Gay Grows Up:
An Interpretive Study on Aging
Metaphors and Queer Identity

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ABSTRACT. This study is based upon qualitative research conducted with the Phoenix chapter of the Prime Timers, a social organization that offers older men in the gay community a space to communicate their general needs and desires. Using data collected through participant observation and informant interviews, the research demonstrates the ways in which the group’s affiliates respond to queer sensibilities. The analysis argues that intergenerational communication is fettered by age stereotypes that generate communicative boundaries between young and old members of the gay community. The report then suggests that age-based breakdowns in communication prevalent in the gay community are further advanced by a difference in intergenerational approaches to survival. doi:10.1300/J082v52n03_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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The queer community and the theories it brings forth are like a shattered mirror, reflecting many faces, identities, and standpoints. In the last decade, queer African Americans have increasingly spoken of the specificity of their marginalization (Alexander, 2000; Julien & Mercer, 1991); queer Asians have also sorted through their particular affairs by means of scholarship (Eng, 1997); similarly, queer Hispanics have documented their unique struggles both in and out of academia (Arrizon, 1999; Munoz, 1999). While the growing field of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered scholarship appears promising (Dolan, 2002; Patton, 1993; Sedgwick, 1993; Warner, 1993, 2001), many factions of the queer community remain woefully overlooked, most notably older gay men.

Having lived through the Stonewall riots, the apex of the AIDS pandemic, and the shame and frustration of much more “closeted” times, older gay men offer insight into a counter-cultural history that remains largely fragmented and absent from broader cultural discourses. The changing landscape of gay and lesbian politics and theory, unfortunately, tends to “wall out” the experiences of its older members by espousing labels and epistemologies that are not commensurate with how gay seniors are historically situated.

There are, however, organizations that provide settings for aged gay men to congregate, share narratives, and contribute to the homosexual community. In this paper, I turn my attention to the Prime Timers, a group that is uniquely concerned with how older gay men fit into the rapidly morphing context that is better known today as “queer” culture. Embracing the word “queer” is particularly troublesome for the graying gay population, because, as one man in the Prime Timers put it, “The term has a long history of subjugating many of us and we have a knee-jerk, negative reaction to its use.” Furthermore, queer theory and politics have become the purview of white, upper-middle-class young men who tend to blend into straight culture and reify social stigmas that continue to disenfranchise the fringes of the queer community (e.g., drag queens, effeminate men, butch women). Plum (1996) suggests that “the [queer] movement’s goal to ‘end domination’ will never come about if queer discourse continues to be so blatantly focused on the concerns and experiences of the middle-class gay white men who currently control discussions regarding what it means to be queer” (p. 118). This elitism may be explained by the fact that cultural bonding in the queer community has overwhelmingly taken place in market-mediated settings such as bars, resorts, and urban commercial districts, ensuring that the capital-holding, white, young men who tend to populate these environments benefit the most from the re-appropriation of the term [queer] (Warner,
1993, p. xvi). Warner (1999) explains that there is a growing tendency to form a queer movement that “you can take home to mom”; this push to regularize the “normal” homosexual results in an appearance of homogeneity that betrays the polysemous reality of the gay and lesbian social order (p. 42).

Many older gay men who feel spurned by the recent queering of the gay community demonstrate their contempt by denouncing the utility of the “queer” label. Unfortunately, their disapproval widens the communicative chasm between older and younger gay men. Current communication research posits that younger people think that older men and women are not willing to adopt or adjust to generational language changes even when they might include an effort to attain mutual goals (Edwards & Giles, 1998, p. 2). Given the Prime Timers’ propensity to speak at length regarding the ramifications of the word “queer,” this research project explores how the Prime Timers interact with and react to the shifting paradigm of queer politics, practices, and advocacy.

This essay begins with a review of literature relevant to aging and homosexuality. After discussing my methods of data gathering and analysis, I present findings that interrogate the use of age metaphors and comparative generational survival techniques. I conclude my analysis with a discussion of the implications of the research and possible future directions for intergenerational gay scholarship.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE AND FUNCTIONS OF AGE AND METAPHOR IN THE GAY COMMUNITY**

While there are no definitive criteria used to specify young and aged groups in our society, western culture has inscribed numerous milestones in our daily contexts that help to better define the categories, including the age of retirement, the age one begins to collect social security based on years lived, and the legal smoking and drinking ages (Williams & Coupland, 1998, p. 140). For the purposes of this paper, “younger” in the gay collective refers to a fluid category that describes men and women under the age of thirty-five. This categorization is by no means decisive, but it does point to an aging script that I have personally been exposed to in the queer community. For example, a DJ at a local gay bar announced over the establishment’s loudspeaker that a man was “old” on his thirty-fifth birthday. Hajek and Giles (2002) support the 35-year-old boundary between “young” and “old” in the gay community when they declare that “life in the bars, for sexual purposes,
is ‘time-limited’” and men 35 years of age and older tend to be viewed as “old” because they are beginning to lose their sexual attractiveness (p. 704).

Within the gay community, age and age perceptions can regularly forecast the direction and expectations of interactions between gay men. Frequently, intergenerational communication is shaped by misconceptions that doom potential interlocutors before their initial utterances. This phenomenon might be partially explained by a tendency in American society to reduce older people to the negative stereotypes that frequently belie the realities of these individuals. The growing field of gerontology argues that there is an emerging attitude in our culture that older people are “irritable, nagging, grouchy, weak, verbose, and cognitively deficient” (Braithwaite, 1986, p. 356; Branco & Williamson, 1982; Giles, 1996; Neussel, 1982). Typically, these (mis-) constructions of our graying population are internalized by cultural members and the taken-for-granted stereotypes which then impact the ways in which younger members of our collective interact with older men and women. Giles (1996) explains that when a young person comes into contact with an older individual, nonverbal cues (e.g., graying hair, dress) trigger age stereotypes that alter normal communicative behaviors (p. 223). With respect to the Prime Timers, these irregular performances culminate in a tacit awareness that young and old gay men may occupy the same general space, but the common area is subdivided by age- divisions that are perpetuated through communication.

Age-dismissive behaviors are, in fact, even more prominent in the gay community. Older gay men suffer the same age-based discrimination as their heterosexual counterparts but have additional sexually charged stereotypes to deal with. For example, Rogers (1978) claims that older gay men are often compared with vampires that are “out to prey on our youth” and are thereby “obsessed with recapturing their own youth through sexual domination of a younger person” (p. 21). Metaphors such as the one proffered by the vampire analogue help to explain why there is a sense of “mutual avoidance” between the gay subculture’s older and younger members (Grube, 1991, p. 121; Hajek & Giles, 2000, p. 707).

Metaphors are figurative comparisons that provide “additional information about the structure, content, and meaning of a particular situation” (Sackmann, 1989, p. 465). Deetz argues that metaphors found in communicative exchanges tend to reproduce the systems from which they aim to signify (p. 219). Studying the age metaphors that the Prime Timers use to make sense of one another is a worthy project because the
comparisons convey deeper meanings that bolster homosexual stig mata (Norton, Schwartzbaum, & Wheat, 1990, p. 811). I, therefore, question what the age-specific metaphors used by the Prime Timers reveal about the intergenerational divides working within Phoenix’s gay community.

THE ROLE OF “QUEER”
IN INTERGENERATIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION

In addition to the use of age metaphors to help construct gay identity, the current analysis also questions how the label “queer” inhibits intergenerational communication. When the word “queer” was re-appropriated by gay and lesbian activists in a 1990 New York City ACT UP conference (Berlant & Freeman, 1993, p. 198), an ideological war was declared against heteronormative constructions of sexuality. Increasingly, gay men engage(d) in what could only be described as an analogue to their heterosexual peers’ intimate relationships, and assimilating men became the poster boys for the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement (Warner, 1999, p. 66). The choice to reclaim “queer” indicates a willingness to expose and celebrate cultural differences between heterosexuals. “Celebrating” queer ethos necessarily includes taking pride in more public displays of sexuality because overt demonstrations help to distinguish queer identity from heterosexist paradigms that prefer to keep sex and sexuality in the private sphere.

Many older gay men, however, are not comfortable with self-identifying as different and/or “queer.” Grube (1991) reveals that showcasing differences makes little sense to the older population of gay men whose idea of “public status” has largely been associated with passing as heterosexuals (p. 120). In the context of this essay, passing refers to the process by which homosexuals present themselves to the world around them as heterosexuals (Berger, 1990, p. 328). Older gay men, or what Grube refers to as the traditional gay community, have used passing as a survival technique when the pressures to assimilate to heterosexual society were much more pronounced than they are today (p. 122).

Passing practices in the gay community have also caused a number of men to judge factions of the homosexual population who have not opted to or simply cannot pass. Grube (1991) demonstrates how the “flaming queen” or “flaunting” homosexual has previously faced condemnation from both heterosexuals and more “closeted” homosexuals (p. 120). “Flaming” or “flaunting” gay men are those who typically act in an effeminate manner. While the more flamboyant homosexual continues
to be marginalized both by heterosexual culture and his own brethren, older gay men and their valuation of passing particularly predisposes them to frown upon feminine embodiments in homosexual males. The effeminate-acting gay man is constructed as a nuisance and a liability because he does not conform to the expectation to pass as a heterosexual and may implicate the men around him with his overt sexuality.

For many older gay men, keeping sexual identity a secret was and continues to be used as a way to distance self from stigma. Passing, unfortunately, reifies the perception that the dominant group is somehow better than the subordinate group (Cox & Gallois, 1996, p. 18). Given the rapidly decreasing threat of not being able to pass as a heterosexual in American society, it is important to investigate the ways in which passing as a survival technique may hinder communication between the Prime Timers and the queer-identified generation of gay men in the Phoenix area who believe that there are dangers inherent in repressing sexual identity.

BACKGROUND, DATA, AND INTERPRETIVE METHODS

The Prime Timers is a national organization that caters to the needs, desires, and affiliations of older gay men, offering them a space to share and compare their respective experiences. The Phoenix chapter of the Prime Timers consists of roughly ninety gay men who meet once at month at a local gay-owned and -operated restaurant in downtown. While the organization clearly privileges issues related to older homosexual males, any individual who wishes to come to a general meeting may do so, whether that person is straight, female, and/or young.

Many of the men in the Phoenix chapter of the Prime Timers organization are “closeted” homosexuals who depend on the guarantee of their privacy. It was, therefore, important for me to clearly state my research interests to the board of directors and to guarantee that my methodologies would protect the men’s privacy. After ensuring the executive committee, who served as gatekeepers to the site, that identities would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and that member participation in the study was voluntary, I was granted access to begin my research on the same day that I presented my proposal. As I will soon explain, my initial endeavor into the field is also when I first learned that many of the men in the Prime Timers find the term “queer” problematic.

Given my own ties to queer culture, it is critical that I interrogate and challenge the very theory that I chose to ground this project in. Some
may argue that using queer theory as a backdrop for this research while simultaneously depicting it as a problematic epistemology is nihilistic, at best. I hope to assuage this concern by presenting self-reflexive accounts of how the data I collected affirm, negate, and/or contribute to the current cannon of queer scholarship. As Altheide and Johnson (1994) remind us, reflexivity depends on the researcher’s ability and willingness to see him or herself as a part of the research setting and context (p. 486). Self-reflexive interrogations of my own youth-related and queer-oriented biases are especially important in the current study, because the aforementioned standpoints aid in the ways in which I, as an opportunistic researcher (Riemer, 1977; Hayano, 1982; Krieger, 1983; Bochner & Ellis, 2000), process intergenerational communicative exchanges among gay men.

Data Sources

A queer epistemology also influenced how my informants were chosen. In an effort to display the various ways in which sexuality intersects and interacts with race, gender, and age, my “pool” of informants was purposely heterogeneous; in the year that I spent collecting data, I interviewed three black men and one Asian man; furthermore, one of my informants considered himself to be a “female impersonator.” Given the burgeoning field of literature that worries that queer theory erases racial identities and experiences (Walters, 1996; Brookey & Miller, 2001), a “good” qualitative treatment of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community should aim to include voices that are commonly left out of similar research projects.

For this study, I employed twenty-seven hours of participant observation and conducted ten informant interviews of forty-minutes to two-hours duration (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 176-77) to collect my data. My participant observation of the Prime Timers primarily took place at the monthly general meetings held at Chuck’s (a pseudonym) restaurant on the second Tuesday of each month. Chuck’s is located in a high-traffic and densely populated area of downtown Phoenix. This district has become the unofficial queer space of Phoenix and houses a vast majority of the businesses that directly target members of the LGBT population.

Roughly 65 men were present at each meeting. With the exception of two Asian American men and four African American men, the general gatherings were primarily attended by white men who ranged in age from 39 to 85. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) would describe my role in
observation as observer-as-participant because my primary goal at the meetings was observation colored by brief episodes of participation (p. 149). Following Geertz’s (1973) recommendation, my field note descriptions are very thick, detailing how the environment/context impacted all my senses; Geertz believes that this sort of thick description is necessary if we are to sort the scene’s “winks from twitches” in our ethnographic accounts (p. 116). I also had the opportunity to conduct twelve onsite informal ethnographic interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 176) that typically served the purpose of defining native terms or clarifying organizational procedures as they occurred in the field.

After 15 hours of participant observation, it was important for me to compare my initial findings against other sources of data. Bloor (2001) refers to the process of combining two or more different research strategies as triangulation (p. 384). My data were triangulated after conducting three audiotaped and two online informant interviews with members of the Prime Timers. To further guarantee the participants’ anonymity, I personally transcribed each interview no longer than one week after it was conducted and erased the audiotaped records after the transcription process. The audiotaped interviews lasted from forty minutes to two hours and were conducted in public “safe” spaces, such as gay restaurants and coffee shops. Additionally, I returned to the site a year later to conduct five more in-person informant interviews. The year that I spent away from the organization greatly aided in my ability to self-reflect upon my own gay-related, age-based biases. After my initial venture in the field, for example, I began to critically dissect intergenerational exchanges in each homo-social space that I entered. A year ago, would I have read an older man’s smile or pat on the back as a sexual advance? Is he standing alone because he prefers solitude in a sea of clipped chests, rounded biceps, and shaped eyebrows? A year ago, I would have had more answers than questions; a lot can change in a year.

The first five interviews were structured by an IRB-approved interview guide that began with queries that helped to establish rapport and ended with more controversial questions that probed into the intergenerational gaps in communication from the older men’s perspectives (see Appendix for interview guide). The guide largely concentrated on the following content areas: age categorizations, age stereotypes, intergenerational communication, responses to the use of the word “queer,” salient historical events, organizational conflicts, and perceived organizational rewards. The guide was slightly modified in the final five interviews to specifically interrogate conflicting interpretations of historical
and organizational events and probe deeper into perceived intergenerational gaps in communication.

**Interpretive Analysis Procedures**

My combined 125 pages of typed and single-spaced field notes and interview transcripts were then transferred into NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program. After reading through the transcripts and field notes several times, I began to code and categorize the data using both *in vivo* terms (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 219-20) that came directly from words and phrases used by participants (e.g., “having another drink”) and interpretive codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57) that emerged from my own analysis (e.g., “problematizing the queer label”). As the project pressed on, several of the first-level descriptive codes were replaced with second-level codes that better incorporated the theoretical concepts of my research (e.g., “blaming one’s age”). This form of grounded theory allowed me to compare one respondent’s beliefs and actions with/against another respondent’s (Charmaz, 2001, p. 348). In this sense, my methods of coding constantly transformed and took shape based on the influx of data collected by my two primary methods of inquiry, participant observation and informant interviews. After completing the first draft of my report, I conducted member checks (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 175) that required me to allow members of the Prime Timers to read my research report and take note of how true my depictions “rang” for the participants of my study.

**FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

Age metaphors are utilized by groups to help categorize membership criteria. The representative terms used by the Prime Timers, while not entirely unique to the organization, help to delineate age boundaries and to regulate expectations between intergenerational exchanges among gay men. The following analysis examines the labels used by the Prime Timers when they were asked to speak about perceived gaps in communication between younger and older generations of homosexual men. I begin with a presentation of emergent data that suggest that the paramount metaphor associated with gay youth holds a positive and sexually charged valence. I further demonstrate how the primary synecdochical term that is used to describe older gay men bears a negative connotation
that the men have difficulty identifying with. The final portion of the analysis focuses specifically on data that emerged from my field notes and interview transcripts that illustrate how the queer label fails to account for the histories of older gay men because their collective pasts are largely shaped by trying to “pass” as heterosexuals—an assimilating strategy that rallies against public celebrations of homosexuality.

**Chickens and Trolls: Age Distinctions in the Gay Community**

Tyrone, one of the four African American Prime Timers who consistently attended the monthly general meetings, became frustrated when I asked him to define what “young” and “old” mean. His dark eyes grew wide as he passionately exclaimed in a gruff baritone, “I hate those two words! Age doesn’t mean a damn thing!” Seated at the bar of Chuck’s as disco anthems blared in the background, he stared down with such resonant determination when he gave me his answer that I felt like we were in a Western—a gay Western. In his next breath, Tyrone sat back in his chair, exhaled, and explained to me that “If you’re old, you’re called a troll; [if you are young, you’re called] a chicken.” For somebody who initially claimed to believe that age categorizations do not “mean a damn thing,” Tyrone was only too willing to go on to demonstrate the linguistic significance of age in the gay community. Ironically, he dismissed the words “young” and “old” as if they were the two most odious words in the English language but almost chuckled when he described older men as “trolls” and younger men as “chickens.” These native language terms (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 202; Spradley, 1980, pp. 89-90) that repeatedly emerged in field-note data gave members of the Prime Timers like Tyrone a way to discuss age divides without ever explicitly addressing age numerically.

It took little time for a member of the organization to answer questions regarding the definitions of the words. After I asked Jacques, a man in his mid-seventies who frequently apologized for bouts of memory loss, “What is a ‘chicken?’” he quickly replied, “Young. A young person.” “Troll” and “chicken” are compelling because they offer a point of entry into the uncomfortable subject matter of socially constructed notions of age. By using jargon already embedded within the Prime Timers’ community, I was afforded the opportunity to talk about aging and its subsequent value in a manner that has already been negotiated within the organization. I began my informant interviews with inquiries that aimed to make sense of the major metaphor that was used to describe the men’s younger counterparts, *chicken*. 


Chasing chicken. Mavis, a 65-year-old black “female illusionist,” provided the best explanation of what a “chicken” is and where the word may have come from:

A chicken is a slang word for somebody who is much younger or inexperienced. [The age of a chicken] just varies. [When] I think [of] a chicken, I think of the term “inexperienced” or “naïve.” That’s what I take it as. A lot of other people may take it on a more sexual level, a person who is less sexually active or unknowledgeable of sexual activities. With me, I take it as a person who has less life experience and I don’t just mean that in a sexual vernacular. I mean a person who is rather innocent of life, innocent of things that surround him. [Chicken] is an old, old saying that goes way, way back. I can remember they used to refer it with females, like “Turn that chicken back to the barnyard. She’s too young to fly.”

Although Mavis opted to look past the objectifying capacity of chicken in his own comprehension of the term, he did give credence to its more sexual vernacular when he felt the need to explain how “a lot of other people” understand the term.

In an earlier interview, when I asked Jacques if he thought there was a sexual connotation to the use of the word chicken, he confidently replied, “No.” My own experiences with the label and its sexually charged subtext have proven otherwise. While exchanging pleasantries with the executive council at one of the general meetings, for example, Norman, the activities director for the group, greeted me, an archetypal chicken, by firmly grabbing my right buttock for a full fifteen seconds. Norman, in fact, had to be coaxed away from my butt by a fellow Prime Timer who scrunched up his face in an annoyed manner and told him that his nonverbal salutation was inappropriate. Blood rushed to my face as I tried to negotiate the practicality of verbalizing my own discomfort with the objectification in light of my research project. My choice to remain silent inadvertently affirmed Norman’s behavior and made me complicit in the suggestion that I was more of a “chicken” than a researcher in the setting.

The group’s monthly newsletter even highlighted my perceived attractiveness and youth when stating:

Ragan will be attending our meetings on a regular basis and at some point will be conducting individual interviews, so please don’t hesitate to speak freely. Besides, he is a very handsome
young man and it should be a pleasure spending a few minutes with him spilling your guts.

While the term “chicken” was not used by Norman or the author of the newsletter, perhaps out of respect to my presence, there is an obvious objectifying undertone at work when participating in an interview with me is depicted as advantageous given my age and that I am considered “very handsome” by the man who wrote the newsletter.

On the other hand, my reading of the events might also suggest that my views of older gay men and their communicative strategies are equally influenced by stereotypic beliefs. When I returned to Chuck’s a year later, I began to frame the men’s mild flirtations differently. In the year that I spent away from the Prime Timers, I began to notice the degree to which my similarly aged gay male friends and I flirted with one another in a more playful than sexual manner. As I grow older, if I continue to use sexually charged innuendo in my communicative exchanges, as I have been doing for over a decade, will younger men read my seemingly harmless jokes as come-ons? For many of the men in the Prime Timers, initiating conversations with other men has more to do with companionship than sex. Geoffrey, a man in his late forties who attends the Prime Timers meetings to gain dates with older gay men, confessed, “I can’t tell you the number of older men I’ve been with who aren’t even sexually functional. Look, ‘chicken’ is flattering! When I was your age, I enjoyed being called a ‘chicken.’”

The use of the term “chicken” and the communicative behaviors it tends to invoke in its users, however, only give steam to the unfounded but popular belief that gay men are predatory on children. In its most basic sense, chicken is meat that is raised for consumption. The word is paradoxically and covertly connected to the marginalization of gay men and the socially constructed myth that older homosexuals eat “chicken,” the word used to connote younger men. Tyrone weaved the concepts of legal age boundaries, crime, and sexuality when he answered the question, “At what age does somebody stop being a chicken?” He took a moment to reflect, looked me squarely in the eyes and explained:

Well, first of all, [there are] pedophiles. There are gays who like the young guys, but if you stay within the age boundary—I know some gays, not all of them, that like the young kids—ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen—to me, that’s a no, no. There are enough men out there who are of age that you’ve got to mess with some
damn kid? I'll tell ya', if I had a kid and somebody messed with my kid, I'd be in prison.

There was something about Tyrone’s unyielding eye contact as the light bounced off his bald head that punctuated his disdain for molestation. Metaphors like chicken can, unfortunately, communicate messages that the speaker does not realize he or she is saying (Richardson, 2001, p. 940). Referring to younger men as “chicken” reinforces the stereotype that depicts gay men as morally lacking in their sexual endeavors, willing to objectify and consume any male, regardless of his age.

Like most of the men I interviewed, Jamie believed that there is no discernable age for a chicken. Chuck, a 68-year-old man, on the other hand, believes that chickens are typically between the ages of 18 and 25. “Although,” he explained, “anyone twenty years younger than you are could be a chicken. I look at some 40-year olds and call them chickens. It's all relative.” Chickens can, more often than not, be juxtaposed to more aged men. Jamie described a “chicken hawk” as an “older person who pursues only younger people.” The men’s use of the term “chicken hawk” reveals how age perceptions can be translated into a diachronic relationship in which younger men, or chickens, are sometimes chased by older gay men. Communicatively, the “chase” manifests in numerous behaviors, ranging from buying a cocktail for a minor to offering a home to a younger man in need of shelter. When my boyfriend and I separated, for example, he, a strapping young man in his early twenties, was offered a spare room in the home of two gay men in their mid-seventies. After only two nights of staying with the men, my former lover returned to my doorstep and explained how the two “trolls” encouraged him to get drunk. After he had become inebriated, the men made several “inappropriate” sexual advances on him. When my boyfriend rejected the men and ended the chase, he was asked to pack his belongings and leave the premises. It would be prejudicial and foolhardy to assume that my lover’s experience is characteristic of a majority of queer intergenerational communicative exchanges. It is possible that my ex-boyfriend’s own age-related prejudices were activated in the exchange with the older men and stereotypes tainted his narrative. My status as a younger gay man only adds to the intergenerational confusion of a story twice relayed and twice removed. It can be argued, however, that using the “chicken” metaphor hints at chase-guided behaviors by evoking images of consumption, consumers (chicken hawks), and objects (chickens).

Jamie believes that the label functions as a “qualifier” that reduces individual identity to a sexualized other and discourages gay men from
looking at youth as people. He argued that, “It [the chicken label] is another one of those categories that seem to go away from liking a person just because they are a person.” While none of the men I interviewed was able to categorically or confidently state the age range of a chicken, there were recurrent and common descriptors used to better hone down the label. Collectively, the men believed that chickens are young, naïve, and both sexually and emotionally inexperienced.

Trolls. When one thinks about a troll, s/he probably conjures up mythological images of an old, withered, and sexually stymied individual who is, most assuredly, sub-human. While none of the Prime Timers ever referred to themselves as “trolls” during my participant observation or interviews, the expression was articulated by many of the men in passing. When asked about the role his mother played in his life after he came of out of the closet, Mavis, for example, recounted a particularly telling moment in which we see the negative connotation that is associated with being a “troll”:

Mom would go to the bar and she’d introduce me to all sorts of people from all walks of life. I said, “Mom, that’s a troll.” She’d say, “Oh, but he’s nice and he enjoys your show! Oh, he’s just a nice man. You ought to go out with him.” I said, “No, no, no, Mom. He’s an old troll.” Over the years, she would invite people that I never even spoke to in the bar to dinner on Sunday afternoon. I’d look up and there would be a host of people at my dining room table that I wouldn’t hardly speak to [at the bars] but there they were. Mom had invited them. In the long run, I got to know them and understand them and accept them much more.

Mavis’ explanation displays how younger gay men have a history of labeling older gay men as “trolls” and dismissing their worth; his answer also demonstrates how young men must often be coaxed into conversations with their older counterparts in order to establish any type of genuine relationship.

Furthermore, the inability to self-identify as a troll may be partially explained by the ridicule that is highly correlated with the utterance. “Old trolls” make up one-third of what I refer to as a *marginalizing triad* that operates *within* the gay community; “fats” (overweight men) and “fems” (effeminate acting men) comprise the remaining two thirds (Hajek & Giles, 2002, p. 707; Warren, 2000). While the troll label is not exclusively restricted to describing older gay men, I have more often than not heard “old” attached to the term, as in “old troll,” when used by
both the Prime Timers and the men and women at the gay bars I frequented on weekend nights. When asked to define what a troll is, only one of the men I interviewed used “old” to help explicate the term. Tyrone provided the clearest link between the two when he said that “If you’re old, you’re called a troll.” I did, however, overhear many of the men conflate “old” and “troll” when they were not specifically asked to explain what the term (troll) means. Mavis, for example, only hinted at the relationship between the two words when he made statements such as, “Mom, he’s an old troll.” Understandably, the derogatory connotation of the label makes it difficult for the Prime Timers that I interviewed to use the term in their own identity constructions. After all, who in their right mind wants to be called a troll? Conversely, I, as a gay man in his late twenties, feel uncomfortable when men refer to me as a chicken. Many of the Prime Timers, however, do not fully understand how a young man might be offended by the use of the “chicken” label. For example, Jamie suggested that “Troll is derogatory but chicken is not; chicken can be anything from humorous to dismissive.” In his statement, we recognize both Jamie’s refusal to acknowledge “chicken” as a derogatory term and, paradoxically, his admission to the label’s dismissive capabilities.

Jamie argued that a troll is “someone who is not so attractive that chases people who don’t want to be pursued by that person.” Again, the metaphor of a “chase” is used to make sense of the intergenerational communicative practices at work within the gay community. The chase implies a proverbial game of cat and mouse; it suggests that somebody hunts while the other person serves as prey. The metaphor, as a structural device, may help to clarify why intergenerational gaps in communication occur within Phoenix’s gay community, as the analogue implies stereotypic and often false expectations between the two groups.

**Cringing at Queer: Intergenerational Identity Politics**

One final label perpetuates a division between younger and older groups of gay men. Re-appropriating the term *queer* in the 1990s was supposed to signify an embracement of everything that makes homosexuality vibrant, “out there,” and, most importantly, different from heterosexuality. Queer literally connotes a shift from what is normal. Other manifestations of the word represent suspicion, worthlessness, and insanity (Merriam Webster, 2003). The latter derivatives of queer obviously have a disparaging and marginalizing connotation that re- inscribes many popular myths associated with gay men. Given all
this, it should come as no surprise that many factions of the GLBT pop-
ulation remain skeptical when evaluating the descriptor’s signifying
appropriateness.

Queer femininity. In the year that I spent with the Prime Timers, I
never encountered a single individual who agreed with or understood
why younger gay men and women have chosen to reclaim the word
“queer” when describing homosexual identity. These men, many of
who believe they have had to pass as heterosexuals to live a safe and
comfortable life in less accepting times, have difficulty comprehending
why the younger generation would take pride in not being able to pass.
The value of passing is most readily seen in the men’s willingness to
speak out against effeminate-acting gay men who they perceive to be
giving a bad name to the rest of them. After James, a member of the
executive board, informed the group about the details of their annual
Christmas party, he joked that the men could either wear tuxes or
dresses to the event. Much to my own effeminate chagrin, a man in the
back of the room yelled, “Don’t wear a dress!” Then, as if guided by a
homosexual Robert’s Rules of Order, two other men loudly seconded
the bravado and interjected with similar comments—“No dresses!” Dresses,
for the men, represent a broader notion of feminine performativity that
they believe hinders opportunities to be seen as “normal” by the hetero-
normative culture that surrounds them. Further interviews revealed that
effeminate bashing is an unspoken manifesto for the group.

When I asked Jacques why he opted to join the Prime Timers, for
example, he replied, “[I joined] because they are a group of men who
aren’t effeminate; they’re real people who have real jobs and families.”
The dehumanization of effeminate men in Jacques’ statement is
troublingly clear. His words indicate that somehow effeminate men are
not “real people” who have “real jobs” or “families.” Ironically, these
are some stigmas, same as those that the GLBT population has been bat-
tling for quite some time. Jacques goes on to implicate the rest of the
Prime Timers and their collective disdain for femininity when he states,
“[The Prime Timers] are just an excellent group to be associated with
because, as I say, they are not effeminate—I can’t stand that; most of us
can’t.” I was taken aback by Jacques’ anti-fem manifesto, because I am
unmistakably feminine—so much so that when I presented this section of
the paper at the 2004 National Communication Association conference
in Chicago, a large audience broke into a fit of uncontrollable laughter
at the mere idea that Jacques might have perceived me as butch. In retroverspect, Jacques’ disdain for femininity might be so acceptable to him that
he did not care if I was implicated by his rhetoric.
Tyrone also does not want to be likened to behavior that is anything less than masculine. When asked about his “coming out” experience, Tyrone told me, “I knew gay people and I had seen what they call a ‘sissy,’ and I said ‘I’m not one of them people.’ Here’s the thing about the gay establishment, there are gay people who you would never know were gay because they don’t look [like] it [and they] don’t act [gay].”

While Tyrone’s discomfort with femininity is less pronounced than Jacques’, the anti-effeminate sentiment in both men’s statements represents a much larger phenomenon of effeminate bashing within the Prime Timers organization. These behaviors point to a sense of internalized homophobia at work within the group. Warner (1999) argues that the projected shame that many homosexuals have felt for being different is precisely what led the younger population of gays and lesbians to “celebrate diversity” and, therefore, embrace a queer sensibility (p. 7).

_Peer pervasiveness_. I learned the importance of finding substitutes for the word “queer” when in the company of a Prime Timer at the first board meeting I attended. After I explained to the executive committee that I planned on using “queer theory” to inform my data analysis, several of the board members raised an eyebrow and stroked their chins as if they were gay versions of Sherlock Holmes, patiently waiting for the mystery of my words to unfold. After I briefly contextualized my use of the word, a few of the men nodded their heads as if they understood but others still looked hopelessly perplexed and stared at me as if they were still waiting for me to explain my use of the signifier. Jaime, one of the board members, told me at that meeting that he understood why I used the descriptor, but pressed the idea that many men in Prime Timers hate the term. During our interview, Mavis more succinctly explained his discomfort with the label; he argued:

I think it’s outdated. I don’t think that being gay is really that queer. It’s almost like looking at a person who is slightly retarded and saying that they’re queer. I would prefer for them to say that they’re “unique,” a little “different” or something other than using the word “queer.” For me, it’s like using the word “faggot” or using the word “dyke.”

Comparing “queerness” to mental retardation speaks to a greater unwillingness for Prime Timers to even consider the label’s productive signifying capabilities. As of late, however, the word is inescapable in their worlds.
As I sat down with Jacques at a table in Chuck’s restaurant adorned with a placard advertising “Queer TV Night,” I asked him how he personally felt about many younger gays and lesbians embracing the queer label. He responded:

I would prefer the word “gay” because that seems to be the “in” term. “Queer” certainly says to everybody exactly what that means. It is not used as much these days. “Gay” is the word that is used for homosexuals.

Given the presence of the many posters stuck to the wall of the establishment that had the word “queer” scribbled on their every corner and the more immediate and undeniable piece of pink cardboard that announced the “Queer TV Night” at our table, I found myself perplexed with Jacques’ inability to recognize the pervasiveness of a term that he assumes to be “out” of cache.

*Queer* can be thought of as a threat to the Prime Timer’s very way of life. Queer sensibilities encourage gay men and lesbians to rejoice in what makes them different from heterosexuals. The word “queer” and what it represents scoffs at the utility of *passing* as a method of survival and passing is what many of the Prime Timers feel like they have had to do to in order to live safely in the homophobic culture that they were brought up in.

*To pass or to come out; that is the question.* Many of the Prime Timers occupy a liminal space (Turner, 1966; Park-Fuller, 2001; Eastland, 1993) that falls somewhere “betwixt and between” straight and gay cultures. In the sixties and seventies, homosexuality was thought to be more of a “secret society” than a viable and public way of living (Berger, 1990, p. 328). This arcane take on sexual identity might help to explain why several of the members of the Prime Timers organization have been married to women, have children, and are still not completely “out” of the closet. Barney, for example, was “happily married for forty-three years” before he attended his first Prime Timers meeting. Soon after, he began to experiment with homosexuality. Jacques’ narrative is indicative of the typical life story of a Prime Timer. After asking him when he became aware that he was a homosexual, he replied:

I tried to deny [my homosexuality] for years, got married, and told myself, “I’m going to get rid of this [feeling] and have children.” For the first ten years of my marriage, I didn’t think about being
gay. The second ten years, I said “Whew! There goes a cute ass.” I said, “Oh my God. It’s happening to me.”

In the above explanation, we can see how cultural scripts that promote marriage and childrearing proffered Jacques a detailed and mapped out alternative that helped him repress his sexual identity. His life choices that culminated in marrying a woman and having a child contradict the reality of sexual desires and inclinations Jacques had felt at a very young age. His story is particularly compelling because he and his ex-wife had a gay son who came out of the closet much earlier than his father [Jacques]. Jacques explained:

Years after my son came out of the closet, he came to us and said that he had AIDS. We were about to separate, but we never said a word. We just knew we were going to have to go through it all. It was the worst thing that I have ever experienced in my entire life.

The politics of homosexual visibility that resulted from AIDS activism in the 1980s can partially account for the generational differences between Jacques’ “coming out” experience and the ways in which his son revealed both his own homosexuality and HIV+ status. Growing up with a generation of gay men who wore “SILENCE = DEATH” t-shirts and buttons that spoke of the dangers of ignoring HIV and the cultural silencing and marginalization of gay men and lesbians (Crimp, 1990, p. 15), it makes sense that Jacques’ son would feel more comfortable than his father when negotiating the practicality of “coming out” of the closet. For younger generations of gay men, passing is tantamount to complicity in marginalizing strategies. The concept of survival, then, has radically different meanings for older and younger generations of gay men. For older homosexual males, survival meant/means being able to pass as straight; the younger generation of gay men, however, equate survival with queer visibility. Often this visibility manifests itself in communicative acts that many older gay men in the Prime Timers see as irresponsible. “Drug use and public sex,” Perry the veteran Prime Timer argues, “are things younger people do. That’s not us.”

Institutional ties to passing. In their youth, many of the men I interviewed were members of institutions that aided in their passing as heterosexuals. When asked about his “coming out” experience, Jacques revealed that:

As a teenager I hid it and had quite a bit of sex with boys my age and older men. Then I went into religious life. I was a Holy Cross
brother for five years at Notre Dame, came out of there, went into the service, and was still hiding it.

Despite having sex with men, Jacques’ institutional affiliations would be read as straight by most superficial cultural standards. The military, in fact, would not have allowed Jacques to participate in their activities had they known his sexual history; similarly, churches in the 1950s and 1960s would most certainly have denied him “Holy Cross” status had they been privy to his past homosexual activities.

Tyrone, a man whose deep voice, bald head, and husky build allow him to easily pass for straight, also used his past institutional roles to help make sense of his ability to mask his homosexuality. When I asked him how gay men go about passing for straight, he said:

I was in the military and they were talking about getting all of the homosexuals out of the military; they never got me out because they never knew who I was. I was there for eight years. [I think] it really depends on how you carry yourself and how you fit into society.

Tyrone’s claim that passing “depends on how you carry yourself ” speaks to a social expectation for gay men to pass. “How you carry yourself” is tinged with a subtext that insinuates, “this is how you ought to carry yourself ” communicatively—both verbally and nonverbally. Other Prime Timers with military ties, however, did not share Tyrone’s ability to convincingly play straight.

Unlike Tyrone, Mavis’ self-presentation is unmistakably gay. There is something about the way his high-pitched voice stumbles over “S” sounds and the overtly feminine way he points his pinky in the air when he takes a sip of his martini that screams “Gay!” Having spent over thirty years as a female impersonator, Mavis straddles the socially constructed line that determines appropriate gender performances. I was, therefore, shocked when he told me about his own military experience. After I asked him if he had ever been a member of any other gay-oriented organizations, Mavis informed me that:

Up until about three years ago, I belonged to a “gays in the military” group for about six months until it tapered off. I was in the military, so I thought that it was something worthwhile to get into. [I wanted to] get to know other people with my military experience. In fact, I came out of the closet when I was in the military
back in the early 50s. I think that I’ve always known that I was gay ever since I was very young but with peer pressure, family values, and that sort of thing I was somewhat hesitant. I went into the military and I came out my last year.

Whether masculine-acting or feminine-acting, institutional ties have provided a smokescreen to conceal sexual identity for the men I interviewed.

In a new era of increased homosexual visibility, however, the men are left with survival tools that are not commensurable with the new millennium of homosexual acceptance and queer politics—all of which have culminated in a linguistic privileging of a term that many of the men find offensive. I believe that the ideological instruments that were once used to help gay men survive now inhibit their ability to communicate with a younger population of gay men who can more fearlessly take pride in their sexual identities.

Communication between generational groups. Out of all the Prime Timers that I got to know through my interviews and participant observations, Mavis appeared to be the most connected with younger generations of gay men. The young, hunky waiters at Chuck’s, in fact, were all on a first-name basis with him. When I met up with Mavis at the restaurant for our interview, he sat in the bar area at a small circular table with a group of three young, attractive men. Arms waving madly about in the air, Mavis shared humorous stories with the men as they laughed heartily and kept their eyes fixed on the one-man force of nature seated before them. From my observations, the intergenerational joviality that I briefly witnessed between Mavis and the other men seated at his cocktail table is not representative of how other Prime Timers interact with gay men under the age of thirty-five. When I asked Mavis if he thought that other men his age befriended younger gay men, he told me:

No, not really, because in the line of work that I do, when I go to the bar, I’m rather popular so I know a lot of different people in a lot of different age groups. I’ve always tried to be a very conversational and outgoing, but I think I’m kinda the exception to the rule since I’m one of the older female impersonators here in the city and everybody knows me. I just talk to anybody and everybody. [Take for example those] little boys I was talking to in the bar when you came in here.

Not coincidentally, Mavis was the least likely of the Prime Timers to pass for a heterosexual. His female impersonation, furthermore,
indicates a willingness to commemorate the ethos of difference that is characteristic of queer sensibilities. Whereas many of the men have taken the time to express their disapproval for effeminate-acting men, Mavis did not appear to mind being seen as different or labeled as what Tyrone might describe as a “sissy.” Perhaps his lengthy history in female impersonation has afforded him an ability to navigate the politics involved in being an older gay man who is living in a queer epoch. Whatever the case may be, he was one of the very few Prime Timers who appeared willing and able to sustain friendships with numerous younger gay men.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There are several important theoretical implications that can be derived from this project. First, the age metaphors that are used by several of the men in the organization make them complicit in their own marginalization. When the Prime Timers refer to young men as “chickens,” they buttress the belief that older gay males are sexually obsessed with children, regardless of whether or not they actually engage in sexual activities with minors. The findings presented here indicate that many of the men in the group remain surprisingly unaware of the chicken metaphor’s ability to signify sexual consumption. For them, calling a younger man a “chicken” provides a humorous way to refer to innocence and inexperience in the gay community. Unfortunately, the use of the term perpetuates a system of objectification that obscures the sexual practices and rituals of homosexual males. In short, it is difficult to build bridges with mainstream America when your preferred terminology implies that younger gay men, like chickens on a farm, should be caged, fed, and, when the time is right, devoured.

The men’s use of the “troll” metaphor also hinders their ability to combat stereotypical views connected to their age. By most rational standards, trolls are unattractive, sneaky creatures that cannot be trusted. Similar to the “chicken” label, referring to older gay men as “trolls” provides a convenient way to dehumanize them. What is perhaps most surprising about the two marginalizing metaphors is that they are both insider, native language terms that gay men use to describe themselves. “Chicken” and “troll” are, however, not unique to the Prime Timers organization. As a gay man, I hear the words in almost every gay space I occupy, from on-campus gay and lesbian Ubiquity gatherings to steamy nightclubs. Studying the terms from within the Prime Timers
organization, however, has allowed for a closer examination of how the two metaphors complicate intergenerational communication. Furthermore, interrogating the terms, while studying the Prime Timers, has forced me to take a closer look at my own readings of older gay men’s communicative practices. Future studies might investigate the ways in which organizations that cater to gay youths promote age stereotypes and age-based dismissive behaviors via metaphor.

The “chicken” and “troll” labels provide a lens for understanding structures that continue to keep young and old gay men apart from one another. As previously stated in this essay, the depiction of young men as “chickens” and older gay men as “chicken hawks” implies that aged homosexual males are in a perpetual game of chase with younger members of their community. The metaphors imply that younger gay men should be sought after while older gay men should be avoided. This interpretation helps to explain previous research that suggests that older homosexual men are not welcome or accepted in the broader gay community that is often run and dominated by the younger generation (Grube, 1991, p. 121; Schaffer, 1973; Lee, 1987). “Troll” also contains a structural component. Literally, a troll is a dwarf that hides away in caves (Merriam Webster, 2003). By using the term “troll” to describe older gay men, there is an inherent suggestion that aged gentlemen should remain reclusive and disconnected from the queer (counter-) public that surrounds them.

Second, the data presented in the study help us to understand why some of the Prime Timers have a difficult time accepting the re-appropriation of the word “queer.” Specifically, members of the organization refer to the descriptor’s emphasis on difference to justify their dissonance. These men, who have invested a lot of time and energy in concealing their sexuality identities, frown upon the new age of visibility politics that stresses the utility of foregrounding the cultural distinctiveness of the LGBT population. Nowhere does this intergenerational conflict of interests play out more than when the Prime Timers verbalize their contempt for effeminate-acting men. Mavis’ feminine mannerisms and lack of verbal judgment against more “flaming” representations of homosexuality prove that not all of the men in the organization are persuaded by the anti-effeminate attitudes projected by many of the group’s members. It is also important to note that that Mavis is also one of the few Primetimer who has numerous interpersonal connections with younger gay men. The ability to recognize changing attitudes regarding visibility is, therefore, crucial when members of the organization attempt to forge relationships with members of the younger generation.
The analysis also questions the value of passing as a survival technique for gays in the new millennium. Determining the appropriateness of passing is largely dependent on the cultural milieu that one is performing in. Berger (1990) explains that passing “embodies a complex set of attitudes and situational factors” (p. 328). As such, gay men who perform heterosexuality should be doing so because the historical situation makes “living a lie” more attractive to them than being “out” and open with their sexuality. Future research may opt to investigate how a lifetime of learning various passing techniques makes it difficult for individuals to abandon the practices when the threat of performing homosexuality no longer presents a clear and present danger to the individual.

Finally, institutional life continues to play a key role in the lives of the Prime Timers. Whereas they may have once turned to heterosexual institutions (e.g., marriage, military, church) to help them pass, the men are now members of an organization that gives them a platform to reflect upon history and changing cultural times with other homosexuals in their “golden years.” Other analyses of groups that cater to the aging homosexual population might benefit from exploring the ways in which a given group’s activist agenda increases or decreases intergenerational communicative behaviors. In other words, which events and activities promote communication between younger and older gay men? Which ones inhibit communication? Do organizations like the Prime Timers prefer activities that keep them separated from the younger generation or do they make an earnest effort to bridge gaps in intergenerational communication? Additionally, future project might investigate the ways in which there are communicative variations within a given generation. By understanding how the men react to the radically changing landscape of queer visibility, we open up possibilities for improved bonds between older and younger gay men.

NOTE

1. This analogue refers to sexual acts becoming less public and same-sex partners taking on gendered relationships that are typically found in heterosexual unions (i.e., one man stays home to cook for his “husband”).

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

A. Background of a Prime Timer
1. When did you become a member of the Prime Timers?
   Probe: Are you a member of any other gay-oriented organizations? Which ones?
2. How did you first hear about the Prime Timers?
3. Why did you decide to join the Prime Timers?
4. When did you “come out” of the closet?

Description of the Organization
5. How would you describe the Prime Timers to somebody who knows nothing about it?
6. What is the ideal age to join the Prime Timers? Why?
7. What happens at the typical Prime Timers meeting?
8. Which organization-sponsored activities do you enjoy the most and why? (structural question)
9. Which activities do you like the least, why?
10. How often do younger men come to the meetings?
   Probe: (depending on answer) Why do you think this is the case?
   Probe: What age range do you consider to be “young?”

B. Themes and Myths
11. In your opinion, what does the ideal gay man look like, act like, and believe in?
12. What were the most important public events to happen to the gay community from your birth to present day?
   Probe: How important have these events been for you? Why?
13. I’ve heard some men express frustration when younger gay men don’t know about important events in queer history. Why do you think some men get upset when some young gay men don’t know about this event?
   Probe: Does this bother you?
14. If you were younger, what would you do to better educate yourself about gay history?

C. Sexual Innuendo
15. Some of the men who I’ve spoken to tell me that enjoy making sexual jokes. What purpose does it serve?
   Probe: How might you use sex talk to lighten up a conversation?
16. Do you think it’s more acceptable for two gay men to hug or two straight men? Why?
17. What are some examples of sex talk in everyday conversation?
18. Do you think gay men talk about sex more than straight people? Why or why not?

E. Relationship with Youth
19. I’ve heard some men use the term “chicken” to describe other men. What is a “chicken”?
   Probe: At what age does somebody stop being a “chicken”?
   Probe: Is there anything sexual about the choice to call younger gay men “chicken”?
20. Do older gay men and younger gay men dress differently? (depending on answer) How so?
21. How is a Prime Timers meeting different than a typical Friday night at a gay bar?
22. I’ve heard some men talk about how many young gay men don’t take much initiative to befriend gay men who are their elders. Would you say that’s your experience, too? Why or why not?
   Probe: (depending on answer): In what ways have you witnessed younger and/or older gay men use to appear unapproachable to one another?
23. Why do you think some younger gay men don’t make more of an effort to socialize with older gay men?
24. How do you feel about some gay men and lesbians embracing the word “queer”?
   Probe: Why do you think they may have chosen to use this term?
   Probe: Do you use this term?
25. Reflecting on your own life, what is an example of the most disturbing incident in which somebody used the word “queer” in your presence?

F. Closing Questions
26. Is there anything that you wish people to know about the Prime Timers, or older gay men in general, that you haven’t already told me?
27. What advice would you give to a young gay man about life in general?
28. What would you like your pseudonym to be?