



Ageism

by Tina Gianoulis

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Ageism was first defined in 1969 by Robert Butler, then director of the National Institute on Aging, as discrimination against older persons on the basis of age. Butler and other social critics cited many examples of prejudiced, dismissive, and harmful acts and attitudes directed towards old people by both individuals and institutions.

This bias in favor of youth has been found in most demographic groups, including the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities. Many old people have formed organizations to fight back against ageism, and queers, long used to combating discrimination, have been an important part of this movement.

The Destructive Impact of Ageism

The destructive impact of ageism can be seen in three major areas: discrimination in the workplace, bias in the healthcare system, and social prejudice. Erroneous characterizations of the old as sick, sexless, ugly, powerless, and mentally deficient contribute to unfair treatment of old people in all three areas.

In the workplace older workers may not be hired or promoted because employers often believe that they will be less flexible and less competent than younger employees. In a system that values profit above all, employers often prefer to replace experienced and better paid older employees with cheaper and younger labor.

Health care providers may ignore or dismiss the chronic complaints of the elderly to focus on the more acute health issues of younger patients.

Finally, however, it is the social stigma attached to aging that underlies most ageism. As much of western culture has dedicated itself to the veneration of youth, age has become a subject of shame, ridicule, and disgust. In extremely youth-oriented industries, such as entertainment and computer technology, ageism has become almost fanatical, with workers in their thirties being viewed as "over the hill."

Gay Elders

If straight seniors must struggle against becoming invisible as they age, gay elders have been almost non-existent in society's mirror. Since many queers who are reaching old age during the 2000s came of age well before the gay liberation movement, they may have spent much of their lives in the closet without the support of a visible community.

Those who have partners may find their relationships discounted and ignored as they get older. They may be separated from partners and placed at the mercy of unsympathetic family members or nursing home staffs. Little research has been done about the lives of these older gays, even though some researchers estimate that there are between 1.75 and 3.5 million gay men and lesbians over 65 in the United States.

Discrimination against older queers does not always come from the straight world. Within the gay and lesbian communities, youth has often been a prized commodity. Gay men might seek slimness and attractiveness, while lesbians tend to value strength and athletic vigor, but for both groups accepting the aging process presents a challenge.

Though there are undeniably queers of all ages, there is often little interaction across generations and therefore little understanding of the issues of differing age groups.

Moreover, there are many damaging myths about the loneliness and unhappiness of older gay men and lesbians. These myths are destructive not only to the old, but also to the young, for it makes aging a specter to be dreaded.

While there has not been much research into the experience of aging in the glbtq communities, what research has been done has suggested that homosexuals adjust to aging as well as heterosexuals.

Organizing to Fight Ageism

Many old people have organized to fight ageism in all its forms. In 1970, Maggie Kuhn met with five older friends to found the Gray Panthers to speak out against age discrimination, the Viet Nam war, and other political oppressions.

Gay activists followed suit with groups such as Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE), a national group formed in New York City in 1977, and Old Lesbians Organizing for Change (OLOC), formed in 1989 from an ad hoc committee meeting in San Diego, California.

There are also many regional and local groups, such as Gay and Gray in the West and Gays and Lesbians Older and Wiser (GLOW) in the Midwest. These groups provide community for older queers, as well as promoting their rights within the glbtq community, the straight community, and the institutions of society.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.