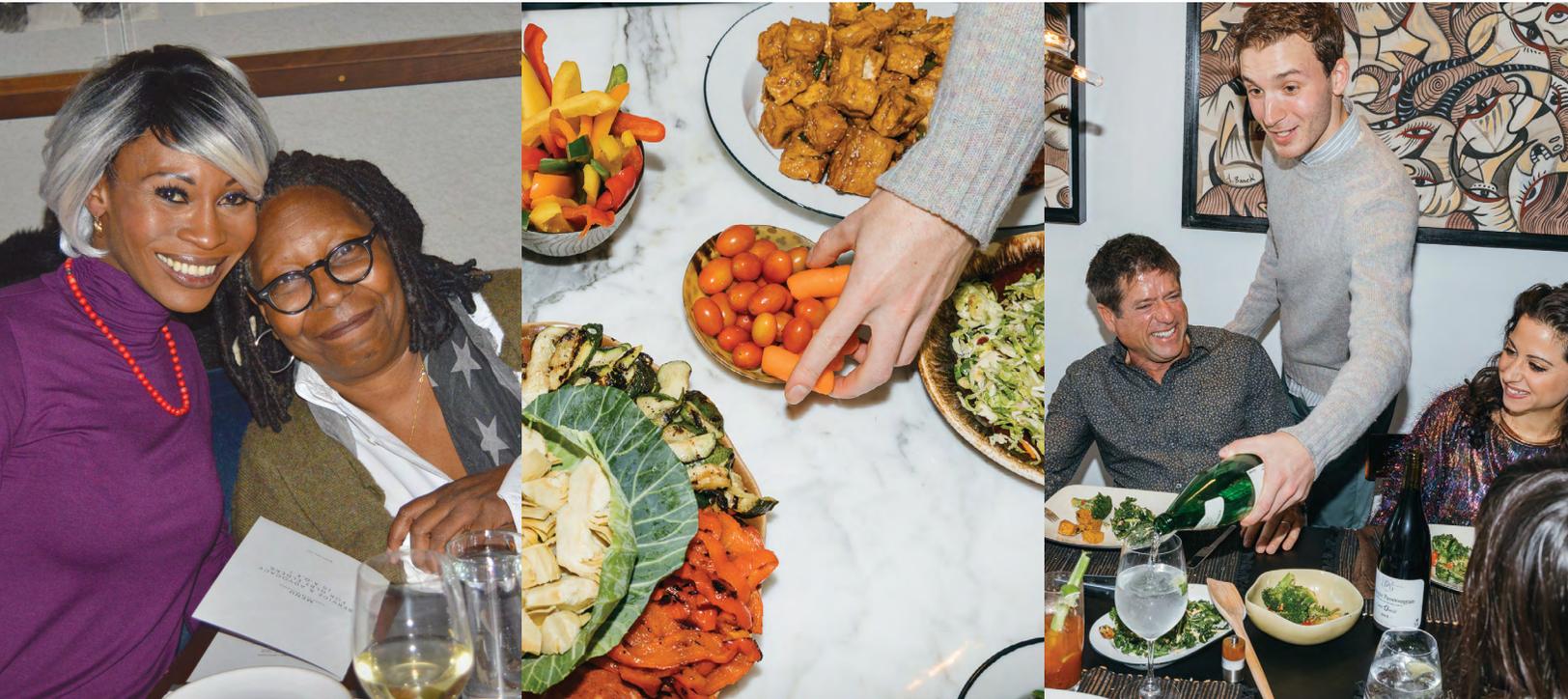




From Connections to Community

Data-informed lessons
on an intergenerational gathering





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Data informed lessons on an intergenerational gathering

by Eric Gladstone^{a, b}, Pony Knowles^c, and David C. Thompson^a

SAGE Table: One LGBT family. Many generations. Countless connections.

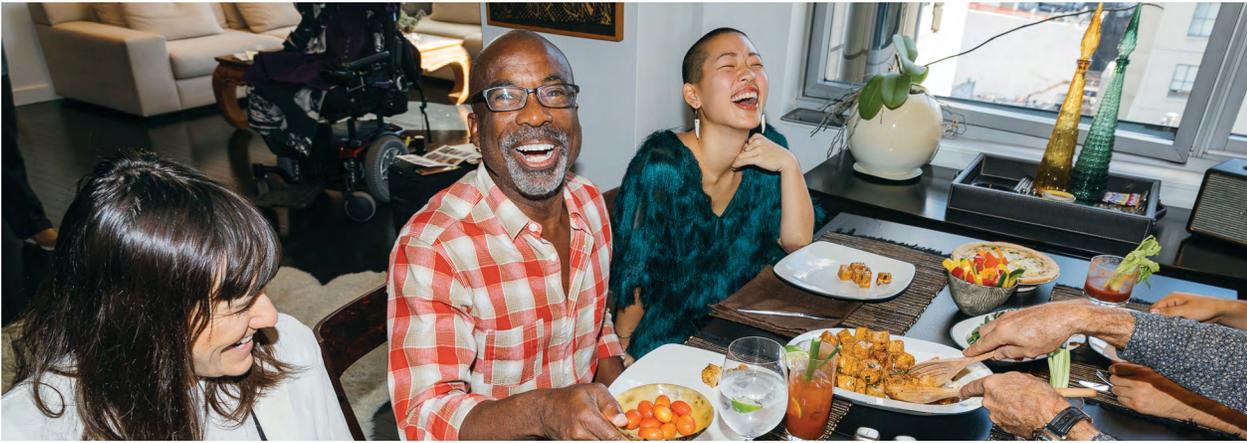
How would you create an event, at a national scale, to foster connections across generations? What steps would you take, what questions would you ask, and how would you know you'd been successful?

What follows is a data-informed summary of an audacious pilot program to convene intergenerational groups in the service of fostering connection and build community within different age groups of the LGBT (and allies) family.

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Why is SAGE Table important?

For many of us, the messages we hear around aging render it, at best, largely a mystery, or at worst, something to be feared or driven back for as long as possible. The things that keep us silent about the joys and the challenges of getting older mean that, in a variety of areas of modern life, our current selves are often poor stewards for our future selves. We continue to age into poorly planned futures, assiduously avoiding the simple question:

"Who is going to be taking care of us when we're old?"

This issue is an especially acute one for LGBT individuals. In a recent survey conducted by *The Economist*¹, representative samples of people in four large countries—America, Brazil, Italy, and Japan—were asked a set of questions about end-of-life care. In all four countries the majority of people said they hoped to die at home, although far fewer actually expect to be able to do so. The gap between what people hope for with regards to aging and what they get is stark and deeply human in its complexity.

Unfortunately, a detailed literature review by SAGE, the country's largest and oldest organization devoted to improving the lives of LGBT older adults, uncovered a distinct lack of research on issues and factors related to intergenerational LGBT community building. SAGE decided to learn by doing, and opted to build on the success of On The Table². With support from AARP, they sought to create an intentional intergenerational event to build bridges within the community to talk about aging and care. Old and young, coming together to share food, stories, hopes, and challenges—and to build and strengthen intergenerational relationships.

Many members of the LGBT community do not have children to care for them as they age or families that may support them fully. Indeed, too many members of the LGBT community will go through different stages of their lives without some measure of support that only someone of another generation could provide.

How to then build bridges, across generations, to foster connection and a sense of community?

SAGE Table hosts and guests were invited to register to participate in a SAGE Table event, which took place across the country and throughout the day on May 18th, 2017.

¹ <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21721375-how-medical-profession-starting-move-beyond-fighting-death-easing-it-better> (Accessed June 28, 2017)

² <https://onthetable.com/>—An annual forum since 2014, designed to encourage civic conversation, build new relationships and incite collaborative action across the Chicago region.

To fulfill this obligation, in partnership with [interstitio](#), a firm offering rigorous social science as a service, SAGE examined each area of the planned SAGE Table event, and thought critically about the questions they were asking of hosts and guests, stepping into a SAGE Table event. A robust online exit survey was co-created and a link to the survey administered via email on May 19th, directly following the event. For several communities a shorter one-page version was administered in-person on the day of the event, with the responses being captured on paper, and then transcribed in the following days. A Spanish language version was also made available.

During the creation of the survey vehicle, four domains of inquiry were explored:

1. Host / Guest motivation
2. Event preparation and execution
3. Event experience
4. Future orientation / commitment

The survey was administered via email and sent to almost 2700 participants (everyone for whom SAGE had an email contact address for). The survey was open between May 19th and May 29th with 598 online surveys ultimately being completed (22% response rate). These data were aggregated with the 105 offline surveys that were subsequently transcribed, for a total of 703 survey responses for rigorous analysis.

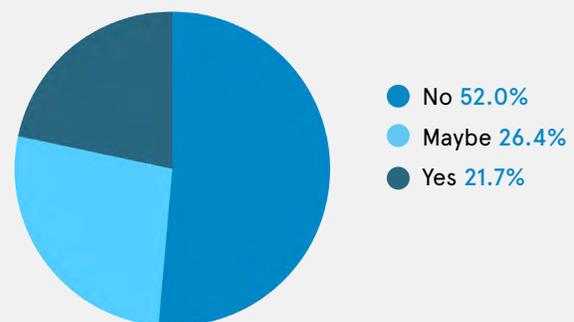
1. Host/Guest motivation

In order to meaningfully create authentic intergenerational conversations within the LGBT community, it is important for SAGE to understand participant motivations. To what extent are the drivers of individual participation commensurate and aligned with the SAGE Table mission, and where are there opportunities for future improvements? Given that SAGE is trying to create intentional space for a difficult conversation to occur the complete alignment of participant motivation and strategic vision may be impossible to achieve, but beginning to understand where folks are is vitally important.

Critically, as suspected, the majority of SAGE Table participants did not know who would be caring for them as they aged (Figure One). Also, although unsurprisingly perhaps, it was found that younger participants were significantly more likely to report not knowing who would take care of them when older ($p < 0.05$)⁴.

SAGE Table participants were strongly motivated to participate through a desire to 'make a positive change in their community' and in participating in an event that had a 'family feel' to it; for both of these question options, the responses were heavily skewed to the 'Most Interested' option (7th choice-point on a 7-point Likert scale) receiving 48% (N = 490) and 39% (N = 487) respectively.

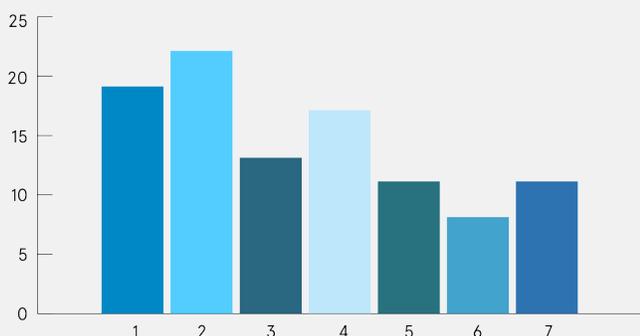
Figure One - Do you know who will take care of you when you're older? (N = 535)



⁴ Throughout, we report p-values for the statistical tests conducted on the survey data. A high-level overview of p-values can be found here: (<http://www.dummies.com/education/math/statistics/what-a-p-value-tells-you-about-statistical-data/>)

FIGURE TWO - I have fears about aging that I want to discuss

(1 = Least Interested, 7 = Most Interested) (N = 481)

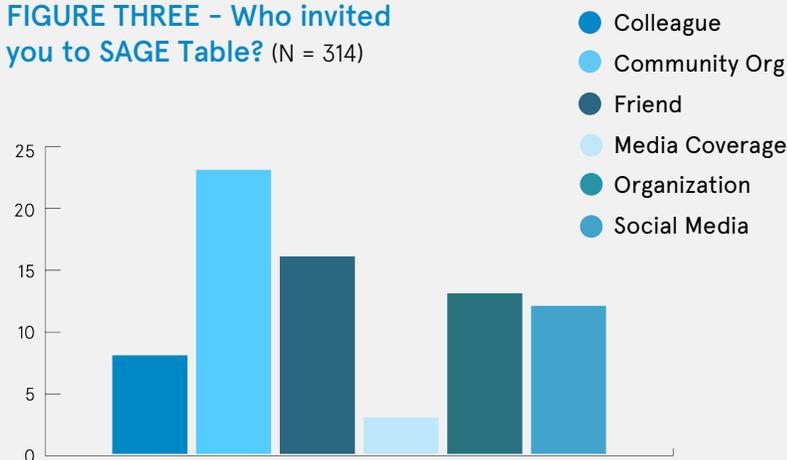


Interestingly, fears about aging, or sharing that people were motivated by fears about aging, were much more evenly distributed among all possible responses (Figure Two). One of the foundational questions driving SAGE Table was the belief that most participants would be unable to positively answer the critical question of elder care provision. Ultimately, that the majority of respondents did not have an eldercare plan, and did not consider this a 'fearful' thing is both heartening, and an opportunity. That this wasn't a clear motivational driver of participation is likely a confluence of factors, with likely contributions from (i) not wanting to bring such a heady topic into a social context (despite the event's stated focus) and

(ii) a misplaced discounting, as being something to worry about in the future.

Further research is warranted within the LGBT community to further understand this finding. We also observe the opportunity to reframe this 'fear' as a more practical 'obligation'. Such that it becomes something that can be approached with the thoughtfulness we are encouraged to consider personal preparations for retirement; i.e. make the consideration of elder care normative, and to help the community think through practical options for enabling such considerations.

FIGURE THREE - Who invited you to SAGE Table? (N = 314)



With regards to who invited survey respondents to a SAGE Table event, data support broad engagement across a variety of avenues including community organizations, friends, and social media (Figure Three).

A regression analysis demonstrates (unsurprisingly) that hosts (versus non-hosts) were much more effective at bringing guests to the table ($p < 0.0001$). In general, the mean number of people connected with in service of bringing people to a SAGE Table event was 7.

2. Event preparation and execution

SAGE Table Hosts were critical to ensuring the success of each of the events hosted around the country. Understanding both the preparation, and then reflections on the execution of the event, were critical as we sought to understand possible predictors of a successful SAGE Table experience.

Hosts spent, on average 13.5 hours preparing for SAGE Table. They reflectively reported significant attention being paid to event location and type of meal. Seating arrangements were

equally important and unimportant and this may be an interesting aspect of the event to experiment with for subsequent events or iterations of SAGE Table (Figure Four).

Hosts reported being interested in ensuring gender and sexuality diversity of their guests, but less interested in education, personality, career and ethnic diversity.

There appears to be a desire among hosts to improve their ability to help orient folks to future opportunities both for connection and participation in other activities. This is an important takeaway for SAGE, and supports the creation of a robust calendar of options and low-barrier entryways for participants to easily consider and potentially participate in. These will not be SAGE events exclusively, so there is an opportunity to continue to work intentionally with local community-based organizations and to act as coordinators.

Most encouragingly, when asked if they would host a SAGE Table event again, 91 percent of host survey respondents answered yes.

3. Event experience

What of the event itself? Survey respondents (both Host and Guest) found the event to be very enjoyable (a strongly skewed distribution of responses, the 'Most Interested' option (7th choice-point on a 7-point Likert scale) receiving 67% of responses (N = 449)). The numbers reporting a change in their understanding of aging and the complications associated with aging in the LGBT community saw a much more even distribution amongst respondents (Figure Five). This is despite the fact that respondents reported discussing relevant topics related to aging in the LGBT community (Figure Six).

Interestingly, people also reported making an effort to speak to new people, and reflectively noting that they actively avoided known individuals (Figure Seven). That these data are almost mirror images demonstrates some consistency in people's reflective perceptions on their participation in the event.

FIGURE FOUR - Seating arrangements

(N = 89)

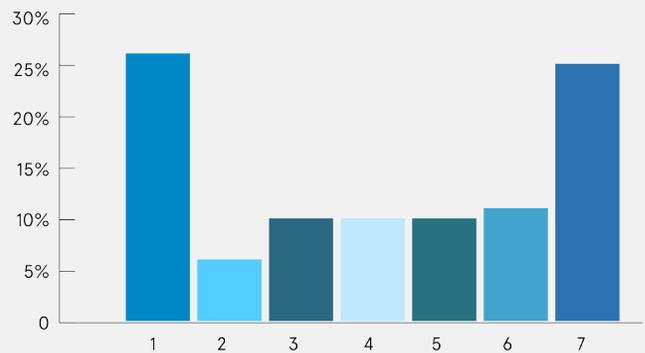


FIGURE FIVE - I found the experience changed my understanding of aging

(1 = Least, 7 = Most; N = 449)

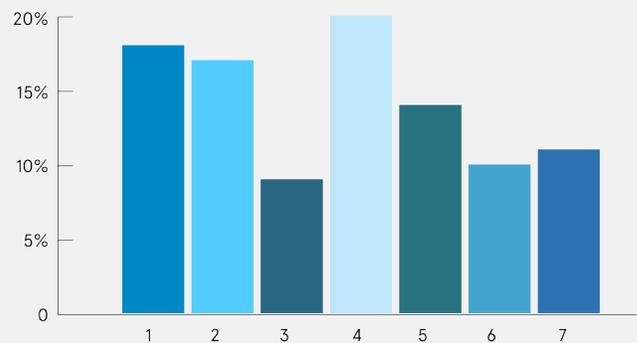
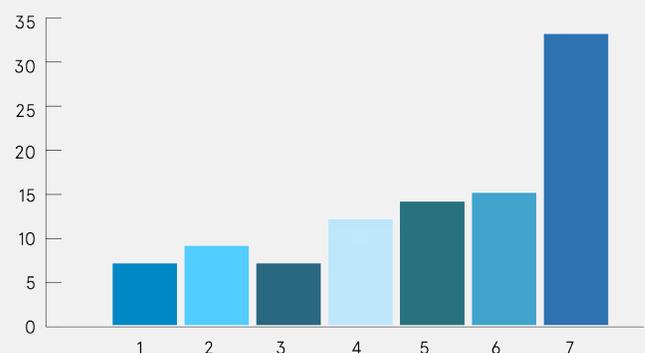


FIGURE SIX - We discussed things relevant to caring and aging in the LGBT community

(1 = Least, 7 = Most; N = 445)



In order to facilitate critical conversations across generational divides, SAGE created a discussion guide (made available to hosts in both Spanish and English) that offered an array of stimulating conversation questions:

- Think of an LGBT role model that you've had, at any point in your life. What was it about them that inspired you and opened the door to more possibilities in your own life?
- How do you envision you and your friends getting older? Where will you live? Who will you take care of, and by whom will you be taken care of?
- How does the LGBT community need to change in order to be more inclusive of LGBT elders?
- What action can you commit to right now to make our community stronger and more inclusive for all of us, at every age?
- SAGE Table Participants were encouraged to focus on similarities and solutions to problems, and to be on the lookout for shared activities and passions and experiences—the first step towards creating a more age-integrated LGBT community.

A significant proportion of SAGE Table participants used the discussion guide (Figure Eight) and the use of the discussion guide was strongly correlated with finding satisfaction in the event by survey participants. Not only did respondents who used the discussion guide find the dinner more enjoyable ($p < 0.01$), individuals also reported speaking to more people previously unknown to them as use of the discussion guide increased ($p < 0.001$), and were much more likely to experience a change in their perception of aging ($p < 0.001$).

Location played an important role in participants' reflection on their SAGE Table experience. Individuals found the event more enjoyable as their perception of the location being private increased ($p < 0.001$) and reported a greater change in perception of age understanding as their perception of the location being private increased ($p < 0.001$). Moreover, as their perception of the location being private increased, individuals reported:

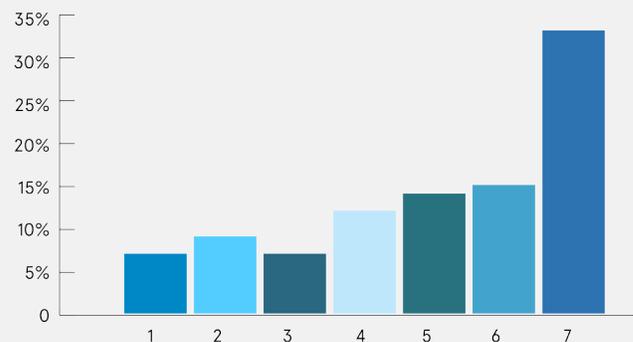
- Speaking to more different people ($p < 0.01$);
- Speaking about more LGBT relevant material ($p < 0.01$);
- Having a positive impact on their experience ($p < 0.01$).

These are important findings for Hosts of future events to consider during planning. Perhaps unsurprisingly, physical space and location play crucial roles as mediators of 'safety' and subsequently as predictors of engagement with a difficult topic.

FIGURE SEVEN - I spoke to only those people I already knew (1 = Least, 7 = Most; N = 445)
I made it a point to speak to people who were "different" than me (1 = Least, 7 = Most; N = 442)



FIGURE EIGHT - We used the discussion guide and questions (1 = Least, 7 = Most; N = 444)



4. Future orientation/commitment

In planning and preparing for SAGE Table, SAGE had wanted it to be the first step in a much larger campaign around the creation and maintenance of robust intergenerational connections grounded in elder care. To the extent that SAGE was keenly interested in understanding SAGE Table participants' 'future orientation'; what would participants be interested in doing in the future, and to what extent (what is their own level of perceived 'engagement' with those future opportunities)?

SAGE provided the following 14 options to survey respondents:

- Safe Housing
- Participating in an Online Community
- Online Communities
- Age-Friendly Pride
- Helping Someone in Need
- Arts
- Visiting a Public Official
- Taking Part in a March/Rally
- Advocating for Aging Issues
- Visiting an Isolated LGBT Person
- Intergen Social Opportunities
- Mentoring
- Being Trained as a Spokesperson
- Advocating for LGBT Rights



and asked respondents to identify their level of engagement with each option. Accordingly, engagement opportunities were:

- Receive information about
- Attend a workshop or event on
- Volunteer for a campaign addressing
- Organize or Lead an effort on
- None

In our analysis of engagement as a function of future orientation, we find it useful to employ a traditional 'engagement framework'—such as might be used in understanding consumer behavior⁵. In employing such a framework we posit three levels of potential engagement—Awareness, Understanding, and Advocacy. Specifically:

Awareness - A general familiarity of a topic or issue

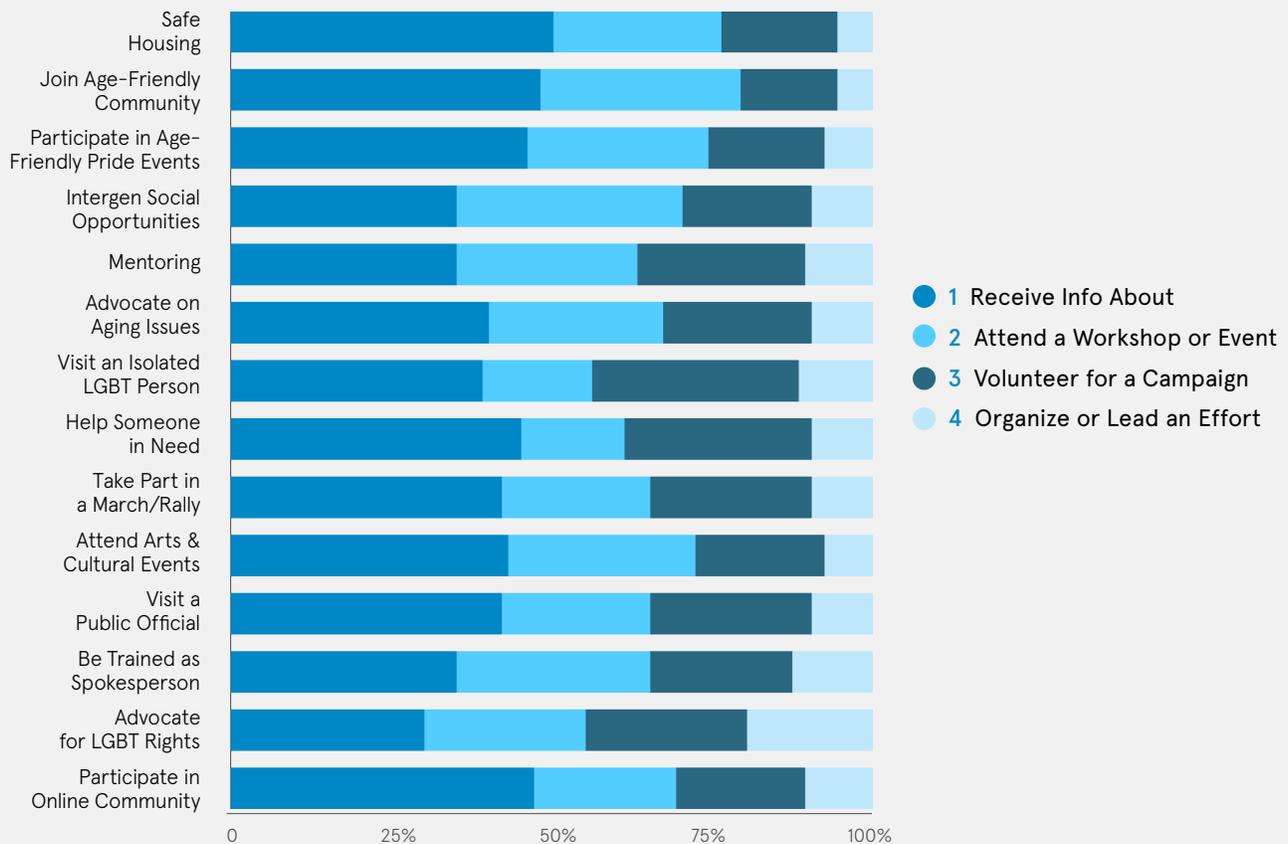
Understanding - A contextual appreciation of a topic or issue, and an ability to speak with a level of competence about the topic or issue

Advocacy - Individual level leadership regarding a topic or issue—having changed oneself, or others, beliefs with regards to the topic or issue

Generally, we expect the proportions of each engagement level to reflect Awareness > Understanding > Advocacy. Indeed, the field of 'behavior change' could be interpreted as how to effectively move people between these different levels of engagement (from Awareness through to Advocate).

⁵ We should point out that consumer behavior is somewhat poorly explained by such a simple linear model, as is succinctly discussed in Adams, Paul. *Grouped: How Small Groups of Friends Are the Key to Influence on the Social Web*. New Riders Publishing, 2011, p104. That said, we have found the coarsest form of 'Awareness' > 'Understanding' > Advocacy to provide a useful framework for discussion and prioritization.

FIGURE NINE - Engagement scoring as a function of possible future orientation



Prior to data collection we suggested the following mapping:

- Receive information about -> Awareness
- Attend a workshop or event on -> Understanding
- Volunteer for a campaign addressing -> Understanding
- Organize or Lead an effort on -> Advocacy

In all but one category (intergenerational social opportunities) we find the relationship suggested above (Awareness > Understanding > Advocacy) holds; for each future opportunity there were more people interested in being aware of it than wanting to lead an effort on it. This is somewhat unsurprising given the challenges of realizing social change at scale.

As a resource constrained organization, SAGE is unable to do 'all of the things', so engaging their community in this fashion is a useful way of understanding where there is perceived energy for future action, which can then be used as the basis for internal conversations around future directions. Ultimately, SAGE determined that a focus on mentoring is an appropriate next step—and represented an effective balance of their strategic priorities, and input from the survey participants. Programming is currently under development for a mentoring program.

Overall, the event generated a strong interest in participating in further intergenerational social opportunities. Almost all SAGE Table survey respondents (91%) want the opportunity to participate in more intergenerational events. The potential benefit for community elders is strong.



What's next?

Today in America, a 70-year-old man has a 2% chance of dying within a year; in 1940 this milestone was passed at age 56. The United Nations estimates that between 2010 and 2050 the number of over-85s globally will increase twice as much as that of the over 65s, and by 16 times as much as that of everyone else.⁶

We will live longer than our forebears and, outside of the most privileged in our society, we will most likely not have a firm idea of what our future elder care will look like. This is particularly acute for historically marginalized communities. Indeed, as we have seen, the majority of SAGE Table participants, most of them LGBTQ-identified, did not know who would be taking care of them as they got older.

In an effort to address this gap, SAGE sought to create an intentional space to engage intergenerational community members to begin to broker and maintain relationships. The data collected suggest the materials and guidance SAGE created to steer SAGE Table conversations were a useful boon to participants' experiences, despite the difficulty of the topic. SAGE has collected robust data on what the community would like, and have created a vibrant platform for leading community members into evermore important conversations around aging and care provision.

SAGE's commitment to participating in rigorous data collection and analysis during this pilot program, will ensure that subsequent SAGE events grow in ways that are beneficial to the community, and to the realized vision of a future wherein we could all readily answer the question "What could caring for each other look like if age no longer divides us?"

**Interested in knowing more about intergenerational efforts in the LGBT community?
Sign up for more info at sageusa.org.**

⁶ <https://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21724745-ageing-populations-could-be-boon-rather-curse-happen-lot> (Accessed August 15th 2017)



SAGE is the country's largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older adults. In partnership with its constituents and allies, SAGE works to achieve a high quality of life for LGBT older adults, supports and advocates for their rights, fosters a greater understanding of aging in all communities, and promotes positive images of LGBT life in later years.

At **interstitio**, we use mathematical and scientific data analysis techniques to help forward-thinking organizations understand the best way to get from point A to B. We believe that organizations are complex social problems. To help you manage this complexity while effectively delivering on your organization's mission, we ask thoughtful questions to deliver practical answers with an acute sense of urgency. We believe that happiness is a function of clearly-defined expectations and that clear expectations contribute to the realization of remarkable outcomes. We believe in the role of clarity, coherence, and coordination as drivers of your mission, and ours.

- > **David Thompson.** David has made a career out of first making science and then designing tools that make science. His published work in both the physical and social sciences reflects his love of the scientific method as a way of making sense of the world. In addition to his work at interstitio, David is the founder of Lunch Roulette, a simple web-based process that's helped facilitate tens of thousands of serendipitous lunch meetings in companies all around the world. He has also worked to help bring exposure to STEM careers to diverse and underserved populations. David's writing has appeared on Forbes.com, HBR.org, and ScientificAmerican.com. He has a PhD in Theoretical Chemistry from the University of Cambridge and an MSci in Chemical Physics from University College London.
- > **Eric Gladstone.** Eric is an expert in behavioral science and organizational network analysis. In addition to his work at interstitio, he is an Assistant Professor of Management at the LINKS Center for Social Network Analysis at the University of Kentucky, where he continues his research at the intersection of organizations and network processes. Eric's approach utilizes statistical analyses, experiments, "real-world" data, and computer simulations to help analyze the efficiency and efficacy of organizational and social networks, social capital, and decision making. Eric's extensive research in this field has been featured in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. He has a PhD in Management and Organizations from Cornell University and a Masters in Sociology from the University of South Carolina.
- > **Pony Knowles.** As the National Engagement Manager at SAGE, Pony is charged with developing and implementing projects that involve significant numbers of LGBT people and their allies in advancing the SAGE mission. He brings decades of experience in creating measurably transformative, people-driven initiatives: these include running a student activist training program in Atlanta and Philadelphia with PPEHRC, to helping found grassroots internet-based communities like Queer Exchange, to teaching bilingual courses on historical literature of resistance at NYU. Pony has a research background focused on social experiences of queer identities from Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), and has consulted on research studies aimed at measuring LGBTQ lived experiences with Hunter College and the National Center for Transgender Equality.