

Researchers Say Sexual Risk-Taking Due to Social Oppression

NARTH clinician Christopher Rosik critiques study's conclusions

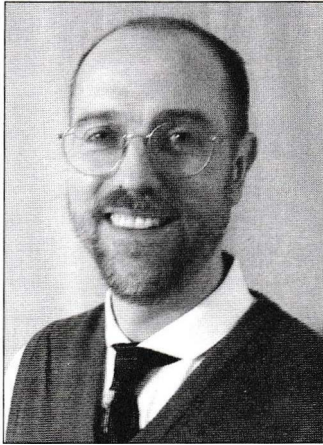
By Frank York

Three researchers claim that Latino gay males engage in risky sexual behavior because of the negative influence of social oppression, homophobia, and poverty.

The researchers have published their findings in the August, 2004, issue of *Cultural Diversity And Ethnic Minority Psychology* (Vol. 10, No. 3, 255-267).

The study's authors were Rafael M. Diaz, San Francisco State University; George Ayala, AIDS Project Los Angeles; and Edward Bein, University of California, Berkeley. They conducted interviews with 912 Latino gays between October, 1998 and March, 1999. Prior to this, the researchers interviewed another 300 gay and bisexual males between November, 1996 and March, 1997. Diaz and Ayala have also written "The Case Of Latino Gay Men And HIV Risk."

The research questionnaire was designed to test the hypothesis that sexual risk is heightened by social oppression. They observed: "Specifically, we hypothesize that experiences of social oppression—discrimination on the



Christopher Rosik, Ph.D.

basis of race/ethnicity and sexual orientation as well as hardships related to low socioeconomic status—can lead to higher sexual risk by producing high levels of psychological distress."

The researchers developed 11 items to measure experiences of "homophobia"; a four-point Likert scale to measure psychological distress; a 10-point scale to assess participation in difficult sexual situations; and detailed questions about the two most recent sexual encounters experienced by gays who participated in the survey.

Data gleaned from these questionnaires was analyzed to compare experiences of social oppression with measurements of sexual risk.

Sixty-four percent of those interviewed had experienced verbal harassment as children; 70% felt their sexual orientation hurt and embarrassed their families; and 64% had to pretend to be gay in order to be accepted. In addition, gay Latinos experienced high rates of psychological distress. Sixty-one percent reported sleep problems and 44% report-

ed anxiety or panic attacks; 17% reported suicidal ideation at least once in a six-month period.

The study also revealed that 31% were afraid of being discovered in a public sex environment; and 31% were under the influence of drugs while 54% were under the influence of alcohol when engaging in sex.

According to the researchers, the data shows that "men who are sexually risky report significantly more experiences of homophobia, racism, and financial distress than their low-risk counterparts." They continue, "social oppression affects sexual risk by increasing the likelihood that individuals participate in situations that make it difficult to practice safer sex."

"Society Should Change"

They conclude by urging that discriminatory policies against gays will lead to a "more just and healthy society, and perhaps the most important tool to fight diseases like AIDS that breed on social injustice, prejudice, and inequality."

NARTH Therapist Says Study's Limitations Should Have Been Included in Discussion

Christopher Rosik, Ph.D., has reviewed this study and has noted numerous methodological flaws in it. Rosik is on the clinical staff of Link Care Center in Fresno, California.

In a statement provided to NARTH, he made the following observations:

"There are a number of serious limitations to this study, and it is of interest that no presentation of study limitations is provided in the discussion session.

"First, in order to control for the potential confound of number of sexual partners, the authors limited their assessment of sexual risk behaviors to only the participants' two most recent sexual partners during the past year. It is not clear how this fully solves that problem, as one would think that higher numbers of sexual partners constitutes a risk factor in and of itself.

"In this study, the results indicated that 64% of the participants had two or more partners in the past year. It appears that by definition in this study a high number of sexual partners is not a risk factor as long as one practices 'safe sex.' This is a most questionable assumption.

"Second, methodological limitations abound. Despite the cross-sectional nature of this study, the authors' utilize

words such as 'predict' and 'produce' that imply causation. However, correlational studies do not allow for implied conclusions on the directionality of causation between the variables under examination. Thus, the study can not conclusively determine if sexual risk-taking is caused by poverty or homophobia, or whether engaging in behaviors like sexual risk-taking contributes to the conditions that lead to poverty or homophobia.

An Interactionist Perspective Is Much More Plausible

"I suspect the truth is somewhere in between, with an interactionist perspective that sees each reinforcing the other. Yet even partially attributing the cause of any kind of stigmatization to the individual is not permitted in the world of current social scientific thought. The authors' underplay, in my judgment, the fact that even the low sexual risk group of gay Latino men display strikingly high levels of sleep problems (52%), fear or panic for

no apparent reason (40%), sad or depressed mood (78%), sex under the influence of alcohol (51%) and suicidal ideation (15%).

"As is frequently found in this area of research, the sample pool was obtained through gay social venues in major urban centers. Generalization of the findings beyond the immediate reference group of participants is therefore questionable. The study also fails to provide any comparison groups that would help in the interpretations of the findings. For example, it would have been useful to compare heterosexual Latino men with similar levels of exposure to racism and poverty to see more clearly the effects of sexual orientation.

"Finally, highlighting again the subjective dimension of social science research, the authors did not include in their analysis variables that would be of particular interest to NARTH members and would have further clarified the meaning of the findings. Variables such as childhood sexual and physical abuse, family structure, and perceived emotional bond to one's father are just a few factors that might moderate or mediate the relationships between the indexes of social oppression, psychological distress, and sexual risk behaviors among the gay Latino men investigated in this study.

"In short, the present study provides some useful data, but more importantly, highlights the kind of limitations that are ubiquitous in this literature. Consequently, the study's findings should by no means be considered conclusive." ■

The truth is likely somewhere in between, says Rosik: Social oppression cannot be assumed to cause all of the psychological problems.