

The Perfect Man: How Do Desired Partner Characteristics Shape Condom Use in Young MSM Relationships?

Young, L., Sullivan, P., and Stephenson, R.

Background-Understanding factors and reasons behind partner selection are important in the study of HIV and STI transmission. Knowledge of these influences can help explain why groups of people can participate in the same sexual risk behaviors, but certain individuals have a significantly greater risk of contracting or transmitting HIV than others. Men who have sex with men (MSM) represent an estimated 2% of the United States population, but account for 53% of people living with HIV (CDC, 2009). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 52% of new infections were among young black Men who have sex with men (MSM) ,aged 13–29 years, which was more than any other racial/ethnic age group of MSM in 2006 (CDC, 2007). There is extensive data that supports a racial disparity between rates HIV infection, but the reasons for the causes are unclear. Recent reports suggest an important element in lowering the rates of HIV infection is understanding the sexual behavior between couples (Sullivan, Salazar, Buchback, Sanchez, 2009). For young MSM, approximately 80% of new HIV infections are estimated to arise from main sex partners. The idea of sexual networks and partner selection is a concept that has not been heavily studied among this population. The primary objective of this research is to examine variation in desired characteristics of sexual partners, and investigate how these characteristics influence non-condom use, among a sample of young black and white MSM.

Methods- Participants included in data collection were obtained from two Emory University approved parent studies entitled Involvement and The MAN Project. Involvement is a prospective cohort study of 340 HIV-negative black MSM and 340 white MSM. The MAN project is surveying 750 MSM on partner concurrency and composition of their sexual networks. For data collection 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted. Participants aged 18-25 were included in the research. The sample (n=30) included 52%black and 48%white MSM.

Participants were shown a list of 12 descriptive characteristics, and they were asked to choose five that they desire in an “ideal partner”. A discussion about why these attributes are important will take place between the facilitator and the participant. Questions about these choices were asked. Emphasis was placed on sexual risk taking behaviors and condom use. The goal of this activity is to determine what characteristics are desired among the young men in the sample, and how having or not having these characteristics influences the likelihood of non-condom use. IDS’s explored the factors that shape the choice of sexual partner, how these factors shape condom use and risk, and how decisions to have anal sex without condoms vary based on desired characteristics of sexual partners.

Data were transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA. Coding of the qualitative data included using inductive codes based on expected outcomes, followed by deductive codes as they arose independently from the IDIs representing unexpected findings, themes and patterns. Crosstabs were run on the transcriptions to determine if there was an association between what attributes participant's desire in a relationship and non-condom use.

Results: Participants were placed into two separate categories based on their preferences for romantic partners, emotional and physical. Among men who indicated desire for partners based on emotional characteristics, intelligence was associated with a low level of perceived risk during unprotected sex. Among these participants, it was reported that an intelligent partner was considered safer to have sex with because of knowledge about their health and other issues related to STI's. Participants who desired partners based on physical characteristics associated a desired for good sex with non-condom use. Discontinuing the use of condoms was reported as a natural part of relationship progression, and was often impacted by the length of relationship. These findings were not racially varied. Most preferred older partners. Among one-time sexual encounters, high rates of condom use was reported, however, younger participants had more isolated incidences of not using condoms during these encounters.

Conclusions: The idea of sexual networks and partner selection is a concept that has not been heavily studied among this population. Greater understanding behavior beliefs about condom use, patterns of partner selection, and condom use in relationships among MSM by race may help explain disparities in sexual health outcomes among this group. The findings provide evidence about stopping condom use with partners differ for MSM. The attributes that the participants found desirable had an association with the sexual risk they were willing to take with partners. Programs and messaging that explore how decisions about sexual risk behavior are influenced by romantic relationships, are needed for this this group.