

Ethnoracial MSM Research Think Tank Summary

June 2009

Background

The Ethnoracial MSM Research Working Group was established by the AIDS Bureau of the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care in 2005 to address gaps in research evidence on ethnoracial MSM communities to support policy and program development. The Working Group has been meeting and collaborating on different projects and studies to engage our target communities over the past few years. To date, the development of a guiding principle document for conducting community based research (CBR) with culturally diverse communities and the designing of a research study to help identify research needs and gaps for target communities have been completed.

Recently, The Ontario HIV Treatment Network (OHTN) has taken on the role of coordinating the Working Group. As part of the strategic planning process, a Think Tank was identified by working group members as an important step to foster learning among key stakeholders, facilitate identification of research priorities, and to encourage collaborative research related initiatives amongst ethnoracial MSM communities.

Objectives

The objectives of the Think Tank were to:

- share knowledge and information on current ethnoracial MSM research;
- expand upon the needs and priorities for specific communities; and
- explore opportunities for collaboration and partnership

Introduction

Frank McGee, Sean Rourke, and Alan Li introduced the day's objectives and the Ethnoracial MSM Working Group and outlined the importance of pursuing research agendas with ethnoracial communities in Ontario and the potential resources (financial and otherwise) available to support such initiatives.

Attendance

Forty-eight individuals attended the Think Tank, representing policymakers, academic and community based researchers from across Ontario, and front-line service providers from AIDS service organizations, community health centres, hospitals, universities, and research institutes.

Presentations

Robert S. Remis – *Epidemiological characteristics on Ethnoracial MSM in Ontario*

Haile Fenta – *A review of recent research on HIV Risk and Prevention Interventions among Men who have Sex with Men from Ethnoracial Communities*

Winston Husbands – *MaBwana: Health, Community and Vulnerability to HIV among African, Caribbean, and Black Gay and Bisexual Men*

Devan Nambiar – *Improving the Capacity of the HIV Sector to Respond to Ethnoracial MSM: Tapping Front-Line Expertise and Wisdom*

Barry D. Adam & Gerardo Betancourt – *Mano en Mano: First Pilot Intervention for Latino MSM Newcomers to Canada*

Rory Crath – *Body Image Satisfaction and Mental, Physical and Sexual Health among Ethnoracialized Gay and Bisexual Men*

Group Discussions

The afternoon small group session provided an opportunity for specific ethnoracial groups to get together to review key ideas in specific research projects underway or in the works, identify additional research priorities, and to explore potential collaboration.

The four groups were:

- African, Caribbean, and Black
- South Asian
- Latino (includes Spanish and Portuguese-speaking individuals)
- East & Southeast Asian

The direction of each small group discussion was unique; however a number of common themes came to light that created a foundation for the larger group debrief that followed. Within each group, discussions arose around the extreme diversity that exists within each of the racial categories. While useful as a framework for organizing and expanding research knowledge, these categorizations will require recognizing this diversity and at times further individuating communities currently grouped together.

All groups echoed a call for better support to evaluate current prevention strategies and to develop innovative interventions. Many were in support of pursuing a richer understanding of who these communities are – the attitudes, knowledge and behaviors that influence risk and resiliency, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This was complemented by a desire for further investigation into the intersections of racism and homophobia.

Faith traditions are of great importance to different communities and were a topic of conversation in a number of the dialogues. A desire to better understand the stances of faith communities towards both MSM and HIV transmission as well as investigate different ways of engaging faith communities in this work were identified as key.

The following are highlights from the small group discussions:

Black/African/Caribbean:

This group focused on identifying key questions that need addressing. They explored stigma and discrimination, as well as effective ways of addressing them, particularly in regards to new migrant Black communities. Significant conversation occurred around service provision, both for people with HIV and for those at risk, and ways to ensure that services are tailored to the community. Evaluating the services available as well as investigating effective prevention and support models is a top priority.

Cultural norms that create barriers to prevention efforts were explored including the historical context of slavery and colonization and how these play into the current criminalization of HIV, an analysis that has often failed to consider the racialization of populations and its impact on criminality. Also discussed was the idea of men on the 'down low' and how this affects HIV transmission and how best to ensure that straight identified MSM are receiving prevention efforts that match their sexual practices.

Next Steps: A key strategic direction identified was to build a research network of Black, African and Caribbean academics and community based researchers interested in doing HIV research. CBR was noted as a valuable tool for exploring the concepts noted above, providing the current move to support such research gains momentum.

South Asian:

Much of the initial discussion focused on the challenge of identifying research questions in light of the vast complexities of identities and cultures among communities that fall under the South Asian category. In addition to national and linguistic diversity, it was noted that South Asian MSM identity, and the labels used to describe it, can be different based on length of time or number of generations since immigration. It is believed that research can provide useful qualitative and quantitative data to guide program and service developments, but a fundamental question that needs clarifying is the meaning of the South Asian identity to different people within these communities. Knowing this will help determine whether it is most prudent to substantiate and evaluate current programming, reform programs or look at new models for HIV prevention and support services?

Next Steps: The action items from this dialogue were around better understanding the South Asian MSM community, to quantify and qualify the characteristics of the populations that services are meant to target. This is a key first step in moving towards stronger and more effective service provision.

This group was strongly in favor of collaboration in the interest of capitalizing on strengths, and ASAAP has committed to communicate research requests they receive to ensure that research is guided by the community.

Latino/Spanish-/Portuguese-Speaking:

Dialogue in this group centered on strengthening the research team that guided the *Mano en Mano* project to develop a larger study that will examine the contexts of sexual behaviors and decision making among Spanish and Portuguese-speaking MSM. Exploring the applicability of US research findings to the Canadian context was noted as an important step as was running parallel projects with Spanish and Portuguese-speaking MSM communities.

Immigration and socialization into a culture with different values around sexual expression, and the concomitant language barriers it creates, was cited as a vulnerability of Latino men. For example, Latino men are often not reached by materials that use language 'coming out,' 'barebacking' or other terms often used in the broader MSM community.

Next Steps: The group foresees setting up parallel sub-teams to further develop methodologies and outreach strategies targeting Spanish and Portuguese-speaking groups. A key challenge will be to evaluate how recruitment is carried out for research projects to engage non-gay identified MSM as the need to reach different geographic communities and to address different ways of engaging MSM in different sex seeking settings (i.e. specific cruise spots, different norms, etc.) is important.

East Asian:

This group highlighted the need for resources that will support the development of infrastructure that will enable ethnoracial agencies and communities to develop and meaningfully engage in research. The group identified the need for better baseline epidemiologic profile on East and Southeast Asian MSM, including the different social determinants that affect their social locations, diversities in age, socioeconomic class, length of migration, and other factors that affect their mental and sexual health. In a pre-think-tank discussion, ACAS prioritized youth, newcomers, and long-term survivors as key populations needing attention. Participatory action research is the preferred vehicle for addressing these questions.

Next Steps: The group will actively look into developing research partnerships with institutions such as the University of Toronto and The Ontario HIV Treatment Network to develop studies with intervention components that focus on and across specific sub-populations.

Cross community common priorities

Through the small group discussions, the facilitators were able to identify the following research priorities of common interest:

- Research studies that evaluate current prevention and support strategies and models
- Epidemiologic studies on sexual health, behaviors and protective factors on different MSM populations that include qualitative and intervention components
- Efforts to build linkages with faith-based communities in HIV prevention work
- Priority populations that require further investigation include: newcomers, youth, older adults, long-term survivors, non gay-identified MSM, and women (impacted by non-gay identified MSM).

Follow up action

To ensure momentum and effective mechanisms to advance identified priorities, the group agrees to maximize coordination and collaboration within existing projects and forums, working on related issues. Different organizations volunteered to take the lead on specific populations to ensure next steps are taken. This could involve a gathering of research groups, advocating for academics to address community concerns, or continuing dialogue on the direction research needs to take.

The following leads were identified:

- *Research studies that evaluate current prevention and support strategies and models:* The group will work with the newly established **Prevention Research Network Advisory Committee at the OHTN** to further this agenda.
- *Epidemiologic studies on sexual health, behaviors and protective factors on different MSM populations that include qualitative and intervention components:* The **Spanish and Portuguese-speaking group** will take the lead and will invite partners from ASAAP, ACAS and African/Caribbean communities to collaborate.
- *Efforts to build linkages with faith-based communities in HIV prevention work:* The **CAAT Mobilizing Ethnoracial Leaders research study** will take the lead on this issue.
- *Priority populations that require further investigation:* The **Newcomer MSM Resource Development Working Group** (trustee by Black Cap) will take the lead to follow up on this population and will liaise with the newcomer queer study group who are interested in developing related study. Youth, older adults, long term survivors: **ACAS**, Non-gay-identified MSM and women impacted by non-gay-identified MSM: **ASAAP**.

The **Ethnoracial MSM Research working Group** will continue to play the overall coordination role and will call periodic network meetings to ensure the agenda is moving forward.

The Think Tank was a full day of brainstorming and action planning and the community based organizations involved are motivated to take next steps to ensure the needs of ethnoracial MSM communities are addressed in research formulation and service provision.

Appendices (attached):

- Agenda of the day
- Power point presentations
- Think Tank participant contact information
- Ethnoracial bibliography (2006-2009)
- Ontario Gay Men's HIV Prevention Strategy (November 2006)