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Sexual Culture, HIV Transmission, and AIDS Research

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The spread of the international AIDS pandemic has drawn attention to the urgent need for data on human sexual behavior; yet the absence of an established tradition of theory and method in sex research has limited the development of initiatives in this area. This has been particularly evident in the lack of attention given to the ways in which cross-cultural differences structure the meaning of sexual experience. While survey research can play an important role in documenting sexual behavior, qualitative research on sexual culture is equally important in order to develop a framework for the comparative analysis of behavioral data. This article seeks to contribute to the development of theory and method in sex research by outlining key research issues and possible methodologies for the qualitative investigation of sexual culture in relation to HIV/AIDS.

KEY WORDS: AIDS, human sexual behavior, qualitative research, cross-cultural differences.

INTRODUCTION

The spread of HIV and AIDS in countries around the world has drawn attention to the serious lack of scientific research on human sexuality (Abramson, 1990). In spite of the obvious importance of data on sexual behavior in relation to HIV transmission, the long-standing neglect of research in this area has made it difficult to respond to AIDS by drawing on a pre-existing data base or body of knowledge. Indeed, the lack of development of sex research has made it difficult to even begin to create new research initiatives. The absence of an

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established tradition of theory and method for conducting research on human sexuality has left AIDS researchers with little or no foundation for the assessment of sexual practices relevant to the spread of HIV infection and has limited their ability to contribute significantly to more effective strategies for AIDS prevention (see Abramson, 1988; Abramson & Herdt, 1990; Parker & Carballo, 1990).

Over the course of a number of years now, survey research has been initiated in a variety of different social and cultural settings to collect baseline data that had previously received little or no research attention: on patterns of sexual relationship, numbers of sexual partners, the use of condoms, and so on (see, for example, Carballo, Cleland, Carael, & Albrecht, 1989; Coxon & Carballo, 1989). As important as such investigation clearly is, however, it has become increasingly apparent that most quantitative surveys of sexual behavior have offered only limited insights into the complex range of social and cultural meanings that may be associated with different behaviors—and to the ways in which behavior itself is shaped by such meanings in different social and cultural settings (Abramson & Herdt, 1990). By situating behavioral data within a wider social and cultural context, qualitative research can potentially offer an important framework for the comparative analysis of data on sexual conduct (Abramson & Herdt, 1990; Parker & Carballo, 1990). Whether carried out in conjunction with quantitative survey research, or developed as an end in and of itself, systematic qualitative investigation can thus make a key contribution to the kinds of knowledge and understanding that will ultimately be necessary to develop more effective responses to the risks posed by the international AIDS pandemic (Abramson & Herdt, 1990; Parker & Carballo, 1990).

With these concerns in mind, we seek to lay out an agenda for qualitative research on sexual culture in relation to HIV/AIDS. Our goal is not to imply that qualitative investigation should be seen as a substitute for other research methods; rather, a more effective approach will be found in the implementation of a range of different research strategies. While they have received considerably less attention, qualitative methods occupy a key niche within such an agenda, since these offer the possibility of answering many of the important research questions that currently confront us. By discussing a range of qualitative research methodologies that might be drawn upon for research development in this area, we hope to contribute to the growing body of literature on the theory and method of sex research, thus suggesting some of the ways in which social and behavioral research can contribute to a fuller understanding of the AIDS epidemic and

more effective strategies for AIDS prevention (see also Abramson, 1988, 1990; Abramson & Herdt, 1990; Carballo, 1988; Parker & Carballo, 1990).

RESEARCH ISSUES

Research over the past decade has demonstrated the importance of sociocultural factors determining basic aspects of sexual behavior. Many researchers have recognized the importance of the individual and society as two poles of description and analysis, and new attention has focused on meaning systems in understanding both individual and social patterns of sexuality. Sex is no longer perceived as merely a biological fact, but rather as a culturally informed experience, shaped by the inner world and the material world in which humans live (see, for example, Davis & Whitten, 1987; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Gregor, 1985; Herdt, 1981; Parker, 1990a; Weeks, 1985).

The AIDS epidemic has underlined the urgent need for detailed qualitative data on the fullest possible range of human sexual experience (Carballo, 1988; Carballo, Cleland, Carael, & Albrecht, 1989; Turner, Miller, & Moses, 1989). We need culturally sensitive knowledge of sexual beliefs and practices in order to understand adequately patterns of HIV transmission, to evaluate the impact of AIDS on different communities, and to design more effective intervention programs (Abramson & Herdt, 1990). A basic tool in this work is the concept of sexual culture: the systems of meaning, of knowledge, beliefs and practices, that structure sexuality in different social contexts (see, for example, Parker, 1987, 1988, 1990a).

This notion of sexual culture, by extension, raises the question of the relationship between sexuality and a range of other sociocultural systems such as religion, politics, and economy. Culture shapes individual sexuality through roles, norms, and attitudes in each of these institutions, while at the same time contributing to the reproduction of the collectivity. Precisely because of this interplay between individual and collective patterns, the study of both levels is essential for a comprehensive account of sexual culture (see Gregor, 1985; Herdt, 1987; Herdt & Stoller, 1990; Parker, 1990a).

The description of sexual culture, in turn, involves a set of basic distinctions between cultural ideals vs. actual practice, public vs. private conduct, and prescribed vs. voluntary behavior. While the stated norms of a society may ideally require one mode of behavior, in reality a wide range of different behaviors may actually be found in any given community. What people say and do in public with regard to sexuality may differ greatly from and even contradict their private

sexual behavior. The forms of sexual behavior that are prescribed in different situations may contrast sharply with the ways in which individuals may behave voluntarily. And so on.

Our concern is with sexual culture in relation to HIV and AIDS, and some of the ways in which alternative qualitative research methods can tackle these issues. This discussion is necessarily preliminary and partial; it is intended as the first step in seeking to think more systematically about the possibilities for the cross-cultural investigation of human sexuality within the context of HIV/AIDS and about the kinds of questions that urgently need to be addressed in order for social and behavioral research findings to contribute more effectively to the goal of AIDS prevention (see, also, Parker & Carballo, 1990).

Sexual Categories and Classifications

In seeking to understand the structures of sexual culture in different settings, it is useful to draw on a basic distinction, often used in anthropological and linguistic research, between insider and outsider perspectives. Cultural and linguistic categories vary across societies, and understanding sexuality in different settings, therefore, depends upon a sensitivity to these categories. Gender is an example of a very fundamental cultural category that structures human sexuality. Gender is not reducible to any biological dichotomy. On the contrary, gender roles may vary greatly from one society or historical period to another. Biological males and females must necessarily undergo a process of sexual socialization in which notions of masculinity and femininity are shaped across the life course and across cultures (see, for example, Ortner & Whitehead, 1981). Sexual socialization is the process whereby someone learns the sexual feelings, desires, roles, and practices typical of persons of their cohort in their society (see Herdt, 1987, 1989).

The importance of cultural categories such as "male" and "female" or "masculinity" and "femininity" should draw attention to the importance of language and linguistic analysis in research on sexual culture. Language is often extremely important in marking out cultural domains and categories which are distinct in one society but not in another. In many cultures, for example, language not only constructs the domains of gender but is itself gendered: males have specific terminologies and concepts expressed through language, while females may have others, and sharing between the two groups does not take place. It is common in New Guinea societies, for example, for men not to know the concepts for certain parts of female genitalia, or even to know whether women experience orgasm (Herdt & Stoller,

1990). This points to the importance of language in expressing basic features of sexual ideology. Moreover, it suggests that the sex of researchers themselves is an important factor in gaining access to the sexual concepts of the informants (see Warren, 1988).

In thinking about language as an important key to the understanding of sexual culture, a useful distinction can be made between formal language and informal language—particularly the use of sexual slang and obscenities. Sexual slang may be central, for example, to the intimate language of sexual desire, of sexual excitement and arousal, and may be central to the interactions of partners or lovers in private situations (Parker, 1990a). Many societies utilize sexual slang, as well, as a way of making general statements about the nature of maleness or femaleness, the nature of reproduction and sexual pleasure, or about the nature of sexuality during a particular period of life (Herdt, 1981; Parker, 1990a). In addition, linguistic labelling is also often used to stigmatize certain sexual practices or groups of individuals within a society, and it can offer important insights into approved and disapproved sexual behavior (Parker, 1990a; Plummer, 1981). These labels can even become markers of social status positions with higher and lower social value accorded persons who occupy them. In many societies, for example, a wide range of expressions alluding to unacceptable sexual promiscuity in females is used to defame their status, associating them with prostitution, and leading to negative psychological and social consequences.

It is important to remember that language exists in a complicated relation with both culture and behavior. The lack of a linguistic coding for a particular practice does not mean that it is empirically absent in any given setting. On the other hand, understanding what concepts or categories are present provides fundamental insight into the value system of the society. Analyzing the categories that map out the cultural landscape therefore becomes essential to the task of studying the most basic factors of human sexual experience.

Partner Relations

The very notion of sexual "partners" is a cultural concept which permits a wide range of definitions around the world. Every culture will define the concept of partnership somewhat differently with regard to sexuality. The degree to which a culture marks a partnership as "sexual" or "non-sexual" is instructive for understanding the mixture of social and sexual roles throughout a society. A wide range of social roles and activities will influence sexual partnerships. Similarly, the system of sanctions and prohibitions in a society will constrain sexual

partnership relations. We need to recognize also that an individual's own meanings of partnership can change across the course of life, as between adolescence and adulthood, and between subgroups within societies.

The relationship history of sexual partners in a community is a particularly important issue for qualitative investigation. Most studies of HIV transmission recognize the importance of sexual history in understanding sexual risk. It is important to know, for instance, if this is the first, or second or third, etc., sexual partnership for the respondent. Is there a cultural value placed upon monogamy and lifelong attachment to a single partner? Are serial or multiple partnerships possible, approved, or disapproved? In addition, we want to gather data concerning the motivations of each partner in the relationship: sexual, financial, and emotional motivations may all be highly salient in many cultural contexts.

The institution of marriage is, of course, of paramount importance in the definition of partnerships. Less obvious, however, will be norms concerning the preferred age of the marriage partner, or the emotional or gender characteristics attributed to him or her. Indeed, marriage strongly reinforces gender role patterns in many cultures. Gender roles, in turn, provide idealized cultural patterns of sexual behavior in marriage, with some culturally preferred and others disapproved (i.e., genital vs. anal intercourse). Likewise, these gender roles suggest patterns of voluntary vs. involuntary sexual activity within all partnerships in the society.

Cultures vary greatly in the extent to which sexuality is defined outside of the context of marriage, suggesting the need to understand variations in the sexual pattern. Other kinds of heterosexual partnerships to be investigated by the fieldworker would include premarital, extramarital, polygynous, serial enduring partner relationships, and other possible variations that might be found in a given community or society. In some cultural contexts, for example, it is common for males to have multiple, enduring, partner relationships with either same- or opposite-sex partners. This raises the question of investigating bisexual and homosexual relationships both in relation to marriage, outside of marriage, and as enduring partnerships in their own right.

Other variations in sexual partnerships should also be investigated. It is important to emphasize the distinction between sexual behaviors and sexual identities in cultural contexts (see, for example, Carrier, 1980; Parker, 1987; Read, 1980). For example, in a range of societies, persons may engage in homosexual behaviors, but not identify as homosexuals; thus, an adult man may be the active partner in homo-

sexual intercourse while at the same time married and self-identified as heterosexual. Other persons engaging in the same behaviors may self-identify as bisexuals. An early cross-cultural study, for example, found that 64% of the cultures surveyed either approved or tolerated homosexual behavior for some persons at some times, illustrating the range of cultural regard for sexual variation (Ford & Beach, 1951).

In societies in the South Seas, a pattern of age-structured homosexual behavior requires males from middle childhood until late adolescence to engage in exclusive same-sex contact, followed by the requirement for exclusive opposite-sex contact in later life (Herdt, 1981, 1984, 1987). In other societies undergoing rapid social change, such as Brazil, we find a variety of different forms of homosexual relationship coexisting in the same society within the same historical period (Parker, 1989). In none of these instances is the partnership necessarily defined as gay, which is a distinct historical and cultural category that appears to be unique to the modern period (D'Emilio, 1983; Greenberg, 1988; Plummer, 1981; Weeks, 1977). Though they have received less research attention, patterns of lesbian relationships also reveal important variations, even when compared with gay relationships (see, for example, Ponse, 1978). Finally, even where it is well-established or recognized, recent research indicates that there is often a significant degree of variation (ranging from exclusively monogamous to exclusively causal) in the form of same-sex partnerships among gay men.

Like same-sex partner relations, relations in which sex is exchanged for money, gifts, or other favors may exhibit extensive diversity both within and across cultures (de Zalduondo, 1991). Such partnerships may be either occasional or, in some instances, ongoing. They may involve partners of both the same and the opposite sex, and extensive variations in both the structure and content of such relationships may exist in many cultural contexts. In some social and cultural settings, for example, persons who exchange sex for money have clients of both sexes, while in others, prostitution may be structured along more exclusively heterosexual or homosexual lines. Investigation of the motivations for sex work should include the subjective feelings of persons, their economic need, the development of their sexual identity, and situations of possible physical coercion or social pressure (see Pheterson, 1989).

Ultimately, the key point that must be underlined here is that extensive variation has already been documented in the nature of partner relations around the world. Precisely because of such variation, attention to the range of diversity found in types of sexual partnership must

be a focus not only for the study of partner relations in relation to HIV/AIDS. Describing the full range of possibilities for partnership will be essential in developing an understanding of sexual life in any given society, as well as a more complete understanding of human sexual relations in cross-cultural perspective.

Sexual Practices

The study of sexual culture has revealed the importance of understanding indigenous categories of a range of sexual practices across social settings (see, for example, Parker, 1990a). Once again, in this context, it is important to describe differences between culturally idealized and actually occurring sexual behaviors within the same population and within the same person across time (Gagnon, 1989; Herdt, 1981, 1987, 1989). Sexual relations can be structured both by formal institutions and roles (i.e., marriage, and ritual) and spontaneous, informal activities (adolescent sexual experimentation). A society provides multiple strategies for sexual encounters, which may involve norms and rules of a subtle or implicit nature not easily expressed in the survey. For instance, people may engage in heterosexual vaginal intercourse on a regular basis and be willing to reveal this to the fieldworker. On rare occasions, however, they may engage in other sexual practices (such as oral or anal intercourse) that are socially disapproved and embarrassing to them, inhibiting them from discussing these practices except in the most private and trusting interviews. It is noteworthy that in examples such as this, society prohibits these acts but, in prohibiting them, also defines them as imaginable possibilities (Parker, 1990a, 1990c).

Other indigenous categories of sexual behavior are equally important. The distinction between active and passive sexual roles and practices appears to be particularly widespread (see, for example, Carrier, 1980; Jackson, 1989; Nanda, 1985; Sheperd, 1987). For example, in many Hispanic societies, the active role is culturally approved for adult males whereas the passive role is disapproved (Alonso & Koreck, 1989; Carrier, 1971, 1976, 1985, 1989a, 1989b; Fry, 1985; Lancaster, 1988; Parker, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990a, 1990b; Taylor, 1985). The characteristics of the sexual partner are also socially regulated; sex, gender role, age, class, ethnicity or race may all contribute to the culturally determined desirability or repugnance of partner recruitment or practices (Parker, 1990a). Every society provides alternative situations and opportunities for sexual practice, such as ceremonial occasions or ritualized drinking bouts; these can be described as either socially prescribed or disapproved (Gregor, 1985; Herdt, 1981).

Another dimension of sexual practice variation concerns the frequency and periodicity of sexual behavior, with culturally required periods of abstinence, such as post-partum taboos or religious holidays, and periods of intense sexual exploration, such as adolescence or carnival (Gregor, 1985; Herdt, 1981; Parker, 1990a).

The social marking and representation of time comes up repeatedly and is worth examining in some detail. Just as the meaning of many basic demographic characteristics such as age must be examined in different social contexts, attention must be directed to mapping how societies express or encode the developmental timing and sequence of sexual practice across the course of life (see Gagnon, 1989). In the United States, for example, masturbation is a frequent mode of initial sexual behavior during adolescence. Later in life, however, masturbation may be regarded as either deviant or undesired depending upon person and context (Abramson & Mosher, 1975). Recent study reveals the existence in the United States of a sequencing pattern among gay and lesbian teenagers in the process of sexual emergence, during which a phase of first heterosexual and then homosexual behavior is followed at a later point in the developmental process by exclusive homosexual behavior (Herdt & Boxer, n.d.). These examples illustrate the need to investigate the form of sexual relationships and practices prior to the attainment of regular sexual partnerships within wider social, cultural, and developmental contexts. Cultural variation surrounds initial sexual relations regarding whether the partners are familiar or strangers, as well as the sex of these initial partners.

What is perhaps most important here, of course, is an understanding of the meaningful context within which sexual behavior takes place—and of the subjective meaning which this intersubjective context invests in such behavior for individuals. By focusing on this question of meaning, it is possible to address a whole range of issues related to the erotic significance of sexual behavior: what makes such practices sexually satisfying, what constitutes their erotic value, how they are invested with psychological impact, and so on. Nuanced understandings of the meanings associated with such behaviors, like a fuller understanding of the criteria for the selection of sexual partners, notions of desire and pleasure, and the like, have rarely been taken as a key focus for sex research, particularly in relation to HIV/AIDS. Yet, these critical issues must be understood if social and behavioral research findings are to be translated into more effective strategies for AIDS prevention (Parker, 1990c).

Contraception and Sexually Transmitted Disease

Given the importance that has been placed on the promotion of condoms as a key for risk reduction in the face of HIV infection, a fuller understanding of contraceptive use within the context of different sexual cultures has been seen as an important focus for research on sexual behavior in relation to HIV and AIDS. As important as specific information on condoms clearly is, however, it must also be situated within a wider context of contraceptive attitudes and techniques, as well as on the use of contraceptives in order to control sexually transmitted disease, if it is to be fully implemented.

Culturally shaped perceptions of contraceptives may make these seem inappropriate for disease prevention. Similarly, cultural norms may dictate when and with whom contraceptives are used for disease prevention—with casual as opposed to regular partners, for example, or with the clients but not the non-commercial partners of sex workers, and so on.

Culturally constructed notions of risk perception and emotional distance must be examined in order to assess the culturally constructed meanings associated with the use of contraceptive methods such as condoms in different settings (see, for example, Obbo, 1988).

Some of the important issues that warrant further investigation might include techniques of family planning such as contraception, abortion, infanticide. Traditional, as opposed to modern, contraceptive methods, should also be examined, as should the meanings and beliefs related to contraceptive use. Indeed, even the cultural acceptability and desirability of different kinds of lubricants should be among the issues that research on sexual culture in relation to HIV/AIDS must seek to address.

Like the elaboration and classification of contraceptive methods, local definitions and classifications of STDs may differ widely among societies and may range from very elaborate schemes to situations in which there may be almost no locally known descriptive terms. Again, the importance of indigenous terms and categories for the classification of disease should be stressed, and the ways in which different social and cultural groups interpret and respond to STDs should be an important focus on research on sexual culture in relation to HIV/AIDS (see, for example, Schoepf, Nkera, Ntsomo, Engundu, & Schoepf, 1988). Far more attention should be given to what might be described as the indigenous belief system related to STDs generally, with questions related to HIV and AIDS examined in relation to this belief system (see Barton, 1988).

Information about contraceptive use and sexually transmitted disease, like information about other aspects of sexual life, tends to be transmitted from one generation to another in a number of formal and informal ways (see, for example, Parker, 1990a). Formal mechanisms might include rituals, instruction related to life cycle transitions, educational programs, and the advice of designated experts. Informal mechanisms can include jokes, stories, comics, gossip, and, in many instances, the informal advice and counsel of relatives or friends. The cultural background of contraceptive techniques and disease prevention strategies, and on the ways in which information about them are transmitted and learned, weigh into the assessment and potential effectiveness of condom use as key strategies for minimizing HIV infection.

Together with the examination of sexual categories and classifications, partner relations, and sexual practices, then, a focus on contraceptive practices and sexually transmitted disease, with a broader conception of sexual culture, are among the key issues that should be examined in seeking to analyze and interpret sexual life in relation to HIV and AIDS. This does not exhaust the field or raise all of the questions that might be examined across societies, but it nonetheless offers a point of departure for research aimed at examining the wider context within which sexual behavior takes place.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The design of qualitative research, like quantitative research, depends heavily on the goals of a given project (see Strauss, 1987). A range of different methods is available, and researchers need to formulate a strategy for implementing these methods according to the goals of the project and the setting of the research (Bernard, 1988; Kirk & Miller, 1986; Strauss, 1987). The strategy for using different methods depends on target goals, and such strategizing may employ one or more particular methods, singly or in combination, according to these goals. As we have attempted to suggest in the preceding discussion, the study of sexual culture raises a series of specific issues that are perhaps distinct from those that would emerge in the study of other cultural domains. With these issues in mind, a range of different qualitative research methods can be employed in the study of sexual culture. Each of these methods has its own strengths and weaknesses, of course, and just as qualitative methods generally may be especially effective when combined with quantitative methods, any particular qualitative methodology will be most insightful when combined with others in order to offer the widest possible coverage. In the following

section, we outline a number of the most useful methods that researchers might draw upon, and we discuss the ways in which they can be most effectively implemented in the design of qualitative research on sexual culture in relation to HIV transmission and AIDS (see, also, Parker & Carballo, 1990).

Qualitative Research Methods

In order to maximize the cross-cultural comparability of qualitative data, it is useful to enumerate a number of different qualitative methods that might be incorporated in the design of research on sexual culture in relation to HIV/AIDS. While they clearly do not exhaust the full range of field methods that might be drawn upon, we will place particular emphasis on the use of secondary sources of information, ethnographic observation, focus group discussions, indepth interviews, sexual diaries, and linguistic analysis. In the pages that follow, each of these methods will be briefly discussed, and the ways in which they might be employed in conjunction will be examined.

Secondary Sources

The systematic review of secondary sources is crucial to research in any area and is no less important in the study of sexual culture than in the study of other topics. The quality and availability of secondary sources will, of course, vary in different research sites. Useful sources of information can nonetheless be found in a range of different settings: from government departments such as census bureaus or statistics departments, from medical and health departments, and from scholarly publications and the unpublished records or archives of local research institutions.

While its quality may vary, basic demographic data should be available from government statistics departments or census bureaus. Most countries try to conduct demographic surveys on a periodic basis, and in many countries even more frequent surveys on particular aspects of the population are often carried out. These sources should be consulted for information on a range of different issues: the basic demographic background of the population in terms of age and sex; data on fertility and mortality; marriage patterns; the population distribution in rural and urban areas; migration patterns; and any data on economic activity that might be relevant to an understanding of sexual culture in relation to HIV and AIDS.

Along with the kinds of data that might be available through census bureaus and statistics departments, important information on issues such as contraceptive practices, STDs, and even HIV infection can

often be obtained through a variety of health and medical institutions. STD clinics, general or gynecological clinics, family planning organizations, and primary health care facilities can all serve as sources of information, for example, on the incidence of STDs in the general population, the significant demographic patterns that may be present in STD incidence, the types of STDs found in the society, methods of treatment, and the availability and use of contraceptives. Particular attention should be given to data that are most immediately relevant to HIV transmission and prevention: STD patterns that might be associated with anal intercourse, the use of condoms for both contraception and disease prevention, and so on.

Finally, a thorough review of published ethnographic, historical, and sociological literature should be undertaken, and an attempt should be made to evaluate systematically its reliability and relevance for research on both sexual culture and the culture of health, illness, and disease in relation to HIV and AIDS. The archives and unpublished data that might be available in local universities can sometimes supplement other published sources of information and should be consulted wherever possible.

Ethnographic Observation

Ethnographic observation has traditionally been used in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology to collect data about a wide range or spectrum of social behavior (Burgess, 1982). Immersing themselves in the flow of daily life within a community, researchers have attempted to observe significant aspects of social interaction and to extrapolate from such interaction the underlying rules or norms that govern behavior within a community. While ethnographic research in very small-scale societies has sometimes been particularly holistic, focusing on an overview of the fullest possible range of different aspects of social life, the ethnographic study of more complicated societies has become increasingly specialized. Specific research topics have been identified, and the method of ethnographic observation has been employed to examine these topics and to situate them within the wider context of social life (Bernard, 1988; Burgess, 1982; Spradley, 1979, 1980; Strauss, 1987). Precisely because of this, the ethnographic method can be especially useful in offering insight into the structures of sexual culture in different settings.

In the study of sexual culture, since the most intimate sexual practices may not be open to direct observation, attention should focus above all else on the context of sexual interactions. The idea of space can be useful in planning a strategy for ethnographic research, and the

researcher's activities can be organized, at least in part, around the spaces in which different kinds of sexual contacts or behaviors take place: specific bars or clubs, streets or parks, and so on. Particularly in urban settings, what might be described as the sexual geography of the city can be highly complex, with certain parts of the city providing a focus, for example, of female prostitution, others for homosexual interactions, or perhaps others still for the interaction of young heterosexual couples. A strategy for ethnographic research can be built up by beginning with an inventory of such spatial divisions, and then elaborating a systematic schedule for observation in these areas (see Parker & Carballo, 1990).

Although it is perhaps implicit in almost all discussion of the ethnographic method, it is perhaps worth noting that ethnographic observation entails not only visual observation in the strict sense, but also verbal interactions between the researcher and the men and women present in different settings (Spradley, 1980). Informal interviews in the field can provide a range of extremely important data, even though it will not normally be possible to develop these interviews systematically, let alone with a sample that can be linked to a more systematic sample frame. Together with the information gathered through direct observation, however, data collected in ethnographic interviews will offer perhaps the broadest record of sexual culture available in different settings. Data recording through the write-up of systematic notes on a regular basis following field observations must be carried out rigorously in order to provide a written record that can be analyzed in conjunction with the data collected through the use of other research methods. The write-up of field notes, in turn, will facilitate the ongoing evaluation and re-evaluation of the central issues and topics that should provide the focus for ethnographic observation (Bernard, 1988; Spradley, 1979, 1980).

Focus Groups

The use of focus group discussions for the collection of qualitative data has been developed most recently in market research, where it has been especially useful in offering quick answers to specific questions. Social scientific research has often used focus group discussions in order to form hypotheses before carrying out quantitative surveys, as well as to help explain or interpret the findings of survey research. Normally, a focus group meeting is a discussion in which a small group of informants (perhaps 6-12 people), guided by a facilitator or moderator, talk freely and spontaneously about a set of issues under investigation (Morgan, 1988).

Since the group setting will condition the discussion, focus group participants may be unlikely to openly discuss experiences that deviate from accepted social norms, and this is perhaps particularly true when sexual conduct is the focus of discussion. Precisely because this is the case, however, focus groups can provide useful information concerning the dominant norms within the community and can often uncover specific areas of agreement and disagreement on the part of the informant population. They can be particularly effective in drawing out information which people may not have formulated fully for themselves before the group discussion (Morgan, 1988).

Focus group discussions are often most productive when the participants share a good deal in common (the same sex, roughly the same age, a similar socioeconomic background, and so on), as their shared experience will already offer a significant foundation for their interaction within the group. In addition, meetings should be held in locations where the participants will feel at ease and will be comfortable in talking openly about subjects that are often highly charged or controversial. In orienting the discussion, the facilitator should seek to guide the group through a number of predetermined topics. Subjects for discussion can be introduced through direct questions, general statements for further discussion, or the posing of hypothetical problems that group members are asked to comment upon. Topics or questions should normally be addressed in an open-ended manner, however, in order to stimulate discussion between participants themselves rather than introduce a question and answer session between the facilitator and the participants (Morgan, 1988).

Indepth Interviews

Perhaps the most important method used in qualitative research on sexual culture and its relation to sexual experience is the use of indepth interviews. While indepth interviewing is a key component of almost all qualitative research, independent of the specific research topic, it is perhaps especially important in the case of research on sexual experience. In general, the study of human sexuality requires a deeper, more intimate and trusting rapport between researchers and research subjects than is usually necessary in other areas of social inquiry. In more intimate settings typical of indepth interviewing, the researcher may be able to establish a climate of mutual respect and trust that ensures a more accurate level of information and a deeper understanding of the informant's subjective experience of sexual life.

These points highlight a number of important differences between the kinds of data on sexual experience that can be collected through

focus group discussions, on the one hand, and indepth interviews, on the other. While focus group discussions offer important insights into group norms and dominant values, they tend to be less effective in documenting variations from the norm, or values that deviate from dominant culture patterns. Precisely because of the greater confidentiality and trust that they allow, indepth interviews, on the contrary, offer a context in which individual variation and diversity can be explored more effectively, and deviations from community norms can be examined in greater detail. In offering an opportunity to examine possible contradictions between ideal norms and actual behaviors, indepth interviews can, therefore, provide among the most intimate and personal data on sexual conduct.

As important as indepth interviews can be, however, they will offer valuable information only if adequate thought and planning have been given to the interview schedule, the kinds of information to be investigated, and the ways in which questions will be framed and presented. Random conversations often lead researchers to important insights. In planning a schedule for indepth interviews, however, the most productive method is to seek to develop a semi-structured format that can be reproduced, at least in its broad outlines, with all of the informants who are to be interviewed within a given sample population. Open-ended questions on relevant topics should be asked, following a general outline or checklist which permits topics to lead into each other naturally (see Spradley, 1988).

One particularly useful technique that can be effectively developed within the context of the indepth interview is the collection of more detailed sexual histories than would be possible through the use of formal survey instruments. In particular, collection of the person's sexual history from childhood up to the present time, including approved and disapproved sexual experiences and their emotional and social effects, should be a key element of the research agenda for indepth interviews. Other examples of particular importance here include collecting data on sexual variations in the person's life history (homosexual and bisexual experiences, incest, prostitution, sexual abuse, etc.) and information about the lives of their sexual partners (see Pomeroy et al., 1982). The collection of these private sexual histories can, in turn, inform critical changes that have occurred in the sexual practices and mores of the group and can be tied to a fuller investigation of the sexual history of the community as a whole.

Given the highly sensitive nature of information about sexual behavior, the quality of data collected through indepth interviews

depends heavily on the degree of trust and confidence that is developed between a researcher and her or his informants. To ensure confidentiality, such interviews should always be conducted in private. In addition, the relation between interviewers and informants is built up through time, and provision must be made for re-interviewing selected informants across time. Informant responses may vary, even in relation to the same question, from one interview to the next. Such variation can be the result not of inaccurate data collection, but of the processual nature of qualitative research, and the interpretation of such temporal variations should be included as a part of data analysis.

Sexual Diaries

Like indepth interviews, sexual diaries can be used as a tool for documenting detailed aspects of sexual behavior as well as for recording psychological and emotional responses to sexual behavior. Although issues relating to sexual excitement and erotic meanings will be explored in indepth interviews with informants, even in the indepth interview setting, such issues may be so highly charged in emotional terms that it is difficult to discuss them. They may be so fleeting that the details are impossible to remember and recount. Sexual diaries can offer an opportunity for the recording of such issues with greater immediacy, and in a setting that may be psychologically less threatening for informants.

Once again, the successful use of the sexual diary, like all other qualitative research methods, will depend on the careful design of a strategy for implementation. The informants keeping sexual diaries should be drawn, whenever possible, from the sample used in other methods of data collection, so that cross-referencing and analysis of the diaries will be possible. In addition, in order to ensure diary entries that will address the central research issues, the goals of the diary entries must be carefully explained to informants. Diaries should be turned in periodically, and then returned, so that informants can benefit from feedback on the part of researchers. And a plan for the analysis of diary entries should be elaborated that will identify the key issues to be examined in reviewing diary entries (Coxon, 1988).

Linguistic Analysis

While it cannot be described in terms of a single method of data collection, special note should be taken of the importance of language in qualitative research on sexual culture. Traditionally, the elicitation of lexicons or vocabularies for various cultural domains has been an

important part of many qualitative field studies. Particularly in instances in which the fieldworker is not a member of the society being studied and does not already speak the language of the community, eliciting local terminologies serves the dual purpose of offering training in the language while simultaneously enabling the researcher to collect information on the linguistic categories and classifications that organize experience within the community. Collecting taxonomies of plant or animal life, techniques of material reproduction, and so on, is thus frequently an important part of field research (Burgess, 1982).

This same basic approach can be useful even when researchers are already familiar with the local language, and in relation to other cultural domains such as sexual culture. Even in situations in which the researchers are themselves members of the research community, they are likely to be uncommon in any number of ways—more highly educated and often participants in the language and concepts of modern medical and social science. Since the language of sexuality is often a folk or popular language, however, researchers should be cautioned against assuming that they are, in fact, fully fluent in its terminology and nuances. Even in these situations, then, emphasis should be placed on eliciting the fullest possible range of terms and expressions used, even in informal or vulgar speech, to speak about issues related to sexuality and disease. The collection of these lexical items, along with full contextual data concerning the ways in which they are used, will provide important data for mapping out sexual cultures (Bolton, 1990; Parker, 1990a, 1990c; Parker & Carballo, 1990).

Most frequently, elicitation of relevant terminologies will be carried out in work with key informants, as the privacy of the interview setting will enable the discussion of the full range of meanings even in the case of lexical items drawn from the area of slang or vulgar speech. In some instances, however, it might also be useful to discuss the range of meanings associated with some terms within the context of focus groups, as debate and disagreement concerning the semantic domains of different terms can be useful for analysis. Finally, even in ethnographic observation, information on language and language use in these areas should be collected; this information can be especially important in documenting the ways in which lexical items are, in fact, employed and manipulated in actual practice. Among the areas that should be investigated, researchers might include terminology for parts of the human body, for sexual acts, for contraceptive practices, or virtually any of the other domains of sexual culture that have already been discussed above (Bolton, 1990; Parker, 1990a; Parker & Carballo, 1990).

CONCLUSION

The rapid spread of the international AIDS pandemic has drawn attention to the serious limitations in our understanding of human sexual behavior—as well as to the lack of a well-established tradition of scientific research in the area of human sexuality (see Abramson, 1988, 1990; Abramson & Herdt, 1990; Turner, Miller, & Moses, 1989). Over the course of the past decade, researchers have worked within these limitations in seeking to respond to the challenges posed by AIDS, and a good deal of descriptive data have been collected, principally through the use of survey research methods (see Turner, Miller, & Moses, 1989). As our understanding of behavioral issues has increased, however, it has simultaneously become apparent that the kind of insights offered through existing research paradigms has, nonetheless, been limited in a number of ways (see Abramson & Herdt, 1990). In particular, the lack of attention given to the social and cultural context of sexual behavior has made it difficult to examine behavioral data within a comparative framework and has failed to provide a basis for the kinds of explanatory models that will ultimately be necessary to develop more effective AIDS prevention strategies (see Parker & Carballo, 1990).

In seeking to develop a culturally sensitive approach to the study of sexual behavior in relation to HIV and AIDS, systematic qualitative research can offer important insights that might otherwise be missed. Focusing on what can be described as sexual culture, and situating behavioral data more effectively within its wider social and cultural context, qualitative investigation can provide a framework for the comparative analysis of research findings on sexual experience. Qualitative data collection can thus make a key contribution to the kind of cross-cultural understanding of sexual behavior that will be necessary in order to respond to the international AIDS pandemic (Abramson & Herdt, 1990; Parker & Carballo, 1990).

This review of research issues and qualitative methods for the study of sexual culture in relation to HIV/AIDS is intended as a step in the direction of more comprehensive research strategies. It is suggested not as a substitute for other methods, but as an additional resource that can be drawn upon, elaborated, and implemented to enrich the kinds of data and analyses that are possible in the study of human sexual behavior. Our conviction is that multiple methods of data collection and an ongoing process of interdisciplinary collaboration will be essential to the task of developing cross-cultural understanding

of human sexuality. A more adequate understanding of human sexuality, in turn, will continue to be perhaps the most important key to more effective strategies for AIDS prevention in the foreseeable future.

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