

Brief Report

THE LANGUAGE OF BLACK GAY MEN'S SEXUAL BEHAVIOR: IMPLICATIONS FOR AIDS RISK REDUCTION



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The development of appropriate AIDS risk reduction interventions targeted at African-American gay men could be aided by an awareness of their terminology for specific sexual behaviors and types of sexual encounters. This paper explores similarities and differences between the HIV-related sexual language of Black and White gay men. While much of the vernacular is shared, differences in some terms and greater or lesser emphasis on others are apparent.

KEY WORDS: Black gay men, AIDS, sexual language

While gay men's language has been of interest in the fields of linguistics and literature for several decades (Hayes, 1976), it was not until the AIDS epidemic that "gayspeak" acquired considerable attention from behavioral sex researchers. This health threat necessitated rapid development of public health interventions targeting specific sexual behavioral changes in the gay male population. Previous research (Leventhal, Safer, & Panagis, 1983) had found that the most effective messages for producing health-related behavior change were those that were both in the language of the target population and delivered by credible sources. For gay men, this has meant the extensive formulation of "safer sex" interventions in which low-risk sexual behaviors are promoted using vernacular common to the gay male community.

However, the heterogeneous nature of the community suggests that gay men may not exactly share one common language, even though engaging in similar behaviors. Bell and Weinberg (1978) found that the African-American gay men

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in their San Francisco-based study had ready sexual, but not social, access to the larger, generally White gay male community. Social isolation itself produces language differentiation. In addition, language is a primary means of indicating ethnic group membership either to signal similarity or to establish differentiation in interacting with another (Bourhis & Giles, 1977; Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977; Taylor & Royer, 1980). Thus, we might expect that Black gay men have somewhat different words for describing behaviors targeted by "safer sex" interventions. To the extent that such language differences exist, the impact of public health messages may be impaired. For African-American men, this would be particularly unfortunate given their disproportionate risk for HIV infection (Cochran & Mays, 1988).

Insofar as language is public while sexual behavior and feelings are often private, a schema for translating the private into the public in a safe manner is an important issue in an oppressed population (Andrews & Owens, 1973). This allows for communication in public without fear of reprisal. Several studies suggest that gay men use coded terminology to a greater extent than heterosexual men and or lesbian women (Masters & Johnson, 1979; Wells, 1989). Drake (1980) notes slang is a socially important group phenomenon related to group identity, used to express both alienation, encoding a disdain for the existing social order (Dumas & Lighter, 1978) and social distance or solidarity, on an interpersonal dimension. The area of sexuality, a prime concern of society, is one of the richest semantic fields for slang (Sledd, 1965). Black gay men, quite aware of the legacy of physical and psychological intimidation by societal institutions, prejudices against both homosexuality and the Black community, and the overall lack of discourse on sexuality in the Black community, have developed even more refined methods of communicating with other Black gay men (Garber, 1981).

We present here some of the sexually related terminology used by Black gay men in the United States. The purpose is to highlight both similarities and differences from White gay men in the hopes of developing better "safer sex" messages for this population.

METHOD

Data for the paper were obtained by two methods. First, we conducted several focus groups nationally to poll Black gay men differing in age and background about the use of sexual language. Our initial focus groups were conducted in 1988 to assist in the development of a sexual behavior inventory. These groups, each with eight to ten Black gay and bisexual men (total $N = 74$), took place in eight cities of varying HIV prevalence and geographic region: Chicago, Columbus, New York, Atlanta, Omaha, Pittsburgh, Detroit and Washington, D.C. (Bellinger, Mays, & Cochran, 1989). Groups were structured so as to promote both participant heterogeneity and openness in discussing HIV-related materials. All participation was anonymous. All but one group was conducted by an individual who did not reside in that particular city. Thus, the group leader was usually uninvolved in the social or political networks of the participants. Also, in each city, we recruited from several different networks, allowing no more than two individuals to be selected from any one source. This worked quite well, as the senior author and focus group leader had different networks. The result

was that participants generally did not know more than one or two of the other men. All groups were audio-taped and later transcribed.

Participants were given a list of HIV-related sexual behaviors based on an early version drawn from our previous work studying primarily White gay men (Cochran, Mays, Ciarletta, Caruso, & Mallon, 1991) and items adapted from existing instruments, or utilized as originally written in consultation with other psychosocial AIDS researchers who served as scientific advisors on our larger AIDS study. The list of sexual behaviors which included both technical terms and common gay vernacular was read to participants by the focus group leader. Each term was discussed to assess both extent of comprehension and utilization. Participants were also encouraged to write down any additional terms used for a particular sexual behavior. The list describing the sexual behaviors was then revised to reflect this input from participants.

In 1990, two additional groups were conducted. The first included 1 White and 5 Black gay men. Participants reviewed the revised list of sexual behaviors and categories of partners/objects as part of their training as interviewers for our AIDS study. Terminology was further refined. A second focus group convened five months later with the same participants meeting specifically to discuss Black gay men's sexual language.

We then gathered data in a second manner, utilizing a snowball technique. Participants in our last focus group each recommended other Black gay men whom they knew nationally, resulting in approximately 20 additional interviews conducted over the telephone. Again, participants were asked to comment on their use of particular terms and other slang that they might use. Finally, when all of the Black gay men consulted agreed on the terms, the terms were shown to 10 White gay men to establish tentatively the uniqueness to the Black gay male community of particular terms. If these White gay men indicated that they or any other White gay men they knew used the terms, the slang was considered to be common gay vernacular.

RESULTS

HIV-Related Sexual Behaviors

In Table 1, we present technical terminology for several HIV risk-related sexual behaviors and the vernacular common among gay men as drawn from "gay language dictionaries" (Dynes, 1985; Max, 1988). We also list the phrases employed by some Black gay men to describe these behaviors. As can be seen, some terms overlap both the Black and White gay communities, while others may be used rarely, if at all, outside of the Black community. For the men in our focus groups, technical terms ranged in levels of familiarity. Both "frottage" and "fellatio" were least understood unless paired with gay vernacular.

Terms for anal intercourse elicited the most responses. While we listed several terms given for anal sex, many men also reported highly developed encoding of the behavior in language that would only be understood by in-group members. For one respondent, this included describing the desire for anal sex as, "My refrigerator is empty and I need something in it." He also described some risks of anal sex by commenting, "If you play in someone's backyard, you're bound to get paint on it (or get dirty)." Indication of disinterest in anal intercourse could easily be accomplished without direct discussion through

Table 1

Types of HIV-Related Sexual Behaviors

Technical Language	Gay Vernacular	Black Gay Vernacular
Deep kissing	French kissing Tonguing Suck face	Tonguing Swapping spit Checking out his tonsils Giving a tonsillectomy (N.Y.)
Masturbation	Jerk(ed) off, Jack(ed) off Stroking, Beat off, whack off Circle Jerk Meatbeater Hand Job	Jacked off Play with stuff Pumping Choke your bishop Chokin' the chicken Beat your meat Hand Job
Frottage	Body rubbing, Bump and grind, Humping, dry humping	Slit fucking between thighs College style Dry fuck Slick Leggin'
Fellatio	Give head Blow job Suck dick Go Down	Give face French Takin' it Mouth job Munching trade Eating trade
Anal Intercourse	Butt fucking Heels on the ceiling Lay pipe Top/bottom man Bang Greek Poke	Fucked you in your butt, did butt sex Worked your box Laying some pipe Drill/drilling Freak/freaking George/georging Legs up/ Legs reaching for heaven Heels on the ceiling/put your pumps up Pumping, pump butt Serving Poke Doin' the Do Getting Done Bone-ing Getting your life Knockin boots
Oral Anal Contact	Rimming Eat out Eating ass Cleaning your/my kitchen	Tossing salad, tossing cookies, eating chocolate chip cookies I like peanut butter Eatin at Joe's
Manual Anal Intercourse	Fisting Handballing Finger fucking	Fingering Finger fucking

phrases such as, "The bakery is closed" or "It ain't that kind of party." The latter phrase could also be used in a broader context to indicate refusal of sexual activities in general, or refusal of a particular person. Black gay men who engaged in both anal receptive and anal insertive intercourse were referred to as "flipflops" or "pancakes."

Food-based slang was frequent in describing oral-anal contact. References to eating chocolate chip cookies, peanut butter, tossing salad or eating at Joe's were common substitutes for licking and/or sucking the anus. In gay vernacular, "eating out" and "cleaning one's kitchen" serve the same purpose, obtusely describing a behavior that is frequently referred to as rimming in sex surveys. "Round the world" was a term used at times by our sample for oral sex from head to toe.

Sexual Body Parts

Important to the assessment of HIV-related sexual activity is some knowledge of terms used for different body parts. Slang for the anus and penis were

Table 2

Terminology for Sexual Body Parts

Technical Language	Gay Vernacular	Black Gay Vernacular
Anus, rectum buttocks	Ass, Asshole Box, Pussy, Butt, Rear, Cupcakes, Cakes Buns	Manhole Box Pussy, Boy pussy, Punk pussy Boygina, bogina Booty, boogina Cupcakes, Cakes Buns
Penis	Dick Tool, Shaft, Rod, Thing, Piece, Dong, Meat	Pole, fishing pole Meat, sausage, salami and boola Junior, Uncle Willie, Spermin' Herman, Hermy, George, Piece Dong, ding-dong Sweet daddy Birdy Rod Trade
Scrotum	Basket	Basket
Crotch	Stuff, Sack, Bag, Ball bag	Team
Zone between scrotum & anus	Taint, Tumbutt,	Taint
Nipples	Tits, Titties Points	Tits, Titties Ninnies

invoked most often (see Table 2). Some terms are best understood within context. For example, "salami" is used to indicate a large penis. When paired with "boola," it refers to the large penis of an obviously heterosexual inner city lower-class Black male. Referring to the penis by given names seemed fairly common among our participants, with "George" and "Herman" having the most recognition among the men. "Boygina" and "bogina" to refer to the anus are combinations of the words "boy" and "vagina." This same construction is seen in the word "boogina" which combines booty (the anus) and vagina. The "taint" is the erogenous zone between the scrotum and the anus. Its name comes from the fact that "It ain't the balls and it ain't the asshole; its the 'taint."

Terminology for Sexual Partners

In Table 3, we present a nonexhaustive list of terms used to describe sexual partners/objects. Some of these are common gay vernacular; some seem specific to Black gay men. A major term for describing a sexual partner was "trade." In contrast, White gay men seem to prefer "trick." What we quickly learned was that the term "trade," referring to a sexual partner of low status with an implied impermanent status, has infinite and essential modifiers. The level of commitment or familiarity within a sexual liaison considered "trade" cannot be determined by the use of the word alone. But when modified, the nature of the relationship is more clearly delineated. For example, in "rough" or "hamburger" trade, there is little or no emotional attachment. Their sexual encounter would largely be without any continuing emotional commitment beyond the time of the sexual act. Other modifiers imply a regularity of contact, still outside the realm of a committed relationship, such as "weekend trade."

How trade is used will often be a function of the geographic area in which the term is used, the age of the persons involved, the level of comfort with gay-identification, and the extent to which the person with whom trade is being discussed is a part of the in-group of Black gay men. Trade, therefore, can be used to objectify a sexual partner (e.g., "My weekend trade is on his way over") or as an indication of behavioral activity as in "having trade," "doing trade," or "being trade" (e.g., "I was doing trade when the phone rang.")

A word analogous in complexity is "queen." The word's traditional meaning implies an effeminate man (Hayes, 1981). But, again, modifiers further refine its nuances. There are different types of queens such as "Butch Queen," "Femme Queen," or "Drag Queen." Butch queens are characterized as rough looking ("...the kind that fought better than truck drivers and swished better than Mae West" (Garber, 1981)). At first glance, butch queens give the appearance that they would never be the passive partner in anal sex, but in private they will. As in "trade," variations in its use allow description of behavior, e.g. "being a queen, looking like a queen," or "acting like a queen." "Acting like a queen" can refer to either a heterosexual or gay individual. In the popular television show "In Living Color," the Wayman brothers "act like queens" with their two snaps routine. "Acting like a queen" can be a way of merely identifying that a person is *acting* gay behaviorally without necessarily denoting the person is gay. On the other hand, calling someone a queen whose gay identity is hidden is a way of letting them or others know that the information is not as hidden as assumed.

Table 3

*Categorizing Sexual Partners/Objects in Black Gay Vernacular***TRADE:**

DDT = Dirty Dick Trade

A potential sex partner that one would be inclined to and/or want to wash or bathe before having sex with. East coast slang for young (teen to early twenties) sex partners who may or may not be gay. The term stems largely from the fact that they either reside in or frequent a particular neighborhood or "block." They don't have to be young but look young and rough. Someone who will have sex for the price of cheap food. Akin to Block Boy and Hamburger Trade, young heterosexual acting or masculine local boy, definitely a "man-child."

Block Boys or B-Boys

Hamburger Trade

Banje Boy

Rough trade

DDFT (Drop Dead Fine Trade)

Weekend Trade

QUEEN:

Butch Queen

Femme Queen

Drag Queen

OTHER:

Husband

Husband-nette

Chicken

Sugar Daddy

Daddy

Fuckbuddy

Sex partner perceived to be a street hustler type, usually lower class, perhaps a threat to one's personal safety; maybe a male street walking prostitute or a person who might steal personal property.

A person considered to be especially handsome and desirable.

A regular or occasional weekend sexual partner.

They look very masculine and portray the image they don't allow anyone to screw them. When in reality they will allow themselves to be screwed.

They act very feminine in their mannerisms, walk, and voice pitch. Will play the female role with other men. They are usually the receptive partner in anal and oral sex.

Transvestite. Dresses in women's clothing.

Masculine, take-charge type.

One who primarily takes on the masculine role in a relationship; a versatile partner sexually otherwise.

A minor(s), individuals under the legal age of consent for sex, often referred to as jail bait because of the risk of arrest; much younger individual or young looking.

One who provides continuous financial support in exchange for sexual favors and/or attention, often middle aged, sometimes thought of as physically unattractive, likely to have and attract potential sex partners based solely upon his superior financial means and ability to bestow favors.

Someone who pays the way or takes charge.

A person with whom you have little in common besides sex. You will only get together for the reason of having sex.

DISCUSSION

Much of the vernacular used for sexual behavior, body parts, and sexual partners expressed by our African-American participants are shared with the larger gay community. However, differences in some terms, more or less emphasis on others, and differential preferences in terms for particular situations suggest that, like the heterogeneous nature of the gay male community, language varies, too. While this may be fairly obvious, the implications are potentially quite important. For example, during the conduct of our initial groups, participants who had taken part in other HIV-related studies revealed that in spite of indigenous interviewers conducting the interviews, they could tell by the language used that materials were written by someone not familiar with their culture. This may bias research findings in unpredictable ways. Knowledge of language and the way it functions in the communication system of Black gay men will aid us in designing instruments to tap meaningfully into their world of sexuality.

Differences in language patterns may reflect differences in cognitive structures (Hall & Nagy, 1987). The language used in the asking of questions will influence the organization of internal cognitive concepts and thereby influence the answer given. In asking Black gay men about their sexual behavior, language that helps cognitively and affectively to transport them to an internal state of recall that best matches the actual context will be most helpful in the goal of changing that behavior (Mays & Jackson, 1991). Our ability to design effective HIV prevention strategies for Black gay men will be a direct function of our level of understanding of sexual practices (Fullilove, Fullilove, Haynes, & Gross, 1990).

Black gay language reflects Black language in general in that it is not only language but style. Black language has been characterized as "dynamic, demonstrative and emotionally intense" (Kochman, 1981; Smitherman, 1977). We were unable here to provide for the voice inflections, speech rhythms, tonal patterns or non-verbal behaviors that accompany some of the vernacular. It is also within these parameters that Black gay men are able to define themselves. Both the words and the style of Black gay language, like Black dialect, reflects a way of looking at life, a point of view, a culture (Beam, 1986; Smith, 1972).

In using the terminology presented here for the conduct of HIV-related research, it is important to remember that linguistic and cognitive processes are embedded in a context (Cicourel, 1981; Wells, 1989). In assessing the sexual behavior of Black gay men, the asking of the questions that embody their vernacular must also be asked from a framework of their experience. Using appropriate vernacular for sexual body parts or sexual behaviors, while a step in the right direction, may not elicit the full range of sexual behaviors without, for example, knowing something about different categories of partners in which to assess the activities. The more accurately the questions are framed, the greater the likelihood that the answers will be truthful and reflective of diverse experiences. Our interest here was not merely in acquiring the proper terminology in order to speak "Black gayspeak" but also to demonstrate the importance of context to that terminology. This is a critical point if our goal is the assessment of sexual behavior for the purposes of bringing about behavior change.

It is also important to note that not all Black gay men speak in the terms that we have presented. Some use none of our terms while others may range from using them in very specific contexts to broader applications. We make no claims to have covered all the terms used by Black gay men. We are sure that networks were biased by the urbanicity of the investigators. Yet, we reached a diverse group of Black gay men in our efforts to understand the role of language in sexual behavior and found much consensus. This is of significance as it evidences lines of cultural transmission of the usage of the terminology presented in our study across various African-American gay male communities throughout the United States.

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