

TAVERNS, BARS AND SHEBEENS: SEXUAL RISK AND HIV WITHIN HOMOSOCIAL SPACES AMONG BLACK MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIPS

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KEY MESSAGES

- Little is known about how homosocial and 'gay friendly' spaces in South African townships influence HIV and sexual risk among Black men who have sex with men (MSM).
- There are few public places for MSM in townships to find sexual partners and no places that cater to exclusively gay men.
- These places include taverns, bars and shebeens (formerly unlicensed bars/clubs where alcohol is sold, now defunct), with predominantly male clientele of mixed sexual orientation.
- These venues therefore fulfill a critical function in the township's sexual economy: They are among the few places where, in the facilitating context of alcohol consumption, MSM socialise and where gay and straight men can find partners for homosexual sex.
- Owing to their structural characteristics, taverns, bars, and shebeens can contribute to sexual risk. However, venues could be used to promote safer sex practices.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Commercial Sites

- Observations were conducted at 16 different commercial sites in 4 townships (Atteridgeville, Mamelodi, Soshanguve, & Hammanskraal) in Tshwane, South Africa.
- Venues were known to be popular destinations for MSM, but none of the venues catered exclusively to gay men.
- Ethnographers worked in pairs and visited each site four times, with each visit lasting 3-5 hours on weekends (Friday and Saturdays).

Procedures

- Two ethnographers prepared separate structured observation reports, resulting in two complementary accounts of each visit.
- **Observation reports included:** descriptions of venue and clientele; clientele interactions, including expression of romantic or sexual interest; and on-site alcohol consumption.

Analysis

- Two pairs of coders used ATLAS.ti to apply a set of a priori codes to reports; then consolidated their coding to produce one reconciled report. The analysis concentrated on: venue descriptions; patron interactions; expressions of romantic or sexual interest; on-site alcohol consumption; and exchange sex.

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FINDINGS

1) The characteristics of the places

- Homosocial spaces allow for interactions among homosexuals and heterosexuals, without being formally branded as such and supported by relative anonymity.
- Allow for fluid, constant flow of clientele from surrounding areas.
- Alcohol sold at all sites.
- Physical layout, dim lighting and darkened areas, allow for intimacy and anonymity, and possibilities of secret, casual or transactional, risky sex.
- Condoms and lubricants were rarely observed by ethnographers and not freely available in most venues.

Ethnographers' descriptions of venues

Indeed we also had a discussion with Thabo (early 30s), who happens to be in the employ of [the tavern]. He told us that there is quite a significant number of straight men who sleep with gay men in Soshanguve in general and at [that tavern] in particular.

At approximately 1:00 am the lighting at the back was reduced. I thought that the electricity failed, but apparently around that time the lights normally go dim for people to feel free to do 'whatever' they want to do before the pub closes at 2:00. [...] As the lighting is lowered or dimmed, even our MSM disappear in to the 'thin air' and I assume that gives them the opportunity to look for potential candidates.

I have not seen any condoms at the toilets or at the bar. The owner said there were no condoms.

2) The use of the spaces, distinguishing gay-friendly and gay-tolerant

- Venues are predominantly frequented by men at night; women's relative absence may have to do with their greater vulnerability to violence or abuse.
- Clientele utilise venues for identifying sexual partners.
- There is high clientele mobility and a diverse group of males who find these spaces are accommodating of their sexual expression and sexual identity needs.

Ethnographers' descriptions of space and activities

As is usually the case, the majority of the patrons were men - women were peppered in the crowd with one or two women in a group of men here and there.

[The tavern] is a very busy place and people from as far as Johannesburg hang out at the venue. I also learnt from the people that I got to chat with that MSM liked the place because they always get lucky there and find partners and one night stands.

Jack mentioned that he had a reserved space especially for gays inside his tavern. He said gay people come to his place because 'they know that they will get what they want' (which is sex partners).

This space at times was mostly shared with other openly gay men who were not cross-dressers and the [rest] were, one cross-dresser and two straight acting men (who claim to have sex with gay men, as one of them confided to [the ethnographer], who then informed me).

3) How the spaces contribute to risk

- At the same time that these spaces provide a 'safe', enabling environment for sexual expression, they also indirectly promote sexual risk.
- No safer sex messaging was reported to exist in spaces where heightened sexual expression often occurs.
- Condoms and lubricants are often not made available.
- Alcohol and drug use is combined with homoerotic interactions.

Ethnographers' descriptions of sexual risk and HIV

Gavin, 27 years old, described himself as an MSM. Unbearable economic circumstances have forced him to have relationship with men. He said he would normally pick up different men every night in the clubs and they would go home with him to have sex. After performing his sexual duties he would be paid at least 50 Rand [about US\$6]. Some of the men would call him for his services during the week. He doesn't see himself as a hustler and rejects the label of being gay.

There was Gotzo who also had long shiny hair, wore makeup and women's clothes. I got the feeling that he had an excessive amount of alcohol. ... He was slurring and could barely keep his eyes open. I do not know what he drank. When we went over to greet them and when Tulani introduced us to him, his response was 'hi' and 'ngiyabuyisa mina' [I am selling myself].

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Taverns, bars and shebeens offer opportunities for the expression of male-male desire and the expansion of diverse localized gay and MSM identities.
- However, these sites also facilitate and can promote risky sex practices that increase men's vulnerability to HIV infection.
- The gay-tolerant or friendly spaces offered by these sites could be optimised in HIV-prevention efforts targeting MSM in townships.
- Safer sex among MSM could be supported and promoted by the creation of alternative spaces for MSM and promoting a cohesive gay culture in township settings.

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