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AGEING GAY MEN'S BODIES

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Abstract

Men's bodies have increasingly been placed under the gaze of contemporary Western society. Gay males, in particular, appear to be a group most at risk of succumbing to body based concerns due to a predominantly aesthetically oriented gay culture. Recent debate has focussed more on young gay males as it has been argued that such a demographic are more likely to be impacted by the "look", which is centred around body physique, fashion and personal grooming. Older gay males have been overlooked in this discussion. In an attempt to redress this concern, this paper highlights emergent body based issues for older gay men. Rich descriptive data from three gay males over the age of 44 years were attained through extensive individual in-depth interviews. Emergent themes identify that older gay men also have concerns about their bodies. However, these concerns are tempered with the notion of inevitability, which ultimately provides a positive life perspective.

Introduction

Contemporary males are perceived differently from those of previous eras in terms of their bodies and what these bodies represent. While the body has always played a role in the construction and perception of masculinity, men's bodies are now being scrutinised far more than they have in the past (Drummond, 2005a, 2005b). Previously men's bodies were lauded for 'doing' masculinised physical acts which ultimately assisted in defining one's masculinity. While contemporary male bodies also play a significant role in defining masculine identity, it is the shape, muscularity, and aesthetic perception which provides the most significant personal and outward masculine identity (Drummond, 2001, 2003; Pope, Phillips and Olivardia, 2000). In a consumer-oriented Western culture in which all forms of the body are commodified it can be easily noted that men's bodies are increasingly being gazed upon, commercialised and exploited. In terms of the development of body image concerns the popular press has focussed on heterosexual men

as being the group most affected by this gaze. However the literature claims otherwise, identifying gay men as being immersed in an aesthetic driven culture, and thus most susceptible to body image concerns (Boroughs and Thompson, 2002; Lakkis, Ricciardelli and Williams, 1999; Siever, 1994; Silberstein, Mishkind, Striegel-Moore, Timko and Rodin, 1989; Williamson, 1999).

The culture in which gay men predominantly exist is heavily aesthetically oriented (Beren, Hayden, Wilfley and Grilo, 1996; Dillon, Copeland and Peters, 1999; Herzog, Newman and Warshaw, 1991). A gay man's 'look', which often includes his physique, clothing and hairstyle, plays an important role in the way in which he is sexually perceived by other men. The overall 'look' can have an immediate impact in terms of attracting or discouraging potential sexual partners such is the nature of a specifically image-driven gay culture (Drummond 2005a). This is particularly relevant to younger gay men where the likelihood of casual sex with a range of sexual partners is higher. However, the need to understand the meaning of ageing gay men's bodies should not be discounted. Listening to the voices of older gay men surrounding their constructions of masculinity through and within their bodies provides important insights into how masculinities are developed, maintained and eroded via the body. Jones and Pugh (2005) concur by arguing that the experience of being young and gay is very different from the experience of older gay men.

This paper is based on rich descriptive in-depth interviews with three older gay men. The ages of the men were 44, 45 and 53 years. Each of these men falls within the 'babyboomer' generation. This aspect was an original selection criteria for the research as it is widely recognised that the 'babyboomer' generation is vastly differently from the younger generation 'Y', and babyboomers are commonly recognised as 'ageing'. Given the research is underpinned by life historical narratives, the men provide important reflections on their lives in the context of body identity, and masculine identity within the ageing process. While it was never the original intention of the research to focus

specifically on gay men and body image within the context of HIV status, it must be noted that each of the men are HIV positive. This occurred as a result of an initial participant placing recruitment 'flyers' in a 'positive living setting. Interestingly, the same flyers were placed at various gay men's health establishments around Adelaide, and email versions sent out through these services to men, with no response. Noteworthy is the high number of young gay male participants in a comparable research project to this investigating young gay men and body image employing similar recruiting methods (See Drummond, 2005a, 2005b).

The reticence of older gay men to talk about themselves and their bodies may be reflective of a generational issue that needs attention. While the young men were not quite as articulate and introspective as the three older men who participated, the idea of these young men telling their stories was appealing to them due to the cultural changes and greater societal acceptance associated with sexualities. It appeared the young men wanted their voices heard more so than the older gay men. Significantly, the need for older gay men's voices to be heard is crucial in understanding gay men's bodies and masculinities and working with gay men through the ageing process.

Method

Data for this paper were drawn from in-depth interviews with three 'ageing' gay men. The interviews were conducted in a location where the participants felt most comfortable. Each of the men was happy to meet and be interviewed at the University of South Australia in a quiet non-intrusive environment. In taking on a life historical approach it was necessary for the researcher to use a semi-structured interview guide that would allow for specific areas to be covered within the rich descriptive narratives. Previous research with younger gay men (see Drummond, 2005a) and ageing heterosexual men (see Drummond, 2003) informed the construction of this guide. So too did literature surrounding men's bodies and body image, gay men's bodies and masculinities. Therefore specific areas of sexualities and body image, body identity and masculinities could be addressed within broad life historical perspectives. The interview guide was an important component of the interview as it followed the same basic line of enquiry with each of the men while also providing opportunity

to probe, explore and clarify the participants' responses (Patton, 2002).

Upon meeting, the men were provided with an information sheet and consent form to sign as stipulated by the University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. The men were aware that their identities would remain anonymous and that they could withdraw from the research at any time without prejudice and their data would be destroyed and not be used.

Each interview lasted between two and three hours. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The men also provided contact details so that follow up interviews could be attained to clarify and provide additional data. This not only enriched the data but also provided a form of validity check where necessary. The interviews were open-ended and allowed the participant to discuss both personal and general issues freely and openly. Underpinned by phenomenology, which explores the 'lived experience' the research process also provided an opportunity to explore specific issues at length that required further explanation particularly with respect to the 'essence of meaning' (Van Manen, 1990) of older gay men's bodies. Patton (2002, p. 106) claims that it is this "essence or essences to shared experience" that are part of a phenomenon commonly experienced. In the case of the research reported here it is older gay men and the essence of their bodily experiences from a life historical perspective that was subject to exploration. It is envisaged that themes identified and interpretations of these themes will be reflective of other older gay men living in contemporary Western society.

Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed and open coded (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) they were inductively analysed to identify major themes. Patton (2002) claims inductive analysis to be a useful mechanism within open-ended discussions, as the inquirer is provided the opportunity to understand patterns within the phenomenon under investigation. Further, Patton notes that categories, patterns and themes can emerge through the interaction with one's data through this form of analysis. Therefore with respect to the data within this research inductive analysis was based on my previous research undertaken with a range of males across the lifespan and sexualities, my

professional knowledge and the literature (Strauss, 1987).

Findings/Discussion

The themes identified through the use of coding and inductive analysis are based on the way the participants perceived themselves and their bodies particularly with respect to masculine identity. The themes are also positioned within the context of a rapidly evolving Western culture in which the body, both male and female have increasingly become commodified, exploited and commercialised thereby heightening their aesthetic appeal and importance. While it might be argued that the findings attained from three men do not create overwhelming evidence to support such claims, it must be understood that the themes identified are specifically those that were stated by all three men. That is, each of the men articulated the same notion and therefore constructed an emergent theme. It should also be reiterated that the data have evolved from lengthy interviews with follow-up discussions seeking further clarification thereby enhancing validity and reliability. The dominant themes to emerge from the data will be discussed in detail. These themes are (i) The changing/evolving archetypal male body (ii) On being 40, and (iii) The positive body.

The Changing/Evolving Archetypal Male Body

Increasingly males are identifying the changing nature of men's bodies as being a significant factor in their attitude towards their own bodies which in turn plays a role in determining their body identity and self-esteem (Drummond, 2005a). Young gay men, it seems, are perceived as being an 'at risk' group based on their often aesthetically-oriented cultural ideals (Drummond, 2005a). As has been suggested earlier, research literature acknowledges this notion but does not specifically refer to how older gay men perceive themselves and other male bodies. The older gay men in this research clearly articulate the evolution of the archetypal masculine male as being one to which most males aspire but realistically cannot achieve. This, as they suggest, leaves many males open to a certain level of vulnerability. It was identified that this archetypal physique, largely played out through various forms of media, is not sexuality specific and is therefore a more homogenised 'look'. As one of the men claimed:

I don't think the image of the ideal male is heterosexually based because the image is portrayed to affect everybody, to impact on everybody. Not only gay men but straight men as well, because I mean everybody wants to look good. I mean we all try to aspire to it but just haven't got the work ethic to do it.

Like most of the other groups interviewed in past research (see for example Drummond 1996, 2003; 2005a; 2005b) there is a preference for a body that is not overly muscular, which in the past has been an important signifier of masculinity. The Arnold Schwarzenegger era of the 1980s whereby he, and a number of other hypermuscular, hypermasculine 'superhero' comic book type figures, gained cult status has quickly evolved to a leaner physique. Some might even suggest it is a backlash against those figures that we now see more of a muscular, toned, physical, athletic male, which appears to be able to 'do' more physical feats (Drummond, 1996). As one of the men in the present research claimed when asked of his preference for a male body type:

Not a bodybuilder, a well muscled man who does look good when he's got his solid muscles and his stomach muscles are there and his pecs and his shoulders and his arms and his legs. He just looks good. You know, someone who has put time and effort in and he looks good and that's it really, they do look good. When you see a well-muscled athletic man. That's good.

The men also talked about a certain 'look' that males must have in contemporary Western society to be perceived as masculine. The term 'look' when discussing issues around bodies and body image is interesting in that it takes into account a number of other factors beyond the physical. The men are also focussing on elements such as clothing, hairstyles, body piercings and tattoos. The following claim typifies what each of the men identified:

The type (of masculine male) we're putting forward now is someone who is totally clean cut, totally clean shaven, good clean skin, well groomed, well dressed, body's well defined and when he takes his clothes off there's a whole package of a nice firm, solid looking body.

It is noteworthy in the above quote that the participant suggested that 'we are putting forward' a masculine male who looks a particular way. In a similar fashion the other older males also maintained a perception that certain male bodies are, and have been, 'put forward' for

display to be culturally judged and that this athletic toned, clean-cut version is the one that is currently in vogue. Of significance is the question which could be raised around who puts these bodies forward for display? In the eyes of these older gay men it is indeed the media.

The media plays an interesting role in the production and re-production of body ideals. Some might argue that it is the media that purposely publish, emphasise and showcase the images that are culturally perceived as being desirable and thus develop and perpetuate an artificial archetypal physique for both genders. Others might claim that the media merely represents and reflects what the public want to buy and see. Irrespective of these arguments, unrealistic images do exist in print, cinema, television and internet media and can have a powerful resonance on individuals throughout contemporary consumer culture (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). This is particularly so for those who do not live up to these ideals. For the men in this research the archetypal male physiques promoted in these publications and programs represent something they do not, and cannot, attain due to their age and their HIV medication. As one of the men stated:

It's the media that's pushing it. Well not so much the media but the ad people, Calvin Klein and all these ad people. They're pushing it and it's creating a snowball effect where it falls down onto Joe Blow and Joe Blow says 'I'm wanting to look like Brad Pitt and I could make myself more attractive'. And then it all falls down that way. Everybody sort of talks about it and then they judge people who don't look like them or if they don't fit in. So, it's like 'we don't want you around any more, you're fat and ugly. We don't want you hanging around with us anymore'.

Similarly another man claimed:

You look at all the presenters on these game shows and all the models that they use you know, they're only a few years away from foetuses. It's depressing sometimes. I mean you look at these guys and think that some of them wouldn't be 18 and they're sort of buffed up and doing their thing, and then you've got people in their 30s and 40s saying 'gosh my body wasn't anything like that'. You know, you look at pictures that were taken in the 1940s and that sort of stuff, like Tarzan and all those sorts of people compared to what a body image is today. They're just different. You see all of these boys on these film clips and stuff like that are all buffed to the max but you don't see anybody with a podgy belly unless they're actually 60 or

70 kilos overweight, you know what I mean. They're either extremely obese or they're buffed to within an inch of their lives.

Noteworthy in this last quote is the emphasis on age. For the men in this research having reached 40 years of age has been a significant factor in coming to terms with their bodies as beginning to experience the gradual and more obvious aspects of the ageing process.

On Being 40

Turning 40 is arguably a significant age milestone in a heterosexual man's life. It often represents a time in his life when he can reflect on his 'heady' youthful days and look forward to establishing himself in his career to set himself up financially for retirement for himself and his family. It is also a time for men with families to reflect on their roles as fathers, husbands and partners. However, the meaning of turning 40 for a gay man can be different. The culture in which he exists may differ from that of most heterosexual men and the lives they lead in terms of traditional heterosexual familial commitments. However, as Jones and Pugh (2005) aptly point out, care needs to be taken here to not over-generalise individual gay men's circumstances and lifestyles because many are involved as a parent with children through choice or via past relationships.

Given that the particular form of gay culture, as identified earlier, is heavily aesthetically-oriented the need to 'look' attractive to potential sexual partners is significant (Drummond 2005a). As one of the men in this research suggested:

It's the looks factor. I mean if you don't look like Brad Pitt then they're not attracted to you any more and I think that's a big thing. You go out and you sit in the pub or club and if you're my age they sort of leave you alone until the last minute basically until all the other avenues have been exhausted and they say 'oh well he's the last one I can get so I'm gonna go and pick him up'. But I think it is the ages and mainly the 'look' factor. If you don't look like Brad Pitt and you don't have a figure like Brad Pitt you're not in with a chance.

It is the notion of age that each of the men quickly mention as being a signifier in changing other's perceptions of them as individuals within the gay community. One of the men simply identified the gay community as 'being judgemental'. Further he claimed, "well I

suppose it comes down to ages. I mean if you're over a certain age people really aren't interested in you any more". When questioned as to what age this was he replied, "over 40".

Each of the men in this research have clearly identified 40 as being the time of life where change in the perception of themselves by others took place, and continues to take place in gay culture. A backlash against this appears to be a groundswell of gay males taking it upon themselves to appear youthful in the face of the ageing process. The men appear ambivalent in relation to the underlying meaning of age, other than suggesting it is up to the individual to make up his mind whether he wants to seek gratification through youth-oriented aesthetics. One of the men stated:

Look, I think that the promotion of youthness and that young fresh approach is in. I think it's changing a little bit where you're getting a little older men in some commercials but everybody over 40 has grey hair. I'm not sure where that all comes from but, you know, it sort of seems to suggest that you are old after 40, you know pretty much senior after 40. So people seem to be striving to stay younger for longer and that sort of stuff and that's very much with younger guys in midlife rather than the guys in their 70s and stuff like that. You see guys who are in their 50s now that are really trying to maintain that youthful look or whatever and not having the wrinkles and all that sort of stuff.

Another man was a little more scathing of the youth led gay counter-culture claiming:

There are guys that'll you know, if a dick is under 7 inches then they're not interested. Well you know, there's a lot more to people besides that. So size doesn't play in my mind but I know that it does play in others and there's a big part of that. But it has a lot to do with the way the culture is marketed and all that sort of stuff too. You know young virile lads with hard ons and, you know, everybody's saying well, once you get over 45 or 50 or 60 then the age limit is affecting you. It's fabulous when you're 17 or 18 or 25 or 32 but after that it starts to get harder, see, because it's harder to actually just maintain erections and the change of stamina and doing all those sorts of things plus living life you know and maintaining relationships and all those sorts of rubbish. They say your (a gay man's) bed wears out in 10 years.

The Positive Body

While there are clear differences that exist for the younger generation of gay males compared to those in their 40s and beyond, a more stark

difference exists for those men who are in this older generation and are HIV positive. One of the men identified to me that "this younger generation of men do not have an understanding of HIV simply because they have not lived through it, from the beginning". This historical perspective plays a significant role in the way in which these older gay men perceive themselves, the aesthetic body and their functional body. The double entendre embedded in the theme's title reflects the way in which these men must come to terms with a body that they do not perceive as aesthetically appealing due to the side-effects of heavy medication they are taking. It also emphasises the positive outlook they maintain despite their condition and ancillary illnesses experienced. One of the men clearly articulated the way in which he perceived his body, a view which was also representative of the other men. He stated:

I guess I see my body differently only because of the side effects of the medication I'm on. I mean there's the buffalo hump and the blood dystrophy and 1000 pills. I mean it comes back to what I said before, I've gotten over that now, I don't care anymore. Oh, I still care about it, but I'm not worried anymore, you know, the side effects of the medication and what I look like now. There's nothing I can do about it without spending thousands of dollars to have it medically fixed. So I'm happy with myself and the people I'm around are happy with me and that's the important thing.

While all three men did perceive their bodies as being somewhat different to the archetypal male physique they viewed the functional capacities of their bodies in the highest regard. Maintaining high-level functional capacity with respect to what their bodies could 'do' far outweighed the way in which they looked in terms of aesthetics. Indeed the medication and treatment procedures play a major role in understanding themselves and their bodies. A participant emphasised this well when he claimed:

Look, I can't go a day without doing my treatments and my treatments play a role in how I feel. The thing is, that defines who I am for life. So you know, how long that'll be I just go from there. Like today, I'll finish these treatments and I'll go to the pain unit and then we'll look at some of the other problems that I've got and see what we need to do about those. But I can only deal with one drama at a time so

that's constant you know. And if you speak to a lot of people that are HIV you'll probably find that that's the norm.

Functional capacity did not only mean existing on a daily basis. To these men functioning meant attempting to maintain similar lives to the ones they had developed in the past including work, physical activity and sex. These were all important contributors to the way in which they constructed their masculine identity and how they perceived themselves as men. Therefore the body became a vehicle for far more than simply being looked at and existing. While the 'failing' body deconstructed aspects of their masculine identity such as 'loss of muscle strength' and having to 'wait for someone to come around with a screwdriver to fix things' the body was also a tool that gave them an opportunity to live in the manner that constructed, maintained and re-constructed their masculinity. The following quote provides some insight into the issues confronting the men and the coping mechanisms they use to deal with these issues:

I've lost my erectile functions so I need to use drugs to get a hard on and it took me about 5 years to get over the horror of that and now you count the clock to fit the time you've got. You know, they're saying 'just work with what you've got' and 'there is so much more than a hard on to think about' so it's not an issue any more its just a fact.

Another man put his illness and treatment into his perspective to which the other men concurred by claiming:

It was about 7 or 8 years where things (my body) slowly stopped working. And because of the treatments, you know, I was not being able to maintain an erection, all those other things and that all plays into your masculinity stuff. And with my cancer, you know, prostate cancer, and all these other things, it all builds up. You know, it's part of any bloke. It's part of who you are and all that sort of stuff so you know strength and all that comes from stamina and all those sorts of things and if you don't have any then that's questioned. And you know not that you're wondering where it all went and all that sort of stuff but I know that it's changed and I know that my perception, my needs for certain things have grown and swapped and turned and moved around, so as best I can cope with what's going on. Well you can either get upset about it or you can look at ways that you can cope and to me its about a longevity so I've got to look at what I can change and what I can live with.

Conclusion

Older gay men face a number of challenges with respect to their body image and the subsequent impact on body identity, masculine identity and resultant self-esteem. Amidst a highly commodified consumer culture in which the body is central to youthfulness and vitality, arguably even more so in gay culture, ageing gay men are increasingly confronted with such ageist notions. The expectation within gay culture around maintaining a homogenised youthful 'sameness' is developing momentum and is placing pressure on those who do not live up to this ideal.

While the men in this research were critical of the youth-oriented focus within gay culture they have come to terms with the changing nature of their bodies in terms of their looks and functionality. Given that these men are also HIV positive provides additional circumstances that may not be prevalent for older gay men who are not HIV positive. Still, they have provided important data upon which further research can be based. Such further research is crucial with this cohort group demographic. Jones and Pugh (2005) concur claiming that, "the way forward is to carry out empirical research to determine how older gay men feel about age related changes in their bodies" (p. 258). Challenges must be overcome when researching minority groups (i.e., older gay men) that exist within a broader minority group (i.e., gay men in general) if more is to be known about particular sub-groups of people (Jones and Pugh 2005). In order to act on issues that relate to ageing gay men, future research will also have to look at the many differing aspects of these men's lives. Their voices must be listened to, heard and acted upon.

Author Note

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