

A Qualitative Exploration of the Relationship Between Racism and Unsafe Sex Among Asian Pacific Islander Gay Men

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Abstract Although reported cases of HIV/AIDS among gay Asian Pacific Islander (API) American men and API men who have sex with men (MSM) are still relatively low, current research findings indicate that incidences of unsafe sexual activity may be higher for this group than for any other group. Among the explanations offered to explain the levels of increasing unsafe sex among gay API men have been sexual norms found in Asian cultures, the lack of culturally relevant and/or linguistically appropriate intervention material, lack of integration into the mainstream gay community, and internalized homophobia. What are often ignored in these analyses are the contextual norms in which sexual behavior for gay API men occur. In this article, I develop the argument that racism within the gay community leads to socially and contextually prescribed sexual roles for gay API men that may also contribute to the practice of unsafe sex among this group.

Keywords Gay men · HIV risk · Sexuality · Racism · Unsafe sex

Introduction

Although the reported cases of HIV/AIDS among gay Asian Pacific Islander (API) American men and API men who have sex with men (MSM) are still relatively low and account for roughly 1% of total HIV cases in the U.S. (CDC, 2006), current research findings indicate that the prevalence of unsafe sexual activity may be higher for gay API men and API MSM

than for any other group (Chng & Geliga-Vargas, 2000; Choi, Han, Hudes, & Kegeles, 2002; Peterson, Bakeman, Stokes, & CITY, 2001). Peterson et al. (2001) reported that 26% of API MSM engaged in risky sexual behavior within the past 12 months compared to 24% of Hispanic men and 14% of African American men. In fact, in a recent study, 47% of API MSM reported previously engaging in unsafe sex (Choi et al., 2004). Also, recent evidence indicates that API MSM are less likely to be tested for HIV than other groups and most HIV-positive API MSM are unaware of their status (Do et al., 2005). Taken together, these findings signal the possibility of high rates of future infections that has the potential to reach catastrophic levels.

Despite this increasing risk, the absence of API MSM in larger research efforts to identify a variety of individual, interpersonal, and situational factors that influence sexual risk-taking among gay men and MSM have complicated identifying specific factors that influence unsafe sex for this group (Beck, McNall, & Petrak, 2003; Gold & Skinner, 1992; Hays, Kegeles, & Coates, 1997; Stall et al., 1992; Strathdee et al., 1998). Several scholars have examined factors that may be unique to gay API men and API MSM, such as immigrant status and ethnic identity (Choi et al., 1999; Nemoto et al., 2003). However, there is still much more that needs to be examined, especially social factors that may influence sexual behavior. For example, despite the wide recognition of the existence of racism within the gay community, the role that racism and racialized expectations can play in influencing sexual behavior among gay API men and API MSM has largely been ignored. In fact, in a recent study, 80% of gay API men reported instances of racism within the gay community (Dang & Hu, 2005). However, with the exception of Wilson and Yoshikawa (2004), no scholars have made an attempt to directly link racism in the gay community with HIV risk among gay API men or API MSM.

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In this article, I argue that racism in the gay community marginalizes gay API men and socially constructs them as more “feminine” than gay white men and lead them to prefer gay white men as sexual partners. However, the scarcity of gay white men who view API men as potential sexual partners results in gay API men taking on the sexually submissive role of the “bottom” within gay API/gay white relationships, thus putting them at higher risk for HIV infection than their white partners.

Prior Attempts at Explaining Unsafe Sex Among Gay API Men and API MSM

Limited efforts to explain the rising rates of HIV risk behavior among gay men of color have taken a variety of forms, with some efforts focused on a single ethnic group (Choi et al., 1999; Diaz, 1998; Marks, Cantero, & Simoni, 1998; Seibt et al., 1995; Stokes & Peterson, 1998; Wortley, Metler, Hu, & Fleming, 2000; Yep, Merrigan, Martin, Lovaas, & Cetron, 2002) and others focused on “men of color” as a generic category (Brooks, Rotheram-Borus, Bing, Ayala, & Henry, 2003; Chng & Geliga-Vargas, 2000). Among the explanations offered to explain the levels of increasing unsafe sex specifically among gay API men and API MSM have been sexual norms found in Asian cultures, the lack of culturally relevant and/or linguistically appropriate intervention material, lack of integration into the gay community, lack of integration into the mainstream white community, and internalized homophobia (Choi, Coates, Catania, & Lew, 1995; Inouye, 1999; Kanuha, 2000; Ratti, Bakeman, & Peterson, 2000).

Examining sexual risk among MSM of color, a number of studies have reported relationships between either ethnic or sexual identity on unsafe sexual behaviors (Hines & Caetano, 1998; Seibt et al., 1995). Using acculturation into the gay community as a measure of sexual identity or acculturation into the dominant white mainstream community as a measure of ethnic identity, these studies concluded that gay men of color who were more “integrated” into either the gay community or more assimilated into the dominant mainstream community were less likely to engage in unsafe sex than those who were not. For example, Ratti et al. (2000) concluded that Asian men who were less involved with the gay community were more likely to engage in unsafe sex. Seibt et al. (1995), using readership of gay publications as a proxy variable for acculturation into the gay community, found that gay men of color who were more acculturated into the gay community were less likely to engage in unsafe sex than those who were not. Along these lines, Chng and Geliga-Vargas (2000) argued that API MSM who strongly identify with the ethnic community (unassimilated into the dominant mainstream community) may isolate themselves from the gay community and gay-identified social networks that would expose them to safe-

sex messages as well as to a community where there are opportunities to learn about consistent condom use. Taken together, their findings lend support to Goldbaum et al. (1998), who asserted that non-gay-identified MSM may lack the social support found in the gay community to practice risk-reduction strategies. According to Goldbaum et al., what is needed to decrease the rate of unsafe sexual behavior among MSM is for them to be better integrated into the gay community so that they can have access to the already existing HIV intervention materials and projects.

Closely related to the argument that the high rates of unsafe sex among API MSM can be explained by a lack of integration into the gay community or the dominant mainstream community has been the use of Asian cultural beliefs to explain the increasing rates of unsafe sex among gay API men and API MSM. For example, Inouye (1999) argued that there are “cultural barriers” to practicing safe sex among API MSM. Inouye argued that the collective orientation of Asian culture leads to the belief that AIDS is an out-group disease that will not affect them. Other scholars have also hypothesized that Asian culture may hinder access to safe-sex information due to the strong taboo against openly discussing sexuality and the heavy stigmatization of homosexuality within the API community. These scholars have hypothesized that Asian cultural norms may force API MSM to conceal their sexual preferences largely in order to avoid shaming their families (Aoki, Ngain, Mo, & Ja, 1989; Ratti et al., 2000; Sanitioso, 1999). Like the research examining API MSM integration into the gay community which hypothesized that API MSM would engage in less unsafe sex if they were better integrated into the dominant gay community, the use of Asian cultural beliefs as a cause of unsafe sex implies that the solution to reducing the rate of unsafe sex among API MSM is better integration into the dominant mainstream white community.

Choi et al. (1995) offered a contradictory view to the argument that the solution to decreasing unsafe sex among gay API men may be better integration to the gay community or the dominant mainstream community. In their study, they found that API MSM who were better integrated into the gay community and less integrated into their ethnic communities engaged in higher rates of unsafe sex than those who were not integrated into the gay community. Choi et al. argued that being a part of the API community may provide social networks and protection that can counter the racism found in the gay community, which they hypothesized was the larger reason for unsafe sex among API MSM. Their initial findings were supported by other studies with API MSM that found either few differences in unsafe sexual behavior among API MSM who were better integrated into the gay community or found that API MSM who were better integrated into the gay community actually engaged in higher rates of unsafe sex than those who were not (Choi, Yep, & Kumekawa, 1998; Lloyd,

Faust, San Roque, & Loue, 1999; Mao, Van de Ven, & McCormick, 2004).

The reason for these contradictory findings may lie in the methodology used by the various authors who found that a lack of integration into the gay community or the dominant mainstream white community may lead to unsafe sex. For example, it is difficult to ascertain if the proxy variables that were used to measure assimilation and/or acculturation actually measure whether the participants were integrated into the gay community, mainstream society, or something else entirely. Seibt et al. (1995) used readership of gay publications as a proxy variable for acculturation into the gay community. However, it is not clear if readership of gay publication actually measures acculturation or educational levels. It is quite possible that better educated men are more likely to read publications of any type and less likely to engage in unsafe sex. Although they assumed that reading gay publications is an indication of acculturation into the gay community, Seibt et al. made no effort to address whether these participants read ethnic publications. It is quite possible that API MSM who read gay publications also read ethnic publications. By assuming that being assimilated into the gay community automatically leads to being less connected to their ethnic communities, Seibt et al. ignored the possibility that some API MSM are integrated into both the gay community and their ethnic communities.

Similarly, the reliance on cultural explanations to explain unsafe sexual behavior among gay API men and API MSM is problematic given the diverse backgrounds of men who fall under this umbrella category. Despite prevailing stereotypes that Asian and Pacific Island societies are more sexually conservative and less open to alternative forms of sexual expression than other racial groups, the history of homosexual behavior in Asia and the Pacific Islands reflects a different picture. In fact, Wong, Chng, Ross, and Mayer (1998) suggested that many Asian and Pacific Island cultures traditionally condoned same-sex sexuality. Some examples of how diverse sexual expressions were condoned and celebrated in Asian Pacific Island cultures include the *hijras* in South Asia, the *bakla* in the Philippines, the *kathoey* in Thailand, and *mahu* among native Hawaiians. Despite this diversity, rates of unsafe sexual activity between MSM of different Asian and Pacific Islander ethnic groups in the U.S. do not seem to be significantly different (Choi et al., 2002). More importantly, Choi et al. (1995) found that American-born API MSM were more likely to engage in unsafe sex than foreign-born API MSM, casting doubt on the commonly held belief that Asian cultural values are significant in determining unsafe sexual activity among this group. Finally, examining acculturation into the dominant white culture or integration into the mainstream gay community ignores the fact that the mainstream gay community is largely white (Bérubé, 2001).

What are often ignored when examining unsafe sexual behavior among gay API men and API MSM are the structural

conditions and contextual norms in which sexual behavior for some members of this group occur, including the racial marginalization of gay API men and the expected sexual roles for gay API men within the larger gay community. In fact, Choi et al. (1995) found that gay API men attributed their unsafe sexual activity to situational factors, such as their interpersonal relationships with sexual partners, family members, and the communities that they normally inhabit, rather than the expected risk perception and attitudes towards condom use that predicted levels of unsafe sex among gay white men.

For gay API men, situational factors include the racism found in the largely white gay community. In examining the role racism and racialized construction of Asian men within the gay community, many scholars have hypothesized that social discrimination may have a negative influence on HIV risk behaviors among gay API men and API MSM (Choi et al., 1999; Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004; Yoshikawa, Wilson, Chae, & Cheng, 2004). Yet, despite their discussion about racism in the gay community, these scholars did not outline how racism in the gay community may influence sexual behavior among this group. However, sexual acts are not only a response to biological urges or dictated by cultural beliefs but, instead, are socially constructed in an ongoing interplay between various actors and social situations. More importantly, sexual behavior has been theorized to be not only based on information and personal beliefs about sex but also is a by-product of carefully negotiated interplay between expectations and desired rewards of both bodily pleasures and social acceptance (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Frith & Kitinger, 2001; Gagnon, 1977; Gagnon & Simon, 1973). As such, the social conditions themselves, including racism and racial marginalization, may influence sexual behaviors.

In this article, I suggest that the high levels of racism experienced by gay API men may lead to unsafe sexual behaviors by leading gay API men to prefer white sexual partners who are seen as being in short supply. As such, gay API men compete for the sexual favors of white men, seeing them as “prizes” for playing by the “rules” of gay expectations. It is this competition for white male companionship, facilitated by the marginalization of gay API men in the larger gay community, that ultimately place white men in a dominant position in sexual negotiations, leading gay API men to take sexual risks to win their favor.

For the purpose of this study, I employed a method of qualitative description to explore the factors gay API men deemed important in predicting unsafe sexual practices. As a research methodology, qualitative description draws from the general tenets of naturalistic inquiry in that, “there is no pre-selection of variables to study, no manipulation of variables, and no a priori commitment to any one theoretical view of a target phenomenon” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 337). Rather, the focus is on providing a comprehensive summary of an event or

a phenomenon in the “everyday terms of those events” (Sandelowski, 2000).

Method

Participants

For the purpose of inquiry, qualitative description relies on maximum variation sampling. As such, the primary data for this article come from 15 in-depth interviews with an ethnically diverse group of gay Asian men conducted as part of a larger ethnographic project between 2002–2004 in Seattle. The 15 men were recruited using snow-ball sampling methods and through referrals from staff at community-based agencies. These men were active within the gay, and to a lesser degree, their ethnic communities. After the interview phase of the research, these 15 men served as key informants during the larger ethnographic study. The formal interviews lasted between one and two hours and were audiotaped and then transcribed. As key informants for the larger ethnographic study, the 15 participants who took part in the in-depth interviews were recruited because they were active community members. For the remainder of the article, I use the term “gay API men” to describe this group rather than API MSM, which also includes non-gay identified API men who engage in sex with men.

At the time of the interviews, participants had a mean age of 27 years. The youngest participant was 22, and the oldest participant declined to give his age but stated he was “older than dirt.” Although the exact age of the oldest participant is unknown, I estimate his age to be in the early-50s based on various clues during the interview and the ethnographic stage. For example, he mentioned working on the formation of Asian/Pacific Lesbians and Gays, which was officially founded in 1980, during his college years in California. Among the interviewees, seven were born in the U.S. Of those who immigrated to the U.S., three indicated that they came as infants, two indicated they came before grade school, one came during grade school, and two said they came during high school. Of the participants, three were Korean, two were Chinese, three were Filipino, three were Vietnamese, one was Thai, one was Japanese, one was mixed Filipino and white, and one was mixed Vietnamese and white. Only three participants did not have a college degree, one had an associate degree, four had masters degrees, and one had a doctoral degree. Given that all the men were recruited because they were active in the gay and Asian community, it was not surprising that ten of the men had a previous or current employment history with community-based organizations and all of the men were in professional or semi-professional occupations that provided them with the “expertise” required for

leadership roles within the community. All of the men interviewed self-identified as either gay or queer. Most participants (eight) said that they came out during high school, one participant who did not attend college stated that he came out immediately after high school, and six participants said that they came out during college. However, among the eight participants who indicated that they came out in high school, only two stated that they were completely out during that time. More important for this study, seven of the participants had a history of working in community-based organization that included HIV prevention as a goal of the organization, five of whom either previously worked at or were at the time of the interview working in an organization that specifically targeted HIV prevention with gay API men or API MSM.

Procedure

In qualitative descriptive studies, the emphasis on data collection is to attempt to understand the “who, what, and where of events or experiences” (Sandelowski, 2000). As such, data collection normally involves open-ended or minimally structured interviews which focus on the individual experiences of the informants and their perception of the dynamics in the gay and API communities.

The formal interviews lasted between one and two hours and were unstructured. Although the interviews were unstructured, and the questions were not standardized, participants were all asked to explore: (1) issues of racism in the gay community, (2) homophobia in Asian American communities, (3) their own personal sexual behaviors, (4) factors that they believed may lead gay API men to engage in unsafe sexual activity, and (5) possible interventions that may lead to reducing unsafe sexual activity among gay API men. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and examined for themes that emerged. For example, all participants were asked to describe what they perceived to be the racial hierarchy in the gay community, the influences of homophobia within API communities on gay API men, and to talk about sexual behaviors among gay API men. In addition, they were asked to share their own experiences of racism in the gay community and the larger straight community as well as homophobia in API communities and in society.

Data Analysis

As Sandelowski (2000) pointed out, “qualitative content analysis is the analysis strategy of choice in qualitative descriptive studies.” Unlike quantitative content analysis which employs a pre-existing set of codes to the data, qualitative

content analysis is largely data driven with codes derived from the data and modified as needed.

For the purpose of data analysis, I took an inductive approach and examined the themes found within the narratives rather than counting frequencies. The rationale for this approach was due to the fact that each informant was specifically asked to discuss the five main points above. As such, each informant discussed the relative importance of racism and homophobia on unsafe sexual activity.

Although all descriptive studies are highly influenced by the perceptions and inclinations of the describer (Wolcott, 1994), the goal of qualitative description is for descriptive or interpretive validity. Descriptive validity refers to the factual accuracy of the events or phenomena under study, that is, researchers are “not making up or distorting the things they saw and heard” (Maxwell, 1992).

To test descriptive and interpretive validity, I enlisted the assistance of an independent rater to examine the tapes, read the transcriptions, and to provide a judgment as to whether what is “there” is what “most observers would agree is in fact ‘there’” (Sandelowski, 2000). Although certainly not a scientific test of validity in the quantitative sense, it nonetheless addresses a “realist approach to validity” based on “how qualitative researchers actually think about validity” (Maxwell, 1992).

Results

Three themes were identified in the interviews: (1) racism was seen as a primary factor in the way that gay API men came to view their experiences within the larger gay community, (2) racism in the gay community led to the creation of a social context of sexual behavior that placed gay API men at a disadvantage in mate selection, (3) the disadvantage resulted in gay API men competing for white male partners that involved taking on the submissive role during sexual intercourse, thus having less ability to negotiate safer sexual behavior with white partners.

Racism in the Gay Community

Nearly all of the gay API men in this study reported feeling unwelcome in the gay community at one time or another. For example, during an ethnographic field event at a popular gay bar, I observed the drag queen who was performing on stage make derogatory comments about sushi and ramen. When asked about this incident, one participant commented:

Can you believe that bitch? That’s foul. This shit happens all the time. (Participant 10)

When pressed further, he explained:

You’d think that gay people would be a bit more enlightened, but the reality is that gay guys are more bigoted than anyone else I know of. There is so much racism in the gay community that it makes you wonder... It just makes you want to stay home and lock the door. (Participant 10)

Although racism is normally thought of as a blatant action, such as the one described above, most of the racism directed at gay API men in the gay community is fairly subtle. The more subtle form of racism includes simply ignoring the existence of gay API men which can lead to terrible consequences for their self-esteem. As one participant noted:

There were no, and I emphasize no, gay white men in other bars [other than “rice” bars where gay API men and gay white men went to meet each other] that would go out with us... I had muscles where I didn’t think you had muscles. I looked really good, I was down to two percent body fat, and every muscle in my entire body was obvious. I could walk into a [Rice bar] and people would have their hands on me, on my chest... I used to go to West Hollywood where the non-rice bars were and I could count on both hands how many times I got picked up or I could pick up, actually went to bed with somebody from a non-rice bar. It was horrendous... If I went by myself I was standing in the only empty area in the entire god damn bar. I used to have a ten foot area around me and people would avoid me, I couldn’t believe it... And so, you know, after getting discouraged and feeling um, you know, I’d retreat to rice bars and get pissed off at the atmosphere then go to the non-rice bars and pissed off at the atmosphere, I’d go back and forth. (Participant 3)

This informant’s experiences were not uncommon among gay API men who not only saw the racism at non-rice bars but also saw the subtle racism at rice bars where gay white men “admired” gay API men for what Ayers (1999) called “racist” reasons:

It is an attraction to me because of my Asianness, my otherness. Again, this has nothing to do with who I think I am, my individual qualities as a person, or even as an object of desire. It is the fact that I conveniently fit into someone else’s fantasy... And they expect me to be so flattered by the attention of a white man that I will automatically bend over and grab my ankles. (p. 89)

Faced with both types of racism, many gay API men reported feeling inadequate within the larger gay community. As one participant put it:

For the longest time, I really thought it was me. I thought I wasn’t doing something right, I thought if I

only tried harder, if I only did this or that. After a while, you start questioning your own worth and thinking that you don't have any. That took a long time to overcome... A really long time. (Participant 12)

The subtle racism also included perceptions about who was desirable and who was not. Within the gay press, the "idealized" images are uniformly white men, white male bodies are presented as desirable while other bodies are marginalized or objectified. Not surprisingly, gay API men reported feeling inadequate in the larger gay community where Eurocentric displays of physical beauty are constantly touted:

I think a lot of that is based off of the media's perception on television, advertising, magazines and everything with respect of seeing other role models. You don't see anyone else, especially, you know, the stereotypes they put on Asians or African Americans or other minorities. So, to me, it seemed like white people had, you know, the best opportunities, better lifestyles, better financial situations, it seemed a lot better from where my family being low middle income, self-employed mother, father who worked for the government... I've always felt that white people were always going to be superior. (Participant 8)

Another participant stated:

Basically, like, white is beautiful... Like, if you're not white, then they don't want you. Like, even if you go to chat rooms and you see profiles that say, "no Asians," I don't want or I don't like Asians or they say whites only. You know, it kind of hurts to see that, so you're conditioned to just expect that they're not going to like you... I think that it really perpetuates hating yourself because if you see that that's all that you're portrayed as and that's all that people think of you as, then you'll hate that image and you'll end up hating yourself for it. I went through that, I was like thinking I'm the whitest Asian boy you'll ever meet. I've heard [another gay API man] say that last week or something like that. It's like you don't want to be Asian because that's what all Asians are like. (Participant 6)

Ironically, the subtle forms of racism were even apparent in HIV intervention materials that were intended to help gay API men. One informant told me that the "culturally competent" intervention materials may be actually causing gay API men to become more self-conscious of their racial marginalization in the gay community. As an example, he cited a meeting at a local "mainstream" HIV prevention organization (which the author also attended) at which members of the host organization suggested creating a holiday skit where we would all show each other how we would celebrate the holidays.

When they suggested that we all come up with a skit to show people how we celebrate Christmas in our culture, I almost died. I'm glad that [a person in attendance] said what he did [a sarcastic remark about celebrating Christmas in his culture with a tree and some presents], otherwise, they might have insisted that we put on some cheongsams and beat some drums, maybe light some incense. (Participant 11)

Reflecting on a different meeting, the same HIV-prevention worker stated:

At that meeting, [the white workers] were trying to come up with some culturally competent material they could distribute to Asian guys. One guy actually said we should have some clever [making quotation marks in the air] tag lines like, "Miso horny" or "Roll up your eggroll." This is the stuff they come up with... They think if they throw some chopsticks on it, it becomes Asian enough. I have news for them, chopsticks don't make it culturally competent. (Participant 11)

While the above informant spoke repeatedly about the need for culturally competent material, he also suggested that the marginalized position of gay API men within the larger gay community made it difficult to actually have material that would not be offensive and degrading. Not surprisingly, virtually all of the informants noted racism as a pervasive theme in the personal experiences with gay white men.

Social Context of Sexual Behavior

Sexual behavior is rarely an isolated incident. Rather, it occurs within a social context. As discussed above, the social context where gay API men meet potential partners is often characterized by subtle forms of racism that may have negative consequences on their sexual behavior.

Marginalized by many in the larger gay community, gay API men must look for acceptance outside of themselves and within the culture that values something other than being API. When asked what made him fall in love with his current white partner, one participant stated:

You know, I couldn't put my finger on it then, but in retrospect, so I don't know how accurate all this is, but um, how do I put it... I always feel like I stick out, walking down the street, at work, at school... And it isn't that I want to be invisible, not that, but I wanted to be accepted. I wanted to be a part of things, I wanted to not have to explain... I always had to narrate who I was and [his white partner] could walk into any situation and people would love him. He's intelligent, he's articulate, he's very social, he's blonde haired and blue

eyed and good looking... I never thought I could do or get or have, um, I guess a part of it is identity and part of it is self-esteem. I didn't think I could get those things without him. (Participant 3)

Another participant reflected on his white partner in this way:

He's all the things I'm not. He can do all the things I can't. When I'm with him, I feel like I can do some of those things too, I can have some of those things that I suppose I secretly want for myself but also know that I can't get. (Participant 9)

"Setting the scene" in the gay community also includes the promotion of white males as the "prize" for all men to pursue. Not surprisingly, gay API men indicate an overwhelming preference for white sexual partners. According to one participant:

Asians didn't date other Asians. We only dated outside of, um, we only dated non-Asians. In fact, I remember the very first time that I met an Asian who dated Asians. I actually sat him down and quizzed him for an hour because he was just such a strange animal, I mean, you know, I couldn't believe I met someone like this and, and um, I still know him to this day. He's a really sweet guy and he's still down in L.A., but I sat him down and I literally pounded the poor man with questions for an hour because I couldn't believe my eyes. But we only dated other people that were not Asians, they could be black, they could be Hispanic, although we didn't date a whole lot of blacks or Hispanics, just a few. Um, mainly white. And, um, that used to piss me off because there were many more of us than there were of them... There were many more Asians than there were rice queens so it was hard to get a date, just by numbers and um, it always felt like rice queens had their pick of us because just be numbers they could date anybody they wanted and we couldn't. (Participant 3)

This same informant explained that it did not matter what you looked like, being Asian marked you as undesirable in the larger gay community, particularly among white men who did not date Asians.

This theme that gay white men who prefer Asian men, often referred to by the derogatory term, "rice queens," could have their "pick" of gay API men was repeated by nearly all the informants. According to another:

Rice queens are the ones that like Asians and it's definitely a small population... so [Asians] are kind of fighting over the same people that are potential boy-friends, you know, competition... There's this one

particular rice queen and, you know, everyone jumps at the chance and be competitive about it, like I'm going to be the person he's going to take home and I'm going to be the best person that, um, he's going to like me best, so a very kind of competitive thing for attention... It's like slim pickings, you got only so many to choose from and there's not enough to go around so you better be on top of the dog pile. (Participant 7)

This same informant also added that "getting" the white man over other Asian "competitors" was a way of "boosting your own self-esteem." That if you were successful then it meant that, somehow, you were "better than the other Asians."

Often, these types of expectations led to competition among gay API men for what was viewed as a limited number of potential and suitable partners. One participant described a situation where three of his friends were "dating" the same white man at the same time in this way:

It's pathetic. They're all fucking each other over just to be with [the white guy]. I mean, have some self-pride. But you know, they just bring it on themselves. They all think that if they're just a little better, a little nicer, whatever, then [the white guy] is going to fall in love with them and stop seeing anybody else. But the fact of the matter is, the guy is just a piece of shit and he's going to keep being a piece of shit as long as they let him be a piece of shit. (Participant 10)

As such, the "scene" in which gay API men may engage in sexual activity involves devaluing those who are Asian and pedestalizing those who are white and competing for their sexual attention at their own peril.

Sexual Expectations and Sexual Norms

Given that the overwhelming majority of gay API men report a preference for white sexual partners, and the number of potential white partners is seen as being limited, the racialized sexual expectations of gay white men as well as the sexual norms within gay white/gay Asian relationships are important to consider when attempting to explain unsafe sexual behavior among gay Asian men. For their part, white men often demand certain sexual and behavior characteristics from their API partners. During one gathering, a gay white male told me that he "preferred" more recent immigrant Asian men to more "Americanized" Asian men. When asked why, he stated:

The ones who have been here longer are not very respectful. They act like American guys, they don't have respect for their elders, they're materialistic, and they only think about themselves. (A white participant during ethnographic fieldwork)

When asked to clarify, he also explained that API men who have been here longer tended to be more loud, demanding, and aggressive. Clearly, what this man found attractive were the more “feminine” qualities that he associated with more recent immigrant API men. The sexual expectations of white men manifest themselves in numerous ways. According to one participant:

I did a small mini-experiment in a gay chat room. I posted two profiles, they were exactly the same, except on one, I put that I was Asian and on the other, I didn't put a race. I was going to say “white,” but I didn't want to lie. Well, the guys who responded to the profile without my race started with something like, “hi” or “what's up?” They guys who responded to my profile that said “Asian” were much more aggressive. They said, something like, “Do you like to be fucked?” But the most interesting thing is, the guys who didn't know I was Asian would negotiate about being a top or bottom. The guys who knew I was Asian would automatically assume I was a bottom and if I told them that I wasn't, they would stop the conversation right away. (Participant 11)

The problem, of course, is that rice queens often have the upper hand. When asked if white men have an advantage in sexual negotiations with gay API men, one participant noted:

Of course they have an advantage. If I want to get laid, I had to fit what they want me to be. If I wanted to be myself, I didn't get laid very often, and man, who doesn't want to get laid? (Participant 9)

As such, “getting” a white man involves various role taking to “give him what he wants.” According to one participant:

I had to figure out what sort of stereotypes those guys wanted and I matched those stereotypes. I'm not exactly the submissive type, but I could shut my mouth. I'm not exactly a passive guy, but I could roll over on my back. You know, I mean, I can compliment, I can manipulate with the best of them. If they request and I could get a fun night of it, I did it... I remember talking about that with some of my friends and they got upset because they were foreign-born and they didn't think they could match all the stereotypes that I could as easily. (Participant 3)

Unfortunately, “matching” the requested stereotype often means putting oneself in unsafe sexual situations. One informant told me about an incident when he went on-line searching for a “trick,” quick sexual fix. Recently “dumped” by his boyfriend and feeling horny, the informant told me he went to the chatroom because, “everybody knows that it's all about sex on those sites.” Within a few minutes, he was active in conversation with several men who were all “old rice queens,” with one exception. Finding the “trick” to be

extremely attractive, the informant told me they arranged to meet at his house where they eventually engaged in unsafe anal sex. About that encounter, the participant stated:

I know about safe sex, I've seen the ads, read the books, went to meetings... But he said he wouldn't do it unless it was bareback [anal sex without a condom]. He told me he wasn't really into Asians anyway so it would be no big loss for him, but I thought that if I did what he wanted me to do, he would see me again, who knows? I mean, how often does a guy like that actually want to have sex with someone like me? (Participant 2)

Expanding further, he explained that for gay API men, “good looking” and “young” white guys didn't “come around very often” and that they could “easily go somewhere else” to get what they wanted. Although the informant understood the risks involved with unsafe sex, his desire to be with what he considered a good-looking, white male over-rode his decision to practice safe sex. Born in the U.S., and active in the “gay” community, he knew the “ins and outs” and the one thing he knew was that “guys like that are not usually into Asians.” When asked why he didn't discuss HIV status with his “trick,” the informant explained that he didn't want him to “get mad and leave.”

Rather than an isolated incident, this type of scenario seems to occur repeatedly among gay API men and their white partners. When asked if the expectations of gay white men may lead to unsafe sex among gay API men, one HIV-prevention counselor stated:

Oh, I'm sure it does. Oh yes, you know, I'm an HIV-prevention person, and I know it happens all the time. If you're truly attracted to some guy, you really want him, my clients do say that they do have sex in whatever way the guy wants. (Participant 4)

The attitude among white men that they can “have” any Asian guy in the room was demonstrated to me one night at R-Place, a local gay bar. In one instance, a young white male approached a Vietnamese informant and began speaking in Chinese. My informant looked and responded sarcastically that he did not speak Chinese and asked, “Do I look Chinese to you?” At this point, the white male looked at him and snorted, “You need to take your attitude somewhere else,” then immediately pulled the same stunt at another Asian man standing less than ten feet from us. While I could not hear his next pick-up line, I imagine that it wasn't much different from the one he just used and, in this next instance, he seemed to be more successful. Looking at me and shaking his head, my informant informed me, “He tried that same shit last month, he doesn't even remember.” The white male, a “notorious rice queen,” had quite a reputation for hitting on API men with the same line and being quite successful. When asked what accounts for his success, my informant told me, “Because he's a white guy under thirty.”

Sexual norms within the gay community also may influence sexual risk among gay API men. In the interviews and during fieldwork, it was obvious that there was a huge expectation for gay Asian men to take the sexually submissive role of insertee (bottom) to gay white men. During one drag performance, the entertainer engaged the audience in a game of “Bachelor” where one blinded contestant “chooses” from three “bachelors” by asking them a series of questions. As could be expected, the choosing party was a gay white man while the three hoping to be chosen were Asian men. During the normal course of questioning, the gay white man asked, “If you were to sleep in a bunk bed, which bed would you choose?” While the first two contestants answered, “bottom,” the final contestant answered, “I would sleep on the top.” Unlike the other three answers that elicited no response from the audience, the fourth was met with an uproar of laughter, with one heckler yelling out, “Stop lying, girl!” According to one participant:

I definitely think that [Asian men] are seen as being feminine and submissive bottoms. That’s just the kind of general view, is that they’re just this quiet little things. You know, a lot of them aren’t quiet anymore, but still when it comes down to relationship status and their interaction in relationships, it’s what role do they take on? It’s the, I’m going to do anything to please you so that I can keep you. Yeah, so, a very submissive role. (Participant 7)

Another participant expanded on this point when he noted:

The thing is, that these guys aren’t always so quiet and submissive when alone or with other Asian guys. It’s only when they’re with these white guys that they play up to these stereotypes of being submissive or whatever. It’s like they lose themselves in order to get a white guy. (Participant 2)

During fieldwork, the notion that gay Asian men were sexually bottoms came up over and over again. During one intervention event at the local API community organization, men were asked to play a game called, “tops or bottoms.” While most were “bottoms” one particular gay Asian man insisted he was a top, despite other people’s snickering and snide comments. Later, one of his friends stated:

[He] claims he’s a top, like, anybody believes that. He’s just saying that because he’s trying to be political. He thinks that if he tells people he’s a top, people won’t think he’s such a big potato queen. (Participant 13)

When pushed further, he stated:

You know, he doesn’t want people to think that he’ll open his legs for any white guy, which he does. (Participant 13)

Gay Asian men seem to have accepted the subordinate position within gay relationships. According to one participant:

You know, like, some guy really wants to go to dinner someplace, that’s fine, I don’t have to go where I want to go. And like I said, if they really want to roll me over, then that was okay, I’m okay about that kind of stuff. And there wasn’t a whole lot of negotiation, um, I never negotiated much because I figured out what they wanted and gave them what they wanted... I guess, maybe I fit in some stereotypes and I fit into stuff in lot of different fantasies, and I made sure that I fit a lot of fantasies. (Participant 3)

It is clear from my informants and fieldwork that there is a clear expectation for certain types of sexual behavior from gay white men and that many gay API men are willing to fulfill these expectations in order to get the prize of white male companionship. As discussed below, this finding has strong implications for what should be “culturally competent” intervention materials for gay API men.

Discussion

Without denying that interpersonal factors influence HIV risk behaviors, this study focused on contextual factors that may be related to HIV risk behaviors among gay API men. My findings that racism in the gay community may contribute to unsafe sexual practices among gay API men are not new (Choi et al., 1998; Nemoto et al., 2003; Poon & Ho, 2002; Yoshikawa et al., 2004). However, other researchers examining racism in the gay community, and its influence on unsafe sex among gay API men, have focused only on how racial discrimination may lead to lower self esteem among members of this group. In contrast, this study examined the mechanism through which racism operates that may lead to unsafe sexual behavior among gay API men.

Within the larger gay community, gay API men are stereotyped as being feminine and submissive sexual partners who are only attractive to a small subset of gay white men. As Taywaditep (2001) found in an earlier study, strong anti-feminine attitudes within the gay community places men who are perceived to be more feminine at a disadvantage in selecting sexual partners compared to men who are perceived to be “straight acting.” As such, gay white men are perceived by gay API men as having more power to select their sexual partners while they perceive themselves as having to be selected.

In order to be selected, gay API men often play into the dominant racial constructions regarding what it means to be gay, Asian, and male. In fact, Lippa and Tan (2001) found that gay API men report higher levels of femininity than gay

white men. Although Lippa and Tan attributed this to cultural factors, it is also possible that the reported differences in femininity may be due, in part, to sexual expectations.

Although feminization of API men, both gay and straight, is fairly widespread in American media, it takes on a particularly prominent role within the gay community where sexual behaviors, such as who will be a top and who will be a bottom, are often dictated by perceived gendered characteristics. In addition, these stereotypes are a reflection of the racial hierarchy within the gay community where gay white men are granted the status of masculine, thus desirable, while gay API men are relegated to the status of feminine, thus undesirable (Han, 2006). Much like relationships between heterosexual men and women that are marked by prescribed gender norms (Schwartz & Rutter, 1998), relationships between gay API men and their overwhelmingly white sexual partners seem to follow a gendered pattern. Within gay white and gay API male relationships, gay API men are often expected to take on the more feminine role of sexual “bottoms,” to gay white male “tops.” (Nemoto et al., 2003). The participants for this study also reported that gay API men who did not follow these expected sexual roles were often denied sexual companionship from gay white men who most of them viewed as being more sexually desirable than other gay API men. Given the limited availability of “rice queens,” particularly those who are deemed “young and attractive,” the ideal standard within the larger gay community, many gay API men not only attempt to fulfill the sexual fantasies of gay white men but often compete actively for their attention. As such, rather than simply engaging in unsafe sex because they are unaware of HIV risk or high on drugs, I have argued that the very social context in which sexual activity between gay white men and gay API men occur strongly influences gay API men’s sexual behavior.

Perhaps one of the strongest themes to emerge was the discrepant power dynamic between gay API men and gay white men. The perceived shortage of gay white men willing to engage in sexual relationships with gay API men places them in a much more powerful position, as many of my informants noted. Phua and Kaufman (2003) found that 31% of gay API men requested “white only” in their personal ads while only 8% requested other API men. Although they did not report the percentage of white men who requested “Asian only,” Phua and Kaufman did note that only 6% of the white men requested a minority sexual partner of any race. Even if half of the white men who requested minority partners requested API men, it would mean that only 3% of white men requested “Asian only” in their personal ads. It allows gay white men to dictate the type of sexual behavior that is expected and easily find alternatives if their requests are not met. More importantly, the differential value placed on white men and API men within the larger gay community leads many gay API men to view having a white male partner as a source of self-affirmation.

Given the strong influence of social factors that may lead to unsafe sexual behavior, future research needs to examine the more precise nature of such social context. Only by examining all the aspects that influence sexual behavior will we be able to develop meaningful intervention materials for racialized and sexualized groups.

While the small sample size, the characteristics of the sample, and the localization of the study makes it difficult to draw broad generalizations, this article can nonetheless add to the understanding of unsafe sexual behavior among gay API men and perhaps open the dialogue for further study into the role that racism plays in defining sexual behavior, not only among gay API men but among other gay men of color. Clearly, large-scale research efforts with gay API men, as well as other men of color, are sorely needed in order to reliably test the hypothesis presented by this article.

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