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“I didn't think I could get out of the fucking park.” Gay men's retrospective accounts of neighborhood space, emerging sexuality and migrations

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Abstract

Young, African American and Latino gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM) are disproportionately represented among new HIV cases according to the most recent national surveillance statistics. Analysts have noted that these racial/ethnic disparities in HIV among MSM exist within the wider context of sexual, mental and physical health disparities between MSM and heterosexuals. The intercorrelation of these adverse health outcomes among MSM, termed syndemics, has been theorized to be socially produced by a heterosexist social system that marginalizes lesbian, gay, bisexual, MSM and other sexual minorities. African American and Latino MSM experience overlapping systems of oppression that may increase their risk of experiencing syndemic health outcomes. In this paper, using data from twenty in-depth qualitative interviews with MSM living in four New York City (NYC) neighborhoods, we present accounts of neighborhood space, examining how space can both physically constitute and reinforce social systems of stratification and oppression, which in turn produce social disparities in sexual health outcomes. By analyzing accounts of emerging sexuality in neighborhood space, i.e. across time and space, we identify pathways to risk and contribute to our understanding of how neighborhood space is experienced by gay men, adding to our ability to support young men as they emerge in place and to shape the social topography of urban areas.

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Keywords

United States; MSM; neighborhoods; space; sexuality; HIV risk

Introduction

Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM) continue to be disproportionately affected by HIV in the United States (US) accounting for 61% of new cases in 2010 and 49% of prevalent cases in 2009 (CDC, 2011; Prejean et al., 2011). Young MSM are disproportionately represented among new HIV cases; (CDC, 2007; CDC, 2008; Hall et al., 2008) young MSM accounted for over a quarter of new HIV infections in 2009, a 34% increase from 2006 (Prejean et al., 2011). Among young African American MSM, new HIV infections increased significantly by 48% from 2006 through 2009 (Prejean et al., 2011). In addition, there have been recent increases in the rate of new syphilis cases (Pathela et al 2011), particularly among urban-dwelling MSM. Empirical investigations into the causes of racial/ethnic disparities in HIV have not found support for the roles of individual sexual risk behavior, such as unprotected anal intercourse (UAI), number of sexual partners and drug use (Millet et al., 2007; Millet et al, 2012; Harawa et al., 2004; Koblin et al., 2006), although the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Millet et al., 2007) and sexual mixing patterns and networks (Tieu, 2012), are areas currently under investigation. A recent meta-analysis of 164 studies ranked correlates of HIV infection and found that structural factors constituted the majority of the top 10, including low income and education, recent unemployment, and a lifetime history of incarceration. Black MSM were twice as likely to experience these structural factors than non-Black MSM (Millet et al., 2012).

The production of racial/ethnic disparities in HIV has occurred within the wider context of the intercorrelation and overrepresentation of adverse health outcomes among MSM of all race/ethnicities, termed syndemics (Stall et al., 2003; Singer and Clair, 2003). Syndemic health outcomes among MSM have been theorized to be socially produced by “social inequality and unjust exercise of power” (p. xv. in Singer, 2009), or the marginalization and oppression required to maintain heterosexist social systems. Analysts (Frye et al., 2006; Frye et al., 2008; Egan et al., 2011) have considered these interrelated adverse health outcomes among MSM, applying socioecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), lifecourse (Ben-Shlomo and Kuh, 2002) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) theoretical approaches to make more explicit how the social and physical contexts that MSM experience across time and space might both produce adverse health outcomes and exacerbate existing racial disparities, particularly in HIV infection, as well as mental health outcomes (Meyer 2003). African American and Latino MSM experience overlapping systems of oppression that heighten their risk of experiencing adverse and syndemic health outcomes. Millet’s (2012) recent findings underscore how critical sociostructural factors, static reflections of social systems that structure society, are to growing racial disparities in HIV. Understanding how sociostructural factors and systems of oppression manifest in the physical and social environments of gay men’s lives may inform space- and place-based interventions to decrease racial disparities in HIV and related STIs.

Social Systems as Constituted in Space

A spatial consideration of how social systems work centers on how space acts to both constitute and reproduce social stratification (Bondi, 1991; Massey and Denton, 1993; Gieryn 2000; Gans, 2002). Lauren Joseph (2008), in her synthesis of the literature on the spatial turn in urban social research, identifies three crucial dimensions of the intersection between urban space, social inequality and social difference. They are: how urban space reflects and constitutes patterns of social difference and inequality; how urban space is a site of struggle between social groups; and how urban space serves as a vehicle for social reproduction of inequality. Echoing Gieryn's discussion of "what place does" (2000), these dimensions offer a useful heuristic for studying how social systems of inequality, such as the race and class systems, play out in space and interact with other forms of social exclusion, such as heterosexism, to produce adverse health outcomes among MSM and racial disparities in HIV.

Applying spatial analysis to the study of gay life is not new (Binnie and Valentine, 2004; Ingram et al., 1997; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Chauncey, 1994), with studies of public space as sites of sexual exploration and transgression, (Rushbrook, 2002; Tewsbury, 2002; Bell and Valentine, 1995) social and political activism (Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Mitchell, 2000), and neighborhood transformation (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Bell and Binnie, 2004; Castells, 1983). Conceptualizing how urban space affects young African American and Latino MSM requires theoretical explications of the mechanisms of stratification by race/ethnicity and sexual orientation, as manifest in and organized by space (Valentine, 2007; Valentine and Skelton, 2003). Among African Americans, analysts have described how spatial arrangements have been used to further social stratification, for example through residential racial segregation (Atkinson and Flint, 2004; Rugh & Massey, 2010; Bolt et al., 2010; Rothwell & Massey, 2009) and public education system-level segregation (Rothwell, 2012; Hanson Theim 2009; Burgess and Wilson, 2005). Among African American and Latino MSM, neighborhood space may contribute to stratification by race/ethnicity and the production of syndemic health outcomes through several pathways. Neighborhood-level social norms that proscribe heterosexual behavior and label as deviant same-sex behavior and/or gender non-conformity are associated with negative identity impacts, experience of discrimination, internalized homophobia and sexual minority stress (Herrick 2013a; Herrick 2013b; Meyer 2003). The topography of the neighborhood may contribute to the perception that the borders are impenetrable, resulting in decreased mobility. Low-income, African American and Latino MSM are more likely to live as well in neighborhoods that socially disorganized and physically disordered, contributing to environmental stressors and toxins that may increase stress and unhealthy exposures (Williams and Mohammed 2009). They may also be more likely to live in stigmatized spaces, such as public housing projects, that are themselves stigmatized, conferring an added space-based psychological burden (Wacquant 2007; Pearce 2012).

Previous analysts have identified how neighborhood space affects MSM in specific ways, such as same-sex public behavior, feelings of affiliation with a racial group and self-esteem (Egan et al., 2011). In this paper, we analyze accounts of neighborhood space among gay, bisexual and other MSM, examining how social and physical space reflect sociostructural

factors and social systems that contribute to adverse health outcomes and potentially produce racial disparities in HIV. Specifically, we apply the first and third aspects of Joseph's taxonomy to analyze men's accounts of their natal or childhood neighborhoods, childhood and young adulthood experiences of their emerging sexuality, and migrations. We explore how men's experiences of space are often perceived of as racialized, classed and sexualized, illustrating how space acts to reinforce and constitute systems of social stratification, enhance risk and offer protection, ultimately affecting present-day health and well-being. By analyzing accounts of emerging sexuality in neighborhood space, i.e. across time and space, we identify pathways to risk and contribute to our understanding of how neighborhood space is experienced by gay men, adding to our ability to support young men as they emerge in place and to shape the social topography of urban areas.

Methods

Sample

Men were recruited using direct street recruitment and flyers in four focal neighborhoods of New York City (NYC), Chelsea/Hell's Kitchen, Harlem, Washington Heights and Fort Greene (Brooklyn) between March and July of 2010. The neighborhoods were chosen to represent different geographic areas and level of gay community presence including historically entrenched gay spaces (Chelsea), emerging gay spaces (Washington Heights, Fort Greene), and spaces not traditionally associated as gay (Harlem). Inclusion criteria were: 1) self-report biological male sex at birth; 2) report engaging in anal intercourse, defined as either receiving or inserting a penis into an anus with a man in the past 6 months; 3) at least 18 years of age; 4) live in Chelsea/Hell's Kitchen, Harlem, Washington Heights or Ft. Greene, Brooklyn for at least 12 months; 5) communicate in English; and 6) willing and able to give informed consent.

Study Procedures

Men who screened as preliminarily eligible via street recruitment were contacted by telephone by study staff to establish definitive eligibility (the item assessing specific sexual activity was not asked on the street). Men who were eligible were asked to come to the research office and complete an in-depth qualitative interview, which lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and a brief survey asking questions related to demographics and social and sexual networks. The entire visit lasted about 2 hours. The interviews were conducted by an experienced male interviewer (J.E.) in a private room, were audio-recorded and later professionally transcribed and checked for accuracy by the interviewer. Men who completed the study visit received \$30 compensation for their time, along with a two-way Metrocard for travel. The interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide and covered a variety of concepts including: conceptions, perceptions and descriptions of the natal, residential, and social neighborhoods; discussion on sex and substance use within different neighborhood contexts; development of sexual identity and behavior; perceived influence of neighborhood on behavior and identity; migration patterns and related impact on behavior; socio-sexual networks; and resilience. All men provided written informed consent. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the New York Blood Center and New York Academy of Medicine. All participant names have been

changed to further protect anonymity. To increase readability and concision, the qualitative data included have been slightly modified (e.g. we removed the interviewer voice and removed pauses, stutters, repeated phrases and irrelevant text). In all circumstances, we retained the integrity of the quote.

Data Analysis

Using a grounded theoretical approach to the analysis of the in-depth interviews, we applied both contextualizing and categorizing strategies to code and analyze the data (Strauss and Corbin 1997; Patton 1990). First, the transcripts were summarized in a document that described the participant in terms of his life history and social characteristics. We also developed brief descriptions of the four focal neighborhoods. Using QSR International's NVivo 9 qualitative software (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 9, 2010), we conducted coding of the data in three steps. First, based on the summaries and transcripts read by the analytic team (V.F. and J.E.), a list of analytic areas represented in the data were composed and given a code (a "closed code"). Second, the primary analyst reread the transcripts and identified blocks of text to be given a descriptive label (either a label from the closed code list or an original one, termed an "open code"). Next, the open-coded data were organized under and integrated into the closed code list. Third, the data under each focal code (e.g., "home neighborhood" "natal neighborhood" "social neighborhood" "sexual behavior" "identity" "childhood/growing up" "migration"), were read and, if needed, coded into sub-categories (e.g., "adaptive behavior" by neighborhood) in order to refine the analytic categories used (Strauss 1997; Patton 1990). The first three interviews were initially coded by both analysts and then coding was compared across the transcripts, noting any inconsistencies. The remaining interviews were coded by a single coder (J.E.). Once the data were coded, portions of coded text (e.g. "natal neighborhood" and/or "migration: benefits") were compiled, read, discussed and analyzed by the analytic team. Finally, all transcripts were re-read in full to confirm that no reported quote was overly de-contextualized from the larger narrative. This analytic process identified how natal and childhood neighborhood space was experienced and described by men, with a focus on how it related to emerging sexuality, sexual behavior and sexual identity. Here we present the major, representative results. We also conducted a contrast analysis, where text coded as natal neighborhood were compared by race/ethnicity, assessing if the accounts varied markedly by this code. As well, we specifically paid attention to data that did not confirm emerging or dominant themes, noting these in subsequent analyses.

Results

Study Sample

Sample demographics are described in Table 1. The mean age of participants was 34 (range 20-50). The men self-identified as: Latino (30%), African American (30%), White (15%), or Asian American (5%). Of the African American men, one also identified as Native American Indian and another as Latino; of the Latino men, two reported having one white parent, but still identified as Latino. The men interviewed self-identified as either gay (90%) or bisexual (10%). All the men had lived in NYC for at least one year. Seven were born in NYC (all of whom were either Latino or African American) and 2 reported being foreign

born. Of the 8 men (40%) who reported being HIV-positive, 4 were African American, 2 were Latino, 1 was White, and 1 was multiracial. Five of the 8 men born in NYC were HIV-positive. Most (90%) were currently employed.

Accounts of natal neighborhoods

The men described their natal neighborhoods in terms of both physical and social characteristics, including social cohesion and norms, availability of gay role models, existence of gay social spaces, and support for gay people. Men who grew up in middle/upper class areas typically described a suburban, neighborhood where the physical and social conditions met their socio-emotional, developmental needs (e.g. education, physical safety, artistic enrichment) and nurtured them (in ways unrelated to sexuality). These indicated an awareness of the spatial nature of this support and protection. Bobby, a 30-year old Asian American medical professional raised in Southern California, described his natal neighborhood as, "...a community, gated community" where he explained,

...you'd never have to leave the community 'cause ... we had pretty much everything we needed. At the same time, I mean, it's a paradise in itself. Not many people know about it, but, again, if people do, they know what the community is like."

The supportive educational and economic conditions of natal neighborhoods were noted mainly by middle-class, typically White or Asian-American, men who migrated to NYC from middle-class suburban areas (although one young African-American man grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Atlanta). Alex, a 40-year old White photographer, grew up in an "Upper middle class neighborhood". He described his life and neighborhood there:

"I went to one of the top 20 high schools in America...a really great school. Everyone went to college with the exception of two people ... really good public schools...great neighborhood, no gangs, very together families."

Men who did not grow up in middle or upper class areas described environments that were more dangerous and resulted in constrained physical mobility. Armando, a 32-year old Latino construction worker, described the violence that characterized growing up in his natal neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn and how that restricted his movement:

Well, it was tough. I mean, I grew up in that neighborhood when there was a big crack epidemic, so [there was] a - crack house - you know, in a one block radius where I grew up, so it was pretty tough, a lot of gang violence. I mean, it was tough to see it but - you know, that was normal to us, back then. So, just, you know, [I] had close relationships with some neighbors and - just went about my life every day, thinking that was normal. ... It was definitely unsafe. I mean you couldn't be out past a certain time. ... Seven was the latest, that was like late, you know, the sun was down, we had to be up. ... I would see, you know, as a kid, I'd see gang violence, I'd see people getting robbed, fights all the time, rumbles between projects, you know, sometimes being a part of it.

Natal Neighborhoods, Sexuality and Development of Sexual Identity

Almost all men described negative experiences in their natal environments around their emerging sexuality. Regardless of race and class, men often described feeling “trapped” by the heterocentric social and cultural norms of their natal neighborhoods. Miguel, a 27-year old Latino party promoter, said of growing up in Staten Island:

I hated it. I just felt trapped. [It] Kind of sucks out there, still does. I still go out there because I have a brother out there and some close friends. I don't like it, just feels different. Because the mentality of people out there. I don't know. It just seems a little more close-minded compared to certain parts of NYC.

Several men described their natal neighborhoods as places where there were no gay role models and where it was “boring” or “stifling.” They connected a lack of gay presence to a feeling of being limited both in space and in their personal and sexual identity development. Eduardo, a 48-year old African American/Latino man explained:

It was kind of boring. Um, I would say a lot narrow minded people, I remain involved in many different things while I was growing up because I was dealing with my sexual issues um, try and understand myself, I didn't feel like I had anyone I could relate to. So in order to avoid you know, I guess, the, the depression that I probably [could have] fallen into, from dwelling on my issues I tried to keep myself busy to not think about I guess who I really was. I didn't want too much time with myself.

In contrast, Diego, a 44-year old Latino artist who grew up in Miami, described his neighborhood as possessing a “sexual culture” that he relished and that allowed him to be open with his sexuality.:

... it's a very Latin, hot town, and um, I don't mean hot, like hot, sizzling hot, but hot, like as in temperature. And it's a very sexual place. ... I love that my culture is very expressive of itself. I love Latin people, they dance, you know, shake their booty, and that's what I grew up with, you know. We were never pure Puritanical white people from Iowa, you know. That to me is sort of what, quote, unquote, America, or Americans of this country is. I never experienced that. I'm thankful where I grew up.

Some men who grew up within the 5 boroughs of NYC, all of whom were African American or Latino, described the difficulty associated with emerging as gay in their natal neighborhoods. Malik, a 43-year old HIV-positive African American man born in Brooklyn and living in Harlem, described his natal neighborhood:

I grew up here in Brooklyn. ... It was great. I mean, I didn't have any big issues. My sexuality was probably the only thing that was challenging. Other than that, everything was great. Well, you know, it wasn't real popular to be young, black and gay in the projects. So, you know, I had to do some masking and well, first of all, I had to come to terms with the fact that there was something wrong with it because it just came naturally for me to be gay, but you soon became, you know, aware that your surroundings did not promote that. So, you had to kind of have a double life.

In describing how his neighborhood manifest this lack of support for gay youth, he described having to enact the dominant masculine norm in order to not become a target of violence:

... people were pretty stereotypical around gay people. You know, they called you names. You were considered less than. So, it made sense for me as a - further protection point of view to create another persona and not go with the one that they were ridiculing. I had to show interest in females which was something I - sexually, I really wasn't interested in, in the beginning. So, I had to show interest in that. I had to show interest in sports. I had to show interest in, you know, scaling walls and, you know, balancing on the fence and jumping over, you know, Johnny pumps and throwing rocks at squirrels. I mean, shit that I didn't want to do, but to fit in, I did.

In response to whether there was a place in this neighborhood for boys like him that did not fit in, he responded:

Yeah, because like I wasn't like, you know, I wasn't like gay-faggot. I guess I had proved myself that much to where I wasn't looked at as that, but I wasn't like down-low. So, I was kind of in between. I don't know if that makes sense. ... Well, like I said, it only became confusing for me when it became clear that people were more uncomfortable with me than I was uncomfortable with me, because I was okay with me, you know. And as it became clear that people was uncomfortable with me, being the people pleaser that I was at that time, that's when I began to start trying to do some things to change. Like, I started dating girls. You know, and I started having, you know, relationships and that's kind of when my sexuality kind of took a shift because then I became - like the things that I did with men went a little underground at that point. Done but not publicly. A lot of park cruising...I would go off on my own. I had really become, like a loner at that point.

Malik continued to describe how, being isolated and unable to connect openly and safely with gay youth for friendship and/or sex, he began cruising in Fort Greene Park, a major park in Brooklyn, which, like many public park spaces, functions as a space for gay men to connect with other men and have sex.

Ft. Greene Park, back when Ft. Greene Park was really cruisy around that time. Drugs and alcohol began to take an effect at that point and so you would find yourself doing things under the influence that you could blame on being under the influence that you wouldn't do out and out. Well, you know, I started off drinking beer, smoking reefer and then it progressed. I used to hang out with this guy and his family was big with drugs and he was one of those guys where he had a reputation for, like hanging out with guys. He had this straight persona too. You know, he had a girlfriend and all this stuff, but he had this reputation for hanging out with guys, especially younger guys that he would shower with; you know, stuff and stuff would happen and so I started hanging out with him and that's when the drugs really progressed; cocaine, heroin. Yeah, I was 16, 17 with a problem.

Malik's experiences in the NYC of the mid-1980's was bounded by his neighborhood, particularly the park, and punctuated by risks associated with violence, substance use and an emerging HIV epidemic of which he knew very little. In describing the first time he heard about HIV and condoms, he said,

Condoms wasn't one of those things that you [heard about] - first time that I had heard about - anything about, like STDs was this guy, this older guy... tried to penetrate me and he used the plastic that goes on the outside of a Newport box and that was the first time there was any kind of barrier that was even introduced. ... then after that, I remember he shared with me that I needed to go down to the clinic and get tested because something happened with something and I was like, you know, just baffled."

Accessing gay space

Some men who were born and raised in NYC or other urban areas felt unable, in their youth, to travel to Manhattan or access the local gay community or space. For many of these men, their neighborhood geographic boundaries constituted uncrossable symbolic boundaries. Armando, a 32-year old Latino construction worker, describes his experience of coming out and living in Williamsburg:

I didn't come out because I couldn't - I didn't identify with anyone there - you know, I mean, gay wasn't something that you spoke about, so I didn't even know what gay was. I didn't step a foot into Manhattan until I was about 19 years old. ... the first time that I came to Manhattan I was lost - because my life revolved around Brooklyn - you know, everything happened in Brooklyn so - and again, it was such a tough neighborhood that - you know, we didn't - we were just worried about getting through the day, we weren't really looking to - you know, go out to Manhattan and - you know, go sight-seeing or - you know, we would just - you know, go to school, you'd come home or - you know, you'd hang out with your friends for - for a bit and you come back home. And that was day-to-day living over there.

Similarly, Peter, a 25-year old African American man born in and living in Brooklyn, was involved in a long-term sexual relationship with a Brooklyn neighborhood friend from about age 10 and had this to say about why he didn't access the gay spaces of Manhattan:

I didn't know anything about that. I didn't know anything about that. I didn't find a gay - I didn't think about gay space until I was like okay well the relationship is over - um - I went - all I knew was people used to say that gay people hang out on West 4th Street. So I went down to West 4th Street and I just started walking around. And eventually I walked down to Christopher Street. And I met these kids sitting in a coffee shop and they were punk rockers in there. And I made friends with them and they basically showed me the ropes of Christopher Street and the village and here I sit today.

Another man, Pedro, a 50-year old Latino man raised in Chicago and currently working as a health care professional, found a gay youth community center not in his natal ("brown")

neighborhood but in a more affluent (“white”) neighborhood (Boystown area). After finding the support he needed in this group, he left home at age 16 and began life on his own.

And he [hotline counselor] told me where they [gay youth support group] were located. And every weekend every, because they met on Saturdays at noon. Every Saturday at noon after that, I told my mom I was going to the library. I'd pack my backpack and pretend like I was doing something. And it was far away from where she lives, so I knew that there no way she was ever going to like find out. You know? Because it was sort of like in the [inaudible] just literally, at that time I can describe, it was like in a white neighborhood. And we lived in a brown neighborhood. So there was like, she had no reason whatsoever to be on there, nor anyone that I knew. So anyway, so here I am, going every Saturday and making, making friends and finding out so much about positive things and positive reinforcement and support and you know, parades. And to me it was like I hit the lotto, you know? Because once I realized that you're not the only one, and you're not this. And you're not going to, you know, and you don't have to be miserable or depend on someone who wants to like hurt you. That was just like, that's it.

Pedro was able to cross the geographic and social boundaries of his natal neighborhood to access gay space. In so doing, he was able to experience a place where being gay was accepted and celebrated. Through access to supportive networks (e.g. friends and LGBT institutions), he was able to permanently transgress the social boundaries that kept him in place and was able to ultimately migrate away from his natal neighborhood and abusive mother. Similarly, Alex (40-year old White photographer) described leaving the church youth group in his own affluent Midwestern town to attend one in the neighboring town, which was slightly lower income, to escape the gossip associated with a sexual encounter with a young male member of the first church youth group. While able to find a more accepting space, and by hanging out with the “good Goth kids” at high school, Alex was traumatized by the possibility of his sexuality being exposed to his family and community and considered suicide at one point.

Migration

Migration to an urban area and/or gay mecca is a familiar theme of gay culture in the U.S. (Weston, 1995). Many of the men we interviewed were unable to emerge as gay in their natal neighborhoods and described migrating to urban – or sometimes just different - areas to search for a place where they would be able to more easily exist as a gay man. Luis, a 39-year old Latino/White man living in Washington Heights and working as a graphic designer, left Puerto Rico as a young man and described his decision to migrate:

As a matter of fact, there's no - I don't think there's a place down there [Puerto Rico] for a gay person like me. Because it's either a drag queens or men that are married and fool around. So there's no place for a gay man to just, I mean, still be a man. However, you're sexuality happens to be, you know, like there's - it's - there's no place for me down there.

Some NYC-born men ran away from impoverished neighborhoods and abusive families, seeking survival, and finding risk, in sexual relationships. Javier, a 42-year old unemployed Latino man, described such an early life experience:

Actually I ran away - yeah I ran away because my mom was alcoholic and she used to beat the shit outta me. She never physically - she never sexually abused me, my father neither, but my mom was alcoholic and she used to physically abuse me so I didn't want to be there. And so I started running away, had nowhere to go and I met a guy one time that kind of - I'm not going say he forced me to, because I did it, but in a way I would say he coerced me into doing it, that's not what I really wanted to do but I needed a place to stay and I needed da money. So if you ain't got somewhere to go and you don't want to sleep outdoors - you know - you say okay. And I said well what do I got to do? He said all you got to do is let me give you head. I remember the first time he did I didn't like it. I was like cringed and like this ain't - this ain't - right with me, I don't like this kind a thing. And then after awhile, maybe about couple months, you just kind a like block it out, become a mental thing, you block it out and you think about somebody else or a girl - you know - and - and that's how I was doing it and I was getting paid for it and - I don't know. I wouldn't recommend that to nobody else.

Peter, an African American man migrated just a few blocks away after a traumatic break-up and being outed in his natal neighborhood.

Once it came out it spread like wildfire. And I immediately noticed the change in how people looked at me, the change of how they spoke to me or whether they even spoke at all. I stayed away for a few years. I think it was probably within the course of 5 years they saw me maybe 4 times. I moved out - I moved - I wasn't living on the block. I wasn't living too far ...probably like 6 blocks away. ... But I went to work, I brought my ass home, I hung out, I partied, I didn't go around relatives, and when they called I didn't answer their phone calls. I stayed away for awhile.

In response to the how important leaving his natal neighborhood was for him:

The distance, the time - I mean - there was a lot a shit that- a lot a stories that went around while I was gone; oh Pete died, Pete got locked up, meaning there was a lot of stuff. But for me it was necessary because I didn't need that stuff to cloud my focus... How do I handle - how do I help him when I'm worried about - you know - what people are saying about me? It was enough for me [the six blocks]. It was what it was. I did what I had to do.

By putting just a few physical blocks between himself and his family members, Peter avoided them for five years, creating enough social distance so that he could focus on his own needs. Ultimately, Peter moved back to his childhood neighborhood and established himself as an out gay man there. Not all men found it possible to return to the dangerous and violent childhood neighborhoods that they fled. Malik developed a drug addiction at age 17, but was drug-free and in recovery by 21. After learning that he was HIV-positive, he migrated to a southern state and found community among people living with AIDS. He

emerged as a gay man at this point and in this different place. When asked whether he would have been able to fully embrace his sexuality and sexual identity had he stayed in NYC, he said “Who knows? I really often - often, I ask myself and I don't know. Like I said, I didn't think I could get out of the fucking park.” After living down south for many years, Malik moved back to Harlem rather than to Brooklyn. He said that Brooklyn felt “unsafe” to him. He said, “I always liked New York ...although I grew up in Brooklyn, I really didn't like Brooklyn. No, never felt safe in Brooklyn. I guess it's because of the whole growing up [in] Fort Greene and having that whole project mentality, and that project mentality was not only in Fort Greene. It was in every - it was in Marcy. It was in Crown Heights. It was in Bed-Stuy.”

In describing how he felt when he returned to NYC and settled in Harlem, he said “I felt like I could be myself and at this particular point, when I came back to New York, I was really, really totally okay with my sexuality, even my status.” Leaving the city made him feel like he had “escaped.” He noted that before he left NYC and accepted his identity and HIV status he was “trapped” in Prospect Park. He said:

“I couldn't get out of Prospect Park when I was living in Brooklyn...I had a job where I had to be to work early in the morning and I would be in Prospect Park, four or five o'clock in the morning, looking, searching and this is even when - this is clean. I was introduced to recovery at that point. I couldn't shake the behaviors. That's why I probably became positive, while being clean, is because although the drugs and alcohol had stopped, the behaviors didn't.”

For Mlik, the park was the context for his unsafe sexual behavior, not the use of drugs or alcohol. Thus, the park became a tainted space for him, and the taint contaminated all of Brooklyn, which no longer felt “safe” to him.

Discussion

In this paper we examined the spatiality of the nexus of sexuality, race/ethnicity and social class, exploring retrospective accounts of emerging sexuality in childhood neighborhoods and migration among gay men in NYC. We found that in describing their childhood neighborhoods, the men often used racialized and classed language in their descriptions of the spatial dimensions of their neighborhoods, illustrating how space operated to maintain various social systems via symbolic and physical exclusion or isolation. Childhood neighborhoods were described by the men interviewed as “gated” or “exclusive” and “brown” or “projects.” These terms were used symbolically and reflect popular notions of the social and cultural meanings of certain geographic or physical spaces, with some accounts reflecting the stigmatized status of neighborhood space (Wacquant 2007). The spaces functioned as barriers to movement and access to the gay community. Despite the existence of mechanisms for transgressing the boundaries, most men - as young men - did not travel outside of their neighborhoods in search of gay space. Lamont and Molnar (2002) articulate the difference between social and symbolic boundaries, highlighting how symbolic boundaries, popular notions made by actors to create groups, can translate into social boundaries, which act to include or exclude certain groups. In these accounts we see how symbolic boundaries, based in and constituted by geographic space, act as boundaries

maintaining social stratification through mechanisms that contribute to a lack of access to gay space and community.

In their accounts of childhood neighborhoods, men born and raised low socioeconomic positions of NYC offered accounts of neighborhoods in which they felt physically constrained. These men tended not to describe spaces engendered with support (e.g. educational opportunity), but rather focused on day-to-day survival. Men living in these areas, typically men of color, described experiencing traumatic events and characterized confinement of movement due to open drug markets, gun violence and other results of structural violence that prevented them from accessing the benefits of safe and socioeconomically nurturing environments. However, some men were successful in transgressing these social and physical boundaries to seek different spaces. In contrast, men born into moderate or high socioeconomic positions or areas, where safety and survival were not the primary goals, described environments that nurtured them and enhanced their ability to assume positions in within the heteronormative middle or upper classes. For these men, geographic and social boundaries reinforced their privileged positions using physical gates and exclusivity associated with the high cost of housing to maintain safety, control movement and exclude non-members of their own social group.

All of the men -- independent of age, race and class -- spoke of the negative effects of heterosexism and homophobia on them as young MSM. As they grew into adolescence, most of the men encountered social boundaries defined by the social norms of dominant hegemonic masculinity. These men described their efforts to conform to these ideals as well as negative consequences associated with failing to conform. Because of this, most of the men in the sample described feeling “trapped” in their natal environments by heteronormative and masculine idealist cultural norms. To escape these destructive spaces, many men migrated away from their natal neighborhoods ending up in gay-affirming neighborhoods, however, experiences of migration varied. Middle-class men in particular expressed an eagerness and easier ability to leave their natal home to move to either a city or gay neighborhood that would provide unfettered access to an established gay community, along with other perceived benefits of urban environments. These men described less difficulty accessing the required resources to overcome barriers to migration.

Men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds less frequently described a conscious childhood desire to leave, describing their migrations as either accidents or responses to traumatic experiences or dangerous family environments. These men often had fewer experiences of leaving their natal neighborhoods and less access to essential migration related resources. They may have also been reluctant to move to neighborhoods where they would be in a racial/ethnic minority. Despite their relative proximity to NYC gay neighborhoods few of these NYC-born men ventured out of their outer borough neighborhoods to seek safety, sex, or community in the historically established gay neighborhoods of Manhattan until their late teens. Some of the men born and raised in lower socioeconomic areas outside of Manhattan, after migrating or emerging as gay men, maintained strong familial relationships, returning to their natal neighborhoods in later life, choosing these areas over residence in gay neighborhoods. Demonstrating resilience, some of these men were able to remain in or return to their natal neighborhoods, successfully

integrating their multiple identities, confronting heteronormativity and confronting and resolving familial and neighborhood expectations. Some men consciously decided that connection to their natal family and neighborhood took precedence over the unmediated expression of sexuality associated with a gay enclave.

In this paper, we apply an approach which posits that the early development of MSM within systems of heterosexism, heteronormative violence and social marginalization predisposes men to psychosocial health issues, which snowball into co-occurring and intersecting health problems later in life (Stall, 2003, Stall 2008). Recent evidence suggests that childhood and adolescent development is critical to the process, with childhood events (e.g. gay-related victimization, masculinity attainment, childhood satisfaction) significantly associated with syndemics production (Herrick, 2013a). The accounts we analyzed reveal how natal neighborhoods may affect men's sexual, mental and social health and well-being. Consistent with Bruce and Harper (2011), the childhoods of the men in our sample were characterized by marginalization and isolation due to their emerging sexual identities as gay men, failure to conform to gender norms and/or same-sex behavior. Men born and raised in low socioeconomic status neighborhoods experienced multiple potential routes of influence to heightened risk, related both to their individual social class and the socioeconomic conditions of their neighborhood. Thus, Malik describes developing an alternate persona to survive in a highly homophobic environment; this persona had to engage in heterosexual and other behaviors, such as neighborhood violence, designed to establish a masculine identity. Poverty drove some men to engage in dangerous or criminal activity, drug use and exchange sex. Middle- and upper-class men also described pathways to risk associated with space-based environments and experiences. Typically, the negative experiences these men described were related to the high levels of heterocentrism of their neighborhood and familial-social groups, demonstrating the near ubiquity of heterocentrism and homophobia in the US. As with men living in poor urban areas, there were few gay role models or spaces for young middle- and upper-class MSM to safely explore their emerging sexuality. These men also described traumatic experiences related to confronting their emerging sexuality, which resulted in feelings of despair and hopelessness. These men did not however describe dangerous natal neighborhoods, filled with environmental risks. Thus, men growing up in poor urban areas, men of color in particular, experienced both sets of pathways to risk, illustrating their positions in intersecting systems of oppression, race/ethnicity, class and sexuality.

Limitations

The analysis has several limitations. First, although we engaged in purposive sampling, the sample was essentially one of convenience recruited using street and venue-based outreach. While overall the sample is diverse in terms of geography, ethnicity, and age, the size of the sample is small, particularly given the size and diversity of the MSM population in NYC. Furthermore, as the neighborhoods were chosen to represent differing levels of gay presence and affirmation, we did not include men from the vast majority of NYC neighborhoods. While concentrating on only a few neighborhoods afforded us the opportunity to compare and contrast experiences, we were unable to explore the experiences of men residing in other theoretically relevant neighborhoods. In particular, we were not able to capture experiences

of men who grew up in historically gay or highly resourced NYC neighborhoods. As well, the study is set in NYC and thus provides a very specific urban context within which we interpret gay men's experience of urban neighborhood space. While gay men in other urban areas and men in non-urban areas may have similar stories, they also very likely have a different perspective on how neighborhood impacts their health and well-being. While all attempts were made to assure quality and consistency in data collection, such as using a highly skilled interviewer, a population-appropriate and pilot tested interview guide, the use of a comfortable interview environment, and modest participant incentives, some participants may have been less comfortable with qualitative data collection. Future research ought to include follow-up qualitative interviews to explore in more depth the findings reported here. Given these limitations, we caution that the findings we report are suggestive and that further research is needed in this area.

Conclusions

Drawing on men's accounts of their natal neighborhoods, emerging sexuality and sexual identity and migration, we explore how space reflects and reinforces overlapping systems of stratification and acts to enhance risk of syndemic health outcomes. Using Joseph's dimensions of social divisions and space as an analytic lens that connects social structures and socially interactive experiences as situated in place, we examine gay men's descriptions of space, ones often described in racialized and classed ways, to document how these men have suffered, survived, feeling trapped and breaking free, and for some ultimately thrived, with the attendant adverse physical and mental outcomes associated with these experiences and migrations. The contrast between the experiences of middle and upper-socioeconomic status men with those of the men born in lower-socioeconomic status areas, typically urban areas, illustrates how different early childhood experiences and environments act to reinforce these men's social positions, while negative experiences related to homophobic neighborhood social environments constitute shared experiences across social class, race and natal neighborhood. In identifying pathways to risk and contributing to our understanding of how neighborhood space is experienced by gay men, we add to understanding of how to support young MSM as they emerge in place, as well as consider how to shape the social topography of low SES, urban areas where men who feel trapped in intersecting systems can either access gay space or shape their own space to meet their developing needs as young, gay men.

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Research Highlights

- MSM experience mental and sexual health outcomes that are socially produced.
- In the US, MSM of color experience intersecting social systems of oppression.
- Spatial boundaries reinforce these systems, stratification and health disparities.
- MSM of color described space and spatial boundaries as racialized and classed.
- Natal neighborhood space can promote health and well-being among urban MSM of color.

Table 1

Sociodemographic and Health Status Characteristics of the M2M Sample, July 2010

Sample Demographics (N=20)	
	% (N)
Age mean (range)	34 (20-50)
Race/Ethnicity	
African- American	30% (8)
Asian-American	5% (1)
Latino	30% (8)
White	15% (3)
Unemployed	10% (2)
Identify as gay	90% (18)
Born in NYC	35% (7)
HIV-positive	35% (7)
Of born NYC, % HIV+	71% (5/7)
Of born NYC, % AA/Latino	100% (7/7)