

ALCOHOL AND THE SOCIAL SCRIPTING OF UNSAFE SEX AMONG BLACK MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIPS

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KEY FINDINGS AND MESSAGES

- Study findings suggest that many MSM, including those who do and do not identify as gay, routinely frequent places of alcohol consumption to socialize and look for potential sex partners.
- Some gay identified (GI) MSM prefer to have non-gay identified (NGI) MSM for sexual partners and vice versa, and often seek to exchange a variety of favors for sex with them.
- Alcohol consumption plays a key role in facilitating sexual encounters among MSM, and increases the chances of unsafe sexual practices.
- Although MSM understand the need for safer sex practices, consistent and often heavy alcohol use during social interactions leading to sex is likely to trump adherence to this need.

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BACKGROUND

- Whereas the link between alcohol use and unsafe sex is well researched, studies of the underlying processes have not been exhaustive.
- Little is known about how local contexts and understandings of same-sex sexuality and the use of alcohol influence unsafe sexual practices among MSM in South Africa.
- This study examined the role that alcohol may play in influencing MSM's unsafe sexual practices and their attitudes.
- The theory of sexual script (after Mullens et al. 2011) was adapted to frame data analysis.

METHODS

- In-depth interviews were conducted with 81 Black MSM from Tshwane: 20 participants each from three townships and 21 from the fourth.
- Age range: 20-39 years
- Having engaged in oral, anal, or masturbatory sex with at least one man in the preceding year was an eligibility criterion.
- Regarding alcohol use, participants were asked about, inter alia; reasons for drinking alcohol, whether people always buy their own (alcoholic) drinks, how drinking affects men's sexual behavior, and whether alcohol use interferes with practicing safer sex.
- Using ATLAS.ti software, coders independently applied a set of a priori concept-driven codes to the interview transcripts. Initially each transcript was coded by two coders. After consensus was reached about application of the codes, the remaining transcripts were coded by one coder.
- The alcohol use code covered: "Where, when, and how MSM use alcohol (and what kind of alcohol)."
- The Transactional/Exchange sex code covered: "Descriptions of observations, experiences, or cultural norms related to the exchange of sex for money, gifts, alcohol, or drugs. Include who initiates the exchange, where it takes place, what social norms guide the transaction, etc." This code also included "practices of buying alcoholic drinks for sexual partners that may be less overt forms of exchange."
- The unsafe and safer sex practices code covered: "Descriptions of safer sex practices, including use of condoms. Also included in this code are instances where informants did not practice safer sex and the reasons why, as well as their perceptions about other MSM's practice of safer sex."

RESULTS

In the context of the study, social scripting focuses on shared understandings regarding alcohol use and sexual practices among MSM. The results showed that the link between alcohol use and unsafe sex practices can be examined in terms of the following social scripts: **self-presentation**, **exchange of favors/negotiating sex**, and **alcohol consumption and its perceived effects**.

SELF-PRESENTATION

Creating the impression that one has better financial resources helps facilitate sexual encounters between MSM. The ability to afford buying drinks for sexual partners creates desire and opportunity for a sexual encounter even where little would otherwise exist.

"And they are coming looking fly, wearing Carvela shoes and Levi's etc, with a swagger walk, not lookable, but fuckable... you'd have sex with him... that guy who is not really your type but you'll check, you end up doing that and you would end up doing that at the wrong place, the wrong times without protection. And that has its own consequences. I mean I have lost quite a number of people..." – GI MSM talking of potential NGI MSM casual sex partners

EXCHANGE OF FAVORS/NEGOTIATING SEX

Casual sex among MSM is likely to revolve around exchange of favors. Alcohol is often the medium of, and underpins, transactions between MSM intending to have sex, often after the first encounter. Both GI and NGI are likely to use alcohol to facilitate a sexual encounter:

"Ja, like the one I told you about, if I get him to [the venue] or somewhere, I will tell him, 'Buy me four or five' or 'Buy me drinks, if you buy me, I am going home with you,' such things and he is going to buy me, and if I don't want him I'll just dodge him." – GI MSM explaining how to exploit the social script of exchange of alcohol for sex

"Or you'll probably buy them, not telling them that I'm actually expecting something in return, but then come late bells then they'll say to you, 'Look, bought you those drinks so we're going to my place'." – NGI MSM illustrating how the social script around exchanging alcohol for sex may be used

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AND ITS PERCEIVED EFFECTS

Alcohol was seen as both the cause and excuse for transgressing safer sex social norms. Unprotected sex was both attributed to and condoned through excessive alcohol consumption:

"[Alcohol] does not affect your sexual behavior, it just pushes you to do what you are afraid to do. I would say so."

"I think drinking makes men horny."

"You see when you are drunk you need more men."

"You are less aware of stuff that you do like if you [were] sober, most of the time you will not sleep with a guy without using a condom, and then if you are drunk, you kind of, you know, sometimes, that is why I prefer not to have sex when I am drunk. Because most of the time we will not have that much of a willpower, like you just go."

CONCLUSIONS

- Alcohol plays a key role in the social scripting of norms around sexual encounters.
- These scripts inform how casual sex is negotiated, and how pleasure is anticipated and experienced in the context of safer sex norms.
- The co-existence of awareness of the adverse effects of excessive alcohol use and the central role that alcohol consumption plays in the exchange of favors among MSM points to a complex interplay between alcohol use and unsafe sexual practices.
- Empowering MSM to re-script the relationship between alcohol and desire is important to developing effective social and behavioral HIV interventions.

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