

THE GAY COUPLES STUDY

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Greetings

By Colleen Hoff

Greetings and welcome to the Fall 2009 Gay Couples Study Newsletter! We have much good news to share with you since our previous newsletter.

This fall marks our one year anniversary at the Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality at San Francisco State University (SFSU). We are happy to be part of the SFSU family and have enjoyed a wonderful year here. A new semester has started and has brought with it many new students. One of them, Liz McCoy, recently joined our team as a Student Research Assistant. You can read more about her in this issue's Staff Spotlight. We are delighted to have her on board.

Also, in August we completed data collection for T5, leaving only T6 which we will complete in February, 2010. Although many of you have already finished participating in the Gay Couples Study, several dozen more couples have yet to come in. Once we are finished with all data collection next year we will begin disseminating results.

As we mentioned in our previous newsletter, we have been actively pursuing additional funding to continue our research.

Race-Based Sexual Stereotypes among Men who Have Sex with Men

By Sean Beougher

In recent years the internet has become one of the most popular methods for men to meet other men for sex. Its popularity in this regard rests, in large part, on its advantage as a tool for finding partners: users can search for the characteristics they most desire in a partner as well as market their own qualities to attract other men.

Race is one of several characteristics men search for online. And although race itself is problematic – at best it is an imprecise and subjective category, at worst it is rife with stereotypes and a source of oppression – it remains meaningful because it shapes personal and interpersonal experience. Its meaning extends to sexuality in the form of race-based sexual stereotypes, which are the beliefs and expectations about a sexual partner based on his (or her) race and include the attributes a sexual experience is assumed to take on, based on the race of the partner.

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We are pleased to announce that one of our proposed studies was funded. You may read more about it on page 2 in the article "New Study: Gay Dads," by Research Assistant Carla Garcia.

Finally, this issue is full of reviews from new research with gay men and gay couples. Project Director Sean Beougher discusses new data from New York City on how stereotypes influence partner selection. Research Assistant Walter Gómez discusses his own research on Latino gay couples. And our new Student Research Assistant Liz McCoy reports on data from five U.S. cities about primary partners and HIV transmission.

As always, we appreciate your continued participation and thank you for the time and effort you have invested in our study. Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments. In the meantime, happy reading!

Recently, researchers at Columbia University examined the complex relationship between race-based sexual stereotypes and the shape of the HIV epidemic in the U.S. among men who use the internet to meet other men for sex. A paper they published explores the following two research questions: What stereotypes exist of Asian, Black, Latino, and White men? And how do these stereotypes influence partner choice?

From April, 2005 to March, 2006 the researchers interviewed 120 men who use the internet to meet other men for sex. The men were recruited online and participated in a two-hour, face-to-face interview that explored how their sexual experiences were tied to race. The participants self-identified their race based on categories widely used in the U.S. for demographic purposes. Asian, Black, Latino, and White men all participated in the study.

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New Study: Gay Dads

By Carla Garcia

As we analyze the data from the Gay Couples Study (GCS), additional questions emerge that warrant further study. One question of particular interest involves gay men and gay couples who have children (approximately 10% of couples participating in the GCS reported having children). Recently we received funding for a new study that will explore how parenting impacts gay men's health and examine whether gay men and gay couples respond to the challenge of parenting differently than heterosexual men and heterosexual couples. We are pleased to announce that we will begin research this fall.

Specifically, the two-year study will examine changes in gay dads' stress levels, lifestyle and health habits, relationship dynamics, peer networks, and exposure to antigay discrimination. Participation involves a one-time, face-to-face interview that lasts between 90-120 minutes.



We are recruiting 50 gay couples and 15 single gay fathers. This will be a dual site research study that will take place in San Francisco and Salt Lake City. A majority of those recruited will participate at the San Francisco site. If you or your partner have children and are interested in participating please contact us. If you know any gay couples who have children, or if you know of any single gay fathers, please pass along our contact information. Finally, feel free to call us if you have questions. Our phone number is 1-888-688-1777.

Age, Age Differences, and Aging in Latino Gay Couples

By Walter Gómez

During the fall of 2007, we decided to expand our research sample and to include Latino, Spanish-speaking gay couples. This project came about due to concerns about addressing the issue of race and ethnicity among gay couples, as men of color, especially Latino men, are disproportionately affected by HIV in the U.S. HIV infection rates among gay Latino men in the U.S. are steadily rising. While Latino men are represented within the main sample of the Gay Couples Study, the idea was to reach out to specifically Latino men who were in intimate relationships with other Latino men to see whether unique issues were present in these relationships. The Spanish language element was added in hopes to target men who were less integrated into mainstream gay communities in order to have a more culturally specific scope for our research.

From December 2007 to March 2008, we recruited ten couples, most of who came to us through community based organizations focused on HIV prevention that targeted Latino gay men. Similarly to the qualitative arm of the Gay Couples Study, couples arrived together and were interviewed separately to foster more candid and open exchanges. Topics addressed in the interview included: relationship history, racial/ethnic and sexual identity, a natural history of any sexual agreements, whether those agreements had been broken, sexual experiences with primary and outside partners, and HIV and STD risk reduction efforts.

Although not a focal point of the interviews, age and age

differences between partners were major themes throughout nearly every interview. Eight of our ten couples had at least an eight age differences between partners, with the average age difference being 12 years.

While I was conducting the interviews, and well into the code development phase of the study, I grew increasingly fascinated by this phenomenon. At first, I could not help but relate this issue to the topic of power, which has become a staple in our conversations as a research team. Once it came time to writing and publishing our findings, it was rather clear to me that I would focus on the meaning of age and age differences for the couples in this sample. I am currently in the process of polishing off the draft that will be submitted to an academic journal this fall.

I split my themes into four sections. First, I decided to address the notion of the older partner taking on a mentoring role toward his younger mate. There were a number of instances in which this proved to be the case. However, there were also many instances in which the younger partner held the reigns when it came to decision making as far as their sexual behavior together as well as their agreements about sex outside the relationship. On the topic of youth, my second theme, I saw how in gay cultures youth is something that is simultaneously fetishized and seen as a time of immaturity and instability. Some participants expressed that their assumptions about

Please see *Latino Gay Couples* on page 5

Primary Partners: A Source for HIV Transmission

By Liz McCoy

Men who have sex with men (MSM) have been at increased risk for HIV since the earliest days of the epidemic in the U.S. and continue to be the group most commonly diagnosed with HIV. HIV prevention research aims to gain a deeper understanding of what puts MSM at higher risk of HIV transmission. Researchers are investigating the role that primary (as opposed to casual) sex partners have in HIV transmission among MSM.

Researchers created a model of HIV transmission based on data from MSM in five US cities from the National HIV Behavioral Surveillance System (2003–2005), the HIVNET Vaccine Preparedness Study (1995–1997), and other data. Annual HIV transmissions were estimated by partner type (primary or casual) and by type of sex (receptive anal intercourse (RAI), insertive anal intercourse (IAI), or oral sex).

The data was used to estimate numbers of MSM with primary partners in a year, average numbers of casual partners for men who had them, proportional distribution of partner serostatus, proportional distribution of sexual encounters that involved RAI, IAI, and oral sex, proportion of anal sex that was unprotected, the prevalence of HIV by partner type (primary versus casual), the proportion of unrecognized HIV infection, and the number of sexual encounters per year for men with primary and casual sex partners.

The study reveals that MSM are taking more sexual risk with their primary partners. Men are significantly less likely to use condoms with their primary partners for anal sex when partners reported negative or unknown HIV serostatus. Men were also more likely to have had RAI with their primary partner than with their casual sex partner during their last sexual encounter.

The increased risk MSM take with primary partners may be associated with their increased vulnerability to HIV transmission. According to the study model, 68% of HIV transmissions among MSM in five U.S. cities were from primary sex partners.

This finding highlights several factors that contribute to HIV transmission among MSM that arose from sex with primary partners. First, some men have more sex with their primary partners than casual partners. Second, some men were more likely to have RAI, which carries higher risk of HIV transmission, with their main partners. Third, men were less likely to use condoms for sex with their primary partners than with casual partners.

“Among primary partners, [HIV] transmission mostly arises from partners believed to be HIV-negative.”

Another factor that draws special attention is that among primary partners, transmission mostly arises from partners believed to be HIV-negative. Among transmission from casual partners, most were from those who did not know their HIV status. By sex type, most transmissions were estimated to arise from RAI. The assumption MSM make about the serostatus of their main partners may be especially problematic with respect to decisions about condom use.

The data suggest that HIV prevention interventions should address issues related to risk within gay couples and issues of testing and disclosure, and interventions that focus on gay couples should also be considered. The HIV epidemic among MSM, a group that continue to be diagnosed with HIV, can benefit from more in-depth, insightful research efforts. Research that promotes couples-based HIV prevention will further intervention efforts by taking into account the risks involved in HIV transmission within gay couples.

Reference:

Sullivan, P., Salazara, L., Buchbinder, S., & Sanchez, T. (2009). Estimating the proportion of HIV transmissions from sex partners among men who have sex with men in five U.S. cities. *AIDS, 23*(9), 1153–1162.

“According to the study model, 68% of HIV transmissions among MSM in five U.S. cities were from primary sex partners.”

Sexual Stereotypes from page 1

In response to their first research question, the researchers identified four categories of race-based sexual stereotypes. The first category, sexual characteristics, consisted of the participants' beliefs about the sexual act itself. Many men reported the following sentiments: Latino men are passionate and sensual, Asian men are more reserved or vanilla, and Black men are more aggressive and "raw." The second category, gender expectations, included the participants' thoughts on what and who is considered to be masculine or feminine. In general, participants reported that Black men are hyper-masculine or "thuggish," while Asian men are more effeminate and submissive. The third category, embodiment, included the participants' beliefs about the physical attributes and body styles of men from different racial groups. Here, the participants reported their feelings that Asian men are small in frame, slim, smooth, and have small penises, Black men have large penises, and Latino men have large, uncircumcised penises. Finally, sexual positioning as a category consisted of the participants' beliefs about which sexual role (top or bottom) a man was more likely to take depending on his race. Many men reported that they believed Asian men were more often bottoms and Black men were more often tops. Or, put another way, if they had sex with an Asian man they would top him and if they had sex with a Black man they would bottom for him.

Importantly, the authors draw attention to the great deal of consistency in the race-based sexual stereotypes that Asian, Black, Latino, and White men used to understand themselves and each other (participants were asked about their views of their own racial group as well as other racial groups).

In response to their second research question about how stereotypes influence partner choice, the researchers identified three ways in which the stereotypes discussed above function in a sexual context. First, most participants gave clear indications of racial preferences. White and Latino men were preferred more often than Black and Asian men (who together were least preferred). A minority of participants said they had no racial preferences. Second, many participants discussed color preferences when discussing skin pigmentation. Unlike racial preferences, however, there was no broad agreement on whether one skin type (lighter or darker) is better than another. That said, many men expressed preferences for light or dark skin. Third, the researchers draw special attention to the fact that most participants had little to say about stereotypes associated with White men. Without prominent stereotypes attached to them, White men's aesthetic becomes the standard against which other, non-white men are judged. Because so many had so little to say about this standard, it remains largely invisible and, as such, occupies a privileged and powerful

position in the sexual marketplace, giving many white men an advantage not enjoyed by most men of color.

In sum, race-based sexual stereotypes influence partner choice and ideas about what and who is attractive. These stereotypes can create situations that objectify men of color by reducing aspects of their individuality and amplifying their stereotyped characteristics. The researchers adroitly point out that some men use stereotypes to their advantage, however, their use in this manner is limited.

The researchers also point out other key findings. First, the race-based sexual stereotypes reported by participants reflected the stereotypes operating in U.S. society at large. U.S. society continues to distinguish and stereotype individuals in sexual terms, which leads many men of color to either be fetishized or loathed by others depending on their race. Second, stereotypes are persistent and may be more heavily relied upon in online settings such as websites where men go to find other men for sex. Finally, race-based sexual stereotypes may define (in terms of partner choice) the contours of sexual networks (the groups of people individuals may associate with for sexual purposes), which may lead to some individuals engaging in high risk behaviors. These stereotypes may also reinforce risky behaviors among some men.

Race-based sexual stereotypes influence men's ideas about men belonging to other racial groups and how those men behave sexually. Similarly, sexual stereotyping generates expectations about potential sexual partners and experiences, which have enormous consequences for men meeting other men online for sex.

Reference:

Wilson, P., Valera, P., Ventuneac, A., Balan, I., Rowe, M., & Carballo-Diéguez, A. (in press). Race-based sexual stereotyping and sexual partner among men who use the internet to identify other men for bareback sex. *Journal of Sex Research*.



Latino Gay Couples from page 2

younger gay men, often led to them subscribing to gender and sex roles that were not necessarily in tune with their own needs and desires. My third theme, dealt with statements around the toll aging has had in the participants' sexual performance, libido, and attractiveness. Most participants did not have particularly negative feelings about their own age and aging, but some reported feeling demeaned by their partners and members of their gay/Latino communities on account of it. The fourth and final theme I looked into was the role of social networks and social desirability on age. The general assumptions on this issue were that some folks thought that in intergenerational relationships in these kinds of relationships, older men took advantage of younger partners for their youth and its appeal or said another way, younger men were with their older partners for ulterior motives, such as financial benefits. The participants who reported coming into contact with these sentiments explained that they did not affect their relationship, their attitudes towards their partners, and intergenerational coupling in general. Most participants reported a strong bond with their families, while others stated that they tried to avoid social interactions with other Latino gay men, because they felt that their relationship and their choice to be monogamous were not respected by others.

In general, this sample did not engage in a great deal of HIV risk behavior, such as anal sex without a condom. The fact that they were recruited through HIV prevention-focused organizations might have influenced this. However, there were a number of discourses, such as the aforementioned truncated gender and sexual identities and self-esteem issues tied to aging that hinted at the need for prevention efforts to focus further on issues regarding self-image and self-esteem that could translate into risky behaviors.. Lastly, more research needs to be done with regards to the role of age, age differences and aging and how it affects all gay couples in order to assess how this could affect HIV risk behavior as well as the mental health of the gay community at large.



Staff Spotlight: Liz McCoy, Student Research Assistant

Elizabeth McCoy joined the Gay Couples Study in July 2009, as a Student Research Assistant. She currently attends San Francisco State University where she is pursuing her Bachelor's in Psychology.

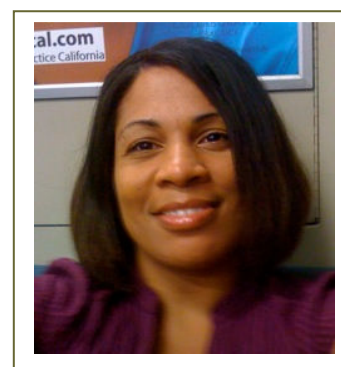
Elizabeth became part of the research team through her involvement in the Career Opportunities in Research Program (COR), a program that provides opportunities for SFSU students to receive mentoring and financial support to help them prepare for doctoral programs in mental health. COR is a two-year mentoring program focusing on research and professional development. Students receive a scholarship and work closely with a faculty mentor.

Elizabeth will be working with her mentor, Professor Colleen Hoff, who will guide her through the development of her own research

plan. She will use data from the Gay Couples Study in her research, which she will present at a professional conference at the end of her first year in COR.

Elizabeth's research interests include family dynamics, which guides her interest in the study team's new grant looking at gay fathers. She will be closely involved in the two-year study which will examine changes in gay fathers' stress levels, lifestyle and health habits, relationship dynamics, peer networks and exposure to antigay discrimination. The aim of the study is to help health practitioners and community groups design interventions that promote healthy LGBT families.

Eventually, Elizabeth would like to pursue a graduate degree in Psychology. She wants to use her education to help others develop and maintain healthy relationships and families.



Study Name

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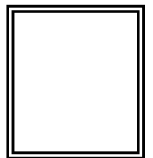
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