



California Center for Population Research
University of California - Los Angeles

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the Sexual Risk and Disclosure
Behaviors of HIV-Positive Latino
Men Who Have Sex with Men and
Women (MSMW) in Los Angeles¹**

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CCPR-2009-057

**January 2009
Last Revised: December 2009**

***California Center for Population Research
On-Line Working Paper Series***

Gender Neutral? Contextualizing the Sexual Risk and Disclosure Behaviors of HIV-Positive
Latino Men Who Have Sex with Men and Women (MSMW) in Los Angeles¹

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Bryce McDavitt, Homero del Pino, Claudia Rodriguez, and Vincent Heckard for their comments on earlier drafts, as well as Stefan Timmermans for his thoughtful advising on this project. An earlier version of this work was presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association on August 8th, 2009. While conducting this research, the first author was supported by a fellowship grant funded by the State of California under the California HIV/AIDS Research Program and administered through the California Center for Collaborative HIV Research – Network for AIDS Research in Los Angeles (CH05-LA-608).

ABSTRACT

Disclosure of HIV status among men who have sex with men and women (MSMW) is a primary topic within the context of HIV prevention. Yet, communication about factors

¹ Note, this working paper has been adapted from a talk and includes only a brief literature review. Readers may contact the first author at tmckay@ucla.edu for a more complete reference list on the topic of HIV positive MSMW and disclosure.

associated with HIV risk behavior takes place within complex sociocultural contexts that remain largely unexplored. Still less is known about Latino MSMW in particular, despite the fact that Latinos are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS nationally and in Los Angeles County. Latino MSM are also more likely than White MSM to have female partners and less likely to identify as gay versus bisexual or heterosexual. Some work has shown that nondisclosure of HIV status is intertwined with sexual risk among Latino MSM, particularly for those who also have sex with women. The present study uses data from 23 qualitative interviews with HIV-positive, English-speaking (n=8), Bilingual (n=7), and Spanish-speaking (n=8) Latino MSMW to investigate the cultural, social, and sexual interactions that influence disclosure and sexual risk with male and female partners. The analysis pays close attention to the implications of the contexts and meanings of sex and sexual relationships for disclosure behaviors. Interviews were analyzed in a modified grounded theory-analytical induction. Overall, most men did not discuss HIV with any of their partners. Instead they attempted to find ways around potential transmission to others through abstinence, isolation, risk reduction, serosorting, or calling off sexual encounters/relationships that they perceived as too risky. Strategies for avoiding risk were generally more beneficial to male partners who participants perceived to be more cognizant of HIV risk and more likely to be HIV-positive. Findings also highlight the importance of substance use during sex with male and female partners, as well as cultural and familial expectations that certain personal information, particularly information health and sexuality, would not be discussed. Ultimately, the paper argues that the contexts and meanings of sex and sexual relationships differ for male and female partners and that these differences inform disclosure behaviors for Latino MSMW.

INTRODUCTION

Disclosure of HIV status among men who have sex with men (MSM) is a critical topic in HIV prevention. The issue of disclosure has often been framed as one of personal responsibility among HIV-positive individuals. Within this framework, it is assumed that individuals will act preemptively and altruistically to protect a partner who may or may not also be infected. Yet, we must also remember that communication about HIV and HIV risk behaviors takes place within contexts that often challenge or constrain open and direct disclosure. This paper focuses on some of the issues faced by a group of HIV-positive Latino behaviorally bisexual men – or men who have sex with men and women (MSMW) – as they navigate disclosure and their feelings of responsibility to their male and female partners. We present qualitative data from a series of interviews conducted with 23 men. Ultimately, we argue that the contexts and meanings of sex and sexual relationships differ for male and female partners and that these differences inform disclosure behaviors for Latino MSMW.

Background

Disclosure has largely been discussed in the HIV literature as a risk-benefit analysis, and a number of studies have observed that assessments of the personal and social benefits and risks are important determinants of whether individuals disclose their HIV status to anyone, including partners, friends or family. While these risks should not be trivialized, they certainly don't tell the whole story. The risk/benefit paradigm has been strongly challenged by work focusing on the meanings of disclosure among men who have sex with men (MSM) and by research specifically addressing the social and cultural contexts of disclosure for Latino MSM. In addition to assessing the risk of loss or rejection, Gorbach

and colleagues (2006) find that decisions to disclose also reflect a sense of responsibility to individual partners or even larger public health goals, perceived transmission risks, and the contexts and meanings of sex. Research also indicates that among Latino MSM, cultural norms regarding privacy, stigma associated with HIV, and norms about protecting others from harm limit discussions about health issues and HIV status (Mason, Marks, Simoni, Ruiz, & Richardson, 1995).

With these findings in mind, the present study was designed to capture and contextualize disclosure behaviors among a specific population affected by HIV: Latino men who have sex with men and women and their partners. We were primarily interested in whether and how the contexts and meanings of sex might differ for male and female partners and how these contexts and meanings are interconnected with disclosure behaviors.

METHODS

Participants were recruited via flyers, online postings, and chain referral. To be eligible for an interview, participants had to: be 18 years or older, identify as Latino, be HIV-positive, and report sexual contact with at least one male and one female partner in the last five years. These men may or may not self-identify as bisexual, but for the purposes of the study have been behaviorally bisexual in the last five years. Using a longer time period here for eligibility allows us to capture a richer set of sexual encounters and relationships over time. In addition to not self-identifying as gay or bisexual, men who engage in bisexual behaviors may not have “open”, polyamorous, or concurrent relationships with men and women; thus their sexual practices with men and women may

only be captured over a period of several years. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish and with a male or female interviewer at the request of the participant.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

In total, 23 men were interviewed, including eight English-speaking, seven Bilingual, and eight Spanish-speaking participants. Of the 23 men, eleven were Mexican or of Mexican descent, seven were Central American, three were Caribbean, and two were South American. Eleven of the men immigrated to the US as children or in early adulthood. The average age of the sample was 43 years (range 31-54). Six of the men were previously or currently married. Eight had at least one child. Slightly more than half (twelve) had been positive more than 10 years.

Since self-identification as bisexual was not necessary to be eligible in the study, it is important to keep in mind that bisexual behavior takes many forms in the lives of these men: for example, some men identified as straight, sustained marriages or long term relationships with women and restricted their sexual activities with men to anonymous encounters; while others openly identified as gay, had primary relationships with men but also had sexual encounters with female partners; still others had male, female, and/or transgendered partners concurrently or only had sex with male partners in exchange for money or drugs or during periods of incarceration.

The Context of Sexual Encounters

The first noticeable differences in the data concern the context of sex for male and female partners. For these men, the landscape of sexual encounters is structured very differently for male partners and female partners, especially for casual encounters. While

sexual relationships with men are perceived as widely available, sexually rewarding, but lacking in emotional investment; sexual relationships with women are perceived as requiring effort and persuasion, but are accompanied by the possibility of a future relationship. In short, sex with men is presumed to be casual, while sex with women is presumed to be anything but. As Jerry, a 31 year old of Puerto Rican decent explains: “[Casual sex] doesn’t happen with women because you don’t hook up with a random girl and have it be over with... guys are more accessible and easier to be with.” Another says, “Men are more slutty. Men are vultures. They skip over the wine and dine part and go straight to sex.” And another says: “Men, they just want the physical, they want what they want. There is a difference between who you meet at the club versus who you meet on the street. The ones in the club are more physical. The ones on the street, they usually want to get to know you a little better, but they’re all the same in the end. They want what they want. [What do they want?] Just sex. Just to be physical. And then goodbye. I never met you.”

Gender, Family, and the Meanings of Sexual Relationships

Yet, it is not just the context of sexual relationships with male and female partners that these men perceive as different; in their discussions of relationship expectations, relationships with men and women signify different things. The men interviewed overwhelmingly highlight a gendered notion of relationship benefit that puts relationships with men and relationships with women in opposition: men are to have sex with while women will be there for you, will be a true companion, and take care of you but are never discussed sexually.

When asked where he sees himself in the future, Gabriel responds: "For a long time I have wanted to have a relationship with somebody, it doesn't matter to me, either man or woman." But then he reconsiders: "No. I want a woman, to treat me like a baby, to give me love, and to take care of me." Another says: "With women, I like the companionship, I mean, I like to be taken care of sometimes but guys don't like to do that too much." And two others: "What I like about women are their pure feelings. With men is more about the sex. Men, they cannot just stay with one person. They always want to have more and more sex." "A woman she'll take you all different ways. I just want someone to be around and accept me for who I am."

Unlike other MSM or gay-identified men, very few of the men in this sample had had or were in primary relationships with male partners. Although many of these men are attentive to the stigma and internal conflicts they feel about having sex with men in other parts of the interview, they do not discuss the limited options for companionship and emotional investment with men that we see here as an outcome of homophobia. Instead, they refer to it as a naturalized fact, as a disposition of men.

By contrast, relationships with women signify the value and permanence of reproductive relationships within the family system. Ultimately, many of the men interviewed perceived relationships with women as the only way to achieve a rewarding life and companionship, while relationships with men for many represented a sexual outlet but were impermanent, and accompanied by isolation, or even "danger" as Christian states in the next passage:

"I still have hope, whatever my past was, you know, bisexually whatever, maybe its meeting a girl and having a child. I wouldn't mind having-, trying that family life. I kind of

figure that's probably what would've saved me, if the first girl hadn't dumped me, if I was able to give her that ring, I'd probably be married and have a little-, grown kids already, or all that. But as soon as she did that to me, it sent me off on a tangent that just-, that just went on a collision course to danger, with men and tricks and, um, my [drug] use."

For some who immigrated to the US, relationships with women in their country of origin, although now perceived as unattainable, continued to be valued highest of all. Like Christian, for a long time Victor wanted a family, but he has since given up these dreams. Before immigrating to the US from Guadalajara, he says, "I had a regular straight life with a girlfriend. When the clubs would close at 2, you know, us guys, we'd go to be with guys. If I were still in Mexico, this would still be my life, but I wouldn't be HIV. If I were still in Mexico, I would have a family all around me. I would have someone in my life to grow old with. Since I became HIV, you know, I know that just can't happen. You know, I have a desire to work hard, (laughs) to get a job, to have a beautiful girl, a *very* beautiful girl, you know, to be old with. You are not supposed to be old alone...When I came to Los Angeles, then I basically just got rid of that straight life. I worked. And then I worked as an escort after work for whoever wanted, men or women."

For Victor, both immigrating to the US and being diagnosed with HIV have altered his experiences and expectations of relationships with male and female partners. As a result of each, Victor feels he has lost the opportunity to have what he feels he should – a family and someone to grow old with. In the next few passages, we argue that what these relationships signify to Victor and to others are connected to disclosure behaviors.

Gender and Responsibility: Who Needs to Know?

A few of the men felt a strong sense of responsibility to disclose their HIV status to all partners and said so without hesitation. These men had largely been diagnosed longer, discussed explicit strategies to cope with rejection from potential sex partners, and had networks that included other HIV positive men. All of them identified as gay and we're among the few in the sample who had had primary relationships with a male partner. They voice their responsibility to disclose in absolute terms:

"There is no situation where it is ever ok to not reveal your HIV status to your partner." OSCAR elaborates on a typical disclosure situation for him, "When I tell them I'm HIV, if they say 'No thanks,' I say 'No thanks? Ok, No thanks!' and I'll go look for somebody else. There are plenty of fish in the sea...Me and the one I'm with now, we started out that way, as just one night. We met in the park but I ended up loving him. We're both HIV. The first night I just said to him 'I'm HIV positive. What about you?' He said, 'Oh me too!' And I asked him, 'Oh, who's your doctor?' [laughs] We ended up having the same doctor."

Yet, for those who did not assess all partners as equally deserving of disclosure, the context of sex and the meanings associated with relationships influence the extent to which these men feel a responsibility to disclose their HIV status. Many felt a stronger responsibility to female partners, using language like "you *have* to tell them." This necessity is linked by one participant explicitly to the value he sees in having relationships with women: the potential for having a lasting familial relationship. No one made such strong assertions about male partners; rather, nondisclosure to male partners is frequently justified by using condoms, serosorting, or by withdrawing before ejaculation. The next two excerpts highlight the contrasting responsibilities to female versus male partners.

Victor states: "I am not with women since I am HIV and you *have* to tell them. Men they all know already... [Women] they are straight. They don't think about it. Men, we think about it. We know to protect ourselves. But a man, he has to tell a woman, because she is going to want a family, and he can't have a family."

Jerry makes similar assessments about his lack of responsibility to disclose to male partners. When he's with men, HIV status is not really talked about, and in contrast to Victor's feelings that you need to tell women, Jerry doesn't feel a need to tell male partners at all, as long as he's safe. "When I meet someone, like on the street or the bus or wherever, HIV doesn't come up. No one really says anything. You gotta protect yourself or just do stuff that's not really risky, and that's really what it ends up being anyway, you're not doing full on no-condom sex...Or if I meet them online, you can pick a guy who's positive and it's not a big deal." Here, the context of sex and the expectations Victor and Jerry have for relationships with male and female partners, inform their decisions to disclose their HIV status.

Only having casual sex with male partners was also explicitly used as a way to avoid responsibility and anxiety about disclosure for several of the men. Jerry continues, commenting on why he enjoys casual sex with men: "There's no attachment, and once you're done, you're done. Just go your own way. It's no hassle and there's not a lot of pressure to get involved emotionally. I don't have to worry about telling them I'm positive. That's a lot of stress for me. I'm still not 100% comfortable just telling anybody." Here Jerry describes how he navigates his lack of readiness to disclose to male partners through casual sex. This anxiety is also present with female partners for Jerry, but revolves around different issues. JERRY: "If I'm going to be with a woman and I tell them that I'm positive,

they have a different reaction than the guys that I'm with. The last girl I dated, when I told her I was positive, she didn't flip out, but she kind of got taken back and she was uncomfortable with it for a while. We came to an understanding but we didn't last too much longer after that...it was difficult for me because she didn't know if she wanted to be with somebody who was positive. Besides her, most of the other women I've been with were more concerned with getting pregnant than HIV. I don't make it [HIV] an issue but I bring it up that getting pregnant isn't the worst thing."

Like others, Jerry perceives women as less concerned and less well educated about HIV, so while he may feel a greater responsibility to disclose to women he also perceives women as less able to accept his HIV status.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the context of sex is different for male and female partners and relationships with male and female partners are accompanied by different expectations and meanings for Latino MSMW. Particularly striking are participants' low expectations for intimacy in relationships with other men and widespread beliefs that a family and companionship are only possible through relationships with women. As we've shown, these relationship expectations inform disclosure behaviors.

The low expectations of intimacy with male partners occur in conjunction with a decreased necessity and sense of responsibility to disclose their HIV-positive status. This is in contrast to female partners who are seen as gatekeepers to companionship and family life and require disclosure, but that disclosure is perceived as harder to navigate because women are as less concerned and less well educated about HIV.

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