'Between what is said and what is done': cultural constructs and young gay men's HIV vulnerability

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Abstract *This community-based, participatory inquiry mobilized peer ethnographers to observe their own scene and to conduct a series of focus groups in a project aiming to renew HIV prevention programming for young gay men. Ethnographers were provided training and guidance in qualitative research procedures in a process that evolved over months of observation and reflection. Eleven focus groups were conducted, totalling 71 participants. Local gay press was used to invite community feedback by voicemail. Pointed questions probed cultural sensitivities. Several layers of analysis were conducted to identify HIV vulnerabilities. Analysis of 'reality constitutive' talk revealed several culturally constructed HIV vulnerabilities, summarized as follows: individual—extraordinary challenges of personal development over gay men's life course; interpersonal—the unspoken grounds of gay relationships; social—the state of gay culture with respect to society and its local impact; structural— the transience of life in a west coast city. The use of peer ethnographers in developing knowledge for local HIV prevention generated significant data and had a transformative effect on all participants. Ethnographic field work and ethnomethodological analysis demonstrated considerable usefulness in uncovering cultural interpretations of young gay men's HIV vulnerabilities and what may be done about them.*

Introduction

The nexus of gay culture and HIV prevention is only beginning to be explored despite intense scrutiny over gay men's sexual behaviour during the last two decades. Many investigators have recognized the importance of cultural knowledge for the future of HIV prevention (Dowsett, 1996; Flowers, 1996; Kippax *et al.*, 1996; Meyers *et al.*, 1996; Parker *et al.*, 1999). One central problem, however, seems to have been conducting appropriate forms of research to uncover the influence of culture.

Following local urgencies that arose in 1997, we undertook a participatory, community-based, ethnographic study of young men's experience of being gay in Vancouver, an inquiry intentionally designed to probe the health context of gay culture. We initiated the project during a time of overriding uncertainty about the efficacy of our community level HIV prevention efforts and the capacity of behavioural science to inform solutions.

Local epidemiological findings, released to the press prior to their publication, appeared

to be showing that unprotected sex was on a dangerous increase among young gay men in Vancouver. Strathdee *et al.* (1998) reported that 40% of a sample of young men 18–30 years of age, participating in a local longitudinal cohort study, indicated having had unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) with a casual partner in the previous year.

Community prevention workers were caught by surprise when these data were released. Outreach workers at AIDS Vancouver, the largest HIV/AIDS community organization in the city, had long known that various segments of the gay population had either never adopted condoms, used them inconsistently, or negotiated unprotected sex in relationships. Local epidemiological findings suggested that younger gay men were rapidly becoming much less cautious about sexual risk with casual partners than previously believed.[1]

Given the state of alarm and uncertainty, the gap in knowledge about what was going on in the lives of young gay men seemed critical. Our intent was to fill the gap by systematically gathering knowledge about the real world of experience underlying the sexual statistics. Toward that effort, we designed our study to engage this youthful and emerging sexual culture on its own terms by mobilizing some of its members to consciously map its boundaries. The project's acronym, GMAP, Gay Men's Action Plan, was intentionally coined to denote the active knowledge gathering involved in this community HIV prevention initiative.

The project we undertook broke new paths by taking on interpretive ethnography and ethnomethodology as a guiding framework for community level participatory research.[2] In doing so, we embraced a social and cultural perspective in the search for embedded HIV vulnerabilities, instead of individual behavioural risks. We could not agree that a sudden, apparently 'elevated' incidence of unprotected sex among young gay men could be taken to be evidence of a gay community in 'relapse'. The cohort under study was composed of a new generation of gay men, young enough to be the children of most who had been actively involved in the earliest wave of HIV prevention efforts. From anecdotal accounts of outreach workers, we theorized that unprotected sex may have been developing more like a fad. We undertook this study, then, to uncover how changing sexual fashion may have been operative as a new form of risk in the local sexual culture.

To develop this knowledge, we began investigating cultural 'reality making' in the everyday lives of young gay men in their own local scene. Although it is not ordinary to think of it this way, men who experience same gender attraction are continuously engaged in practical work—moment by moment, day by day—in negotiating the terms of 'gay' sexual culture as a routine, taken-for-granted accomplishment. Everyday interaction with each other and with members of dominant society produces, manages and sustains the public sense of gay existence. Because such work goes unnoticed, so go the terms of changing fashion and the embedded vulnerabilities with them, somewhere at an indefinite point between what is said publicly and what is actually done.

Methodology

The very existence of a gay community is commonly questioned amongst young gay men's outreach workers, despite the usual urban landmarks of a gay street scene replete with bars, coffee shops and stores (see Dowsett, 1998). Some other way of knowing the collective experience of gay men needed to be engaged. In following the expanding literature of qualitative sociology, we adapted interpretive ethnography to the purpose of leading a group of young gay men through this investigation, without reference to the gay community per se, but to their own network of acquaintances. In the sense that they were studying each other, we thought of them as peer ethnographers.

Our team of young ethnographers self-selected from AIDS Vancouver's general pool of volunteer gay men's prevention outreach workers. Most had little experience in field studies. Although we worked closely on strategy in an iterative process as co-investigators, we adopted a background stance with the ethnographers, appearing only when called for or to advance to the next stage (see Kippax, 1997). To build inquiry capacities, we provided the team with extensively planned workshops on ethnographic research procedures including participant observation, asking good questions, moderating focus groups and interpreting transcribed data.

We designed the study to include data gathering from several sources. The community researchers were encouraged to make notes of their own observations wherever it seemed appropriate. Each meeting offered opportunities to reflect and consider the next stage of work. The centre of the inquiry, however, was a series of taped discussions held in the peer ethnographers' own homes to create an informal atmosphere for everyday talk. A third source of data came from a 'community question' published biweekly in the city's gay press. Community questions were based on topics arising from the discussion groups. Responses were documented using a voicemail system.

One key intervention with the ethnography team was to help formulate questions for the discussion groups. We began with the idea that we would not inquire about sex directly, seeking instead to learn more about life surrounding sex, questions that would provide a better understanding of the whole situation of young gay life in Vancouver. First attempts produced a very formal interview schedule. So we appeared one evening to loosen up impressions about how socially stimulating ethnographic research might be (see Denzin, 1997). We explored various ways in which focus groups could be considered a form of home entertainment. That opened the way to questions pointedly intended to stir emotional reactions.

If you were going to make a movie about gay Vancouver, would it be a comedy or a melodrama?

Love at first sight is just lust isn't it?

Monogamy is bullshit, right?

How would you react if your best buddy told you your partner is positive?

What's your idea of romance? Hot sex? Or, candlelight and wine?

So you've just won a major lottery, what now?

Recruiting participants for the focus groups was an issue at first. Some peer ethnographers feared having to deal with explosive emotional situations such as HIV status disclosure by their acquaintances or simmering past conflicts between ex-partners. Others felt less specific fears about the potential for the session to flop without much interest from participants. The first round of discussions exploited snowball tactics to recruit from personal networks. The team then elected to recruit more men with some specific characteristics. A second series sought young men who regularly frequented raves, dance parties and clubs. Another recruited serodiscordant couples.

In all, 11 sessions were held, with a total of 71 participants. All participants signed consent forms. Each session was taped and transcribed without personal identification. On average, about 300 responses to a series of 12 community questions were received via voicemail, every two weeks. We arranged text from the transcripts to examine both differences and similarities in our groups of gay men. We also compared frequency counts from responses to the community questions with what we were learning from the transcripts.

Analysis

The discussions that developed from our question frame were of such intensity that the potential for multiple readings of the transcriptions was immediately apparent. As such, the analytical procedures involved in how we exposed embedded HIV vulnerabilities from those emotionally rich sessions bear detailed explanation.

We introduced the peer ethnographers to basic procedures with which to recognize and extract 'significant talk' in order to consider it reflectively. Their first reading accounted for the way various groupings of men encountered the session, the questions being put to them and their reactions to each other. In this way our peer readers were able to develop a useful description of the local culture: what gets talked about and how.

At this stage, however, it was apparent that our interest in culturally embedded HIV vulnerabilities would not have been advanced much by that description alone. Recognizing that there were limitations to what we could expect from our peer ethnographers, we decided that a deeper investigation of the data would be worthwhile, given its intense qualities. In that vein, we undertook another phase of analysis that moved to consider how gay reality was being 'talked into being' by the men in the groups in the language they were using to story their everyday lives.[3]

Reading transcripts for embedded reality-making requires setting aside or bracketing meaning in order to see more clearly how words, concepts and images are being used to produce, manage and sustain the lived reality of the speakers. Analytical interest—culturally embedded HIV vulnerabilities, for example—is focused on the socially constitutive elements of the spoken text instead of the apparent meaning to the speakers themselves.

Analytical bracketing thus opens up alternative readings. One possibility is to examine turn-taking in conversations in order to expose how speakers share or reserve power in the reality making of the occasion. Another possibility is to examine the underlying 'rules of order' embedded in talk to expose the basis upon which reality is being constructed. The latter approach seemed best suited to our interest in embedded vulnerabilities and the resources we had available in the transcripts of the discussion groups. With this in mind, the analytical objective turned to isolating and rearranging 'reality constructs' of gay life in Vancouver in order to interpret underlying vulnerabilities of local cultural practice. For example:

> As soon as we realize we're gay, we have to sort of live by whatever's already been created for us in the gay world.

This text sample illustrates how an otherwise taken-for-granted phrase—*live by whatever's already been created for us in the gay world*—functions as a reality-making construct. Without noticing it, the speaker provides the cultural 'rules of order'—'live by whatever's been created for us'—behind the apparent reality of the 'gay world'. In the free play of discussion this remark would have been merely transitional, intended only to set up another observation. Yet, when isolated from the transcribed text, the embedded cultural script becomes more obvious. We created an inventory of these reality-making features from the mass of transcribed text, but this first required the development of a unique coding system.

An instrument originally introduced to create field assessments of HIV vulnerabilities from ethnographic observations of urban drug cultures adapted particularly well to this task (Rhodes, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). The instrument consists of a four-celled matrix that divides experience into four reality perspectives: individual, interpersonal, social and structural. Considering the contribution that each perspective makes to the totality of lived experience provides a useful way to examine how cultural reality is being structured by ordinary,

everyday talk. The 'individual' perspective sees cultural experience from an inner vantage and accounts for how and what reality comes across to the person. The 'interpersonal' perspective describes experience between individuals. The 'social' perspective references experience of generalized others in the family, at work or in the community. The 'structural' perspective concerns experience with society, institutions and the environment.

During our reading of our transcripts, we realized that coding them according to these reality perspectives would be an innovative way to set up the procedures by which to uncover HIV vulnerabilities from our discussions with young gay men. The sorting tasks demanded by the matrix actually helped to bracket the meaning of each talk sample in order to focus on its reality perspective. Statements that stood out as poignant comments—the witty, the pointed, the overblown ways of putting things—often turned out to be rich veins of cultural constructs.

Findings

Individual vulnerabilities: extraordinary challenges of personal development over gay men's life course

The influence of culture on personal experience is rarely noticed because so much of ordinary talk is taken for granted. From the vantage point of reality production, however, it is possible to account for the way in which people negotiate challenges of personal existence interpersonally and socially by paying attention to the way experience is configured by talk.

In our study, young men described having to accept that their increasing consciousness of same-sex attraction was at odds with social convention in one sense and perfectly normal in another. The vertigo feelings this produces were felt to be strangely compelling, but few cultural milestones were evident by which to measure progress through life:

> Jeez, it's so hard. None of us knows where we're going.

The men in our study talk about their life course experiences as if the work involved in negotiating gay sexuality through socially expected stages of adult growth and change goes completely unnoticed. Yet, arguably gay experience is constituted by the central challenge of negotiating sexual difference safely in one cultural context and sexual competence safely in another. Our gay men described their inner growth and maturity as being thwarted by their encounters with this isolated, thorny process, followed then by a constant stream of difficult personal challenges throughout gay life:

> Your experience as a gay man is the attraction at whatever level for the same sex and all the implications that has on our lives. And in most cases, it means a childhood or an adolescence of hiding, of fear. All of this is so involved. It's certainly common to most gay men, definitely the feeling of being different, that feeling of being part of a minority. And that I think definitely affects your life strongly enough to say that there is such a thing as a gay culture, because it's obviously a shared experience.

These men pointed out that dating begins for most people in their teens but for gay men in their twenties. The consequence, by their own reckoning, is an early adulthood preoccupied by breaking patterns of personal repression and expected societal codes in order to experience gay existence:

> It's a whole new world. It's a very open world. I think most of us grasp it with both arms. And then some of us grow out of that. And others maintain it much longer.

'Coming out'—the process of accepting one's gay identity—complicates growing up, as these men put it, by the conflicted way in which most have to negotiate the social challenges of acceptance in the sexual market, in the family and in society without much psychological or even social support—beyond a 'handful of dysfunctional friends' as one man put it. The few apparent guideposts produce an inner experience of careening through life, learning the ropes of gay existence by raw encounter:

> When I was younger, I fell in love so many times. I moved in so many times. I thought it was forever so many times. But you know, it just didn't happen that way.

HIV prevention for gay men has given little attention to developmental themes; patterns of personal, sexual, and relationship change that occur in various episodes of adult life, where HIV vulnerabilities may either intensify or decline. Certainly, the early phase of coming out is a critical period of vulnerability because of its intensity. Entering gay life is often recalled as a euphoric moment in its own right (Jalbert, 1998), even without the influence of drugs or alcohol. Yet, it is not the only moment. As gay men mature, as relationships or careers change, the life course imposes new challenges: a renewed negotiation of sexual difference in society and inclusion in gay sexual culture at the same time:

> I hope to be happy and in love one day. I know for sure that I'll be a more complete person by that time. So that's what keeps me going every day, that continuous, endless amount of growth that you do.

Exposing such developmental challenges may reframe the way in which gay men recognize personal HIV vulnerabilities, not by sexual acts alone but by significant points along the life course.

Interpersonal vulnerabilities: the unspoken grounds of gay relationships

Nowhere is the vulnerability of reality negotiation more clear than in the formation of gay relationships. It has been shown that gay men may dispense with condoms early in relationships as a way of demonstrating love. In so doing they often fail to confirm the serostatus of their partner (Elford *et al.*, 1999; Hays *et al.*, 1997). Reality negotiation, in other words, remains incomplete. What is hardly acknowledged is gay men's fascination with same-sex love, romance and relationships and how acting on these motives may provide a context for HIV risks:

> I'll be monogamous one day. The sooner the better. It's waiting that's hell.

The men in our study talk about desire for both monogamous relationships and casual sex at the same time as if it is the central problem of their lives. Working out this conflict produces not only intrapsychic stress but also interpersonal tensions amongst networks of acquaintances.

> I'd be like. 'OK, who's the actual person that he wants to sleep with or is it just half of the town', right?

The life of the single and adventurous gay man is always available but the emphasis in this reality is lust over love:

> Love is really the essence of what we're about. And lust? Lust is a great attraction, great feeling, you know: to 'lust' after someone. But it never lasts.

The focus of same-sex love is also a greatly overlooked motivation in HIV prevention.[4]

Nevertheless, love seems a key defining element separating gay culture from other male-male sex. The vulnerabilities underlying love in gay life, according to the men in our study, seem to lie in learning the rules of same-sex relationships through serial partners, with few positive role models, in an era of ethical relativity:

> I stayed for like a year and a half. The sex was amazing. But, I mean, to motivate this person to work! This was totally the wrong person. I know it now and it took me a whole year to get over it.

Negotiating safe yet unprotected sex in gay relationships entered the literature of HIV prevention when it became clear to ethnographers that gay men had already constructed it (Kippax *et al.*, 1996). The problem, however, is in negotiating such a complex reality interpersonally. Consider monogamy, for example, by definition an exclusive sexual partnership. The men in our study, by contrast, talked about 'degrees' of monogamy, apparently without intending any irony:

> So long as I don't take the guy for dinner beforehand, I'm being monogamous. If I only take the guy for dinner, then it's a business deal.

The true definition of monogamy, say the men in our study, is 'up to the couple'. And yet the terms may never be explicitly discussed. Moreover, reminiscent of Bill Clinton's public denials, there is evidently a mutual silence between what is conceived as 'sex' and 'not sex':

> Some guys consider jerking off and sucking off somebody else OK, but as long as I don't have anal sex, I'm being monogamous.

Facing one's boyfriend after an external tryst is a deciding moment: trust in love and acknowledge lust or say nothing?

> Like some people are comfortable with 'Don't ask, don't tell'. Which is one thing that seems to be very prevalent in my experience. And the other one is where people are completely open and honest about what they're up to. Which is probably the one that I appreciate a little bit more, because at least you know what's happening.

HIV prevention research has already uncovered the increased risk of transmission in serodiscordant gay relationships (Hickson *et al.*, 1998; Kippax *et al.*, 1998). The apparent vulnerability is sex between the partners, but how the relationship is constituted may involve even greater risks:

> There's the HIV risk to the negative person and there's the risk of being in an open relationship with a negative person bringing all kinds of other things home. I mean, we did. At the beginning of the relationship we did go through the clap thing. I hadn't had anything like that for years and years and all of a sudden, you're in a relationship, and gotta go get antibiotics for VD.

The popular image of an independent gay man creates the impression that relationships get in the way of gay life. Although this stereotype was certainly represented in the men of this study, it was not the central element. Love, lasting relationships and finding the right man to go through life with dominated the discourse, though often wistfully. HIV vulnerabilities appear, in this light, to be embedded more in the way the desire for love and relationship get talked about in gay sexual culture than by the sex itself.

Social vulnerabilities: the state of universal gay culture and its local influence

Interpreting the HIV vulnerabilities embedded in the social discourse that constitutes local culture invokes at least two points of view: one on the intersection of gay culture with society, another on the internal order of local gay life and its connection to gay life in the world at large:

> It's not about gay this, gay that, but gay people doing what everybody does.

The men in this study relate their experience of society by the way they have witnessed change, in their own lives and by what they know of it from older acquaintances. The apparent contrast with the past makes gay life of the present visible.

> In the last election in this riding, every candidate from every party, was openly gay. I mean, it wasn't an issue any more. They took the issue away completely, which is very interesting, because there was a time when that would have been shocking.

Societal changes have made gay life less oppressive than before the AIDS crisis, in Canada at least, but they fall short of ensuring gay existence is truly supported. The resulting dissonance between sexual cultures continues to be an important source of HIV vulnerability for gay men:

> The way society looks at gays and lesbians has a huge impact on the way we look at ourselves. Homophobia is internalized in each of us and the homophobia is outside of us as well, in the community at large. That affects the way we live our lives, which, for some people, affects them a great deal.

Within gay culture, change is apparently visible as well, particularly by the way in which sexual identity is shifting as a cultural boundary:

> To me there's more and more men where their sexuality is gay and they are not totally defined by being gay. That's where the big change is coming. Before, you had to identify gay because you were coming out from the way you were brought up, or you were just in the closet.

Even so, social relations in gay culture can be as unsupportive as any in society. These men described deep feelings of isolation in Vancouver in terms of loneliness, difficulty breaking-in, making friends and forming bonds that would support developing the healthy relationships they desire. The local gay culture, by the presence of so many experiencing this reality, ultimately defines what is or can be experienced generally. The HIV vulnerability of this situation is the 'power differential' between those in and those who want in:

> You can look basically at my large team of dysfunctional friends and say: 'Is it positive that I know these people at all? Or would it be better if I were still living in the suburbs with everybody else?'

Universal gay culture apparently exerts considerable influence on representations in the local scene's clubs and bars but there is a strong suspicion among the men in our study that the image is commercially driven and devoid of meaning other than exploitation. Young men enter the scene's bars and baths trying to find a relationship and end up losing perspective along with sobriety.

> We're out at the bar every night and whether it's one of those nights where we're getting completely smashed or whatever. You usually have at least a drink while you're there. Usually it ends up being totally smashed though.

Disbelief in a coherent gay community was commonplace among the men in this study. That may well be a sign of generational fragmentation or a more or less concrete observation of the actual condition of Vancouver's gay community.

Structural vulnerabilities: the transience of life in a west coast city

Vancouver, is for many young men, a 'gay mecca' owing to its mild climate (at least by Canadian standards) and 'left coast' reputation. But the illusion of a coherent gay culture, by the mere presence of so many gay men, soon gives way to a pervasive sense of disconnection:

> In Vancouver things are connected but not in any central way, more a random series of events.

In this way, Vancouver is also seen as a 'tent city' populated by people on the run from restrictive families, towns or the past. Everyday life seems at once full of possibility, but, as well, a sense of fatal instability:

> It's got a very vibrant attitude. It's very exciting in that way, right, but in the same way, it's got a very temporary attitude. People aren't willing to commit to projects or people, right. Because no-one knows how long they're staying.

The west-end 'gay ghetto' is a welcome first home but in time the close proximity of everything gay becomes restrictive and disturbing in itself:

> I know guys who haven't left the west end for like six months. They do everything with the same people every day. They sit around drinking coffee all day, do their drugs and start scandals and live scandals. I'd call it a soap opera, because that's what everyone sees it as.

In this ghetto, suites are small and rents are the highest in Canada. Our men feel forced into roommate situations they prefer not to have. They point out that there are few community venues outside of a small number of bars. The only other choices then are coffee shops or restaurants. As one man describes it, 'if you don't like the bar you can always go to the pub'.

> Occasionally I go downtown and see my friends in the club scene and watch them slowly get fucked up by the scene they're in. It's done nothing for them. And none of them have broken out of it. I can't find anything else. And I can't find anybody who's not involved in it.

Structural contingencies like these might at first appear superficial in so far as HIV vulnerabilities are concerned, except that they narrow the choices of individual lives, particularly those who do not drink or fit the predominant gay image. For those who do participate, drinking is almost inevitable. The lack of alternative social venues forces gay culture into bar culture. The only so called 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Community Centre' was so thoroughly dismissed by the men in our study that they ignored it as an option for development, even though it is situated on the main street of the gay village. One of the oft-repeated ideas about what to do with a lottery win was to build a cultural centre, open to anyone but defined by gay men.

Structural conditions such as these are not completely immutable, though they may appear that way at any given moment. Gay men of Vancouver are only beginning to be aware of the impact of these conditions in connection to their own well-being.

Discussion

Any generalizable conclusions that might be reached from this interpretation of a local sexual culture are obviously limited by the very locality of the project. We have, however, recognized some themes in common with other studies of gay sexual culture, notably the diverse impressions about the existence of gay community observed by Dowsett (1998). Nevertheless, it seems possible that studies of cultural constructs embedded in everyday talk, conducted in gay centres worldwide, may produce not only further points of comparison, but possibly a resurgence of interest in HIV prevention for gay men through collaborative inquiry.

For our own part, having recognized these embedded cultural vulnerabilities, we now see a range of possible adjustments to practice in HIV prevention for gay men of Vancouver that we hardly would have recognized before our research began. Certainly, one of our significant insights concerns the vulnerabilities involved in negotiating various episodes of gay men's life course experiences. Now that their importance is clearer, life course vulnerabilities can be addressed in the content of community prevention programmes. The isolated learning that gay men go through in serial relationships also seems a fertile ground to explore with popular education. This initiative would focus on recognizing how everyday talk in gay life affects interpersonal communication in gay relationships. One of the community development strategies we have recognized from this study would be to mobilize Vancouver's gay men to bring about their desires for structural change in order to transform their social conditions.

Considering the original aim of our study, we did not find evidence that sexual risk was increasingly the fashion in the culture of young gay men in Vancouver. To the contrary, we found that sexual safety remains highly valued. What do appear to be operative, however, are cultural practices in gay life that set up conditions where sexual safety may be compromised, occasionally and coincidentally. The unspoken negotiation of safety within gay relationships appears, from our evidence at least, to be a key source of HIV vulnerability for young gay men in Vancouver. Experimenting with desire for both monogamy and casual sex at the same time seems to be the operative fashion of this sexual culture and consequently it is this reality we feel needs to be addressed in HIV prevention rather than predictors of individual risk-taking such as prior sex abuse. We are now proceeding with survey research to determine the extent to which our findings are representative.

It seems worth noting here that the epistemological divide between individual and cultural interpretations of HIV risk needs critical re-examination.[5] Both approaches are necessary for a complete understanding of the contemporary situation with HIV prevention. It may well be difficult to reconcile two apparently divergent modes of understanding because the disciplines involved are so demanding in their own right. Recognizing how easily sexual behaviour may be sensationalized, however, makes this imperative. Perhaps as more cultural studies come forward, behavioural studies will adopt new points of focus. Cognitive behavioural interventions, for example, have shown usefulness in helping men reframe their responses to what might be considered culturally constructed situations of risk reality making (Dockerell *et al.*, 1999).

In the meantime, the development of collaborative inquiry using ethnography in the field and ethnomethodology in analysis to uncover the HIV vulnerabilities of a local sexual culture has shown itself, in this study of Vancouver gay men, worthy of pursuit elsewhere. It is not an easy path. In our case, the organization of community field work and subsequent analysis took two years to accomplish. Interested communities might well take heed to ensure that adequate resources and personnel are available to bring their studies from the field through analysis and back to prevention practice. The rewards are worth the effort. What we

witnessed was a palpable restoration of confidence amongst community prevention workers, a renewed sense of solid direction for prevention practice and a desire to take on more extensive challenges with community research.

Notes

[1] Closer analysis of the published paper later exposed that its reporting rhetoric had the effect of overstating the extent of unprotected sex with casual partners in Vancouver. In conducting their analysis, the authors set aside data from those who reported UAI in relationships, in order to compare two groups: 'risk takers' reporting UAI with casual partners and 'non-risk-takers' reporting condom use. Subsequent analysis of the resulting sub-sample found a positive correlation between risk with casual partners and a prior history of sex abuse. This finding was seen to be significant. But the paper's discussion went on to describe the extent of the problem by referencing 40% of the sub-sample instead of 23% of the cohort. Press headlines and broadcast news claimed unsafe sex figures had doubled over the previous year. That situation was made worse when the principal investigator stated, during an interview on national television, that we were witnessing 'a relapse to unsafe sex in Vancouver's gay community'. The data, however, had nothing to say about how or why this relapse may have occurred.

[2] We have made use of two strains of qualitative research that are related but have different orientations to field work and the data it generates. Ethnography seekes to develop rich descriptions of social reality as it appears to an observer. The focus of ethnomethodology, by contrast, is on describing *how* social reality is being produced by its members (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995; 1997; Gubrium *et al.*, 1994).

[3] The epistemological orientation of this analysis (see Darroch & Silvers, 1982; Schutz, 1967) involves a special way of interpreting word data which is crucial to appreciate for its consequences in theory construction. The interpretive focus is on reality-making tactics embedded in talk and not on the meaning of talk per se. This positions talk as an analytical resource not as the source of 'emerging' theory (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). As such, investigators are made more than casually aware of their own subjective actions in representing talk for the sake of theory.

[4] We were particularly interested in one of the community questions on this subject: 'What would your ultimate sexual experience include?' Response: 53% candles, music, one man; 35% leather, toys, men; 12% hot guy, no breakfast.

[5] Although epidemiological research has attempted to investigate the social context of risk behaviour, the analytical orientation of the field continues to place the onus on individuals for outcomes like inconsistent use of condoms (Kippax, 1997). While 'predictors' such as prior histories of sexual abuse (Strathdee, 1997) may well be solidly represented in the data, the epistemological position ends up holding 'risk-takers' accountable for the injuries of society (McKinlay, 1992). In the same way, an untenable mix of system-level social 'determinants', with self-reported instances of unprotected sex, captivates analytical attention at the expense of a true analysis of sex as a socially interactive experience.

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