



A Little Thing Called Love: HIV Risk and Prevention within Primary Heterosexual Relationships

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Women and HIV Risk

- ✓ Rates of HIV infection are increasing rapidly among women worldwide
- ✓ Most women are being infected by their primary male partners
- ✓ Condoms are least likely to be used in primary relationships

Knowledge ≠ Behavior

- ✓ Other factors influencing behavior
 - ✓ Perceived risk
 - ✓ Self-efficacy
 - ✓ Locus of control
 - ✓ Substance use
 - ✓ Intimate partner violence
 - ✓ Poverty
 - ✓ Gender and cultural norms

Meanings of Love and Sex

- ✓ Differing concepts of “sex”
 - ✓ “Sex” as risk of disease/unwanted pregnancy VS. “sex” as love, trust, romance
- ✓ “Trusting to love” (Moore & Rosenthal, 1991)
- ✓ Love and trust are prophylactic (Rosenthal et al., 1998)
- ✓ Casual and/or unprotected sex as a strategy for “catching love” (Rosenthal et al, 1998)

Moore, SM., Rosenthal, D.A. (1991). Risky business: Adolescents and HIV/AIDS. Bulletin of the National Clearinghouse on Youth Studies, 10, 20-25.

Rosenthal, D., Gifford, S. & Moore, S. (1998) Safe sex or safe love: Competing discourses? AIDS Care 10(1): 34-46.

Risky Misperceptions

- ✓ Use of “implicit personality theories (Misovich et al, 1997) or “characteristics-based risk theories” (Thorburn et al, 2005)
- ✓ Inaccurate AIDS Heuristics (Misovich et al, 1997)
 - ✓ “Known partners are safe partners”
 - ✓ “Monogamous relationships are safe relationships”
 - ✓ “Trusted partners are safe partners”
 - ✓ “It’s too late (to start using protection now)”

Misovich, SJ, Fisher, JD, & Fisher, WA (1997). Close relationships and elevated HIV risk behavior: Evidence and possible underlying psychological processes. *Review of General Psychology*, 1, 72-107.

Thorburn, S, Harvey, SM, & Ryan, EA (2005). HIV prevention heuristics and condom use among African-American at risk for HIV. *AIDS Care*, 17(3), 335-344.

Meanings of Condoms

- ✓ Disease prevention
- ✓ Partner distrust
- ✓ Infidelity
- ✓ Physical barrier to pleasure
- ✓ Condomless sex helps maintain the fantasy that one's partner is faithful (Sobo, 1993)

Sobo, E.J. (1993). Inner city women and AIDS: The psychological benefits of unsafe sex. *Medicine & Psychiatry*, 17, 455-485.

Negotiated Safety

- ✓ Two people of known sero-concordance deciding to have unprotected sex
- ✓ Mutual testing and monogamy or at least condom use with outside partners
- ✓ Increasingly common among homosexual men (Kippax, et al., 1993)
- ✓ Strategy unlikely to be used by young heterosexual couples (Rosenthal et al, 1998)

Kippax, S. et al. (1993) Sustaining safer sex: A longitudinal study of homosexual men. *AIDS*, 7, 257-263.

Rosenthal, D., Gifford, S. & Moore, S. (1998) Safe sex or safe love: Competing discourses? *AIDS Care* 10(1): 34-46.

Project Protect

- ✓ Sustained Female Condom Use in High-Risk Women to Prevent HIV
 - ✓ Examine factors that affect initial and sustained use of the female condom for HIV/STI prevention by women at high risk of infection and their male partners, after participants have received information about proper use & health benefits of the female condom.
 - ✓ Examine personal network and sexual relationship factors that influence initial and sustained female condom use among high-risk women and men over time.

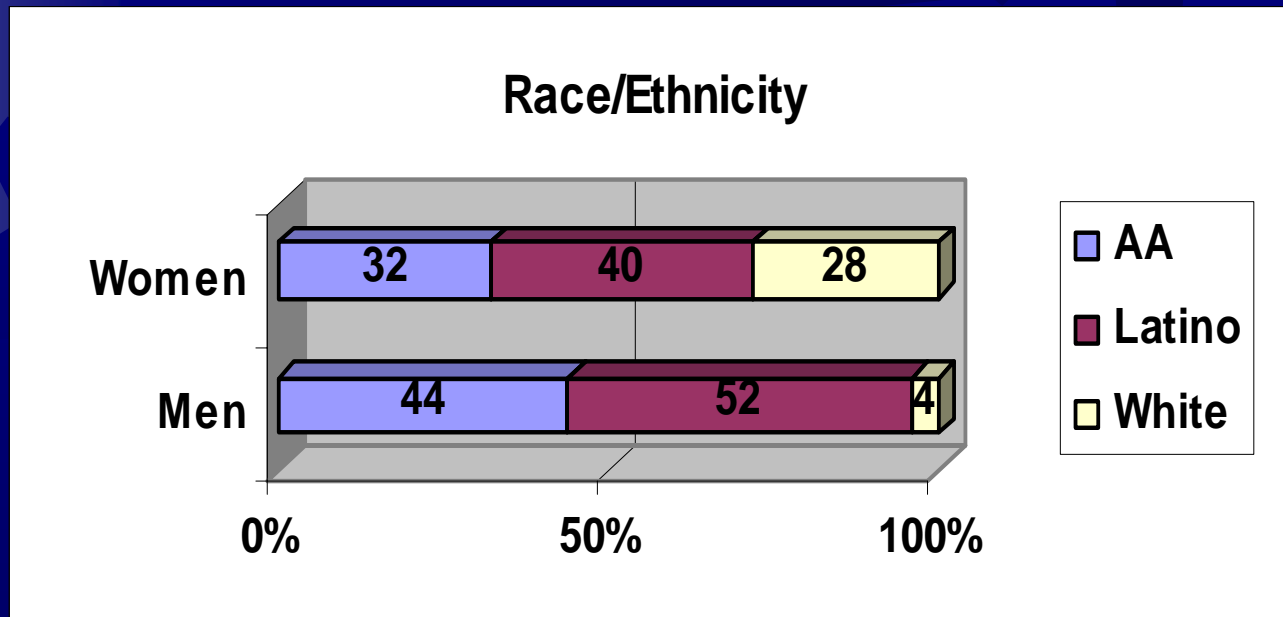
(PI: M.R. Weeks, Ph.D., NIMH RO1 MHO69088-01A2, 2004-2007)

Couple's Trial Methods

- ✓ Surveys at baseline and 10-months exploring sexual behavior, drug use, HIV risk, locus of control, self-efficacy, relationship dynamics, FC knowledge, attitudes, and use
- ✓ In-depth interviews at baseline and 10-months exploring current and past relationships, decision-making, sexual behavior, HIV/STI risk and prevention, FC experiences
- ✓ 2-week trial using the FC followed by a brief survey and in-depth interview

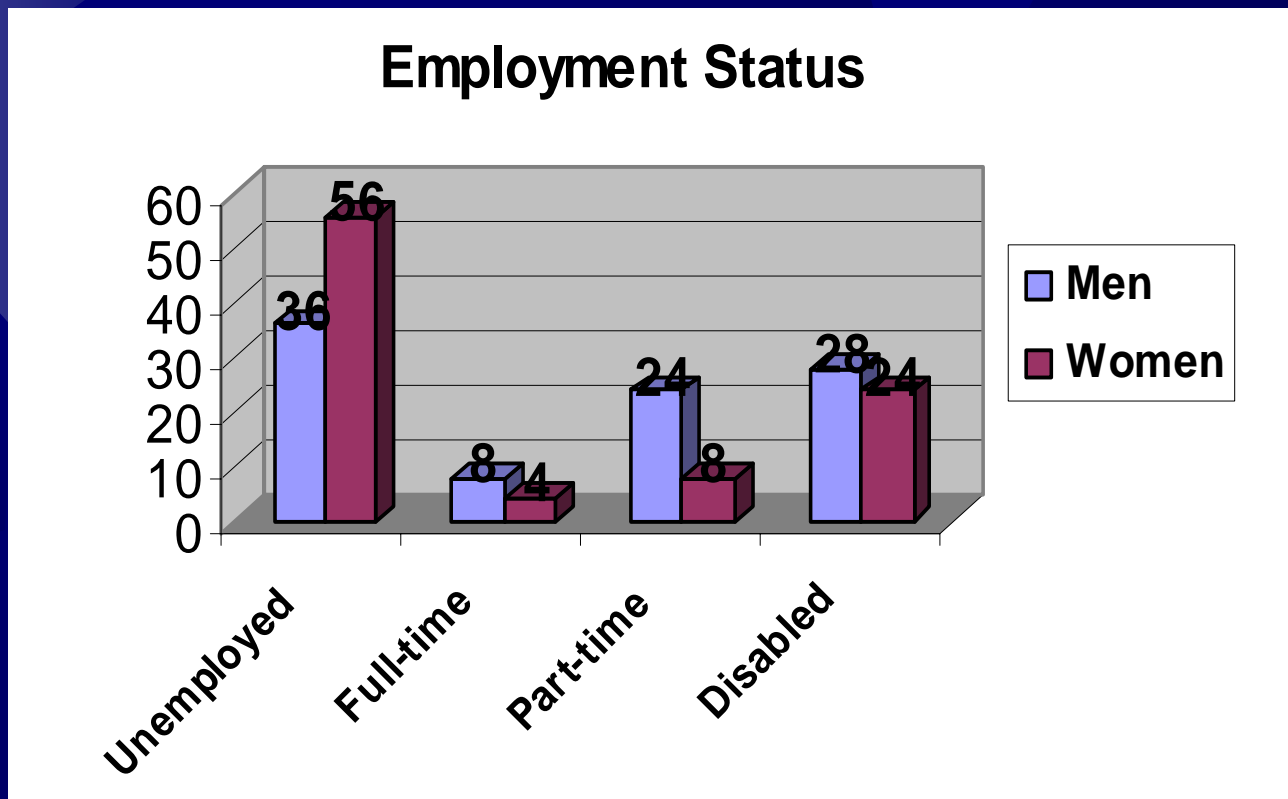
Participant Demographics

- ✓ 25 couples
 - ✓ Women: mean 39.7 years (21-51)
 - ✓ Men: mean 40.8 years (22-58)



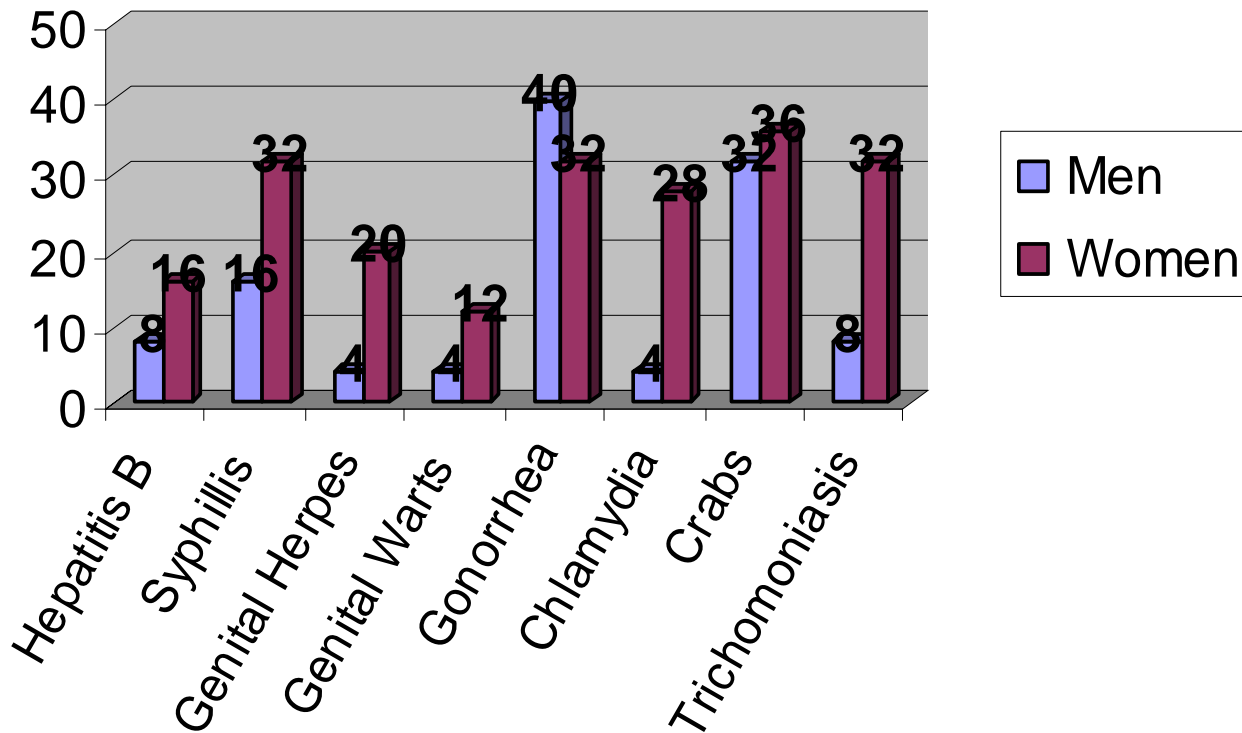
Participant Demographics

- ✓ 32% of women and 32% of men were homeless
- ✓ 44% of women and 36% of men < HS education
- ✓ 68% of women and 48% of men < \$500/month



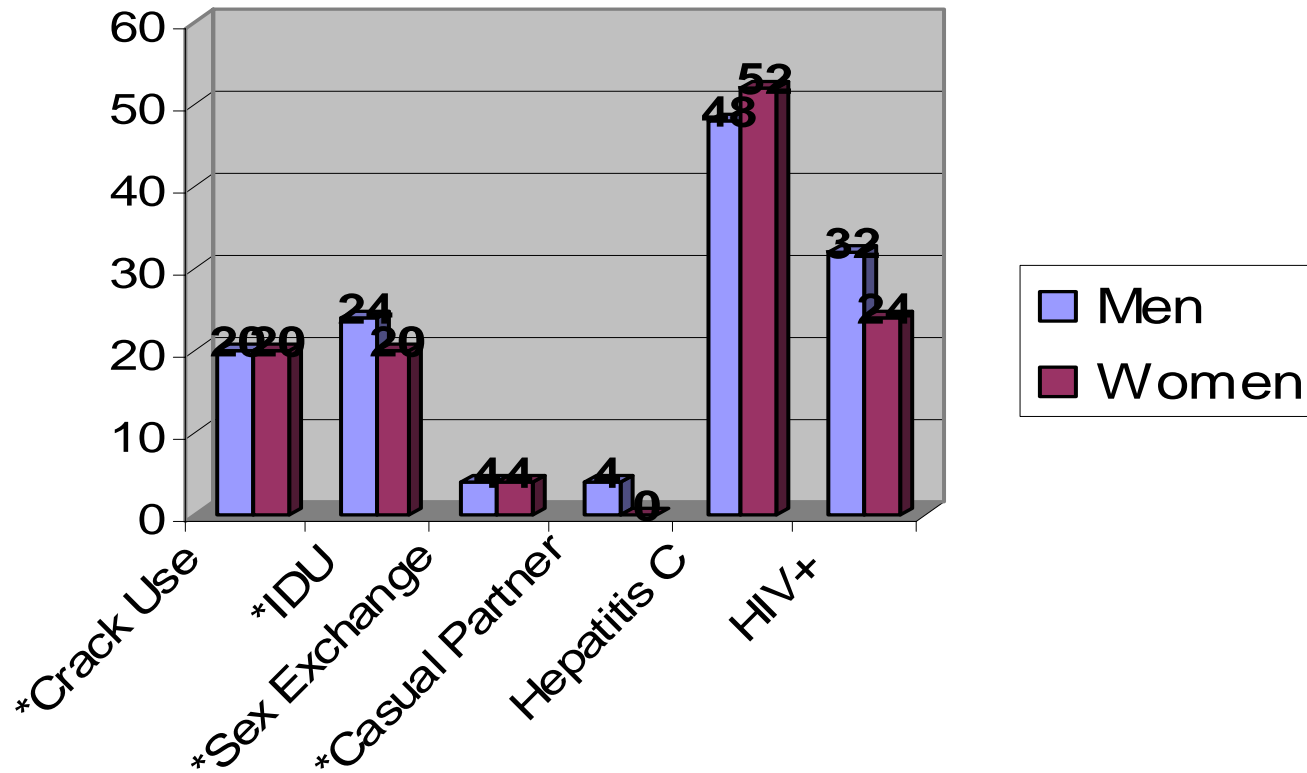
Participant Demographics

STI History



Participant Demographics

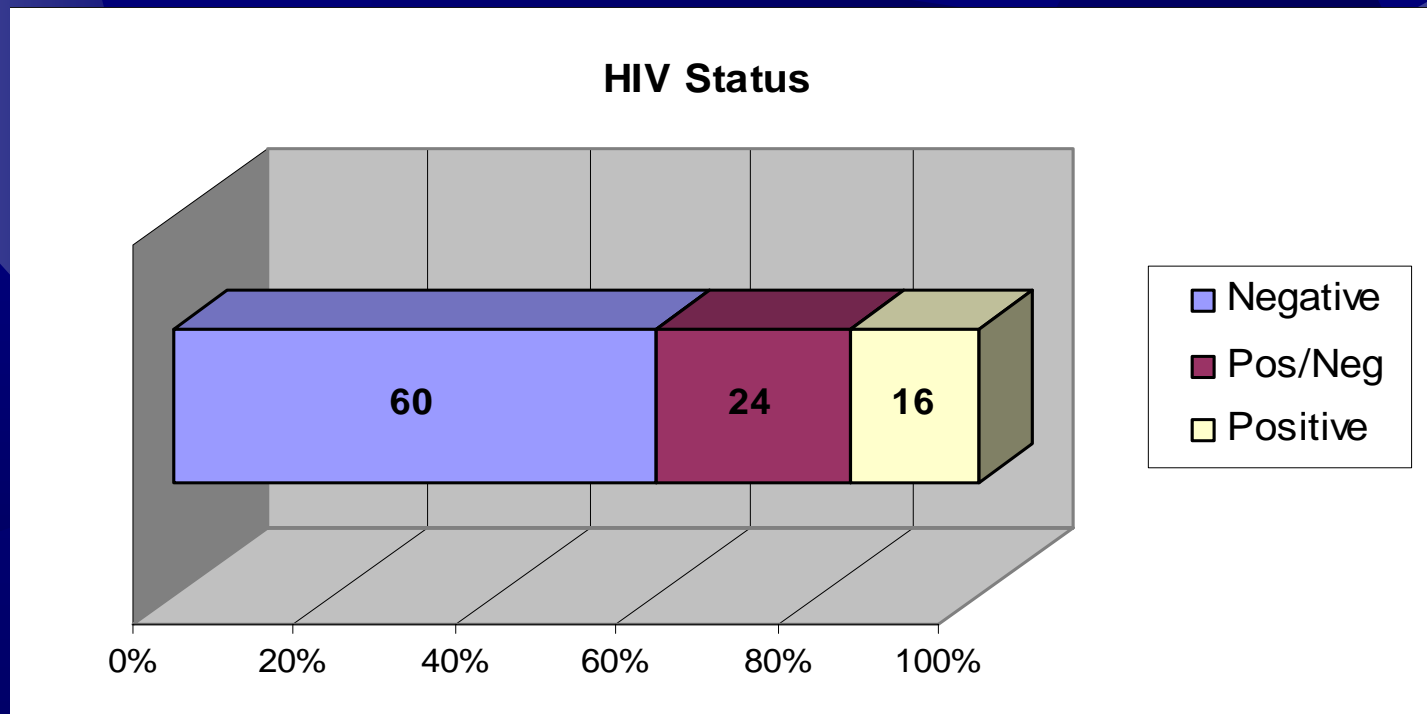
Risk Behaviors/HIV Status



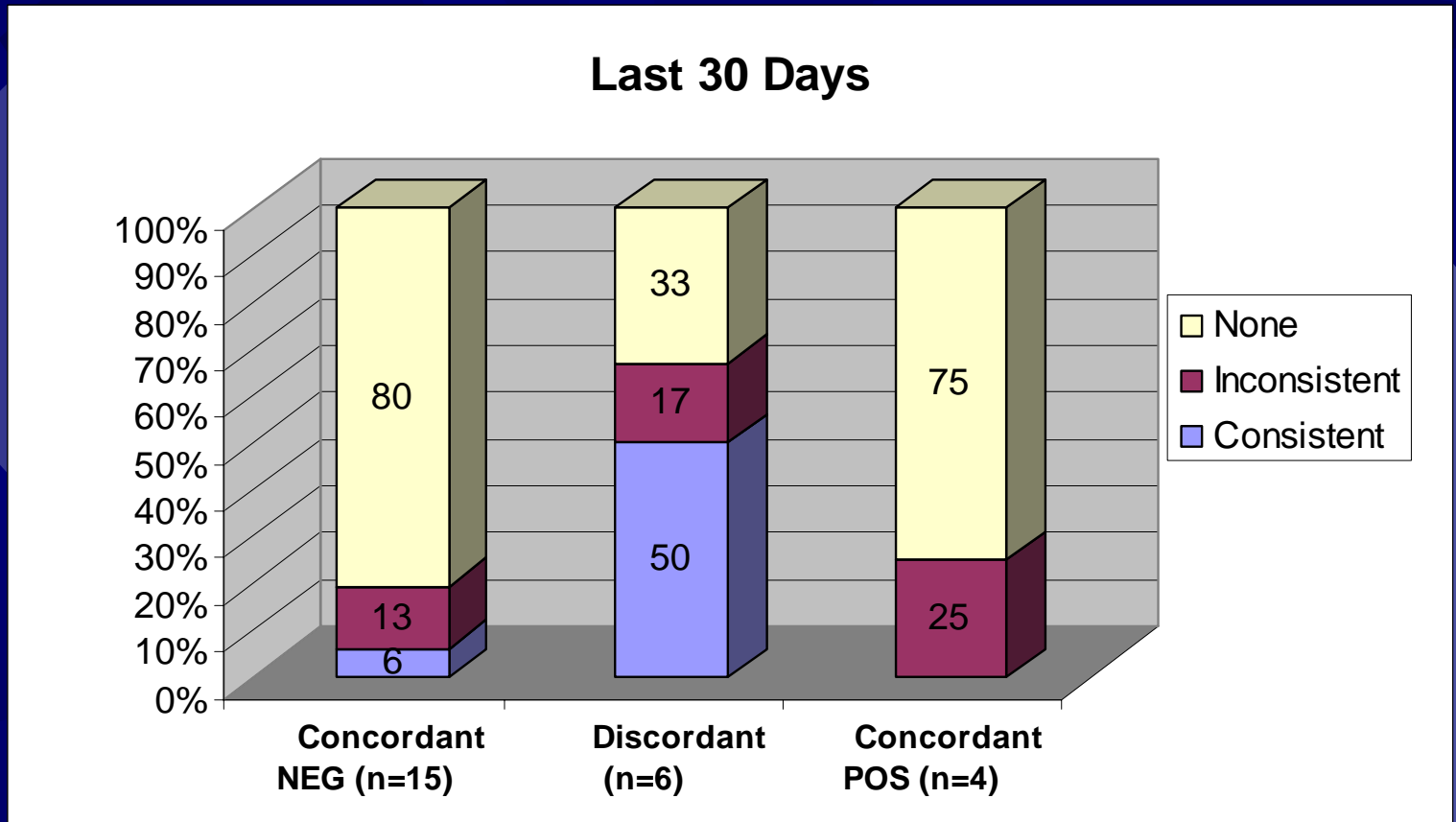
* Reported in last 30 days; 2 women/1 man had never been tested for HIV

Couple Characteristics

- ✓ **Length of time in relationship**
 - ✓ mean = 51 months, range = 1-144 months
- ✓ **Intimate Partner Violence** - 1 woman reported considering herself to be in a physically abusive relationship



Couples' Condom Use



Establishing the Relationship

- ✓ Taking a chance on love
- ✓ Establishing trust
- ✓ Use of characteristics-based theories
- ✓ Negotiated safety

Taking a Chance on Love

E: So, that first time, did you use condoms?

P: [No.] He knew I had Hepatitis C, I knew he had Hepatitis C, I just...so, I didn't care because I knew I was just going to be with him. He wasn't just going to be this one person I was just going to mess around with and then...you know, and not see him, I was at least hoping that I was going to be with him [for a long time].

White Female, 41

Establishing Trust

E: So, was there any talk about protection, did you use a condom?

P: No, we didn't. And we didn't even talk about it; but, the day after I ask him, "How come you didn't use any protection with me?" You know, because he had a girl before me and he was using protection [with her]. He say, "Because I trust you, and I know you've been honest to me so far and I can trust you." And he don't like to wear rubbers. He's the type of guy that when he's in love with a woman, he don't like to use protection; but, if he's just dating someone like he was dating this girl just for sex, he was using protection... I was so proud of him that at least he was using rubbers with them and the reason he didn't with me because he trusted me.

Hispanic Female, 38

Characteristics-Based Theory

E: The first time you had sex, did you talk about diseases at all?

P: No.

E: How did you know that he didn't have anything?

P: I really couldn't tell you. Just looking at him seeing that he ain't had nothing... I just look at him and see that he wasn't the type of person... Because he was telling me about he had like condoms and stuff. So before I met up with him, whoever he been with and stuff, he must have been using condoms because he always had condoms on him.

African-American Female, 44

Negotiated Safety

P: Well at the beginning when we first met it took us a while before we had sexual relations and so well we used condoms at first cause we met in a program. Which you know what I'm saying half of them are sick or something, they have some type of disease. So she had taken her [HIV test].

E: How did you decide to not use a condom?

P: Well she told me to use it...She wanted to protect herself, you know...She made the decision and I agreed with it cause we just met not too long ago and even though we had got tested, still though.

E: Okay and when did you decide not to use any protection?

P: Right after awhile I just decided not to, I mean she agreed with it why should we be using protection. "I can't get pregnant you know". We're not fooling around with nobody else so. If you're sick I'm gonna be sick so it's because it's us, it's not because there's more people in it. But we were tested for everything so we shouldn't be sick...unless one of us went out there and fooled around.

Hispanic Male, 32

Maintaining the Relationship

- ✓ Negotiated safety continued
- ✓ Maintaining the fantasy of fidelity
- ✓ Achieving greater intimacy through condomless sex
- ✓ The power of love

Negotiated Safety Continued

P: For me condoms are only for stopping unwanted pregnancy and disease. There is no other possible reason for a condom. You are not going to be in love with someone and want to use a condom. Just for what? You are preventing something.

E: So you are saying if you are in love with someone there is no need to use a condom?

P: I wouldn't say it in that sense, in this day and time you got to use a condom. But being in love with someone I mean to a point in your relationship where you want to spend the rest of your life with them. You want to build a life. You want to have a house, car, children, dog, everything. There is no need to use one because you are trying to accomplish these things meaning children. You know, "Okay we've been together for a year, we've been tested, you don't have anything, I don't have anything."

African-American Male, 35

Maintaining the Fantasy

E: So, were you concerned about HIV and AIDS?

P: Yes, I mean, of course, we talked. We both knew we both had Hepatitis C. We honestly believed that we wouldn't ever have sex with anybody else again which is still true this day...That is one thing I do believe. And I do know that he's not messing around. I mean, well, in my heart I believe. I guess nobody can honestly say 100% that they believe their mate is messing around or not. I mean, but he, we both had had HIV tests. He said his was negative. Mine was negative. So, we just felt that in using [a condom] it would be more of a blocker of our love.

White Female, 38

Achieving Greater Intimacy

E: What does it mean to use condoms in a relationship?

P: That could mean, what's the use, I mean why? I think your body fluids or whatever is intimacy... When you use a condom I feel you're supposed to either be fucking tricking [or] you don't want no contact with me so what's the use in contact?...And the feeling. His meat against my meat.... Maybe if we have an infection, or I got a yeast infection and it burns or something, it could be for medical reasons...but other than that, if it aint for something burning me, nah-uh, unless you tricking and you don't want no contact with that person. I think a condom means that you really don't want contact... you don't want to feel their immediate skin against yours.

E: So not in a loving relationship?

P: Nah.

African-American Female, 44

The Power of Love

P: The first time we had sex we used condoms. We used condoms for a week and then we talked to each other and I said we don't have to use them no more right, and she said okay.

E: What made you come to that conclusion?

P: We was going to live together.

E: Okay. So, have you ever been in a situation where you put yourself at risk for contracting HIV?

P: Yeah, with my partner [who is HIV+].

E: So, what is it that prevents you from taking precautions?

P: You know what? That's a good question. I don't know. I go with the flow like I always do...Well, because I feel so comfortable and I feel great and I'm living this life, you know, and whatever happens, it happens, you know? Right now I'm enjoying it. Whatever time God wants he'll take me. I'm having the best time right now. I don't want to change this for nothing.

E: So for you, this is the ideal relationship? For you this is *the* person?... Good and bad, you're in a good place in your life and you're willing to risk your life, put yourself at risk...

P: For being happy, yeah.

Hispanic Male, 29

Conclusions

- ✓ Factors such as substance use, self-efficacy, and violence appeared to have little effect on the desire or ability to use and/or insist on the use of condoms
- ✓ The need for love, security, trust, belonging, and acceptance often outweigh concerns of personal health and safety.
- ✓ There is a disconnect between public health and lay conceptualizations of sex – prevention messages are not even in the same language

Directions for Further Research

- ✓ How do we develop effective interventions that acknowledge the real needs relationships fulfill without contradicting people's beliefs about their relationships to the point where they reject the interventions as irrelevant?
- ✓ Exploring qualitatively and longitudinally the process of negotiated safety among heterosexual couples as a potentially effective harm reduction strategy in the prevention of HIV.

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