Understanding Black masculinity & HIV vulnerability: What did African, Caribbean and Black Canadian heterosexual young men in Ontario have to say?

Francisca Omorodion, University of Windsor
Isaac Luginaah, Western University
Josephine Etowa, University of Ottawa
Winston C. Husbands, Ontario HIV Treatment Network
Josephine P. Wong, Ryerson University
Neema Jangu, Research Coordinator (Windsor)
Desmond Miller, Research Coordinator (Toronto)

November 21, 2016
OHTN Endgame 2 Conference
Introduction

weSpeak is a 5-year research program undertaken by a community-campus partnership to engage and mobilize self-identified ACB boys and men to:

- explore how self-identified heterosexual ACB boys and men view and understand, masculinity, heterosexuality and HIV vulnerability, and
- how they make sense of their masculinity, heterosexuality within the context of HIV prevention

This presentation draws on data from focus groups in London, Toronto and Windsor
Preliminary Results
Characteristics of Participants

- Five focus groups with 16-28 years ACB youth (London, 1; Toronto 3; and Windsor 1).
- Total Participants 41 (Toronto 25, London 5, Windsor, 11).
- Ages: 16 to 24 years (n=46, 94%); 25-28 (n=3, 6%)
- Participants primarily African and Caribbean, a few Black Canadian (5) from Toronto and Windsor sessions. Toronto primarily Caribbean youth (14), London (4) and Windsor (9) all primarily African (13).
- Only one participant in Toronto identified as African-Caribbean
- All have legal status- permanent resident or Canadians, with a few international students.
- All were single, and a majority either schooling and working
The Power of Heteronormativity

- Participants’ narratives suggested that many young Black men normalize heteronormative expectations and perform their heterosexuality by acting “straight” – e.g., talking about girls, always spotting girls, and having girls around; and acting “not gay”.

- At the same time, participants’ perspectives about how to relate to women were diverse:
  - Some stated that real men treat women with respect, royalty, and non-violence. “Respecting girls makes you a real man.” (Toronto youth)
  - Others worried that respecting women might be conceived as a weakness and lesser of being a man (Windsor youth)
How Black Youth Defined Heterosexuality

Many participants drew on the dominant heteronormative discourses to define being “straight” or heterosexual with:

- Physical attraction to women,
- Sexual desires/preferences for the opposite sex, and
- To respect/not to respect women

They complicated common stereotypes of ACB men as hyper-masculine, while recognizing the effects of these stereotypes and pressure on them:

“Like always act like we run the school even though we don’t. Always just want to be leaders, I guess of everybody else. We want to show them that we are on top of them, and we’re like men of the school, I guess.”

(London, African, 17 years)
The Power of Racism & Systemic Marginalization:

- Participants opposed or undermined the negative images of Black men by naming the following as qualities of heterosexual Black men:
  - Hardworking and confident
  - Not emotional and able to adapt to changes
  - Being resourceful, persistent, and courageous
  - Living an independent life
  - Being the provider for family

“A hardworking man who provides for his family and is courageous, and strong, physically and mentally, and will not break down when times get tough” (Caribbean, 16 years).
Resistance: Challenging Dominant Discourses

“The whole stigma around Black males and the over sexualization of Black males especially through the media is disgusting. Ah, it’s very repulsive... black males are discriminated against a lot compared to other races... black males are being degraded every day and we see it as a whole but we don’t do enough, which I feel like we should.” (African youth, 23, Toronto)

“I feel like if you’re a black man and you’re straight there are two expectations like, you have to be a thug, or like you have to be living that gangster life and you have to be a player, right.... So if you’re not talking to like twenty different girls at one time, like you’re a waste [laughter from the group]... Even my younger cousins, I talk to them... “Yo, you don’t need to do that. It doesn’t matter what other kids say about you. That’s what people expect of black men these days and I don’t agree with that.” (African youth, 19, Toronto)
HIV Vulnerability

- Environmental: where youth reside, access to services and resources, public policy and changes
- Bio-psycho-social: the experiences and discourses of sexual desire/sex drive; other health issues (e.g., mental health and STIs)
- Social: peer pressure, misconception that HIV does not affect heterosexual men
- Cultural: normative expectations and stereotypes of hyper-masculinity and sexuality
- Spiritual: sexuality as an aspect within one’s biological, psychological, cultural, environmental and spiritual make-up
Black men’s vulnerability to HIV

- Identity Issues – historical marginalization, migration and biography create conflict
- Unprotected heterosexual sex
- Lack knowledge and awareness of HIV (watered down sex education) and sexual health
- Non condom use: being unprepared (“It just happened.”), issue of trust in long-term relationships
- Low HIV testing - unawareness of testing services, limited conversations, stigma
- Mental health challenges that interferes with sexual decision-making
- Pornography – messages on sex and desires
- Lack of accessibility to inclusive HIV services; non-involvement and engagement of black men in HIV responses
Recommendations

- To raise awareness about HIV vulnerabilities among young heterosexual Black men
- Engaging young heterosexual Black men in critical dialogue about racist stereotypes and dominant discourses about Black heterosexual masculinities.
- Sex education in schools and communities
  - Provided by Black educators that young Black can identity with.
  - More honest and detailed conversations around sexuality and HIV issues (young men express lots of interests in weSpeak focus groups)
- Outreach - in groups, government to declare a National HIV Day - prevents feelings of being targeted
- To increase inclusive and accessible sexual health care, health promotion and HIV testing
Conclusion

Although there were common views shared by the participants on heterosexuality and masculinity, there were also differences arising from their individual and group history, biography and experiences.

All Black heterosexual young men are vulnerable to HIV due to stigma, inadequate knowledge and awareness, lack of access to inclusive HIV services and sexual health care, and the pressure placed on them to work harder than other men to succeed.

These are important in designing and implementing HIV prevention that not only addresses HIV vulnerability issues but takes into cognizance of social inequities, entrenched ideologies of racialized heterosexuality, masculinity, and unique salient differences shaping who these men are.
Acknowledgements

weSpeak is supported by funding from
The Ontario HIV Treatment Network &
The Canadian Institute of Health Research

Thank you to all weSpeak Participants, Team Members and Collaborators