Social Sexual Networks and HIV Risk: Men of Color

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Project Description

This study will advance theoretical understandings of HIV risk behaviors by examining potential mechanisms (i.e., social networks and sexual partnerships) through which social discrimination impacts sexual risk among MSM of color and offer valuable insights for possible interventions involving both individual and structural changes. In three phases, we will describe sexual partnership patterns and explain the association between social discrimination, social networks, sexual partnerships and HIV risk among African American, Asian and Pacific Islander (API), and Latino men who have sex with men (MSM) in Los Angeles, CA.

- *Phase 1-* We will conduct in-depth individual interviews and focus groups to explore the nature of sexual partnership formation and examine the key domains hypothesized to influence social networks, sexual partnerships and HIV risk in our working model.
- *Phase 2-* We will utilize qualitative data to develop measures of the constructs of interest and test these new scales to establish their reliability and validity. Based upon these new measures and existing measures in the research literature, we will develop a quantitative survey instrument.
- *Phase 3-* We will conduct a cross-sectional survey to describe sexual partnership patterns and examine our working model of HIV risk. A chain-referral sample of 1200 men will complete audio computer-assisted self-interviews using a standardized questionnaire developed in Phase 2.

Interesting Findings

- From July 2005 to July 2006, we conducted 6 focus group discussions and 35 in-depth interviews with 29 African American, 28 API, and 28 Latino MSM (aged 18+) in Los Angeles.
- Many African American, API, and Latino respondents reported strong ties to their communities of color, families and the church -- environments in which they also commonly reported experiencing homophobia and a sense of being unwelcome due to their sexuality.
- MSM of color reported homophobic experiences in their day-to-day lives in Los Angeles (e.g., at work, on the street). Respondents commonly described being called names, made fun of, judged and treated differently for being gay.
- Many men described social pressures to be macho or manly, and that being identified as gay meant to be perceived as feminine or less than a man.
- Some expressed concern about what others thought and about the level of discomfort others felt being around gay people.
- Most felt frustrated by the constraints these pressures imposed on being able to live their lives in an authentic manner.
- With a few important exceptions, homophobia seemed particularly troubling to many respondents when it occurred in relation to their families of origin. Many African American, API and Latino MSM felt uncomfortable at family functions, due to ongoing pressure from the family to marry and to have children, and fear of disgracing or being rejected by their families.
- Some MSM reported feeling accepted by specific family members, including mothers, grandmothers, and siblings.