

**CONSTRUCTION OF THE FUTURE AMONG YOUNG GAY-IDENTIFIED  
MEN: RELATIONSHIP TO GAY MALE CULTURAL NORMS AND HEALTH**

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**ABSTRACT**

Young gay American men experience high rates of depression, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and HIV infection relative to the general population. A likely root of this problem is the way gay men's sense of the future gets constructed, relative to that of their heterosexual counterparts. This research investigates young gay men's beliefs about their future in Seattle, WA, through the structuring influences of gay male culture, American cultural norms, and American hegemonic masculinity. Since risk aversion has been repeatedly predicted by strength of future orientation in other populations, links between gay male future orientation and risk behavior are explored. **METHODS:** 42 one-on-one interviews, as well as 7 mixed-age focus groups, were conducted with gay-identified men living in Seattle, WA, aged 18-28. 10 key informants were also interviewed, representing local social service agencies and organizations serving young gay men. In addition, data were collected through observations and interactions over a 6-month period of volunteering in two local social service agencies that serve the gay community, as well as through immersion in spaces where gay men congregate. To test the validity of themes arising through these methods, an online quantitative survey was distributed nationwide (n=101). **RESULTS:** The results suggest a large proportion of

younger gay men lack clarity and positive regard for their future, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, income, education level, HIV status, or relationship status. Causes appear to include a lack of constructive connection to a gay community, negative beliefs about aging and older gay men, anticipated future stigmatization in several domains, absence of institutional markers of age progression for gay men, gay male cultural norms linking worth to physicality, present-focused identity maintenance, and threat of HIV infection. Gay culture in Seattle amplifies some of these problems, while moderating others.

CONCLUSION: American and gay male cultural norms both inhibit and confuse future orientation among young gay men. Seattle's gay culture provides a backdrop of opportunities for risky, as well as resilient, health behavior. Acceptance of present-moment risk over future-oriented health investment is informed by the way in which young gay men in Seattle interact with its gay culture.