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BACKGROUND

- Significant disparities in HIV infection rates exist among men who have sex with men (MSM) in the U.S.
- Among this subpopulation, there are marked race- and ethnicity-based disparities, where Black gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men are disproportionately impacted by HIV.
- Meta-analyses have shown that Black MSM do not have higher risk behaviors than White MSM. Possible hypotheses have been enumerated that consider the contexts, dynamics, and meanings of various aspects of sexual partnerships and their networks.

METHODS

Overview:

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 39 non-Hispanic Black and White MSM (20 Black and 19 White) enrolled in the NYC M2M study, a large cross-sectional study examining neighborhood-level influences on sexual HIV risk behavior, substance use, and depression among MSM living in New York City.
- Participants were recruited in person using a modified venue-based, time-space sampling methodology and internet- and mobile application-based recruitment.
- To be eligible for the main NYC M2M study, participants had to be: biological male at birth; ≥18 years old; NYC residents; have engaged in anal sex with a man in the past 3 months; and able to communicate in English or Spanish.
- Every other participant who met the race/ethnicity eligibility criterion (self-report as either Black, non-Hispanic or White, non-Hispanic) for the qualitative substudy was approached and if interested, was scheduled for an interview visit.
- Interviews explored the contexts, dynamics, and meanings of various aspects of sexual partnerships and networks that are consequential to HIV transmission and acquisition.
- Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim; transcripts were coded using Atlas TI.

RESULTS

Participant characteristics:

- Most participants were in their late 20s and 30s; 60% were HIV-negative, 32% previously HIV-positive, and 8% newly-diagnosed.
- Four broad themes emerged: partner characteristics; partner relationship context; partner meeting context; and overlap of social and sexual networks.

Partner characteristics:

- Participants described their experiences selecting and meeting partners as multi-faceted.
- Age, race/ethnicity, and HIV serostatus were the most common factors influencing partner selection.

Like I don't want to be like dependent on an older guy, you know, like I knew that I need to take care of myself and have my own stuff. **(Black, HIV-positive, 30-39)**

"Who's to say that I'm in a relationship with somebody that's positive and I go out tomorrow and I'm hit by a car, you know? So, I don't think it's best for one to sit and just dwell on those things, especially if it's in your control, because some things we can't control." **(Black, HIV-negative, 25-29)**

Relationship context:

- Relationship context impacted partner selection, partner perception, and sex behavior.
- Black and White participants described casual sexual partnerships with similar frequency. Partnerships were more frequently described as monogamous, hook-up, and casual by White participants compared to Black participants.

And he's actually the first and only person I've ever had non-protected sex with because I knew that we were – we were practically living together. I made him get tested first, and I was tested before I went, so I knew that we were both clean. So he's the only person that I ever had unprotected sex with. **(White, HIV-negative, 25-29)**

I know that I have to take certain precautions sexually, but as far as relationship-wise, I don't feel like a status...the status doesn't matter to me. I know to some people it does, and that's a road I have to take, that I have to deal with, and if my status bothers them, then so be it... **(Black, HIV-positive, 25-29)**

Meeting context:

- Participants met partners in a variety of contexts, including geo-spatial networking applications and websites, social networks, and cruising in public spaces and randomly by chance).
- Meeting context influenced perceptions of partners, including trustworthiness.
- Participants without HIV infection more frequently met partners through applications and social networks compared to respondents with HIV, and respondents with HIV more frequently mentioned websites.
- White respondents more frequently discussed sex partners met through social networks, while Black respondents more frequently discussed sex partners met per chance.

If I meet someone in class or even if I meet someone in a bar like there isn't sort of – it is not like we both know that we are going to have sex later, whereas in this situation, like that is kind of, well, not really the assumption, like that really is the assumption and is the purpose of meeting. Whereas if I go to a bar to go out and have some drinks with friends, I am; not going out and saying I am going to pick some guy out of the crowd and say I am going to have sex and that kind of thing. **(White, HIV-negative, 18-24)**

Overlap of social and sexual networks:

- Respondents varied in how connected their sexual and social networks were.
- Relational intent most strongly influenced whether a sexual partner was introduced to a respondent's social networks,
- Respondents rarely reported having some sort of sex with a close friend; when sex partners became friends they were normally sex partners first.
- There was overall little difference between Black and White respondents in perceptions of network overlap.

I need to know everything about someone before I introduce them to my friends, because once you get to my friends...We, like my friends, I'm talking about my mains, like my main five. If I'm introducing you to them, we are like brothers and sisters and cousins....So, you've got to like break that person down as an individual before you can present them to people that are like your family, because...I'm not saying their opinions validate what I'm doing. But, I just, you know, you have to be ready to present someone to other people, I feel. **(Black, HIV-negative, 18-24)**

Friends that become sex partners? That's funny you mention that. I generally try to stop that before it happens. I will say that, with a lot of my friends, there has been some mutual attraction, or maybe they are attracted to me and eventually...but I have to kind of steer them back, because for me, there's a very fine line between...either we're friends, or we're sleeping with each other. **(Black, HIV-positive, 25-29)**

DISCUSSION

- Relationship and meeting contexts influence partner selection, partner perceptions, and sex behavior.
- This influence may differ by race/ethnicity, potentially impacting HIV infection rate disparities.
- This qualitative study provides insights into the contexts, dynamics, and meanings of various aspects of sexual partnerships and networks, with some differences by race/ethnicity that might contribute to HIV disparities.

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