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Intimacy and Vulnerability among Young Men of Colour who have Sex with Men: An Ethnographic Approach to Social Networks and Public Venues

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Abstract

This paper shows the symbolic and structural vulnerabilities that Young Men of Colour who have Sex with Men (YMCSM) confront in their everyday lives. Through the analysis of social interactions in public spaces, this paper shows some of the hidden risks that these young men face, and how these situations increase their vulnerability to HIV infection. Four situations are described as particularly risky for YMCSM: drug use, inter-generational sexual interactions, homelessness and sex work, and stigma and symbolic violence associated with their sexual orientation. This paper is based on participant observation and focus groups in several public venues in New York City. It provides insights into the different social networks and the strategies these young men use to confront the dual experience of discrimination as sexual minorities and as people of colour.

Key words

Young Men of Colour who have Sex with Men (YMCSM), LGBT, ethnography, public spaces, New York City, youth vulnerability

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Introduction

This paper is based on Ethnographic Observation (EO) and Focus Groups (FG)¹ conducted by Community Ethnographer Organizers (CEOs) in several public venues in New York City during 2005 and 2006. The venues of observation are open and in-door public spaces where Young Men of Colour who have Sex with Men (YMCSM) socialize -- in their own words, places where they “hang out” and sometimes “hook up.”

All of the CEOs were young LGBT individuals from an African American and/or Latino background residing in the South Bronx area, a working class area of New York City. The first group of CEOs was composed of four young women and 18 young men, twenty two people in total. They conducted 91 ethnographic observations during 2005. The second cycle of 2006 was composed of 15 men, three women, and one male-to female-transgender person, nineteen people in total. This second cycle conducted 85 ethnographic observations. Complementary ethnographic observations were also conducted by the researcher during the summer of 2006. Additionally, two focus groups were carried out by the researcher with YMCSM.

Participant observation is the main technique in conducting ethnographic observations. It gathers rich, dense, and detailed information through personal experiences with the settings and people (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Through participant observation CEOs gained first-hand information about the experience of YMCSM in public spaces. These ethnographic observations provided social context and privileged insights into young people’s dynamics in these public venues. CEOs conducted these observations through semi-structured formats, which contain three main domains: description of the place, description of people, and description of the dynamics in the different settings.

These observations have the advantage of being conducted by local ethnographers who shared the same age, ethnicity, gender and sexual identities as the young people who socialize in these public settings. They were trained by the research team not only in methodological and technical issues, but also in ethics conducting research in public spaces. This strategy follows the principles of the Youth Action Research Model (YARM)², which has three main principles: 1) The adult facilitator is no longer the sole expert; the youth become the experts of their own experiences; 2) Youth participants should mirror the demographic characteristics of the target population and/or demonstrate connectedness to the social networks and communities where research activities will be conducted; and 3) Teach youth research basic research skills (i.e. taking field notes, direct observations, survey facilitation, etc.) to identify problems in their environment and brainstorm solutions. Through these participant observations,

¹ Ethnographic Observations = EO; Focus Groups = FG.

² The YARM approach is part of the “The Bronx Boogie Down Program”, which seeks to increase access to HIV services among YMCSM”. For further information, see Bronx AIDS Service (www.basnyc.org). This paper is based on a report carried out by the author while working as a researcher in Bronx AIDS Service. My special thanks and gratitude to Mario de La Cruz and Miguel Muñoz-Laboy for their invaluable support during this project.

CEOs registered places and people's dynamics, as well as testimonies from people's conversations. This rich and detailed information constitutes a very useful data to understand the experiences and performances of YMCSM in public venues, and the risks that they face in their everyday lives.

In terms of the two focus groups conducted by the researcher, they provided contextual background to understand the social context in which these YMCSM (YMCSM) reside and socialize. Focus groups represent a very useful technique in qualitative research when participants have a common experience, come from a similar background, or have a particular skill or knowledge about certain topics (Stimson 2003). The YMSM (YMCSM) who participated in the two focus groups share the experience of being ethnic and sexual minorities, living in working class neighborhoods, as well as belonging to the same generation. Additionally, these young people participated in diverse training programs, and were involved in research team activities. The main goal of these focus groups was to unpack issues that had not been sufficiently explored during the observations. In this sense, the focus groups served as an opportunity for the research team to validate some topics. Another important contribution of the focus groups was that we could register and understand local terms for sexual and gender identities, as well YMSM (YMCSM) sexual behavior.

Open and in-Door Public Spaces

Participation observation was conducted in open public spaces (the Pier, Christopher Street, and Central Park) and indoor public areas (*La Nueva Escuelita*, *The Neutral Zone*, and *The Clubhouse*) in New York City.

a. "The Pier" at Christopher Street in the West Village

The Pier is composed of a central long grass area, with benches to sit on and also small tables and chairs. The entrance is adjacent to the West Side Highway, so there is consistent traffic during the hours the Pier is open. There is also a jogging/bicycle path which is used by residents of the area throughout the day. Two restrooms, one for male and the other for female, are close to a fountain near the entrance and are monitored by Parks Department staff.

The Pier is a gay-friendly open public space. In previous decades the pier was an emblematic space for LGBT populations and activists. It was almost an exclusively LGBT place, without closing hours, populated by a diverse racial/ethnic group of LGBT persons of varying age, race, and socio-economic status. The Pier now has a nightly closing time at 1am. While residents want to shut down the Pier at 11:30pm, LGBT activists are trying to mobilize a campaign that will attempt to keep the pier open until 4am. The struggles from both parts are still confronting the destiny of this emblematic LGBT open public space (I do not understand this sentence). Additionally, there is a growing urbanization development, so this area is becoming more residential and less friendly for public activities. Also, the population at the Pier during the late afternoon and evening hours has become increasingly younger and more homogeneous in terms of

racial background: Latino and African-American young men. Some of these young men of colour are openly gay, while others are self-identified as heterosexuals but engage in sexual interactions with other men. These men come from different neighbourhoods in Manhattan, other boroughs in New York City, and even neighbouring states such as New Jersey and Connecticut. They come to the Pier to socialize with other men and engage in a variety of activities ranging from smoking cigarettes and conversation to drinking alcohol, dancing, and flirting.

At the Pier, there are distinct morning and nocturnal, as well as summer and winter, rituals and performances. During sunny and warm daytime hours, the Pier is full of people: both youth and adults from different racial and social backgrounds come to socialize. At these times, YMSM do not feel that the Pier is a “gay place”, but rather almost another heterosexual or mainstream park in the city, a “family environment” that is not friendly for social activities of LGBT people. Additionally, during these early hours, the Pier is mainly white since people of colour usually start coming at later times:

If you go in the morning or the afternoon or while it's still light outside you might see a lot more Caucasians walking their dog (...) a lot of straight people, kids playing in the grass (...) But in the evening you will see a lot more African-Americans and Latinos (...) it's common also to find older men, tourist with their Spartacus (gay) guide looking for picking someone up (FG)

The Pier changes its composition constantly during all seasons. Summer time brings young people and tourists from all around the world to this area. There are also special LGBT-focused events like the annual New York City LGBT Pride Parade, which transforms the Pier's life. All the time new people are coming in to the pier; hence the interactions are always changing. During the day, many white and straight people exercise in this area. During winter and on cold nights, people come to the Pier at earlier hours, usually after 5pm. At these times, Latino and African-American young men are the prevalent group in the area. They socialize more freely among themselves, groups (cliques) of young men take the area. It is also common to observe more interactions between young men from different areas from the city:

The pier is very empty tonight and cold as well (...) people are kissing; some of the guys are dancing and smoking to keep warm (...) it was cold, so people were moving away from the Pier (...) As time goes by, more and more teenagers are coming. “Cliques” sitting down chatting within the group (...) the usual people coming to hang out and also the ones looking to pick some one up (EO, Cycle II).

b. Christopher Street and adjacent streets: *everybody in motion*

Christopher Street and the adjacent streets are “transit places”; everyone here is basically going to somewhere else. There is a Pizzeria on the corner of Christopher Street and Hudson Street, which seems to be a great place for meeting people before or after the Pier. Sometimes, young people congregate for a while around street intersections, but they are always on the move. Christopher Street and the adjacent streets are always

full of pedestrians and house many specialty stores, gay and straight sex shops, restaurants, bars, discotheques, and other vibrant places, which make the place safe and friendly for everybody, particularly LGBT people. The streets are racially mixed, with African Americans, Hispanics, and White people. The age composition is also diverse, the majority being adolescents and young adults but also including middle-aged and elderly people:

Gay men walking back and forth in the area (...) transgender males going to the piers (...) drug dealers offering the occasional “smoke budd” (...) many elderly and adults. Young people are not the majority here (...) no one doing sports in the streets (...) many straight men and women going to restaurants (...) majority of African American guys going to the discos and piers (...) People very busy moving back and forth. No one really standing ... going down to the piers (EO, Cycle I).

There are many clubs and discos with groups of people who seem to belong to various cultures and/or share common traits in terms of age, race, and sexual cultures (e.g. bars for Blacks and Latinos, adult White gay men, muscular guys, “bears”, people of the leather or S&M fetish subcultures, among others). In this sense, the sexual market in these streets is very diverse and offers a range of opportunities for YMCSM to interact with men of different ages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

c. The Central Park Rambles

The Rambles at Central Park are surrounded by trees and narrow, poorly lit pathways, which lead to secluded areas, facilitating the creation of a “private” area in a public space. The Rambles was a well-known gay cruising area decades ago. In current times, New York City policies regarding public spaces, such as the increase of police presence during daytime hours, have decreased the Rambles’ popularity as a place for sexual encounters. However, these areas continue to be visited by diverse people in terms of race and age who are looking for some kind of sexual intimacy:

The Rambles are full of different people (...) Caucasian, old gay men, young Latinos (...) some of them look [like] tourists even (...) their intentions are obvious, they are here for sex (EO, Cycle I).

The absence of police or park guards makes the place easier for encounters and sexual interactions. Men frequent the Rambles during the afternoon, early evening, and particularly at late hours, when the darkness facilitates sexual encounters. Gay men and men who have sex with men cruise in the rambles all year long, and similar to the case of the Pier, the weather also plays a key role in people’s presence and activities during the year:

It’s really cold today (...) it is 5pm and it’s already dark (...) no police at all, people do not have problems cruising here (...) It’s 6pm, getting darker and cooler... more men are going to the rambles (EO, Cycle I).

d. Neutral zone

“Neutral zone” is a drop-in center for LGBT youth located in midtown Manhattan. This after-school program is usually open from 3pm to 10pm. Neutral zone provides social services to these LGBT youth, but also serves as a place for social gathering for young people and adolescents who are looking for social spaces after school. Neutral zone has a living room space, kitchen, and different rooms that serve as offices. The place is described by these young MSM as comfortable for meeting new people and for socializing in a gay-friendly environment. According to the CEOs, young people appreciate the comfortable environment, free food, and safer sex supplies. Neutral zone also provides support groups, housing referrals, clothing, HIV tests, counseling, and help while applying for public assistance. In terms of composition, Neutral zone is basically a place for LGBT youth of colour:

Youth began to enter at around 6:30pm and from there the place gets full of people, mainly young Hispanic and Black MSM (...) Guys are talking about their personal lives. (Neutral zone) is a very peaceful environment, looks like everybody knows each other (EO, Cycle II).

Neutral zone is also a space for low-income MSM of colour to use computers and also Internet to chat on-line and socialize with friends. Some of them use internet also for dating and to find someone:

Couple of guys searching internet, some LGBT links (...) a guy is searching profiles in “Adam 4 Adam” and [an]other guy in [an]other computer is looking at “Myspace” (EO, Cycle II).

As is stated in the literature, LGBT youth of colour from working class families often become homeless after being rejected by their families and social networks for their sexual orientation or gender identity (Sheth 2004; Guzder 2005). YMCSM find in Neutral zone one of the few in-door public places available for sexual minorities where they feel that homophobia and discrimination is not allowed.

e. La Nueva Escuelita (Escuelita) Club

La Nueva Escuelita is an LGBT club and discotheque in midtown Manhattan. Escuelita draws a mixture of people from all ages and racial backgrounds, including some Asians and White men, but mainly caters to Black and Latino males from New York and New Jersey. Escuelita provides spaces where people can engage in various activities. Men arrive both in groups of friends and with sexual partners. Sometimes they come alone. This club is also identified by participants in this study as a “friendly environment” which provides an alternative to other discotheques with more “attitude” and “competitive vibes” elsewhere in the city. Escuelita hosts special nights for diverse types of audiences and different spaces for dancing, drinking, and those looking for intimacy. Escuelita is a gay-safe environment with undressed male bar tenders, male strippers,

and a well-advertised drag show at late hours. The mix of music reflects the place's plural composition: Hip-hop, Reggae, Bachata, Merengue, and even salsa and techno music, which attracts diverse groups of LGBT people. Thursdays are the most affordable day for young MSM of colour:

Impossible to drink something, water is \$5 and \$7 a beer ... and then you have to tip? (...) This is the most expensive option for hanging out (...) one need to calculate your money to go there (FG).

Age restriction is a significant barrier for many adolescent MSM of colour. Security at adult bars and clubs are very strict about age requirements and adult IDs, hence minors are not allowed in these venues. However, according to some CEOs, it is not unusual to meet some minors that were able to avoid the security control of the club.

Legally minors are not admitted (...) security is really strict asking IDs (however), it's not rare to find some adolescents there too ... 16, 17, even 14 (GF, CEOs from Cycle II).

f. Clubhouse

Clubhouse is a young urban club where gay men and men who have sex with men socialize. These clubs attracts adolescents and young gay men of colour who are not required to show an adult ID to enter to this venue. The low cost is also an incentive for adolescents. Inside the club, young men dance in different spaces; some of them are dress up in drag or wearing their nicest clothes, while others get together in the many rooms available. The music is urban and even though most of the men are adolescent and young, there are also some older men who walk around the place. It is not rare to see inter-generational flirting and romancing.

The club opens in the early afternoon, and people start coming around 7:00 pm. Around 8:00 pm, the voguing activities dominate the scene, and the club is filled with lively young MSM. Some organizations that work on HIV prevention are also part of the usual picture of Clubhouse. Adolescents and young MSM are used to seeing these campaigns distribute condoms and perform HIV testing. There are many dark areas and discrete rooms that people can easily go to have any kind of sexual intimacy. According to the CEOs, there is also regular drug and alcohol use in these spaces:

There are like 10 different places people go into and no one can see them, [the] things they are doing (...) it's very discrete for having sex (...) people are having secret sex spots in the dark areas (...) people having sex everywhere (...) a lot of marijuana going on here(EO, Cycle I).

Social Networks, “Houses”, “Cliques” and Youth Identities in Public spaces

As many scholars have demonstrated, many African American and Latino men who have sex with men do not associate their homoerotic sexual experiences with “gay” or

“bisexual” identities (Millett 2005; Muñoz-Laboy 2004; Cantu 2009). Many of these men hide these experiences from their families, friends, or female partners. These men develop diverse sexual identities based on factors such as their masculinity and the sexual roles they perform with other men (Vasquez del Aguila 2012). Within the Black community, these men are known as the ones to be in the “down-low” (Millett 2005). Among the openly gay men of colour, these men confront the potential displacement from family, friends, and community. Additionally, the sense of disconnection from mainstream white culture, combined with social isolation from the Black community for being openly homosexual displaces some gay and MSM of colour from any real sense of community belonging (Malebranche et al. 2004).

For YMCSM, what marks their identity has corporeal inscription not only in race or ethnicity but also in physical appearance markers that address a more complex set of identities. Their body is both a marker of identity and an idealized object of desire (Wiggins 2000). YMCSM express their sexual and gender identities in public spaces through different cultural manifestations such as clothes, music, and ritualized gestures of masculinity and sexuality. These young men represent diverse sexual cultures coexisting in tension with normative sexualities and hegemonic versions of being a man.

Being part of a group or “clique” and the sense of belonging to such group of reference provides not only social networks but also emotional gratification and support to these YMCSM. These young men from working-class areas of the city confront the fact that they are not part of wealthy groups of young gay men who can consume expensive products and frequent affluent venues, including gyms, discos, and other spaces that young people socialize. YMCSM use their “clique” to avoid isolation and social marginalization and to be someone in the gay scene:

In order to fit into a certain group you do have to look a certain way to fit in. You have to show certain clothes, perfect body, certain looks, (...) if you don't have the perfect body or the clothes, you need to have a clique to be know around the scene. You live surrounded by geeks, the Goths, the ballroom girls, the natural vegetarian people. Here is when your friends are so important. You can go to these places and have fun even [if] you are not perfect (FG).

In public spaces identified as gay-friendly, YMCSM usually socialize in groups. For YMCSM, being alone is a clear sign of looking for sex. In this sense, people hanging out alone are identified as the ones who are trying to pick up someone. Solitary people in these gay public spaces are also perceived as the ones undertaking illegal activities such as drug dealing and sex work:

Most people are in groups. There are not so [many] guys alone (...) most of them are old men, Caucasian[s] looking for sex (...) they can be drug dealers too, or prostitutes (...) alone people are those who are clearly looking for sex (GF).

These public places can also be rendezvous points for going somewhere else to have sex, either with someone already known or someone new:

Three Latino guys taking about going to a sex party (...) the new guy invites them to the sex party (...) all of them moved laughing and touching each other (EO, Cycle I).

There are codes and gestures that people perform in these public spaces. People in groups are easily identified by expressing a certain sense of membership and belonging to a particular “clique” or group of friends:

People in their cliques are ‘voguing’, talking to each other (...) groups of people are talking in their way, they know each other, they hang with each other every night (...) nobody else is allowed to the clique (...) every one have serious faces, not too welcoming unless you know someone in the group (EO, Cycle II).

Many different cliques and groups of friends (...) our cliques are at the pier hanging out (EO, Cycle I).

‘Voguing’ consists of ritualized gestures that young MSM of colour use to express their identity as a group or ‘clique’. Voguing is a performed battle among group members, and can be easily interpreted as violent or “aggressive”. However, for them, this apparently tough behavior can express intimacy, friendship, and the sense of belonging to a group with its own identity:

There were two groups of gay men “voguing” and playing around (...) some guys seem aggressive (...) staring very angry, no smiles, but at the same time it’s friendly (...) most of them are Black between 16 [and] 21 years old (...) Young gay men holding hands, their friends are voguing and playing (...) one can see who are cliques and friends (EO, Cycle II).

Some clubs organize a day in a week for voguing, it is “vogue nite” and everybody is performing the battles in the dance floor:

A lot of people today (Thursday) because is vogue nite in Neutral zone (...) a man and a woman fighting, people going against each other on vogue nite (...) everybody is competing against each other (EO, Cycle I).

In this sense, for these YMCSM, “houses” and “cliques” can be seen as a mechanism to deal with the isolation and discrimination that come from not only “white society” but also their ethnic/racial communities and most importantly their own families due to their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Intimacy and Sex in Public spaces

One of the major problems that LGBT youth face is the limited – and many times nonexistent – possibilities to express publicly their feelings and emotions due to the stigma and homophobia toward sexual minorities. In this sense, flirting and courtship among same-sex people has to be a hidden and secret activity, only allowed in the

marginalized areas of the city. This situation increases the vulnerability of LGBT youth, and also places these young people and adolescents at risk of engaging in risky sexual behavior.

As described above, the weather plays a prominent role in people's activities and social interactions in open public spaces. It can influence people's presence in the area. A cold night that discourages social activities in parks and piers can be the best environment for sexual intimacy. During daytime, the crowd makes it difficult for someone to have sexual intimacy in places such as the Pier or the open spaces of Central Park. At night on the Pier, the illumination is subtle, and there are usually no guards or police, which also helps for different kinds of sexual intimacy. During cold nights, the presence of tourists, straight people, and people who are exercising diminishes considerably. On these nights, most of the people around the piers are groups of LGBT young people, mainly Latinos and Blacks, and those who are looking for sex, selling drugs or involved in sex work:

(It) seems no straight people here... mostly gay men, very few lesbians (...) there were two transgender, they look [like] sex workers, going down (...) there are no cops or pier police tonight (...) old guys looking for sex (...) the usual drug dealer too (...) Some people look like there are coming from work (...) coming here for sex (EO, Cycle I).

However, while cold weather causes the amount of people who are hanging around in public spaces to decline, this partial emptiness also offers the best environment for sexual intercourse:

There are spots that are just empty enough to have any sexual interaction and since there is hardly any security around, it is quite possible to do so (...) The possible reason for the emptiness tonight is due to the weather (...) The pier is chilly with the breeze (...) it's dark and empty making the pier very viable to sexual engagements. There are no park police so anyone can feel free to do anything they wish (EO, Cycle I).

Even though the punishment for sex in public spaces is severe, cruising in the Rambles of Central Park is still a common practice. There is not a single pattern or profile of people in the Rambles. Some of them meet in other places in the park and then go to the Rambles for sex, while others go directly to the Rambles to find someone:

(There is) a wooden cruising area in the middle of Central Park (It is 6pm) Lots of trees and benches. On the floor there are lubes and used condoms (...) there are a couple of young people and a lot of older people (...) some people meet before and come here to have sex (...) everybody is walking back and forth looking for people to "hook up". People bushes are having sex and "hooking up". Most people are alone meeting strangers. Some guys were arguing about having sex with some guy and crushed with him (...) (in the rambles) men going into the bushes or behind the rocks to pleasure themselves (...) man masturbating in the bathroom stalls (...) men touching another guy's penis (...) lots of men just keep walking in

circles around the rambles. A couple sitting on benches by the water just talking to one another (...) many condom wrappers around the floor along with tissue (EO, Cycle I).

In terms of cruising in in-door public spaces such as the Escuelita and Neutralzone, these places are basically to pick someone up rather than to have a sexual encounter. Moreover, the club environment intensifies the need to find someone for intimacy and in later hours, choices to find someone dwindle and many guys end up with the ones “available” at that time:

People don’t go to Escuelitas to have sex there (...) you pick someone there and then go to other places (...) in parks you have the chance to pick someone and if you are adventurous and if the night allows, you can have sex there (while) clubs are more for finding someone for sex (...) is more aggressive, people are in a hurry to find someone (...) the more later the more desperate for sex and pick someone for sex (FG)

However, “foreplay” and “intense” intimacy are part of the club dynamics, and MSM youth engage in a variety of sexual intimacy within the limits that a crowded place can allow:

Very dark (in Escuelita) not so much lighting, black lights (...) a lot of the guys were by the bar on the right (...) a Latino couple is having a sort of foreplay, but these will be the limit, too much people to have sex here and the bathrooms are always supervised (...) (EO, Cycle I).

It is 12:15am (in Neutralzone) many sexual things going on (...) there is a really dark area when people go to smoke (...) a lot of more sexual things in the smoking area (...) people were having sex, some were getting oral, but most were anal sex (EO, Cycle I).

YMCSM relate that parks, the Internet, and LGBT clubs are the main venues for seeking sex partners. Interestingly, YMCSM from the focus groups consider the Internet as the main alternative for MSM youth who do not want to disclose their sexual identity. The Internet is the most “secure” option for people who are really in the “closet” and who want fast sex and have no interest in anything but sex:

Guys in the closet don’t want to take any risk to be identified or that someone can know them (...) internet is the best alternative to find someone for sex (...) it is anonymous, secure, discrete, and fast (...) is the best option for guys who only want sex (GF).

Even though Escuelitas and Clubhouse are predominantly spaces for people of colour, racial tension is not absent between Latinos and African Americans. Some

YMCSM have preferences for specific places based on ethnic identity, and those who cross these ethnic barriers might feel rejected for being outside of their ethnic group:

If you are Latino and go to Escuelitas you are more accepted because you are part of that community verses if you are Latino and go to Clubhouse, where it is predominately Black, problems can happen (...) if you go out, you might get caught, and need to be ready to explain yourself (GF).

Structural inequalities in the Lives of YMCSM

Even though the spread of HIV/AIDS and explicit forms of discrimination seem to have declined in cities such as New York, the concentration of HIV infection among racial minorities and the poor in countries such as the USA provides an alarming picture of the pandemic, particularly among YMCSM, who continue being disproportionately represented in the USA rates of HIV infection (Aguirre-Molina et al 2010, CDC 2010). In 2009, 73% of all diagnosed HIV Infections among young people aged 13-19 were among African American youth, even though Blacks represented only 17% of the population in that group. (CDC 2010). In a cross-sectional study in six cities in the USA, of the 16% of young MSM of colour (15-22 years) who were infected with HIV, almost all of them were unaware about their infection (MacKellar and Valleroy 2002), which shows the exposure and vulnerability that these young men experience in their everyday lives.

A more comprehensive approach to the understanding of the HIV pandemic within marginalized populations shows how regardless of the degree of development or prosperity of a particular country, the HIV/AIDS epidemic continues to affect the most marginalized populations who are experiencing diverse forms of *structural violence* due to factors such as social exclusion, poverty, racism, gender inequality, and sexual oppression (Farmer 2001; Parker 2002). For the Latino population, some scholars have demonstrated how the “cultural silence” regarding sex and non-normative sexualities within the Latino community has enormous impact in the increasing presence of HIV transmission among Latino men and women (Alonso and Koreck 1993, Diaz 1998). Various scholars have showed the association between HIV risk behavior and psychological or intra-personal factors among gay men and other MSM. Loneliness, anxiety, anger, low self-esteem, substance abuse, and depression are among the problems mentioned (Carballo-Diequez 2000; Ayala 2010)

This context of racial and class disparities for African-American and Latino gay men and men who have sex with men constitutes an adverse scenario for the young men who engage in sexual interactions in public venues. Scholars have demonstrated how having sex in certain gay-identified venues such as parks and engaging in “situational” sex for drugs or money may increase risk of HIV exposure (Malebranche 2003). This article explores four hidden risks these YMCSM are exposed to in public spaces: drug use, intergeneration sexual interactions, homelessness and sex work, and stigma and symbolic violence.

a. Drug Dealers and drug consumption

Several studies have shown how alcohol consumption and illegal drugs increase risk for HIV and other STIs. These substances impair judgment and increase risky sexual behaviour (Aguirre 2010). Men who have sex with men with a history of injection drug use represented an additional 3% of new HIV infections in USA in 2010. Additionally, an estimated 56% persons living with an HIV diagnosis in USA are MSM or drug users (CDC 2010). This picture shows how young drug users suffer an increased risk of becoming infected with HIV, particularly due to homelessness, sex work and unsafe conditions that lesser their possibility of incorporating safe sex in their sexual interactions.

Drug dealers were part of the scenario in all open public spaces explored in this study. They constituted a mixed group in terms of race, age, and sexual orientation. Some of them were young African-American and Latino men and women, but there were also white and adult drug dealers in these areas. According to the young people from this study, most of the dealers in these areas were not members of the groups who come to socialize in these places, but most of them were heterosexual men and women selling their commodities to the people in the area, particularly to young gay men:

(Drug dealers) can be Latinos, blacks, any race (...) some are Caucasian, some really cute guys, very masculine, hot (...) they are not necessarily gays, most of them are straight just trying to sell their stuff to gay guys (FG)

Even though Police and park police are becoming more predominant in controlling and patrolling the area, their presence does not stop these activities, and YMCSM face the risk of engaging either in selling drugs or consuming them:

There are a lot of park police circling and standing by the pier (...) two guys, one Black and another Latino ask[ed] me if I wanted weed (...) park police don't notice this (...) they just think we are friends (...) Some guys are selling cigarettes and drugs (...) they don't look like typical drug dealers (...) police don't notice that (...) they are just like us (EO, Cycle I).

Drugs are also available in the in-door public spaces such as pubs and discotheques. However, consumers need to know the "codes" of the places to discover these vendors and their activities:

There are not drug dealers here (Escuelita) as in the pier (...) if you want drugs, you need to look after. They (drug dealers) are not open here as in the piers (...) you need to know the business to find out (EO, Cycle II).

Drug dealers and the availability of drugs in places where YMSM socialize represent a serious risk for the youth, particularly if we consider the strong association between drug use and the risk of HIV infection.

b. Intergenerational sexual interactions

Intergenerational sexual relations may carry unequal power relations, such as the subordination of the younger partners due to their economic or physical inferiority. Additionally, some scholars have found how partner influence plays a key role in negotiating safe sex (MacKellar and Valleroy 2002), which is a key issue in an intergenerational relationship.

Younger gay men with older partners are the most vulnerable out of their cohort to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Morris et al. 1995). A study among Asian Pacific Islanders MSM from Los Angeles area found that older partners are more likely to engage in unprotected insertive anal intercourse, and also that older partners are more often identified as HIV-positive and injection drugs users (Choi et al. 2003). The authors suggest that HIV can be transmitted from older to younger MSM within this ethnic community. In this sense, sexual interactions between young and older persons can produce difficulty for the minors to incorporate sexual negotiation regarding safe sex. In this article we are including sexual interactions between YMCSM and older men as potentially vulnerable situations for HIV infection among these young people.

Older men are part of the public spaces where YMSM socialize. Whether in parks, piers or discotheques and clubs, men from different generations share social networks and spaces of socialization and entertainment:

There are a couple of older people walking around the pier (...) a group of young people are voguing and messing around (...) one older Caucasian asked the time, it is clear that he wants to socialize with the youth (EO, Cycle II)

(In the Escuelita) there are lots of people, all kind of races, sexualities (...) a lot of people started to come after 11:00 pm. There were a mixture of youth and adults (EO, Cycle I).

It is interesting also to note that both open and in-door public spaces create the opportunity for inter-racial encounters between youth and adults MSM.

It is 6:38pm (in the Escuelita) at this time there are lots of older white Caucasians, some of them are couples, holding hands, other are alone, looking for some younger Hispanic guys (...) the older people are mostly white and the few younger are minorities, Blacks, Hispanic (EO, Cycle I).

(In the pier) a very young guy ... he looks 17 years (old) with an older guy in their late thirties (...) a young Hispanic male about 17 with an older Black guy (about 38) holding hands (EO, Cycle II).

(In the rambles) a Black young guy walking around, back and forth, all the other men are older, mostly white (...) the young Black guy engaged in oral sex with an older guy (...) the Black man who is receiving from a white guy seems to be on the lookout (EO, Cycle I).

c. Homelessness and sex work

Several scholars have shown how many young gay men and young MSM are forced to leave their homes due to their sexual orientation. A study with homeless youth in Seattle found that young MSM ran away from their home more often than heterosexuals and experienced higher levels of physical victimization than their heterosexual peers (Cochran et al. 2002). This situation is particularly important taking into account that many adolescents do not have the experience or skills to access the labor market, hence MSM adolescents who are homeless are more likely to engage in survival sex than heterosexual homeless male youth (Garofalo and Harper 2003).

Young sex workers constitute part of the public space environment in New York City. Gay men and male-to-female transgender people are the most common YMCSM involved in these activities on the pier and in the parks. As most of these sex workers share the same race/ethnicity with other young MSM who are socializing in public spaces, and as all of them also come from the same low-income background, it is difficult for a non-“local” observer to identify sex workers.

YMCSM refer to these sex workers as the ones who are hanging alone, in the most isolated part of the public spaces, and also those who interact more openly with other white and older men:

A Latino guy sitting on the benches waiting for clients (...) he is walking back and forth to the restrooms to the piers (...) a white Caucasian talking to him and then both disappeared (EO, Cycle II)

Those guys [sex workers] are there [at the pier] to work, so they don't talk with other people who are hanging out, they are waiting for rich white guys (FG).

In the context of homophobia and family rejection, YMCSM from low-income families end up homeless and engage in sex work as the only alternative available to cope with isolation and lack of social support. This situation is even worse for transgender youth. As other scholars have demonstrated, many Latino male-to-female transgender youth who are expelled violently from home end up without support structures when they become homeless, hungry, ill, or reach the final stages of HIV infection (Padilla et al. 2007). It is important also to note that sex work does not always imply an economic exchange, but subtle and diverse ways of exchange of goods and commodities such as food, clothes, among other needs that these young men of colour have.

d. Stigma and symbolic violence

Several scholars have demonstrated physical and psychological violence that young MSM experience in school and their communities (Huebner et al. 2004). However, violence is not always exercised openly or under the effects of physical force. Many times

violence operates in “invisible” ways of oppression. Symbolic violence, understood as complex forms of coercion without the presence of physical force, implies the imposition and perpetuation of power and domination through “invisible” forces (Bourdieu 1999). This symbolic violence against sexual minorities is exercised even in so-called “liberal” urban and industrialized areas, and has enormous impacts in the self esteem of these populations. For instance, some young MSM mention the “abnormality” of their feelings and attractions towards other men due to this symbolic violence exercised by heterosexist messages in the media and social institutions (Harper and M Schneider 2003). This internalized homophobia has enormous impact in the possibilities of negotiating safer sex and more equal relationships.

A common fear for young MSM who are not openly gay to their families and communities is to be “discovered” in gay scenes. This situation is particularly important for young African-American MSM. Several studies have demonstrated how these men often face discrimination from white gay communities and rejection from their homophobic ethnic communities (Kraft et al. 2000; Earls 2003). In this sense, in-door public spaces such as clubs and discos are relatively safe environments for young MSM who do not want to disclose their homoerotic experiences (“DL” men):

The good thing about clubs is that it’s dark there, you don’t know anybody there. There’s no fear of running into anybody from work or school, so it feels like a more personal, better environment for guys who are not out of the closet (...) If you are DL boy, then you are going online. You are not going to find a real “DL boy” on the street or at a club (FG).

For these MSM, the Internet seems to be the most secure option to find someone without risking their identity as straight men:

If you are open with your sexuality, clubs are the safest place for you (but) if you are not I would say the internet because it is less risky. Internet and chat lines are the best for DL guys. You can find online pictures and faces available all the time (...) Right now it is one of the biggest networks out there. There are a lot of DL guys and married guys online, all types of things going on websites. So if someone is DL they would go there before they do anything in public (FG).

Young MSM of colour fear constantly physical and symbolic violence that threatens their everyday life. In focus groups, these young men express their anxiety due to the potential violence they can suffer at any moment and place. Danger and fear are part of the lives of these young MSM of colour.

At the pier you are wide out in the open. You come off the train with your gun and do whatever ... when police are not around (...) there are gangs of people in the pier and I have known people who have jumped a few people. [Guns] have come on the pier and cut people. [The pier] it’s not really guarded too much and there are not a lot of police influences that stop other activity because there’s gun usage (...) even the bathroom is a spot where someone could get jumped in (FG).

In-door public spaces are not totally safe environments for YMCSM; however, security guards seem to be less threatening than police:

The problem in Clubhouse [is that] you have all these people trapped in one room so they could easily get them or like when they go to the bathroom (...) you get searched, security guards are all up front and they're just talking. They are not really threatening like the police (FG).

The threat of potential violence is such a powerful fear that some scholars have demonstrated how gay men reported being more afraid of the threat of being attacked or arrested rather than the avoiding sexually-transmitted infections (Flowers 1999). Even though isolated public spaces can provide privacy, discretion, and the possibility to publicly express feelings toward a person of the same sex, parks and other safe places are becoming more and more controlled by the police, park rangers, sanitation workers, and even straight people who "invade" the area. Additionally, the growing gentrification of the city displaces YMCSM to isolated areas in the city; hence, security is becoming another issue for this population.

Open public spaces constitute for many young gay men and young MSM the only space available to socialize and have intimacy:

We look for gay-friendly parks, places where we can hang out, hold hands, meet with friends (...) places where we feel more secure and queer and gay people are OK (...) Not everybody can go to clubs and pay drinks and everything (...) parks are free; you don't pay to be there (FG).

These young men from disadvantaged communities face the threat of prosecution by police officers who patrol the area in search of illegal sexual encounters. This situation reinforces the vulnerability of young gay men who do not feel protected by the police:

You don't feel secure if police is in the park (...) they are not there to protect you (...) they can accuse you to be drug dealer, sex worker, or just disturbing other people (...) they protect everybody but not the queer and gay people (FG).

Young men learn how to play the "rules of the game" and avoid being caught by the police:

Police cars are patrolling the ground (...) a couple who was having a sort of foreplay stop their play until the police left the ground (EO, Cycle I).

Conclusion

This article shows some of the hidden risks faced by young men of colour who have sex with men in their social interactions in public spaces. It describes how four situations can be particularly risky for YMCSM: drug use, inter-generational sexual interactions,

homelessness and sex work, and the stigma and symbolic violence associated with these men's sexual orientation and racial background.

The criminalization of sexual intimacy in public spaces has become a common feature of most cities around the globe, and New York City is not absent from this trend. Even though heterosexual men and women also participate in sexual interactions in these public venues, it is usually sexual minorities who are the ones who are stigmatized and prosecuted. This article shows how for YMCSM, gay-friendly public spaces are usually their only possibility for socializing, strengthening social networks, sharing information, and reinforcing positive images about their sexual identities. In the case of YMCSM who do not have proper places to express their intimacy due to the stigma related to homosexuality, open public spaces are often the only available and affordable places to socialize.

Public spaces such as the Pier, Christopher Street, and other LGBT clubs are some of the few places in New York City where YMCSM who come from low-income families can socialize and express their identities. An increased presence of police and park rangers does not necessarily mean more security and safety for LGBT youth, but on the contrary, the presence of police threatens these young low-income men and women. They see police and park rangers as potential aggressors rather than authorities to trust.

In-door public spaces are not necessarily safe places for YMCSM. Homophobia and violence against these young men of colour can appear at any moment. In the case of venues close to busy urban areas, they provide a sensation of safety highly appreciated by these young people. In their own words, if something wrong happens in the club, its closeness to an open public space, which is always full of people, provides them a sense of protection and relief.

Prevention efforts geared toward young MSM of colour need to address the structural problems that these populations face in society. Racial tensions, unemployment, and housing problems, among other structural factors, intersect with homophobia, stigma, and discrimination. Any intervention that targets young populations needs to understand the nature of these men's social networks, their social interactions, and their search for identity and intimacy in the community.

A comprehensive HIV prevention program aimed at young MSM of colour should include the risk factors that these young men confront in their everyday life, from substance abuse to the necessity of housing for homeless youth and public spaces for socialization and intimacy. Effective intervention should not conceptualize risk in isolation but as a result of social and structural factors that shape these young MSM of colour's experiences.

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