

Letters to the Editor

The Language of Gay Men's Sexual Behavior: An Addendum

The intriguing recent paper by Mays, Cochran, Bellinger, Smith, Henley, Daniels, Tibbits, Victorienne, Osei, and Birt (1992) contains some statements about the language of gay men's sexual behavior that need clarification.

In Table 2, for both Blacks and Whites, "basket" is listed as a synonym for "scrotum." However, in my experience, White gay men use the term to refer either to the entire set of male genitalia (scrotum, testes, and penis combined) or to the volume of space immediately surrounding them (e.g., indicating someone's jeans: "Get a look at that guy's basket!"). Whether this is a regional difference, a racial difference, or an error in their table needs to be clarified.

Clarification is also needed in the use of the term "trade" (Table 3). In my experience, most White gay men use it to mean a heterosexual male who has sex with men for money or other consideration ("He can be done for trade"; "Watch out for him; he's rough trade"). It is correct that the term is often modified; however, none of the modifiers removes the financial and heterosexual implications—although the latter is often disbelieved ("Today's trade is tomorrow's competition"). For a contrasting view, note that a gay lexicon (Rodgers, 1972, pp. 199-200) defines "trade" as a nonreciprocal sex partner, usually heterosexual, but not necessarily so, and implies no financial correlate. Mays et al. (1992, Table 3 and passim) suggest that Blacks use "trade" in a way synonymous with the White term "trick" (any uncommitted sex partner). Perhaps there is variability or misunderstanding within the gay community on this word.

Notable by its absence from Mays et al. is any reference to the word "punk." Most White people make no

sexual innuendo when they use the term, meaning only that a male is young and delinquent. However, among Black prisoners and street youth (I was once told), a "punk" is a male who is forced into receptive sexual activity (usually in prison) against his will by a dominant male, often for long periods of time. Rodgers (1972, p. 161) claims that "punk" can also be used as a verb, meaning to force someone to become a punk. In which way(s) do Black gay men use the term, if at all?

One final clarification would be appreciated. When I lived in Baltimore, a supervisor warned me against the use of the word "cock," claiming that it meant "penis" among White men and "vagina" among Black men. If this is true, it could obviously cause severe communication difficulties in sex history interviews! I have not been able to confirm or disconfirm this assertion. Do Mays et al. have any data on how Black and White homosexual men use this word? It is not listed in Table 2 as a synonym for "penis" among either Blacks or Whites.

References

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Black Gay Men's Language Revisited: Keeping the Ethnicity in Ethnic Research

Dr. Weinrich's letter highlights the cultural and ethnic nuances of language in the area of sexual behavior. Although we agree that in one of the tables we probably should have indicated that the term "basket" can refer to the general area of men's genitalia, particularly when clothed, his concerns with usages of other words, such as "trade," seem to reflect the very differences in word definition to which we were referring in our article (Mays et al., 1992).

Although White gay men may use "trade" to refer to men among whom financial and/or heterosexual issues are involved, the term has a more general usage among African-American gay men who tend not to use the term "trick," so commonly used among White gay men.

The term "punk" tends to be used most frequently by Black heterosexuals rather than gay men. "Punk" is a variant of "playing the dozens" where its intent is to imply the recipient is a homosexual. Used in such a context it has little to do with actual or reported behavior sexual behavior but rather is more central to identity, as in "I ain't no punk." Black heterosexuals employ its use much like the terms "faggot," "sissy," or "queer" are used among White heterosexual Americans. But all of this introduces new areas of language use that were not the focus of our article.

Similarly the term "cock" to refer to a vagina was noted elsewhere many years ago (Andrews & Owens, 1973), but only in a heterosexual context. This particular definition never arose among the Black gay men whom we surveyed across the United States.

Reading Dr. Weinrich's letter we are a bit concerned that some important elements, or rather the spirit, of our article seems to have been

missed. The goal of our study was not the documentation of gay men's language but rather to examine the language patterns of African-American gay men most relevant to their HIV-related sexual risk behaviors. This was done to facilitate the research and clinical activities of those, who in spite of coming into contact with this population, may not have access to the code language sometimes used in HIV-related sexual behavior interactions among Black men who have sex with men (Mays et al., 1992; Mays & Jackson, 1991). The material that appeared in our article was based on surveying Black gay men in focus groups across the United States and as such represents the generalizations of their experience.

Two points in our original article should be underscored. First, it is important to remember that not all African-American gay men speak this way, nor if they do, will they necessarily employ this language all the time and maybe not in the presence of others who are not a part of the intended sexual interaction (Mays et al., 1992). So exceptions will be found. Second, Blacks', particularly gay men's language is not static;

instead, it is dynamic and creative. As it is adopted by others—White gay men, or Blacks in general, it no longer serves as a code or bond of recognition merely among African-American gays and therefore may be abandoned (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977).

We would like also to reiterate that the point of our manuscript was not merely that the literal words chosen are all that is different between White and Black gay men. Perhaps a quotation from Andrews and Owens (1973) can convey our intended meaning:

Black language is not an exact science. There is no set syntactical form. The way you say it makes it Black. Meanings of words are conveyed by how they touch (intonation, inflections), where they sit next to each other, and how fast they move. . . . The Standard English speaker talks to be heard, attempting to control the reaction of his listener, to impress; whereas the Black language speaker does not try to astound the audience as much as trying to get them into Black rhythms that will turn on the vital response of the people. The speaker's effectiveness is judged by how well he gets others into making speech a communal activity. (p. 20)

We thank Dr. Weinrich for joining us in the celebration of Black gay men's language.

References

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