

Sexual Fields and Sexual Networks: Applications of a Sociological Framework to Health Data of Men Who Have Sex with Men in Chicago

SURG | Social Science and Journalism (SSJ) | Tags: *Fieldwork; Quantitative Data Analysis*

*This cover page is meant to focus your reading of the sample proposal, summarizing important aspects of proposal writing that the author did well or could have improved. **Review the following sections before reading the sample.** The proposal is also annotated throughout to highlight key elements of the proposal's structure and content.*



Proposal Strengths	Areas for Improvement
The background section goes beyond summarizing previous literature. Instead, the section is framed as an argument for why the project should be done based on what is already known and what is not known (gap in knowledge). The background section is also broken up into a background of the topic at hand, a background justifying the methods that will be employed and a background of the theoretical framework. Not all proposals must do this level of explanation, but it works well in this case.	The proposal mentions what type of information is collected by the study the researcher is working within (RADAR), but the proposal could benefit from a few sentences describing why that information would be pertinent for the researcher's particular 8-week study.
The proposal does a great job situating the 8 week project in the larger longitudinal study the researcher is working within.	The proposal does not explicitly explain how each step in methodology helps to address the research aims/question.



Other Key Features to Take Note Of
Your name and title do not need to be included within the 2-page body of your proposal since a cover page is automatically generated for you by the application system.

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[STUDENT NAME]

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Recent public health research has focused on the role of networks in the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as HIV. Although the role of sexual networks in transmission is clear, the theory behind why social networks facilitate disease spread remains understudied. Thus, I propose a research project that analyzes a dataset containing the social and sexual networks of young men who have sex with men (YMSM) in Chicago and applies a critical sociological framework to these analyses. The application of this framework will inform future epidemiological research concerning social network analyses, as well as allow for quantitative support of the theoretical framework. This summer project will constitute the bulk of research for my senior thesis to be written next year.

The fields of public health and medicine, specifically within the study of sexual health and HIV, have focused primarily on the role of individual risk behaviors (e.g., condomless sex, drug use) in explaining disparities.¹ Although these individual-level behaviors may play a role in explaining why MSM have higher rates of HIV than other populations, these explanations *do not* fully explain racial health disparities, particularly when comparing Black MSM (BMSM) to White MSM.^{2,3} Many studies investigating the risk behaviors of MSM have shown that, compared to White MSM, BMSM report similar rates of condom use, less substance use, and fewer sexual partners.^{4,5} In light of these findings, public health researchers have started to move towards other explanations, namely macro-level analyses, to study racial disparities in HIV.

One of these macro-level approaches has been to analyze the networks of MSM. By using social network analysis, researchers have uncovered novel explanations for the spread of HIV in MSM communities, especially regarding racial differences in partner and structural characteristics. For example, one study of MSM in Chicago found that while there were no individual-level differences in risk behaviors, significant differences were found between White MSM and BMSM in sex partner characteristics (gender, sexual orientation, and age).⁶ Furthermore, other analyses have shown differences in the structure of networks between BMSM and White MSM. For instance, BMSM tend to have denser networks of sexual partners (i.e., their partners tend to have sex with other partners in their network) which puts them at increased risk for HIV acquisition.^{6,7} While these macro-level explanations of health disparities have been more compelling than individual-level factors, the mechanism for these factors remains understudied. As research moves from individual to collective approaches, it requires the use of sociological theory to increase its explanatory possibilities.

To guide my analyses, I plan to apply a sociological theoretical framework of sexual fields to explain network differences between Black and White MSM. The application of this sociological framework to network data will provide a comprehensive quantitative approach that will inform later uses of the framework, as well as provide a rich theoretical foundation for later public health analyses of sexual health disparities and HIV intervention design. This project will attempt to answer the questions: how do the venues where MSM interact affect their subsequent social networks, what are the differences in the social networks of groups who frequent the same venue, how do these data inform the sexual fields framework, and how can the sexual fields framework be used to inform public health analyses and interventions?

The theoretical framework I plan to apply will be Adam Green's conceptualization of sexual fields.⁸ Green establishes erotic social worlds as consisting of two parts: the space of sexual sociality, i.e. the physical site, and the social structure (the sexual field), which delegates the distribution of social capital.⁹ The properties of social capital can take various forms, such as physical traits, affectations, or sociocultural tropes, and are valued differently depending on the sociosexual space.⁸ Social actors navigate their erotic worlds with awareness of their level of social capital, and this capital shapes

Intro moves from broad topic to specific issue

Clear research/project statement occurs in 1st paragraph

Background goes beyond summarizing relevant literature. It sets up a justification for the specific research aims

Identifies gap in knowledge and justifies why gap should be filled

Background and justification of methods

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actors' agency within the erotic world. Generally, high levels of social capital allow actors to choose from many sexual partners and give them agency in the sexual encounter.

Proof of
data
access
would
be useful

To answer my research questions, I will use data from my lab collected within a large longitudinal cohort study of MSM ages 16-29 years (RADAR). Study participants provide individual, dyadic, network, and biological data every six months. Network data are collected using an egocentric network approach through a touchscreen interface based on participant-aided sociograms called netCanvas-R.^{10,11} In this approach, the participant (ego) reports the names of their social, sexual, and drug use partners (alters); demographic information on these alters; and connections between alters. Relevant to this project, RADAR collects information on the venues at which egos met their sex partners. Specifically, this includes type of venue (bar, school, etc.) and name. Additionally, netCanvas-R collects information on date of first sex, type of sex (anal or vaginal), and frequency of condom use.

Situates project within
broader study

I will utilize a venue-level (the spaces of sexual sociality) approach by looking at the sociosexual networks of the MSM that frequent certain venues. Through integrating analyses of the variations in ego sexual network properties and fieldwork conducted at these sites, I will be able to construct the social structure and properties of the sexual field, as well as the distribution of sexual capital. The social network analyses will involve the portioning of data by venues/sites. Following other network studies, the number of sexual partners will be operationalized by the summation of sexual alters met at a specific site, and network density will be operationalized by the proportion of all ego/alter and alter/alter ties to all possible ties in the social network.^{6,12} I expect to start with the social network analyses to isolate 8-10 venues where differences in sexual capital are apparent (e.g., structural network differences are found—what kinds of egos meet many partners? what types of sexual encounters are common through partnerships initiated at these venues?), and I anticipate this will take up to four weeks. Fieldwork will involve visiting the sexual sites and taking ethnographic observations (To whom does it cater? What are the characteristics of patrons?), which will take up to two weeks. Integration of fieldwork and network data and formally applying the sexual fields framework will take up to two weeks. I hypothesize that men with lower sexual capital at a sexual site will have fewer numbers of sexual partners, and that their sexual networks will be denser; furthermore, I theorize that these men are also more likely to engage in HIV risk behaviors because they have less agency in the sexual encounter. This grant disbursement will be used for living expenses during the course of this research and transportation expenses in Chicago.

Good description of methods, but could benefit from explanatory
sentences that explicitly connect back to the research aims/question.

Should
mention
specific
course
numbers

I have taken extensive coursework in sociological theory and research methods, and have focused on critical gender and sexuality theory in my coursework. Furthermore, my background in mathematical methods has given me the ability to analyze and interpret quantitative social network data. Lastly, this project will be executed under the supervision of Gregory Phillips II, PhD, MS, an Assistant Professor in the NU Department of Medical Social Sciences with extensive experience in social epidemiology and network analysis, and with whom I have worked for nearly one year. I intend for this summer project to culminate in the writing of my interdisciplinary senior thesis; this will prepare me for the independent research required of graduate students in the social and epidemiological sciences, where I plan to continue researching sexual health and its intersection with sociological theory. This is also a topic that I am passionate about—gay men of color remain vulnerable to HIV, and as a gay man of color, I want to conduct and disseminate research that informs future research initiatives, HIV interventions, and sociological theory in order to benefit this population.

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