

COPING WITH THE RISKS OF INFECTION BY MALE PROSTITUTES IN TIMES SQUARE

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INTRODUCTION

Male prostitutes, often called male "hustlers," are a common feature of the urban landscape. However, until recently, research on this population has been relatively sparse. Many researchers have begun to reexamine the phenomenon of male prostitution largely due to the fact that hustlers are at risk of acquiring AIDS (Boulton et al 1989; Calhoun, Pickerill 1988; Elifson et al 1989, 1993; Lauderback, Waldorf 1989; Pleak, Meyer-Bahlburg 1990; Ross 1988; Rotheram-Borus, Koopman 1991).

Since male prostitutes frequently engage in the primary means of transmission of the HIV virus - unprotected sex with males, unprotected sex with females, and intravenous drug use and needle sharing - they are a group at high risk of infection. This is especially true in New York City, which represents a large portion of the HIV/AIDS population. Additionally, the sex trade in Times Square has historically offered a marketplace for a variety of activities, participants, and customers.

The purpose of this article is to describe some of the techniques used by male prostitutes in Times Square to manage the risks of infection with the HIV virus. Building upon the framework found in Walter Miller's (1958) Lower Class Culture Theory, the various techniques used by hustlers are described as well as how the cultural lore surrounding AIDS inhibits effective prevention measures for hustlers. The information concerning AIDS and its transmission is received, but this information is distorted to the point where the hustlers can describe the risks but avoid taking appropriate risk-reducing measures.

METHODS

This research took place primarily in the Times Square section of the City, although some occurred elsewhere in the Midtown Manhattan area and in Greenwich Village in lower Manhattan. In collecting these data, I used classic ethnographic methods of direct observation and open-ended, unstructured interviews. For one year, beginning in January 1992, I observed, interviewed, and interacted with members of the hustling population. I also interviewed peep show managers,

employees, shopkeepers, hotel clerks, and various street people. In part, I designed these interviews to gain access to the population.

Entry into hard-to-reach populations presents a host of problems for researchers (Agar 1980; Douglas 1972; Hammersley, Atkinson 1983; Karp 1980; Luckenbill 1985). Often the researcher must rely on informants to provide key information about the population as well as providing introductions to its members. Early on in my research, shopkeepers pointed out areas where a good deal of hustling takes place, offered opinions on the nature of the problem, and, in a few cases, introduced me to hustlers. My contacts with other researchers in the area and street people whom I had come to know were also helpful.

Through these networks, I was able to interview thirty-five hustlers. Because large segments of the population pride themselves on anonymity, I cannot make a claim of representativeness. However, I feel confident that what the hustlers have told me about the trade, the culture of hustling, and their lives has been accurate and consistent. When possible I have verified the information through personal observation or by asking my informants or other hustlers for verification. These methods are obviously not without limitations, but they did serve to support the information I was given. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that I am focusing on a select segment of the hustling population in New York City. My insights, assessments, and conclusions can only be applied to the hustlers in Times Square.

There were many reasons for my success in gaining access to this population, but my relationship with three key informants was perhaps the most important. Since they played leadership roles within the culture, their introductions to other hustlers not only paved the way for those particular interviews, but the effect snowballed and additional introductions came at a relatively rapid pace. These three individuals became my cultural guides, pointing out new developments, providing and verifying information about others in the trade, and making important contacts for me.

Finally, I should note my use of the term "boys" in the following passages. I use this term interchangeably with "hustler" and

"prostitute" primarily to avoid distracting repetition. While I have met hustlers as young as fourteen and as old as thirty, I really cannot consider the former group of young men "boys." Thus, the term used is one of convenience rather than of literal meaning.

THE DYNAMICS OF HUSTLING

Much of the hustling in Times Square goes on either in the peep shows or in the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Both offer anonymity for the client and both are places with a great deal of traffic. The exodus of commuters for the City, for example, especially at rush hour, offers clients the opportunity to lose themselves in the throng of people making their way home. As such, they can carry out transactions with hustlers without attracting much attention. The same premise applies to the peep shows, which large numbers of males patronize during this time period.

There is one particular area in the Port Authority known among hustlers and clients as the "Meat Rack." This is an area near some of the departure gates where a good deal of hustling takes place. If an agreement is made between the two parties, they may then go to a variety of places: the peep shows, the client's apartment, their car, or one of the restrooms nearby. Hustling activities are marked by a great deal of diversity. Consider the following:

Smokealot: It depends on who the trick is and what they want you to do. Like some guys will just come up to you and say how much? Right then you know they be Five-0 [the police] because they gotta get you to admit the price first. But some of the tricks will come up to you and ask you what your name is, what you like to do, if you wanna get high or somethin' like that. We work out an arrangement depending on what the trick wants. I only go with tricks I know so I ain't gonna get picked up [arrested]. But other guys will pick up anybody. And usually, depending on what they want, you can make anywhere from 30 to 40 dollars a trick. See it depends on a lotta factors like what they want, how long they wanna go. It's just like females you know what I'm saying? But like for an average, it's about 30 dollars. But you always gotta be clockin' [observing or watching him closely] the man to make sure he ain't Five-0.

Another primary location for hustling are the peep shows. In the basement of many of these shops in and around the area, there is a

section which caters to the homosexual client. Virtually every shop has a sign prohibiting hustling, prostitution, drug dealing, and the entry of minors. However, one can easily find young men of uncertain age loitering near the video booths nearby. The booths are very small, but there is a door for privacy, a bench for patrons to sit on, and the area is kept dark so that they can view the porno films clearly. These factors make it an ideal haven for clients to "pick up" hustlers and to use the booth for sexual purposes.

The managers and clerks of these shops are adamant about not allowing young hustlers in their stores, but the boys tell me it is quite easy to bribe both the clerk and the security officer, who allow them to "work" the area. As long as the hustler is discreet and does not cause trouble, the employees are willing to ignore the illicit activity.

Thus, the peep shows have been, and continue to be, an integral part of a hustler's life. They offer a relatively safe working environment as well as a steady source of income. It may appear, then, that there is a pattern to hustling that all of the participants understand. There is an agreed upon location, a familiar dialogue, and an established pricing policy for the various activities. This pattern fosters stability in hustling. For the most part, very few problems occur either between the hustler and the client or among the boys themselves. That is, in the vast majority of cases, the activities are carried out without incident.

The explanation for this stability is found in the normative system which regulates the boys' behavior. For instance, one extremely important norm is that once a hustler and a client begin a conversation, another hustler should never intervene. This is a sort of territorial claim that is not to be encroached upon. Violation of this norm can lead to severe and violent retaliation.

Another norm stipulates that if a hustler is picked up by an unknown client, another hustler will discreetly follow them as a precautionary measure. The significance of this norm is found in the fact that the protecting hustler may have to sacrifice his own customer to fulfill his community obligation.

Thus, the establishment of a social order has led to a strong sense of cohesion among the members of the hustling culture. These feelings of community provide hustlers with a social support mechanism, a relatively safe working environment as well as preserving,

and, in some cases, enhancing their sense of self worth. For these otherwise disenfranchised individuals, who are without adequate job skills, are poorly educated, and experience a host of other problems, these are indeed powerful benefits.

THE HUSTLERS OF TIMES SQUARE: A BRIEF PROFILE

Most of the hustlers are between the ages of 18-21, comprising sixteen of the thirty-five hustlers interviewed, while twelve were between 14-17 years old. There were also four hustlers over age thirty. These older men are central figures in the community, largely based on their time and experience in the trade.

Additionally, unlike other types of hustlers found in New York City, the majority classify themselves as heterosexual in orientation. Many have wives or live-in girlfriends and some have children. This runs counter to a number of studies and popular notions that male prostitution is a decidedly homosexual phenomenon (Pleak, Meyer-Balzburg 1991). Among the Times Square hustlers, this is not the case. With families to feed and drug habits to support, hustlers view their participation in the trade as a necessity. For these hustlers, prostitution is an income producing activity rather than a recreational one. This approach is similar to the perspective that Reiss (1961) identified in his now classic study on male prostitutes. Focusing on delinquent peer groups, he found that many males are able to maintain their status within the peer group as well as a positive self-image by viewing prostitution simply as a way to earn extra money. Thus, despite engaging in homosexual acts, these boys are able to separate what they do from who they are. It is the same "lack of role identification" (Reiss 1961) by which the hustlers of Times Square can manage their self-image within the context of their hustling activities.

COPING WITH THE RISKS OF INFECTION

With regard to HIV/AIDS, there is little doubt that many hustlers are at risk. Many are IV drug users who share needles and other paraphernalia and they frequently have multiple heterosexual partners in addition to clients. Thus, they engage in virtually all of the primary risk activities and do so regularly. But many questions arise as to whether or not the hustlers of Times Square know their risk

status, and if they do, how they manage to cope with these risks. The vast majority of hustlers in Times Square are quite knowledgeable about HIV and AIDS, and a few take effective precautionary steps. However, there are many others who, while knowledgeable, think they are immune from the consequences or employ dangerous measures to prevent infection. Still others almost fatalistically accept that they will become infected and do very little to prevent it.

The various means by which the boys cope with the risks of infection can be understood by using the framework created by Walter Miller (1958). Building upon Sellin's (1938) work on conduct norms within the context of a subculture, Miller sees criminal behavior as a function of obedience to the norms and values of a unique and separate lower class culture.

Miller believes that slum areas have a distinct cultural climate which remains stable over long periods of time. The reason for this is that the people in these areas are unable to succeed in the mainstream culture, and a group of value-like "focal concerns" evolve to fit the conditions of life in slum areas. These focal concerns are Trouble, Toughness, Smartness, Excitement, Fate, and Autonomy.

In these communities, people are evaluated by their actual or potential involvement in trouble making activity. These include fighting, drinking, sexual misconduct, or criminal acts. Getting into trouble is a status-enhancing mechanism. Related to this is an emphasis on toughness. Lower class males also enjoy recognition for their masculinity and value physical strength, athletic ability, and ability to withstand physical punishment.

Smartness involves the ability to outsmart or manipulate others in the "ways of the street" such as con games, gambling, or avoiding the police. Smartness also goes beyond intellectual skills and places greater emphasis on being able to successfully navigate oneself within the culture.

There is also a heavy emphasis on fate among the members of this population. Getting lucky, finding good fortune, or winning the lottery is a predominant feature of lower class culture. Finally, a general concern exists in lower class cultures about personal freedom and autonomy. Being in the control of authority figures such as police, teachers, and parents is unacceptable. When conflicts with these groups arise, the usual response is hostility and a lack of respect.

Figure 1: Techniques for Managing the Risks of HIV/AIDS

Knowledge of Positive HIV Status	
YES	NO
Denial	Invulnerability
Accept with Vengeance	Smartness
Accept without Vengeance	Toughness/Trouble
	Fate
	Autonomy

In sum, Miller argues that by participating in this distinct and separate culture and abiding by these focal concerns, criminal behavior is an inevitable feature of the lower class.

In the same way that crime is a normal response to established community standards, the means by which hustlers reduce the possibilities of becoming infected are also couched in terms of cultural values. Thus, it is because of the cultural lore surrounding HIV/AIDS issues that Miller's "focal concerns" helps us understand how hustlers are unable or unwilling to take the appropriate steps to prevent infection. This is especially true in light of the fact that they possess a relatively clear understanding of the disease.

FOCAL CONCERNS, HIV, AND HUSTLERS

In looking at how the hustlers of Times Square cope with the risks of HIV, a distinction must be made between those who are aware of their HIV status and those who are not. The reason for this is that this knowledge results in very different behavior with regard to their hustling activities. Figure 1 was developed to describe the various strategies employed by the boys to manage the risks of infection.

For those who are HIV positive there are essentially three responses: denial, acceptance with vengeance, and acceptance without vengeance. Perhaps the most common coping mechanism among those infected is denial. These prostitutes simply deny that they are going to die of AIDS. They cannot accept their fate and believe they will survive and overcome the disease. Apache is the latest in a long line of hustlers to enter this initial stage of coping. He states:

The thing is, they think I'm gonna die soon, bullshit! I don't find no difference between me and anybody else. Whether you got this [the virus] or not you gonna die. I don't believe I'm

gonna be in the hospital with no pneumonia. I mean, I'll die naturally. I'll die just like you die and everybody else, unless somebody walks up to me and puts a bullet in my head. Yeah but you see, my life is full of this. But I don't believe nothin' about dyin' of no pneumonia and all that shit. I don't believe in that. I mean, the way I look at it, I'm just as healthy as you are. The only thing is that I have something in me that you don't have in you.

Thus, Apache views the HIV virus in the same manner most people view a flu virus: something that could be potentially serious, but really isn't and is essentially a short term ailment. For Apache and those like him, they are unable to come to grips with a very real and difficult future.

While some deny, others accept the fact that they are HIV positive. However, with this acceptance comes an added problem: vindictiveness. These hustlers have sought vengeance against clients involved in the trade. Eddie falls into this category. Eddie is only sixteen and is well liked by almost everyone in the hustling community. Once he learned he was infected, his entire outlook changed.

I look at it this way. The only way I could have got it was from some trick who was infected. I think I know when it happened but I ain't positive. But it was some trick who knew he was infected and he didn't care about me. He didn't care about any of these people out here. He probably figured 'since I got it, I'm gonna give it to everyone I can.' Well, when I got it, everything changed. I used to like goin' out and messin' around, doin' drugs, partyin', pickin' up tricks. It was fun. Then when I found out that some sick bastard gave me the virus and now I got to deal with it, I'm gonna make every one of those motherfuckers pay too. I don't tell nobody I got the virus: you the only one I ever told this to. But I'm tellin' you that since some trick gave it to me, I'm gonna give it to every trick I go with. They don't care, I don't neither. It's like what they say about payback.

MC: What about all the other hustlers who go with that trick though? If you infect him, then he goes with them, they get it too right?

Eddie: That's why I tell everybody I know and like to use a condom and to use one every single time cause you never know. You never, never fuckin' know. But if they don't listen and they go

with somebody and get infected? Then that's their fault: They were stupid. But you know what? Of all these hustlers out here, I bet almost all that got it [the virus] got it from some trick that was infected first.

Eddie's comments reflect the feelings of most hustlers. It is generally felt that the transmission of HIV to the hustling community has come from infected clients who either intentionally or carelessly expose them to the virus. Parenthetically, I asked Eddie why he carried condoms if he sought to infect clients. His reply was that he uses the condoms for his sexual partners and he also uses them as a negotiating tool. He will either ask the client to wear a condom or state he must wear one. In response, the client will sometimes offer a bonus for sex without a condom. In this way, Eddie can charge more, and, at the same time, continue his pattern of revenge.

The last category includes those who accept their status and are not vengeful towards others. This group of hustlers is rarely mentioned and even then only in a limited context. These are hustlers who have left the trade and are experiencing the debilitating effects of AIDS. I have not talked to anyone who falls into this category, and judging from the boys' fleeting references to them, they are not a large portion of the hustling population...at least not yet.

In contrast, the vast majority of hustlers do not know their HIV status. Of this group, a small number of younger hustlers, especially those who have little experience in the trade, simply ignore the possibility of infection. This is similar to the perspective offered by Perloff (1983, 1986) and others concerning feelings of invulnerability (Kirscht et al 1966; Synder 1978; Weinstein 1984). These young men simply feel that they are immune from the disease and thus need not worry about preventative measures.

Most hustlers however, use a series of what I call "focal precautions," which were adapted from Miller's theory, and are generally categorized as Smartness, Toughness/Trouble, Fate, and Autonomy.

SMARTNESS

Smartness refers to the ability of the hustler to possess additional knowledge or have devised a more "effective" strategy than others to avoid infection. There are several techniques employed here. Perhaps the most common

risk reduction mechanism is a heavy reliance on the ability to identify an infected client. While the boys admit on one hand that an infected person can look "clean" and healthy, they also point out that they will not go with a client who looks "sick." This means if the client has flu-like symptoms or has suddenly developed a medical problem, or looks pale and sweaty, hustlers avoid him. Prince had this to say about his ability to spot infected clients:

I only go with clean lookin' well dressed men. I don't deal with anybody else. And they got to be healthy lookin' or I ain't goin'. They can't be lookin' sick and shit like they dyin' or nothin' like that. Some of these tricks around here look like they be walkin' corpses or somethin'. But like if I see a trick walkin' around here and he's healthy lookin' and stuff, and then all of a sudden I don't see him for a while and he comes back? Or like if he tells me in conversation he just been to the doctor for a checkup or somethin'? Then I know somethin's up. Or maybe he starts usin' a cane or somethin' like that. He ain't never used no cane before so why does he need one now? See so you got to watch the tricks around here real close and you get like signs from them if they sick or not.

Prince's comments are typical. He believes he possesses some innate ability to identify infected clients. In reality then, this ability to spot infected clients is based on an undefined, superficial assessment. Those that look physically ill are avoided, and the criteria for selecting the "clean" ones probably rests on how much they are willing to pay. To be fair, hustlers do make some type of initial evaluation and this wariness is helpful in assessing other types of risk, such as risks of physical injury.

A second strategy in this category is to limit the range of activities hustlers will perform with clients. Many have stated they will only engage in passive oral sex with clients and since they are not at risk, they are unconcerned about infection. However, oral sex as a means of transmission remains controversial and hustlers are still at risk since an infected client can have sores or cuts on his lips or on the inside of his mouth (Hollander 1990; Lifson et al 1990; Osmond 1990). But perhaps more importantly, one must question whether or not this is the only type of act the hustler becomes involved in. This is especially true for the crack-addicted male prostitute who will do almost anything with anybody for nearly any

price (McNamara 1994).

Third, some hustlers take time off from hustling and in this way believe they can reduce the likelihood of infection by limiting the "law of averages."

Deadhead: If you was a hustler, I would tell you use your condoms and don't go with more than one person a day okay? If you're gonna hustle, don't go with more than one person in a day. That will decrease the odds of you catching it. Sometimes you take a week off. Don't have no sex for a whole week! That way you cut down the chance of you gettin' infected with the disease. It's like the law of averages you know? The less hustlin' you do, the less of a chance you have of gettin' it.

Typically, while those who use this strategy refrain from hustling, their drug use increases, they engage in unprotected sex with a partner, or both. The likelihood of this happening is also predicated on having the financial means to take time off: something not all hustlers have the option to do.

Fourth, frequent testing for HIV is perceived by some hustlers as a viable precautionary measure. Scarface believes he is not at risk because he gets tested every six months. Since he has been tested nearly a half dozen times and each time the result has been negative, he does not need to concern himself. He feels as long as he is selective in his choice of clients and is what he terms "careful" about his drug use (in that he cleans his needles with bleach), he is in no danger. When I ask him what would happen if he received a positive test result, he states, "That ain't gonna happen, but if it did? I guess it would be time to make some changes in my lifestyle." Obviously, regular testing does little to prevent infection, only to assess when it occurs. Moreover, negative test results do not necessarily mean he has not been infected.

TOUGHNESS/TROUBLE

Toughness/Trouble refers to the boy's street reputation or being a "bad ass" (Katz 1989). While some may interpret this behavior as mere street bravado, a number of hustlers actually believe that their standing in the street culture will protect them from infected clients. The idea here is that since they have established a reputation in the area, an infected client would not dare risk the violent retaliation they would receive if they solicited him. Raul

has this to say:

Listen man, nobody in his right mind is gonna come around here and even think of fuckin' with me. I don't care if he's got AIDS or not. Anybody that comes around here knows the rules. And if I find out that anybody around here is tryin' to infect me or anybody else, well, let's just say I'll get them to think twice about it.

Despite these strongly held beliefs, almost everyone admits that infected clients do solicit hustlers. The difference of course is that hustlers who cannot spot an infected client are perceived as having less skill, being unlucky, or having reputation that is not a strong enough deterrent.

FATE

Fate as a strategy is essentially a misnomer since there is an inevitability associated with HIV. That is, for a few hustlers there is a general acceptance of the risks of infection. They feel that since they are in the streets, engaging in a variety of high risk behaviors, it is simply a matter of time before they too become infected. They are convinced of this outcome and do nothing to change it. In some ways this is reminiscent of individuals who feel they have no control over their environment or work situation.

For example, in the same way that a coal miner accepts that a cave-in will eventually occur or they will develop a physical ailment, some hustlers tacitly accept that they will one day become infected. Thus, while some hustlers deny the possibility of becoming infected and others use a series of techniques to negate their risks, this group experiences an inevitability to their lives and do nothing to change its course. They feel that hustling is the only way for them to survive and they have no choice but to accept the risks.

AUTONOMY

Finally, an interesting trend has emerged with regard to condom use. When outreach workers, police officers, social workers, health officials, and the like ask hustlers how they prevent infection, they unanimously state they use condoms. While this could be considered a success in terms of awareness of risks, consider what Flacco has to say about this:

Man this thing with condoms? That's what they think they're supposed to say. Some guys use

condoms, mostly gay guys, but we all know that when somebody comes around here and asks us what we do to prevent AIDS, we say condoms. If we don't, we'll have every motherfuckin' do-gooder comin' around here tellin' us about how we should do this and do that and they won't leave us alone. So we just tell them, 'yeah I use a condom with every single trick I pick up and I won't go with them if they don't want to use one.' But it's all bullshit. You and I both know that most of the hustlers out here don't use them. Besides they ain't a hundred percent anyway so a lotta guys figure why bother?

Thus, while the vast majority of boys state they use condoms, only one, Eddie, has ever had a ready supply to show me. And even though condom use is perhaps the most effective means of prevention for them, even those boys who do use them can be persuaded otherwise if the client is willing to pay more. In this way, many hustlers perceive that they retain control over the nature of their transactions. Just as Miller describes the emphasis on personal freedom and a disdain for authority, hustlers can, in their own way, feel as though they are in control of the situation rather than the other way around.

CONCLUSION

Despite a long history, the study of male prostitution has been largely overlooked. Perhaps the group at highest risk of infection with the HIV virus, only recently have researchers turned their attention to this population. Many studies have concentrated on male prostitutes' knowledge of the disease: what the virus is, how one acquires it, and how one prevents infection.

Yet, despite being surprisingly well informed about the disease and its effects, many hustlers continue to engage in a variety of sexual and drug-sharing behaviors, seemingly without much regard for the potential consequences. It is this puzzling aspect of their behavior that has been the focus of this article.

While educating this population on the risks of infection is important, one must also consider the cultural climate in which this information is given. In other words, the problem lies not in awareness or understanding, but rather in translating that information to behavior. The attempts to educate male prostitutes in Times Square about the dangers of HIV/AIDS has been a success: they know more about the disease than ever before.

However, as I have tried to show in the preceding pages, the vast majority have continued to engage in their risky behavior and few have taken any adequate precautions. Thus, any attempts to reduce risk-taking within this population must also take into account how and in what way this information can be colored, distorted, or ignored in light of the context in which it is interpreted.

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