

Using Peer Ethnography to Address Health Disparities Among Young Urban Black and Latino Men Who Have Sex With Men

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Substantial health disparities exist between sexual minority men and heterosexual men,¹ with Black and Latino young men who have sex with men (MSM) being at particularly high risk for acquiring HIV.^{2,3} The chronic use of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and club drugs (e.g., methamphetamine, ketamine, and MDMA [ecstasy]) are associated with unprotected sex in these populations.^{4–6} Thus the effectiveness of interventions seeking to remedy this disparity in HIV infections depends in part on understanding how these young men view connections between sex and substances. However, some young MSM may be difficult to reach, and the interventions designed to help them may not reflect their views. Peer ethnographers are well positioned to access such populations and capture specific conversations that happen only among insiders, such as talk about substance use with sex.

Ethnography is a research method that often involves gathering information through direct observation and face-to-face social interaction with members of the target population.⁷ Ethnographers spend significant amounts of time with members of the target population to obtain a holistic understanding of the culture. This technique helps ethnographers accurately describe social groups by becoming familiar with how members of the group perceive their everyday social activities. Peer ethnography is an innovative form of ethnography that involves training members of the target population to conduct ethnographic observations among their peers.^{8–11} During a formative phase of our research, peer ethnography provided a rich understanding of the social lives of young urban Black and Latino MSM. As members of the targeted population, peer ethnographers were able to obtain insider information immediately through existing connections to Black and Latino young MSM in their regular social routines. Gaining such

Objectives. We examined the effectiveness of peer ethnography to gain insider views on substance use and sex among a diverse range of high-risk substance-using Black and Latino young men who have sex with men.

Methods. We recruited 9 peer ethnographers aged 21 to 24 years from youth programs for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community in Los Angeles, California, and trained them in ethnography, study protocol, and human participant protection. Peer ethnographers collected 137 single-spaced pages of field notes in 2009 and 2010 derived from observation of 150 members of the target population.

Results. Peer ethnography revealed local language and phrasing and provided a window into new and different social contexts. Peers provided valuable information on current trends in substance use, revealing themes that needed to be addressed in further research, such as the use of substances during sex to “clock coin” (exchange sex for money and substances). These data enabled us to refine our recruitment strategies and ask more culturally relevant questions in a later phase of the study.

Conclusions. The peer ethnography method can provide a sound basis for further research phases in multistage studies on numerous other social issues and with other hard-to-reach populations. (*Am J Public Health.* 2013;103:849–852. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2012.300988)

access might have been time consuming and difficult, if not impossible, for an outsider.^{7,9} We have described some of the strengths, challenges, and limitations of using this method to gain insider perspectives on high-risk substance-using Black and Latino young MSM.

METHODS

Staff ethnographers trained 9 individuals to collect field notes on how Black and Latino young MSM aged 21 to 24 years discuss using substances with sex and where they use these substances. Peer ethnographers were aged 21 to 24 years and had regular contact with members of the target population. Although 7 of the peers were Black or Latino young MSM, we also utilized 2 peers who were not themselves members of the target population. One was a Latina woman, the other a White young MSM; both had social networks composed predominantly of Black or Latino young MSM.

Although the researcher does not need to match peers on all sociodemographic factors, we found that the Black and Latino young MSM peers provided richer, more extensive notes than did the Latina woman and White young MSM.

We recruited peer ethnographers from youth programs for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community in Los Angeles and trained them in ethnography, the study protocol, and human participant protection. Research staff met weekly with peers to review field notes, clarify protocols, and provide feedback to maintain quality of notes. We provided reimbursement only for detailed, high quality notes addressing research objectives. Peer ethnographers collected 137 single-spaced pages of field notes in 2009 and 2010 derived from observation of 150 members of the target population.

We instructed peers to observe and write field notes on conversations about substance use and sex among young Black and Latino gay

and bisexual men in their own social networks. We asked them to omit descriptions of personal or directly observed substance use or sexual activities to maintain a focus on conversations and minimize the risk of peers engaging in such behaviors for us to reimburse them for notes. Peer ethnographers conducted observations at numerous public venues, including bars, clubs, street corners, and social events. To capture naturally occurring conversations, we asked peers to make observations covertly; the need for consent was waived, because informing participants of our study may have changed the nature of their conversations. This method differs from in-depth interviews and focus groups because conversations observed in the field are not structured by an interviewer in a research context or influenced by the knowledge that one is in a study. We instructed peers to focus on concrete, detailed observations but to conclude field notes with a bracketed summary of their personal thoughts about the conversations.⁷

In trainings we emphasized the importance of writing field notes immediately after leaving the field, if possible, and within 24 hours at the latest. Brief jottings written in private areas in the field or immediately afterward also helped improve recall of conversations. We instructed peers to destroy all jottings once they submitted typed notes. To further protect confidentiality, peers sent notes to the study coordinator via a secure Web site in which peers had no access to any record of their notes after submission. We substituted pseudonyms for all names in field notes, including those of the peer ethnographers. At the end of the study, each peer composed a final “field note” reflecting on the experience of being a peer ethnographer.

Peer Ethnographer Training Outline

Content of field notes.

- Discuss the purpose (specific aims) of the study.
- Focus on everyday, face-to-face social interactions and conversations.
- Describe conversations about how and where Black and Latino young MSM use sex-drugs in as much detail as possible.
- Bracket personal reflections in a separate section.

Procedures.

- What is peer ethnography?
- Jot phrases or keywords in the field or immediately after leaving the field to improve memory of conversations.

- Write detailed field notes within 24 hours of leaving the field site.
- Write a separate set of personal reflections on the conversations that were observed.
- Submit notes only to the secure Web site or in person.
- Understand institutional review board–specific stipulations (e.g., issues of confidentiality and protection particular to the study).
- Discuss the role of the peer ethnographer in the field.
- What are the expectations regarding meetings with study staff?
- Make compensation agreements (we compensated peers for accepted note pages only).

Ethnography tips.

- Place direct words, phrases, or sentences in double quotation marks (“...”).
- Avoid writing notes on their own substance use or sexual behavior.
- Spell out words and explain the use of slang words or phrases.
- Provide neutral observation in the section on field notes and bracket personal evaluation in the section on personal reflections.
- Log how much time was spent in the field, any particular events, and how many members of the target population were observed during this observation.
- Avoid things such as evaluative or judgmental language in the field notes.
- Discuss any particular challenges to the study (e.g., in this case observing conversations about sex and substance use only and not their own behaviors).

Field note format.

- Ethnographer’s first name, Date,
- Highlights (a brief summary of contents),
- Field notes, and
- Personal reflections.

Human participant protection.

- History of protecting participants in research,
- Principles of human participant protection,
- Risks involved in human participant research,
- Ways of minimizing risk to participants, and
- Informed consent and circumstances for waiver of consent.

Analysis

We analyzed notes using a modified grounded theory and analytical induction approach¹² in which the research team reviewed all field notes, gathering themes that confirmed or diverged from expected norms for the population on the basis of the literature. Although the results confirmed some of the team’s expectations, we focused on instances of new terminology, social contexts, and patterns of substance use with sex to gain up-to-date knowledge of the population for the subsequent phase of data collection involving venue-based recruitment and qualitative interviews. The principal investigator (M. G. M.), 2

study coordinators, and 3 student research assistants analyzed the data. These research team members reviewed all field notes, prepared analytical memos, and discussed these memos at weekly meetings in which they identified themes and developed a codebook. We assigned codes to the field note texts and read these coded data systematically until we reached theoretical saturation.

RESULTS

Because we asked the peer ethnographers to focus on conversations and they conveyed notes in their own words, this method revealed local language and phrasing and provided a window into new and different social contexts. Field notes that peer ethnographers collected provided detailed data on how these young men talk about substance use, sex, and social contexts in which risk behavior often occurs. On the basis of previous research^{5,13} in which we found particular substances (alcohol, crystal methamphetamine, and marijuana) to be associated with sex and sexual risk among Black and Latino young MSM, we defined these substances as “sex-drugs” and asked peers to focus on conversations about them. The peers provided valuable information on current trends in substance use, revealing themes that needed to be addressed in further research, such as the use of substances during sex to “clock coin” (exchange sex for money and substances). Excerpts from the field notes follow.

Local Language

Drake introduces the term “trapped” to describe being high on crystal methamphetamine:

As I was walking up to the [youth] center, there was 2 boys out looking so trapped out their minds. What “trapped” means is like you’re on meth.

John introduces new terms and conveys a unique voice in his discussion with a friend who engages in sex work and uses crystal methamphetamine:

John: It was 4:39 in the morning at the House of Donuts. . . . Sitting in the corner chair I started a conversation wii[h] my friend. . . .
Friend: Taylor is a boi who is very fishy [feminine] and very tall and slim, nice face, dress is punk rockish. She has a Mohawk on his head with shooting stars [shaved into the side]. Taylor and I were talking about getting dates [dients]. . . .

John: So is it better if the date have glass [crystal methamphetamine] and a little money, or have you ever took drugs for sex from a date? And did you guys smoke together or you do the job and then you get on [get high]? Or do he have to pay too?

Friend: I have done it before when not that much money [is] involved. Shit, I'll take the shit [drug] and a small coin [small payment]. The shit [crystal methamphetamine] will keep me up for the next coin. And keep it going just 'cause it get me wanting to make money all night so I can supply my own high.

John: Girl, when do you go to sleep out here?

Friend: Only when I get ready to go home to my family 'cause I go home sometimes, but no I don't [sleep].

Identifying and Exploring Social Contexts

Several of Drake's field notes took place on "the track." Study staff asked Drake to describe and reflect on the track in a later set of notes:

Well what is the track? It is where the trannies [transgender] and some gay boys make their money for their rooms or drugs. [specific location information removed] It's funny how some of these kids go out there and they think they are just going to be out there for one night but they are wanting to be a part of whatever lifestyle that is out. They think it's so like, "I'm making this much [money] a nite" and I see this and I'm like, "You're so not doing anything new. You're just doing what every gay boy or tranny is doing." A lot of my friends is out there so I'm out a little bit. So what it is to me is a place where dreams are broken and taken away from you, and it's like when you get out there and you think you're going to just be out here for one nite; no, you're stuck.

Kurt discusses crystal methamphetamine use and body image with friend Nolan:

We walked into the art gallery at the plaza and looked at some pictures and chatted for a bit more. I asked Nolan about his experiences, and he told me that, as he was totally addicted to sex, he's totally addicted to pot. I told him that it's like he has to be addicted to something, aka "have a fix" to cope with reality. He told me, "Well, everyone needs something to handle this crazy life in Los Angeles. The clubs, the people, the money, it's all so much to think about and deal with." I told him he was right and that as young gay men, we have a journey ahead in this Los Angeles lifestyle of perfection. He immediately responded with "Yea tell me about it. If you're not really hot naturally, everyone takes crystal to be thin." I told him, "Yea it's the easy way to get thin."

Elijah relates a story a friend, Theo, told him about using marijuana while turning an older man into a client:

Theo said he went to the old White guy's house, and Theo said he had a cool crib, and he said that almost immediately they began to smoke weed. Theo don't smoke like that and it didn't take him long to get high. So Theo said anyway he was faded and he all of the sudden felt he had power

and that with his looks he could turn this White man, so Theo said that full of weed that he all of the sudden felt more comfortable because of the weed he felt completely more relaxed.

The field notes were also particularly revealing regarding social contexts in which these young men talk about and use substances during sex. For example, we gained a deeper understanding of young men's perspectives regarding an urban area referred to as "the track." Although we knew about the area and its role as a hub for male sex work in Los Angeles, the field notes revealed its character in new ways that more closely reflected the lives of the marginalized young men who live, work, and socialize there. Data such as these enabled us to refine our recruitment strategies and to ask more culturally relevant questions in a later phase of the study involving semistructured interviews. They also facilitated rapport because interviewers familiar with the peer ethnographic data were prepared to encounter the terminology, social contexts, and substance use behaviors of this population. Additionally, greater familiarity with localized phrases and settings enhanced interview flow and interviewer credibility.

Finally, the experience of being a peer ethnographer was itself enriching for the peers. Several peers reported a sense of accomplishment, feeling empowered to do even more for the community, and confidence that their lives and experiences mattered to a broader audience. Excerpts from exit interview field notes follow.

Self-Reflection and Empowerment

Elijah: When I was putting the information together I felt empowered to do even more for the community. I loved it. I saw a lot of personalities and got my interest going to see how I can improve myself and others around me, and it was easy for me to come across because I was so comfortable [talking to] my friends.

Kurt: [Being a peer ethnographer in] this study gave me better social skills, a better understanding of my own gay community, and a sense of accomplishment.

Donald: This experience for the most part has been truly a dream come true. Writing has been a passion of mine since I was younger, and having the opportunity to write for a short period of time was truly a blessing. When I first heard about the opportunity I was thrilled, because one I was going to have the chance for people to not only view my work but to broaden my resources.

DISCUSSION

Peer ethnography is well suited to exploratory research with hard-to-reach populations. There may be invisible subpopulations among high-risk populations,¹⁴ and researchers should use such methods to address the unique characteristics and concerns of these subgroups. In our study, field notes that peer ethnographers collected enabled us to obtain unique insights into localized meanings of diverse substance use and sexual risk behaviors among a broad range of social networks, including hard-to-reach, high-risk Black and Latino young MSM. Field notes conveyed key terms in the vernacular of the target population and provided thick descriptions of less visible social contexts, such as "the track"; such data contributed real-time information about the population. This method yielded rich data that the voices of the individuals we studied via natural conversations conveyed.

Additionally, peer ethnography revealed the evolving social dynamics in which substance-using young MSM live their daily lives, providing useful preliminary information for more effective, culturally tailored interventions. Service providers and health intervention staff may benefit directly from culturally specific knowledge gained by peer insiders who are connected to their target population and possess access to a diverse range of social networks. For example, these data demonstrated connections between sex-drugs, sex exchange, and body image among urban Black and Latino young MSM as well as new information about the track. This information, shared with local HIV prevention staff, proved useful in guiding both outreach efforts and curricula on substance use and HIV prevention.

Despite these many benefits, there are challenges and limitations to implementing peer ethnography. The method promises not broadly generalizable conclusions but rather the discovery of perspectives on how members of a particular target group experience and talk about their everyday social lives. It is best used as part of a larger toolbox of methods (such as outsider ethnographic perspectives) that can provide triangulation on topics being examined.¹⁴ Furthermore,

although peer ethnography provides an insider perspective, no data are completely unfiltered by researchers.^{7,15} For instance, we trained the peers to observe conversations about sex-drugs, a construct the researchers selected in advance. Peer notes may also be subject to social desirability bias, because peers are taking notes on their friends, although supervision stressing the importance of neutrality, accuracy, and confidentiality may mitigate bias.

Still, like other researchers, peers must be prepared to navigate complex and sometimes contradictory social roles.¹⁶ Additionally, although the inclusion of peer ethnographers who are not members of the target population may increase the diversity of perspectives gathered, we found that data from matched peers were more detailed and extensive. Researchers with limited resources may therefore wish to employ peers who are matched on all relevant characteristics. Finally, researchers using this method will develop a close working relationship with each peer ethnographer. Such integration into the peers' lives made the research team a first point of contact when peers encountered difficult life events, such as financial, legal, or relationship stressors; researchers should be prepared to provide suitable referrals in these situations.

Researchers using peer ethnography will likely gain substantial knowledge of the lives and social networks of individuals in their target population. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this method is its ability to provide a sound basis for further research phases in multistage studies—in our case, to further refine and develop outreach plans and data collection instruments for the interview phase of our study. However, we also learned that collecting field notes can be a uniquely rewarding and empowering experience for the peers themselves. We believe the method of peer ethnography could be productively employed for studies on numerous other social issues and with other hard-to-reach populations. ■

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Contributors

M. G. Mutchler originated the study and was the principal investigator; he was responsible for all aspects of the study, including design, data collection and analyses, writing, and dissemination activities. T. McKay was the study coordinator; recruited, trained, and supervised the peer ethnographers; and was involved in data analyses and writing. B. McDavitt and K. K. Gordon were involved in analyses and writing.

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Human Participant Protection

The institutional review board at California State University, Dominguez Hills approved the study.

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