of empirical research on gay social networks, social workers and other writers almost universally advocate use of social support from the gay community to help clients achieve psychosocial adjustment (e.g. Burns & Rofes, 1988; Moses and Hawkins, 1982; Woodman and Lenna, 1980).

For example, Krysiak (1987) concluded that high school counselors should help gay and lesbian students by informing them of resources provided by the local gay community. At the other end of the age spectrum, Berger (1984) found that older gay men and women believed that maintaining supportive friends was a key ingredient in good adjustment to growing older. Daugelli and Hart (1987) reported that rural gays and lesbians often lack social support because of the non-existence or limited availability of rural gay community organizations.

Gay community and social support also appear as important concepts in models of sexual orientation identity formation. For example, Berger (1983) noted that a homosexual identity is often established with the help of peer association: the development of social support networks of other self-identified homosexuals. These support networks help the individual to understand, cope with, and ultimately to accept his identity.

*Impact of Social Support on Adjustment* Despite this extensive literature on social support in the gay community, the authors were able to locate only four empirical evaluations of the effects of social support on psychosocial adjustment of gay men. These studies suggested that those who have good social support experience better adjustment.

Weinberg and Williams (1975), in their questionnaire study of almost 2500 gay men, found that social involvement with other gays was positively related to good psychosocial adjustment. Gay men high on social involvement with other gays

were more likely to have an exclusive partner, were more acculturated into gay life, and had less desire to renounce their homosexuality. Those low in social involvement had more psychological problems: they had less self-acceptance and greater depression, loneliness, and anxiety regarding their homosexuality. They were also more likely to desire psychiatric treatment for their homosexuality.

In his study of 112 gay men over the age of forty, Berger (1982) found that integration into the gay community (presence of gay friends) was positively associated with psychological adjustment. Jones and Bates (1988) reported that among gay male couples, social support to the individual and to the couple were not related to relationship quality or satisfaction. However, the authors did not make clear their method of measuring social support and their sample was small (N=28). In a more substantive study of 69 gay and 50 lesbian cohabiting couples, Kurdek (1988) found that social support was related to psychological adjustment for both male and female couples.

*Characteristics of Social Support* A few studies in the past two decades have illuminated the nature of social support networks among gay men and women. Based on interviews with 104 gay men, 61 lesbians, and 84 heterosexual controls, Saghir and Robins (1973) reported that the majority of gay men and women had at least one close friend whom they saw often, confided in and considered a source of help. Most of the friends of gay men were other gay men. About half of respondents' parents knew of their child's homosexuality; of these parents about half were described as compassionate and understanding toward their child's sexual orientation. Half of the gay men believed that their homosexuality adversely affected their social life.

Bell and Weinberg's (1978) interviews with 977 gay men and lesbians and 477 heterosexual controls, yielded a similar picture of social networks. Most gay men and lesbians had five or more close friends and most of these were same-sex friends. Gay men and lesbians had greater numbers of close friends than did heterosexuals, which Bell and Weinberg attributed to the need for 'extended family' among homosexuals and the greater family involvement of heterosexuals. While few heterosexuals

had same-sex friends who they knew were homosexual, gays and lesbians tended to have both homosexual and heterosexual friends. Compared to single gay men and lesbians, those who were coupled understandably spent less of their leisure time alone and more of their time at home.

Berger's (1982) study of gay men forty years of age and older, debunked the stereotypical notion that older gay men are socially isolated. Among 112 older gay men, Berger found that only one-third lived alone. Most had had a lover at some point in their lives, and most had friends and participated at least occasionally in gay community activities. Most older gay men preferred to associate with age peers.

Based on a questionnaire study of 49 gay and lesbian adolescents, Mercier and Berger (1989) reported that isolation from other gays and lesbians was a major difficulty for these youth. Almost all adolescents had recently turned to friends for help. By comparison, only about half had sought help from a parent, a lover or from a support group. Siblings and mental health professionals were consulted by about a quarter of respondents.

Four studies shed light on the social networks of gay male couples. Mead's (1979) intensive case studies of five male couples suggested that "support systems" was a significant theme in their lives. McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found that most male couples formed extended families which included other gay couples, close friends and family members. However, many couples did not enjoy full support from family members. The great majority of male couples considered their closest friends to be other gay people. All had gay friends and about two-thirds spent almost all their socializing time with other gay people. Berger (1990a) reported that among 92 male couples, two-thirds felt that their parents and siblings were supportive of their couple relationship.

Kurdek (1988) conducted the only empirical study which looked specifically at social support among gay and lesbian couples. Based on a questionnaire study of 69 gay and 50 lesbian cohabiting couples, Kurdek concluded that the most frequent providers of social support were, in order, friends, partners, family and co-workers.

*Social Support Literature*

At its simplest, social support refers to the resources provided by other persons (Cohen, 1985, p. 73). Since the 1970's a vast literature has emerged, offering many complex definitions of social support. In response to this literature, Vaux and Harrison (1985, p. 245) argued that research findings were often based on idiosyncratic measures and poorly defined concepts. They noted that the term 'social support' is too vague to be of use.

These conceptual problems have led to difficulty in designing appropriate measures of social support. For example, Cohen (1985) noted that there were almost as many measures of social support as there were studies (p. 73). Other authors have made similar observations (e.g. Barrera, 1986; Orth-Gomer & Uden, 1987; Vaux & Harrison, 1985).

Bruhn and Philips (1984) stressed the importance of measuring both the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of social support (p. 152). Another researcher measured social support by referring to direction (whether support is given or received), disposition (availability and enactment of support), description/evaluation, content (type of support: emotional, financial, etc.) and description of the network itself (Tardy, 1985, p. 188).

Barrera (1986) argued that the term 'social support' be abandoned in favor of three broad categories: *social embeddedness*, *perceived social support*, and *enacted support*. *Social embeddedness* "refers to the connections that individuals have to significant others in their social environments" (p. 415).

The subject's cognitive appraisal of being reliably connected to others constitutes *perceived social support*. Measures of this type of support typically assess individuals' beliefs that support would be available and adequate if needed; some measures of perceived social support also assess satisfaction with support. *Enacted social support* assesses what supportive persons in the individual's environment actually do when providing help.

Despite these conceptual and methodological difficulties, several studies have shown that well being is related to subjective aspects of support (perceived support or support satisfaction) (Barrera, 1981; Hirsch, 1980; Procidano & Heller, 1983). Therefore this study chose to measure perceived social support and support satisfaction.

*Research Questions*

This study sought to describe the following characteristics of the social support networks of gay men: 1) network size (number of persons in the network); 2) type of support; 3) sources of support (relationship of support providers to respondents, persons who were perceived to be the three most important sources of support, and gender of supportive persons); 4) frequency of contact (how often respondent talked with supportive persons); and 5) satisfaction with available support.

Three additional variables were included in this study because of their close connection to social networks and to social and psychological adjustment:

1) Passing as heterosexual (the extent to which an individual's homosexuality is hidden from others) is an important factor in the gay individual's relationship to his social network and in his psychosocial adaptation (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Berger, 1982, 1990b; Braaten & Darling, 1965; Horowitz, 1964; Leznoff & Westley, 1967; Myrick, 1974a). For example, Weinberg and Williams (1975) found that among gay men passing was associated with depression, interpersonal awkwardness and feelings of anxiety about one's homosexuality (p. 250). The most important component of passing is *being known as gay*. Therefore, the present study asked respondents about the extent to which they were known as gay within their networks.

2) Weinberg and Williams (1975) also found that *living situation* was a significant social network factor. Compared to gay men who lived with others, those who lived alone were more isolated and had greater psychological problems: they more often anticipated discrimination, were less likely to be known as gay, were less integrated into the gay world, and were more depressed, lonely, guilty and anxious about their homosexuality.

3) *Relationship status* (whether the individual was in a committed relationship) was found by Bell and Weinberg (1978) to be predictive of good adjustment. Gay men and women who were in primary relationships in which the partners tended to look to each other rather than to outsiders for sexual and interpersonal satisfactions were dubbed "close-coupled." Individuals in these relationships showed "superior adjustment."



Compared to "single" gays and those in "open" relationships, they were more self-accepting, less depressed, less lonely and more happy.

Therefore this study also examined the impact of living situation and relationship status on social network characteristics as well as on perceived friendship deprivation and feelings of loneliness.

## Method

### *Questionnaire*

A five page questionnaire was developed to measure perceived social support and demographic characteristics. The social support items were adapted from an assessment tool developed by Vaux and Harrison (1985). Respondents were asked to list as many as ten persons who they believed were sources of social support. They were then asked to provide the following information about each person listed: sex; the person's relationship to respondent (e.g. lover/partner, parent, close friend); how often respondent spoke to the person; what types of support were provided (emotional, practical, financial, advice/guidance, and socializing); respondents' level of satisfaction with support provided; and extent to which respondents' homosexuality was known to that person. Finally, from the list of supportive persons, respondents identified three individuals they considered to be most supportive.

The questionnaire also asked respondents if they believed they had enough friends (friendship deprivation) (on a five point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") and if they felt lonely (on a four point scale from "never" to "very often"). Demographic items included self-rated sexual orientation, race, sex, religion, education, age, income, living situation and relationship status.

### *Sampling*

Respondents were obtained by targeting friendship networks and a variety of gay organizations and community events over an eight week period during the Fall of 1989.

To obtain responses from individuals in friendship networks, questionnaires with postage-paid return envelopes were

distributed to contact persons known to the second author as a result of extensive professional contacts in the community. Followup calls and meetings with each contact person verified that the questionnaires had been distributed.

The authors distributed additional questionnaires at gay community organizations and special events in Southern California. Questionnaires were distributed to: Dignity (an organization of gay Catholics), Positive Living for Us (an organization of HIV-positive men), two additional AIDS-related organizations, a gay youth service program, a gay student caucus at a local university, an art lecture sponsored by a gay organization, a Gay and Lesbian Community Service Center, Front Runners (a gay men's athletic organization), men in attendance at a Gay Men's Chorus, and Project Rainbow (an organization for senior gays). In addition, questionnaires were distributed at a gay community dinner event in Atlanta. A total of 695 questionnaires were distributed.

Usable questionnaires were returned by 166 men and 34 women, for a response rate of 28.8%. This paper reports findings based on responses of the 166 male respondents. (Due to the small number of women respondents, data from this group were not analyzed).

Table 1 summarizes characteristics of these respondents. Virtually all respondents described themselves as exclusively or predominantly homosexual, they were overwhelmingly white, most were Protestant or Catholic, and they had above average levels of income and education. About two-thirds were in their thirties or forties, over a third were in committed relationships, and almost half lived alone.

## Results

On average, men in this study listed 8.5 persons in their support networks. The greatest number of supportive persons provided emotional support and the smallest number provided financial support (Table 2).

For all persons listed in respondents' social networks, Table 3 summarizes the number with various relationships to the respondent. By far, the most predominant type of relationship was close friend. On average, respondents listed about 4 close

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=166)*

## Percentage

*Sexual Orientation (n = 163)*

- 75.5 exclusively homosexual
- 19.6 predominantly homosexual, only insignificantly heterosexual
- 2.5 predominantly homosexual but significantly heterosexual
- 1.8 equally homosexual and heterosexual
- 0.6 predominantly heterosexual, but significantly homosexual

*Race (n = 166)*

- 83.1 White, Non-Hispanic
- 7.8 Hispanic
- 4.2 Black
- 4.8 Asian, Native American, or Other

*Religion (n = 165)*

- 38.2 Catholic
- 35.8 Protestant
- 7.3 Jew
- 18.8 Other

*Annual Individual Income (n = 164)*

- 14.0 under \$10,000
- 20.1 \$10,000 to 19,999
- 17.7 \$20,000 to 29,999
- 21.3 \$30,000 to 39,999
- 14.0 \$40,000 to 49,999
- 12.8 \$50,000 and over

*Education (n = 165)*

- 64.2 four year college or graduate degree
- 29.1 some college
- 6.1 high school diploma
- 0.6 eighth grade or less

*Age (n = 166)*

- 14.5 20-29 years old       $\bar{X} = 40.5$
- 36.7 30-39                 $Md = 39$
- 26.5 40-49                range 23 to 78
- 22.3 50 and older         $s.d. = 11.0$

Continued . . .

Table 1 Continued

## Percentage

*Relationship Status* (n = 127)

In a committed relationship with a person of the same sex?

38.6 Yes

61.4 No

*Living Situation* (n = 166)<sup>a</sup>

45.8 live alone

30.7 live with a lover

21.1 live with a roommate

3.6 live with other person

<sup>a</sup>Percentages add to over 100 because respondents could choose all responses which applied.

Table 2

*Number of Persons Providing Various Types of Support*

	$\bar{X}$	s.d.
Emotional	6.2	2.6
Socializing	5.5	2.3
Advice and Guidance	5.4	2.4
Practical	4.9	2.6
Financial	2.5	1.7
Total Network Size	8.5	2.2

friends. Overall, almost half of respondents' networks were composed of close friends.

When asked to identify the three most supportive persons in their networks, close friend again emerged as the largest category by far. As shown in Table 4, at least one close friend was listed by 105 out of 166 or 63% of respondents as being among the three most supportive persons. Parents, lovers, siblings and other persons were seldom listed. Overall, 53.8% of the three most supportive persons were close friends.

Men predominated among persons listed in respondents' support networks. An average of 5.5 males (range = 1-10,

Table 3

*Persons in Social Network with Various Relationships to Respondents*  
(N= 166)

	Mean Number	s.d.	Maximum number <sup>a</sup>	Percentage of network	Number of respondents who listed person in network
Close friend	3.94	2.18	10	47.6	156
Parent	0.88	0.84	3	10.6	97
Coworker	0.71	0.98	4	8.6	74
Sibling	0.69	0.87	4	8.3	80
Other person <sup>b</sup>	0.67	0.99	5	8.1	70
Social acquaintance	0.55	0.95	5	6.7	58
Lover	0.42	0.51	2	5.0	68
Other relative	0.37	0.72	4	4.4	43

<sup>a</sup> For each relationship the minimum number of persons listed was 0.

<sup>b</sup> "Other persons" were those not named in the other categories and included: ex-lover, ex-wife, neighbor, helping professional and clergy.

s.d. = 2.0) and 3.1 females (range = 1–7, s.d. = 1.5) were listed in respondents' networks. Of all persons named in these networks, about two-thirds (64.5%) were other men.

Overall, respondents spoke frequently with persons in their networks. A quarter (25.9%) talked with network members on the phone or in person, an average of two to six times a week; almost half (46.9%) talked to network members once to twice a week. Most respondents were known as gay to most persons in their networks. Over half (55.9%) believed that all the members in their networks knew of their homosexuality.

In general, respondents expressed satisfaction with support received from the persons they listed in their networks. Almost all (92.6%) reported that on average they were "moderately" to "extremely satisfied" with support received, and two-fifths (40.4%) were "very" to "extremely satisfied."

Table 4

*Three Most Supportive Persons: Number with Various Relationships to Respondent*

	Number listing person as among three most supportive	$\bar{X}$	range	s.d.
Close friend	105	1.9	1-4	0.8
Lover	44	1.0	1	0.0
Parent	39	1.2	1-2	0.4
Sibling	24	1.2	1-2	0.4
Other Person <sup>a</sup>	18	1.2	1-2	0.4

*Note.* Spouse, other relative, coworker, and social acquaintance were each listed by fewer than 7 per cent of respondents.

<sup>a</sup> "Other persons" were those not named in the other categories and included: ex-lover, ex-wife, helping professional and clergy.

A series of t-tests were run in order to test the impact of relationship status and living situation on social network characteristics. Specifically, those in a committed relationship were compared to those who were not (and those who lived alone were compared to those who lived with others) on the following variables: size of network, number of persons who provided various types of support, frequency with which respondent talked to persons in his network, satisfaction with social support, extent to which respondent was known as gay, and percentage of network composed of persons of the same and opposite-sex, close friends and persons who knew of respondents' homosexuality. In addition, t-tests were included to test the impact of relationship status and living situation on friendship deprivation and loneliness.

As shown in Table 5, relationship status was a significant predictor of three characteristics. Respondents who were not in a relationship were more likely to report feeling lonely; they talked to people in their networks more often; and their networks were composed of a greater percentage of close friends (although the overall network size did not differ).

Table 5

*The Effect of Being in a Committed Same-sex Relationship on Loneliness and Social Network Characteristics*

	N	$\bar{X}$	s.d.	t	p
<i>DO YOU FEEL LONELY?</i> <sup>a</sup>					
In relationship	47	2.17	0.67	2.165	.0326
Not in relationship	78	2.46	0.82		
<i>HOW OFTEN DO YOU TALK TO PERSONS IN YOUR NETWORK?</i> <sup>b</sup>					
In relationship	46	3.69	1.01	2.843	.0056
Not in relationship	78	3.18	0.90		
<i>PERCENTAGE OF NETWORK CONSISTING OF CLOSE FRIEND</i>					
In relationship	44	45.3	17.9	2.162	.0328
Not in relationship	76	53.6	23.9		

Note. All tests were two-tailed. <sup>a</sup> Coded: '1' = never; '2' = seldom; '3' = often; and '4' = very often.

<sup>b</sup> Coded: '1' = every day; '2' = 3-6 times a week; '3' = twice a week; '4' = once a week; '5' = twice a month; and '6' = once a month or less.

Living situation was a significant predictor of two characteristics. Table 6 shows that those who lived alone were more likely to report feeling lonely, and to talk to others in their social networks more often.

### Discussion

Much that is known to date about the social networks of gay men derives from unsystematic observation and professional opinion. This study illustrates the feasibility of conducting systematic research into the social networks of gay men, and of identifying factors associated with good and poor adjustment.

The findings of this study are consistent with those of earlier studies which showed that most gay men had at least a few friends (e.g. Saghir & Robins, 1973; Wienberg & Williams, 1975). This study showed further that the great majority of gay men, at

Table 6

*The Effect of Living Situation on Loneliness and Frequency of Communication*

	N	$\bar{X}$	s.d.	t	p
<i>DO YOU FEEL LONELY?<sup>a</sup></i>					
Living alone	76	2.46	0.81	2.419	.0168
Living with others	88	2.17	0.71		
<i>HOW OFTEN DO YOU TALK TO PERSONS IN YOUR NETWORK?<sup>b</sup></i>					
Living alone	74	3.14	0.82	3.787	.0002
Living with others	88	3.67	0.96		

Note. All tests were two-tailed.

<sup>a</sup> Coded: '1' = never; '2' = seldom; '3' = often; and '4' = very often.

<sup>b</sup> Coded: '1' = every day; '2' = 3-6 times a week; '3' = twice a week; '4' = once a week; '5' = twice a month; and '6' = once a month or less.

least in this sample, were embedded within large and diverse social networks which included friends, members of the immediate family and others. Close friends composed the largest part of most of gay men's networks, and emotional support appeared to be the most common type of support received. Social workers, who are trained to understand people in the context of their personal environments, should be aware of these characteristics of the social networks of gay men.

Gay men in this study were almost twice as likely to list other men, rather than women, as members of their social networks. This is consistent with Bell and Weinberg's (1978) finding that most gay men had mostly male friends. Nevertheless, on average, respondents named three women among those in their networks. Far from being misogynists, as some have suggested (Tripp, 1975), gay men are able to draw support from members of both sexes. This should be seen as a strength.

Not surprisingly, single gay men (those not in committed relationships), and those who lived alone, were more likely to



report feeling lonely. That these men also spoke more often with members of their network suggests that frequent social contact may occur when sources of primary support are not immediately available. Social workers may be helpful to single gay men, and those who live alone, by encouraging these clients to maintain regular contact with members of their social networks.

As in all studies of homosexuality, there are limitations inherent in the sample. Respondents in the present study were mostly white, lived in urban areas, and had higher than average levels of education and income. Conclusions drawn from this study may not hold true for gay men who are less educated and affluent, are minorities, or live in rural areas where supportive social networks are less accessible (Daugelli & Hart, 1987). Even so, social workers working with members of these groups are well advised to help their clients create and sustain supportive social networks.

Much research on gay men has depended on samples recruited through the public institutions of the gay community: bars, social clubs, political groups, and other organized activities. In any study of social networks it is particularly important to recruit also among the many gay men who never or rarely frequent these groups, because the social networks of these men may differ. The present study was successful in recruiting through informal social networks, as well as public groups, thereby strengthening the sample. However, the study sample did not include that minority of gay men who are socially isolated from other gays. This has been an exceedingly difficult group for social scientists to reach (Warren, 1977). Although the findings of this study do not necessarily apply to this group, gay men who are socially isolated from other gays are more likely to have psychological problems. They are also more likely to desire and need intervention by social workers and other helping professionals (Weinberg & Williams, 1975). It would be ideal for social work researchers and practitioners to collaborate to gain access to this group.

Popular rhetoric sometimes suggests that gay men are isolated from or rejected by family (e.g. McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Moses & Hawkins, 1982). The present study indicates

however, that for many gay men, parents and siblings constitute important sources of support, a conclusion which was also reached in a recent study of gay male couples (Berger, 1990a).

While close friends predominated in the social networks of those in the present study, parents and siblings were also cited by at least half of respondents. These figures do not inform us about the level of acceptance of homosexuality offered by parents and siblings, but they do debunk the notion that gay men are universally isolated from their immediate family. Social workers should help their gay clients to explore the possibility of securing or enhancing support from family members.

The present study did not evaluate the impact of the AIDS crisis on the social networks of gay men. The chronic illness and mortality brought on by AIDS has almost certainly had a major influence on the social networks of many gay men, particularly those who live in large urban areas where the epidemic is most prevalent. Gerontological research may shed some light in this area, since gay men affected by AIDS face challenges which are similar to those of advanced old age: loss of one's own functional capacity and depletion of one's social network through death.

It will be important to also learn how AIDS has strengthened gay men's social networks. The gay community, at times with help from social workers (Shernoff, 1990), has organized to provide support to its members (Burns & Rofes, 1988). On an individual level, many gay men have learned increasingly to value friendships and committed relationships, thereby enhancing the quality of support received.

The most important research effort in developing an understanding of gay men's networks will be the development of a multivariate model and application of multivariate analytic techniques. Ultimately, a description of social networks is empty without an understanding of the ways in which network characteristics are related to psychosocial well-being, which is the result of a large number of network and individual factors acting simultaneously. In order for this to happen, researchers from social work and other disciplines will have to continue their study of the social networks of gay men.

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