

Five generations of gay men

Gay men's health linked to place of AIDS in their formative years

HEALTH
NATHANIEL CHRISTOPHER

Gay men's health is closely linked to the era in which they were born and raised and which generation of gay they belong to, says an associate professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

“How gay men think about themselves, their bodies and their desires is a product of social and historical time,” Phillip Hammack told the ninth annual BC Gay Men's Health Summit in his keynote address on Nov 8.

Hammack defined five generations of gay men who are alive today.

Gay men of the stigma generation were born in the 1930s and experienced adulthood in the early years of the gay civil rights movement prior to the “tipping point” of the movement, as symbolized by the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York. Hammack said these men, now in their 70s and 80s, witnessed the transformation of gay identity from a diagnosable mental illness to a legitimate social identity.

“They've been witness to the entire AIDS epidemic and, of course, lost many to the disease, but they have survived,” he said. “They carry with them the psychological and physical legacy of these experiences. They navigated cultural stigma, the hostility of health and mental health practitioners.

“They are our gay elders, and we hear their voices far too little from my perspective.”

Hammack said members of the Stonewall generation, who were born in the 1940s and are today in their 60s and 70s, benefited from experiencing gay liberation in their early adulthood.

“Unlike the members of the stigma generation, they experienced a longer period of their life course free from stigma and, in fact, criminalization of gay sex,” he said. “But also, like the stigma generation, they experienced the devastation of AIDS and the major setbacks to the movement that it brought with it, as well as a complete re-framing of gay culture.”

Hammack described gay men who were born



Phillip Hammack describes five generations of gay men: the stigma generation, the Stonewall generation, the AIDS 1 generation, the AIDS 2 generation and the post-AIDS or marriage-equality generation. COURTESY OF PHILLIP HAMMACK

in the 1950s and 1960s as the AIDS 1 generation because they were “probably the hardest hit by AIDS, given that they were at the peak of their sexually active lives when it was emerging.

“As one of those interviewed for the documentary film *We Were Here* indicates, it was like living in a war zone for this generation, with outwardly healthy and attractive men in their 20s and 30s falling ill and dying in a matter of weeks,” he said.

Hammack placed himself and other gay men born in the 1970s in the AIDS 2 generation. He

said members of this group experienced childhood and adolescence at a time when the AIDS epidemic was often conflated with gay sex, disease and death. But they didn't experience the same personal losses as members of the AIDS 1 generation.

“We grew up in a time when we worried enough about AIDS to certainly be vigilant about condom use,” he said. “We saw the internet emerge to open up entirely new possibilities to ourselves and the next generation. And we saw the emergence of

“They are the first generation to now experience their same-sex desires absent the same fear of AIDS that consumed members of my generation when we were beginning to have sex.”

PHILLIP HAMMACK

treatment advances that gradually transformed our collective consciousness of HIV/AIDS from a lethal illness to a chronic, manageable health condition.”

He said the AIDS 2 generation witnessed the discourse shift from AIDS to issues such as marriage equality and human rights protections. “So now, approaching mid-life, we no longer see our life course as inevitably abbreviated,” he said. “We are not sentenced to a premature death. Members of my generation are finally starting to realize we may actually live to an older age. This could happen!”

Hammack said members of the post-AIDS or marriage equality generation, born in the 1980s and '90s, are now growing up in a “radically different” social and political context than members of the AIDS 1 generation.

“They are the first generation to now experience their same-sex desires absent the same fear of AIDS that consumed members of my generation when we were beginning to have sex,” he said, noting they are coming of age as gay rights and visibility reach unprecedented heights.

“But we're only beginning to hear the voices of men of this generation on their own terms rather than through the lens of paradigms constructed with gay men of prior generations.” X