

## BOOK REVIEW

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*The AIDS Generation: Stories of Survival and Resilience* by Perry N. Halkitis, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014, 240 pp., ISBN 978-0199944972. \$49.95.

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This book attempts to provide an in-depth examination of the psychosocial processes and life journeys of 15 gay men from New York City, during the times when HIV/AIDS arose as an unprecedented epidemic that changed the lives and community these men lived. It is important to note the historical context of the gay movement in the New York City area prior to the discovery of this disease. On June 28, 1969 at 1:20 a.m., police raided a bar called *Stonewall* in Greenwich Village that triggered a relentless push back, by primarily Latino and African American gay men and drag queens who fought back, attracting the attention of the neighborhood residents, and successfully resisting the police raid now referred to as the *Stonewall riots*. This was a major turning point for the gay and lesbian community to rise up, to be more visible, and to launch various activities for their civil rights that challenge the stigmata and perceptions oppressing them. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association, and later in 1974, the American Psychological Association, removed homosexuality as a mental disease. More organizations became active and groups organized to obtain their rights on several fronts and to empower themselves by being open and embracing a positive identity (Wikipedia, 2014). This was the contextual climate these 15 men experienced, as they addressed their personal psychosocial historical traumas, fueled by this negative atmosphere. By the early 1980s, the virus is identified as HIV, setting off much controversy and complications across many fronts. How these men managed the complexities of the psychosocial historical traumas while HIV was also affecting their lives is the focus of this book.

To examine the survival and resilience strategies of gay men during this time, Dr. Halkitis uses a systematic, scientific method for interviewing 15 men, who were a part of this history, to capture the qualitative aspects of their lives and document, through this sample, the life management and developmental processes of what he called the *AIDS generation*. This epidemic puzzled medical and behavioral scientists for many years. The urgency for resources and managing stigma were struggles for this community whose new found sense of a civil rights movement was challenged constantly, by the multifaceted society who historically oppressed them, and continued to do so. Against many odds, these men were able to survive, and maintain a strong sense of resilience across time, whereas others of their community were not as successful. These interviews bring to life the integration of the historical life context, in a personal insightful manner, for these gay men of various

ethnicities and races. There are detailed accounts of how developing their new-found freedom and identity as gay men was complicated by HIV/AIDS in many ways. These men recalled their approaches and coping mechanisms to address the multi-dimensional challenges they faced daily while struggling to maintain their psychological and physical health, and in many cases unknowingly being infected by HIV.

As these men age over time, the recollections of the historical context in which they were raised, remained in their memories, affecting how they managed their lives as they became older. Halkitis vividly states,

I will admit that working on this volume has taken an emotional toll on me. I had neatly compartmentalized my emotions around this epidemic and the losses I have experienced. Through my work, I have come to intellectualize the AIDS epidemic and the havoc it has created in my life. Yet in writing, I could not escape the past, the loss of so many, and my own personal struggles, and for 1 month I was paralyzed in my attempts to write. (p. 203)

A good sample of the strategy for his own inner strength and resilience, Halkitis continued to write,

I confronted my past head on and moved forward. I too needed to prove that I was resilient, that adversity would not stand in my way, and that I would forge ahead with this work and with my life . . . Like John . . . in Chapter 5 . . . I to needed to reimmerse myself in the depths of the despair I experienced to move ahead. Giving up was never an option for me, and defeat was never an option for the men of the AIDS Generation a characteristic that is very much part of each of their constitutions as they now live through their middle age. (p. 203)

In his attempt to make some comparative sense to known developmental theories, Halkitis uses Erik Erikson's theory but finds it limited and with a heteronormative perspective that lacked an accounting for the psychosocial historical context the individuals of the AIDS generation experienced. The lesson learned here is that rather than resorting to existing established theories and ways of thinking, it is important for researchers and clinicians to listen to the voices of the men of the AIDS generation. That is what competent researchers and clinicians are expected and trained to do. The systematic method for obtaining the qualitative interviews should empower researchers and inform clinicians to go beyond established ways of thinking. Through these stories, the readers will recognize that within the lives of these men existed sociohistorical traumas in an environmental context that was supporting their oppression through laws, norms, and mores. It is clear that a strategy for resilience for these men and for Halkitis involved (a) reflecting on their past, (b) learning from their memories, and (c) determining to move forward.

It seems more relevant and useful to give validity to the psychosociocultural historical context, and the trauma resulting from those experiences, recovering from these traumas, and to embrace their various strategies of empowerment. It appears we

can better learn from others who have parallel or similar life challenges and whose lives were affected by the stigma experienced from various legal barriers and social oppressions. What these interviews clearly note is that survival through empowerment involves a strategy of resilience that incorporates reflection, accepting the memories, facing the challenges they represent, and being determined to move forward with the support of others who assist in their positive personal development of empowerment, confidence, and inner strength. One can view this book as an important contribution in documenting the

journeys of those of the AIDS generation, and perhaps with more contributions like this book, the helping professions can generate more inclusive perspectives and frameworks to use in their professional activities and in our personal lives.

### References

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- Wikipedia. (2014). *Stonewall riots*. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonewall\\_riots](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stonewall_riots)