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## A Social-Ecological Perspective on Power and HIV/AIDS with a Sample of Men who have Sex with Men of Colour

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### Abstract

This paper applies a social-ecological theory of power to posit that individual HIV-related vulnerability stems from how power is leveraged across situations over time. The current study identified six power domains and explored how the interchangeability of power shapes HIV-related vulnerability among men who have sex with men of colour. Data were collected as part of a mixed-methods study on the social networks and experiences of racial/ethnic and sexual minority status. A total of 35 Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Latino men who have sex with men were recruited, and individual in-depth interviews were conducted. Results showed that men who have sex with men of colour actively traded upon various domains to alter their relative power within a given situation. Results suggest that power interchangeability, or the degree to which power from one domain can be leveraged to gain power in another, may shape HIV-related vulnerability. Findings offer a dynamic understanding of the nature of HIV risk as derived from everyday power exchanges, and provide theoretical foundation for future work on individual resilience against HIV-related risks over time.

### Keywords

Power; HIV/AIDS; men who have sex with men of colour; HIV-related vulnerability; social ecology; resilience

### Introduction

HIV is a disease of disempowered groups, concentrating among the most marginalised and destitute populations (Stemple 2008). In the USA, men who have sex with men of colour continue to be a population disproportionately affected by HIV. There is little evidence to demonstrate that behavioural differences account for the overall disparity in infection rates (Wei et al. 2009). Rather, extant work on the association between power and sexual risk suggest that power—at the structural and individual levels—plays an important role (Gupta 2002; Pulerwitz, Gortmaker, and DeJong, 2000). For example, men who have sex with men of colour report encountering race-based, stereotypic representations of their sexuality in gay male social media that exoticise and derogate men of colour. Rooted in a hierarchical system of White male dominance (e.g., Han 2008), such stereotypes powerfully guide sexual interactions by scripting sexual roles and idealising a racialised, White gay masculinity (e.g., Tan et al. 2013). Thus, sexual risk among men who have sex with men of colour requires

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considering the role of power as manifested within sexual relationships, but as related to social constructions of race/ethnicity, masculinity, and gender (Nagel 2000).

Nevertheless, advances for understanding the link between HIV risk and power for men who have sex with men have been limited for several reasons. First, analyses of power and HIV risk have been largely carried out among heterosexually active partners drawing on interpersonal level power (Pulerwitz et al. 2000; studies have rarely operationalised and measured power among men who have sex with men. Second, power is a ubiquitous construct used to refer to interpersonal-level social influence with the context of sexual relationships (Amaro and Raj 2000; Pulerwitz et al. 2000) or in the broader context of the community and mobilising individuals toward collective change (Jana et al. 2004). Both conceptualisations refer to very different constructs and measurements of power. Certainly, power operates at a systemic as well as an interpersonal level (e.g., Nagel 2000). For example, social structures systematically confer power to certain groups and not others. Interpersonally and within couples, “what is important is not the absolute power of either member of a couple but the comparative influence of each partner relative to the other” (p. 189, Blanc 2001).

However, conceptualisations of power in HIV studies generally ignore the *interaction* between individuals and environments and their *conjoined influence* on individual-level power and HIV-related outcomes. For example, behavioural control is a dimension of power at the individual level (Fisher and Fisher 1992), while availability of resources is a dimension of power at the environmental level (Larios et al. 2009). Thus, an individual's power is not only dependent on his or her behavioural skills, but also on whether his or her environment affords the behaviour to be enacted. However, one's environment may also facilitate and limit behavioural potentials and, in turn, the individual's behaviours may change environmental features over time. Present conceptualisations of power and HIV-risk lack consideration of how individual and environmental features *interactively* impact behavioural choices and situations that determine when and where power may be used, and by whom. These considerations are critical for understanding how power may impact individuals' sexual risk (Parkes et al. 2005).

### **An ecological consideration of power: Power Basis Theory**

The present study incorporates a social-ecological framework of power that considers how significant features in an individual's ecological niche interact with personal capacities that enhance or inhibit the use of power (Pratto et al. 2011). An ecological niche refers to the environment in which a person's actions are situated, which includes the geographical location in which one lives and the larger, social structures that shape participants' experiences according to race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status including income, gender, and sexual orientation. According to power basis theory (PBT), power may be defined as individuals' ability to meet their needs (Pratto et al. 2011). Individual needs are defined as requirements for survival. The ability to meet needs refers to a behavioural potential that is dependent on the individual, the environment, and their interaction that co-create a “local ecology” that constrains or enables an individual's exercise of power (Pratto et al., 2011). Thus, power dynamics derive from human-environment interactions, and power is ecologically based.

The present study aimed to understand the role of power in HIV-related vulnerability among men who have sex with men of colour by examining how different kinds or domains of power can be leveraged for one another. PBT identifies six domains of individual, community, and structural-level power in which power may be gained or lost: Material Resources, Knowledge and Competence, Health and Wellness, Community and Social Ties, Legitimacy and Social Status, and Sexuality (French and Raven 1959). Material Resources

here refers to the basic necessities for living (e.g., food, shelter, or money to be exchanged to meet such needs). Knowledge and Competence encompasses the realm of formal education, training, knowledge and life skills, which can be used to take effective advantage of various opportunities (Elliot and Dweck 2005). Health and Wellness refers to physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. Well-being may heighten the capacity to perceive opportunities in one's environment, increase motivation to take advantage of such opportunities, and follow a course of action to achieve goals. Community and Social Ties refer to connectedness to a given community or social group. These ties also refer to the availability of interpersonal relationships as sources of social opportunity and social roles, as well as of self-acceptance and resiliency. Legitimacy and Social Status encompasses social acceptance, affirmation of one's social identity, and perceived social power by given social groups. Finally, Sexuality refers to the realm of sexual identities and preferences, sexual characteristics and desirability, sexual relationships and interactions, and sexually related skills, beliefs and attitudes.

According to PBT, these different domains can all be considered places where power is manifest because individuals may leverage power in one domain for power in another domain in order to meet needs. This refers to the interchangeability of power, or the extent to which power from different domains is capable of mutual substitution.

Some power domains are more interchangeable than others. Exchanging money for an education is an example of high interchangeability. Money is in the domain of Material Resources, and education is in the domain of Knowledge and Competence. Money and education are mutually interchangeable to the extent that, in the USA, a young adult can afford higher education, apply the degree to securing a well-paying job, which in turn allows him or her to make social and financial investments associated with a higher quality of life. Interchangeability of power may explain how individuals are resilient, or the extent to which individuals can adapt to, cope with, and quickly recover from calamities and diseases (Kurtz et al. 2012; Lazarus and Folkman 1984).

Some power domains are less interchangeable. Consider a situation in which, instead of earning money using one's education and training, one must earn money by selling sex, an accessible form of power. Exchanging sex for money is less interchangeable because is highly stigmatised and punishable by law in most societies, and is wrought with more risks and incur higher costs for the individual, including HIV-infection, that limit the potential power gained by the exchange. Thus, while some domains of power can be leveraged in multiple ways to successfully gain power, while some can be leveraged in only limited ways.

Based on a social-ecological theory of power, the study used in-depth qualitative interviews to demonstrate how power interchangeability varies by domain and across situations, and when such variability may potentially influence HIV-risk among Asian/Pacific Islander (API), Black, and Latino men who have sex with men. First, the study explored the ways in which men who have sex with men of colour referred to being powerful and being powerless in order to identify the domains and contexts in which men of colour in the sample are powerful, and domains and contexts in which power deficits exist. Next, the study focused on the ways and contexts in which men leveraged power from one domain to garner power in another.

## Method

Qualitative data were collected as part of a larger quantitative study designed to examine the impact of social discrimination, sexual partnerships, and social networks on sexual risk for

HIV among API, Black, and Latino men who have sex with men. The study explored three topics: (a) experiences of social discrimination and coping with respect to ethnic and sexual minority status; (b) descriptions of social networks and their role in HIV risk; and (c) how men's sexual experiences shape their racial/ethnic and sexual identities, influence their relationships with others, and inform their sexual risk-taking behaviours.

## Participants

Men were eligible to participate in the study if they were at least 18 years old, self-identified as API, Black, or Latino, resided in Los Angeles County, reported at least one male sex partner in the past six months, and reported a new male sexual partner in the prior year. Participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm, by a community-based organisation and services targeting API, Black, or Latino men who have sex with men, and through ads in various gay newspapers, and notices in venues frequented by men who have sex with men during July 2005–July 2006. Inclusion criteria were based upon purposive sampling, with cells stratified by age and race/ethnicity.

A total of 12 API, 12 Black, and 11 Latino men participated in individual in-depth interviews. Sixteen men were 18 to 29 years old; 19 men were 30 years or older. The age range was 20 to 60 years, with a mean age of 33 years and a median age of 31 years. Among the individual interviewees, one of 11 Latinos was foreign-born, and nine of 12 API were foreign-born. All Black participants were born in the USA.

## Individual Interview Procedures

As part of the larger quantitative study, individual in-depth interviews were conducted by two of the study investigators using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours, were audio-taped and held in the offices of AIDS Project Los Angeles. Informants for in-depth interviews provided written informed consent and received \$60 to compensate them for their time and transportation costs. The institutional review boards of both partnering organisations—AIDS Project Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA and the University of California, San Francisco, California—approved the study protocol.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Two study investigators independently read all transcripts consistent with qualitative research methods analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2007). We first identified broad categories and excerpts that described power domains and power interchangeability (i.e., how power in one domain can be leveraged for power in another in a specific situation). Previously published data that informed the categorisation of power domains and instances of power interchangeability (Pratto et al. 2008). The two coders met to ensure that adequate reliability was achieved across categories and discussed any disagreements.

## Results

Table 1 lists the power domains, their instantiation, and examples from the interviews. Table 2 presents excerpts illustrating how men described leveraging power, that is, trading upon power domains to become more or less powerful, in the context of HIV-related vulnerability. Names of participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

### Power exchanges that increase sexual risk-taking

**Sexuality for Material Resources**—A theme emerged around sexuality and the use of sexuality to access financial benefits. One participant explained how he viewed and leveraged his sexuality to gain access to an affluent lifestyle that was otherwise unattainable.

“I get middle-aged, affluent white men. Like REALLY affluent. I always think that they have to know that [the relationship is] unequal. They have the power to woo me with all the resources that are available to them, which is an abundant amount... I have nothing and I'm sure they understand that. And so there's an instant power dynamic that's set up. I have no control over that but if I allow myself to be wooed then I have to deal with what comes with that and that comes with playing a role and being interchangeable and they can take away their resources whenever they will because...I mean, they understand...it's sort of active participation, like they're getting it because they can and they know they can...I understand that it's an unfair game and if I want to access that world then this is the role that I have to play...A lot of it has to do with me just making sure that I have something to bring to the table because if I don't have the money and the car and the house and all that stuff, then I have to have the personality...It's important that I have something to bring to the table and I think I'd rather have other things than just my body and my sexuality to bring...I mean, I'm close to 30 so I probably have a couple more years to where [my sexuality is] still enough, but I'd rather be more than that.”

– Henry, 28-year-old HIV+ Black man

The above exchange has implications for the participant's HIV-risk. As the participant well understood, the extent to which he became more powerful by trading his sexuality for financial benefits (in the domain of Material Resources) is tenuous at best. He described his lack of control in the “game” and his expected role if he wishes to access this world, a role that he would no longer be able to fill as he ages.

The following quote from the same participant further illustrated that, despite leveraging a source of power, the exchange of sexuality to gain access to wealth and affluence had not actually increased his power (i.e., changed his socioeconomic position).

“Walking into the apartment was just awe-inspiring, of course you would want to come back. So whatever you had to do to...get that again is awesome, rather than going back to your...one-room apartment to share with your mom. Of course you want to sit like in a hotel in like Beverly Hills. So even if you're really educated and you know that this is a risk and you should use condoms and blah, blah, blah, I mean, you don't want to rock the boat either 'cause you're going to get a really great meal afterwards or whatever.”

– Henry, 28-year-old HIV+ Black man

In leveraging his sexuality, the participant perceived himself to be behaviourally constrained to practice safer sex for fear of “rocking the boat” apparently because he realises the tenuous nature of this type of exchange. Note the power available to his affluent White partners. Leveraging power in Material Resources to gain access sexual partners indicates the level of control the power holder has in entering and exiting this exchange or in practicing safer sex. These examples depict how power interchangeability can change depending on the particular power leveraged as well as the specific power one wishes to gain within a certain situation.

Other financial benefits for exchanging sex included quick cash or a place to stay the night, and these exchanges occur sporadically. The next participant described how he engaged in such exchanges with a non-primary but regular sex partner he had met online, for which he was paid cash.

“There's this one guy that I met on Craigslist. He likes to pay me 60 bucks just to give me head and he calls me like three or four times a week. Well, we had talked earlier and he called me and let me know he was at home, which was really cool

because I had just spent my last money out there and I was like, dang, you know, I need—I could use that money.”

– John, 36-year-old Black man of unknown HIV serostatus

The above excerpt illustrates a situation in which the individual becomes more vulnerable to HIV-risks. It is conceivable that one may be more likely to take risks the more desperately one needs material resources. Another participant described the reasons why leveraging sexuality leads to very little power gained for men who have sex with men of colour.

“Well, it's only a sexual thing. It's not like we're going to the movies or I could go to their places of employment and try to get a job. In the real world it is a whole other ballgame, what people do and how people discriminate, they may do these things [like pay you for sex], but these things are all behind closed doors and only they know about it, but in the real world they would never sit next to you on a bus. They would never even come to your aid. Yet [they] would still go to a black prostitute's house and patronise her business or his business or an escort's house.”

– James, 28-year-old Black man of unknown HIV serostatus

**Sexuality and Knowledge for Material Resources**—Financial instability associated with immigration is often one of the many challenges facing immigrant men who have sex with men. Despite achieving academic success, a mismatch between one's formal training and available opportunities leaves sex work as a viable method by which to earn additional income. In this instance, the participant leveraged his sexuality as well as his cultural and educational background (from the domain of Knowledge and Competence) for power in Material Resources.

“I found that ad for a social escort... So I just responded, and they liked me a lot and they took my picture. And they said we will call you and I don't know if it's a very good company or whatever, but the point is, they liked me a lot and its \$200 an hour... All I have to do is just accompany the celebrities. They like me a lot because I am from a different culture. I'm a holistic doctor. So I'll have interesting topics to talk about. They need someone intelligent, articulate and reasonably good-looking. I fit the bill, so I got it.”

- Kyle, 36-year-old HIV- Asian/Pacific Islander man

The ability to leverage his power from more than one domain, in his view, increased his chances of getting hired for the well-paying job, an opportunity that is appealing because he was limited in opportunities commensurate with his education background. The example illustrates the potential of the participant gaining more in material resources by leveraging both his sexuality and his background than if he could only leverage one or the other. However, leveraging sex for money can increase his vulnerability to HIV-infection.

**Sexuality for Community and Social Ties**—A theme that arose was leveraging sex for social affiliation. As the next participant described, he leveraged his sexuality to meet a need for social connections (power in the domain of Community and Social Ties).

“A lot of these hookups for me it's just simply I'm bored, a combination of boredom and loneliness. So if they come and like maybe they'll have a great body or whatever, but they come and go [and] I feel even lonelier than before. So I already know that. What I find attractive I guess is someone I can talk to and connect, you know, interesting in terms of conversation.”

- Ron, 43-year-old HIV– Asian/Pacific Islander man

Similarly, loneliness and a need for companionship prompted the next participant to engage in sex with someone he had just met.

“I just didn't want to be alone in my apartment...And I met someone at a bar who was clearly looking for [a place to] stay for the night. I'm like all right, you know. I didn't want to be alone and he was looking for a place and, you know, maybe there was a chance of having sex and he stayed for the weekend and yes, we did have sex...He was a white guy, little, stocky, kind of short. But he actually seemed to like a lot of the movies that I had at home so that was fun. But you could tell he was just saying whatever I wanted to hear, just so he could stay, and I was fine with that. I needed him.”

– Dean, 32-year-old HIV+ Latino man

In each case, leveraging sex for companionship was limited to short-term, temporary liaisons rather than deep and meaningful relationships one had hoped to gain. Overtime, because one's need for social affiliation goes unmet, the use of sex to gain companionship may place individuals at increased risk for HIV transmission by driving sexual risk behaviours.

### Other types of power interchangeability

Leveraging sex to meet needs in other domains appeared to increase sexual risk behaviours. However, themes around other types of power exchange in which men became more powerful also emerged. Such power exchanges included leveraging Community and Social Ties with Legitimacy and Social Status; leveraging Knowledge and Competence with Health and Wellness; and leveraging Material Resources with Health and Wellness (Table 3).

**Community and Social Ties for Legitimacy**—Themes emerged around experiences with rejection from other men based on their race and/or ethnicity. The next participant described leveraging his social relationships with similar others (power in the domain of Community and Social Ties) to gain a sense of solidarity around their devalued racial/ethnic identities (power in Legitimacy and Social Status).

“In college I told people in my Filipino organisation [that I was gay]. And it kind of helped me to get over some of my own self-hate and stereotypes. Even though I knew my organisation was very liberal and they even talked about supporting queer people—they even had like a queer Filipino conference—I was hesitant to tell anyone `cause I thought maybe someone's going to still be intolerant or they'd tell their friends and some other people would know. But telling them really made me realise that they were behind my back and they were supporting me.”

- Patrick, 26-year-old HIV– Asian/Pacific Islander man

Through his social affiliations (power in the domain of Community and Social Ties), the participant gained an integrated sense of ethnic and sexual minority identity (power in the domain of Legitimacy and Social Status) that helped him contend with internalised negativity regarding his ethnicity and sexual orientation. In the context of HIV-related vulnerability, the participant would likely navigate his sexual relationships feeling empowered as a valued and legitimate member of society despite prevalent stereotypes.

**Knowledge for Health**—Another power exchange in which men became more powerful was that between knowledge and health. The following excerpt demonstrates how one participant leveraged power in the domain of Knowledge and Competence for power in Health and Wellness.



“I turned to Kaiser, I turned to my psychiatrist, I turned to my therapist, I turned to the AA group, I turned to my whole recovery home that I came out of. But see, these are not like friends. You see, these are institutions that I turned to. You know, working in social services and being in business for a while, I immediately knew okay, well I can access this over here and I can, and I know my rights and I should do this, this, this and this. And I took charge of everything and I still am.”

- Greg, 41-year-old HIV–Latino man

The participant leveraged his knowledge and working experience (power in the domain of Knowledge and Competence) to access health-related resources that ultimately helped him gain full cardiovascular recovery (power in the domain of Health and Wellness). Similarly, a trained health professional applied his training (power in the domain of Knowledge and Competence) to improve his own physical health and gain wellbeing (power in the domain of Health and Wellness).

“Well, because I'm a holistic doctor, I try to practice what I preach. You know, I try to run every day. And I take some supplements—multivitamin, essential fatty acids. I take a good protein shake. I pray. I do my homeopathy and my natural medicine to mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually detox, cleanse, and bring about balance. Emotional detox, mental detox, is huge. Very important, just to [process] stuff we accumulate in childhood that we don't process.”

– Kyle, 36-year-old HIV– Asian/Pacific Islander man

**Community and Social Ties for Material Resources**—One power exchange in which men became more powerful involved leveraging social ties for monetary resources and financial independence, job referrals, and a pay raise. The next participant attributed much of his job success and subsequent quality-of-life improvements to his social connections (power in the domain of Community and Social Ties), although the extent to which he was able to actually improve his socioeconomic status was unclear.

“I kept on going to school, graduated and I came back to LA and I just started working. I started out at this minimum-wage job. It wasn't that much. And then I met a manager [who] was hiring people and that she could start me at a higher rate, even more hours and it would be a new experience. So I ended up going and working with her, where I spent almost two years. It gave me...the chance to earn money and be on my own. And then I met my other friend, and he helped me a lot. He took me to work at Y, which pay really good and they have health benefits and everything because all of that's really expensive. So I've been there for four years already, and it's been really good.”

- Jose, 24-year-old HIV– Latino man

**Material Resources for Health**—A type of power interchangeability that promoted power is leveraging material resources for health. By obtaining stable housing (power in the domain of Material Resources), one participant was able to gain the privacy and stability necessary for adherence to antiretroviral medication in the successful treatment of HIV (power in the domain of Health and Wellness).

“I have my own apartment now so that's very good. I have all the privacy in the world. I needed to get an apartment for myself, so that way I can steadily take my medication and things like that and have all the privacy I want, which I do have now, and I have been taking my medications steadily and, you know, try and take better care of myself.”

- Dean, 32-year-old HIV+ Latino man

The power exchange indicates how highly interchangeable power exchanges have direct implications for decreasing the participant's HIV-related vulnerability by enabling him to improve his medication adherence.

## Discussion

Men who have sex with men of colour are among the highest HIV-risk populations in the United States. Research emphasises the important role of power in understanding HIV-risk among men who have sex with men of colour, but has largely ignored the interplay between individuals and their environment in determining how individuals gain power over time. To that end, we explored HIV-related vulnerability in a sample of Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Latino HIV- and HIV+ men who have sex with men using a social-ecological theory of power that considered how men leveraged power from various domains depending on their needs within specific situations. Based on personal accounts of the challenges they faced and the strategies they enacted to cope with them, we identified the ways in which the men traded upon the power they accessed in one or more domains in order to gain power in other domains. Thus, although some men lacked power in certain domains, they nevertheless leveraged power from domains that are accessible in an attempt to gain power that they lacked. The present study showed that power from the domains of Knowledge and Competence, Sexuality, and/or Community and Social Ties was commonly leveraged to gain power in domains in which they had deficits (e.g., Material Resources, Legitimacy and Social Status, Health and Wellness).

Present findings showed that leveraging power in one domain for power in another may increase individual HIV-related vulnerability depending on the particular domains traded upon in the situation. For example, leveraging one's sexuality in order to gain access to financial benefits allows only temporary access, but ultimately placed the individual at a power disadvantage within the relationship in which no real power was gained. In contrast, building an integrated, positive sense of identity through one's social networks and relationships is an example of gaining power in the domain of Legitimacy and Social Status through leveraging power in Community and Social Ties.

Finally, findings contribute to understanding why some powerful individuals remain powerful and some powerless individuals remain destitute—despite leveraging power. An individual who leverages material resources to buy food and shelter is in turn able to work or pursue higher education, resulting in an upward spiral in power over time. Conversely, an individual who leverages sex to meet needs may suffer deleterious social and health consequences that result in a downward spiral in power. Power spirals help to explain why sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV disproportionately impacts communities of colour. This explanation is also consistent with a syndemics perspective on health (Singer 1996), which refers to the tendency of diseases, their consequences, and the social conditions in which they occur to cluster, including the mental health and HIV syndemic (Stall et al. 2003). However, the present work extends current perspectives by using a social-ecological approach that ties individual power and HIV-related vulnerability to the social ecology. It advances our understanding of HIV disparities in men who have sex with men of colour to consider how the use of power to meet everyday needs has implications for HIV and other sexual-risk outcomes.

The present approach extends our conceptualisation of power beyond the notion of individual agency constrained by social structures. Instead, the approach situates individual power in the interplay between individuals and environment, and identifies individual-level HIV-vulnerability in terms of how power may be leveraged across domains and in various

situations. In this way, we move away from a static focus on the effects of the individual or his environment on sexual risk, and move toward a more dynamic understanding of the nature of sexual risk as derived from active exchanges of power across everyday situations within larger ecological niches over time. The present study suggests that the extent to which one can actively leverage power in one domain and use it to gain power in another domain (thus altering one's relative power within a given situation) may be at the crux of HIV vulnerability and resiliency among men who have sex with men of colour.

### Limitations

The study represents the first foray in applying a social-ecological theory to frame our understanding of how power plays a role in HIV-related vulnerability in an at-risk population. In addition to self-presentation biases, the present findings are limited to individuals' own accounts that may be impacted by participants' perceived control in narrating personal experiences, significant challenges, and life other events (Campbell and Sedikides 1999). Participants may need to discern some measure of control in order to have healthy mental health. For those who have relatively limited power in their larger ecological niche or in specific situations, there may be pressure to discern some measure of control in order to cope.

Because present findings are thus limited, there remain conceptual overlaps in the present conceptualisation of power domains that require further research to untangle. For example, aspects of one's sexuality include one's social identity in the domain of Legitimacy and Social Status, and are conceivably shaped by one's community and social relationships (e.g., through feeling acceptance and belonging). Due to the nature of the data in the current study, we were unable to empirically parse these interrelationships. More work is needed to identify overlaps in power domains in order to effectively understand their impact on HIV-risk.

The conceptualisations put forth in the current study were based on a sample of men who have sex with men of colour living in the greater Los Angeles area. Because ecologies differ by location, we should expect power dynamics to vary among other samples of men. For example, men who have sex with men living in Los Angeles may differ include easier access to tight-knit racial and ethnic communities that provide opportunities to build social ties relative areas in which fewer men who have sex with men of colour reside. Future work employing this framework should identify the ecological affordances and constraints of the particular geographical location of the study sample.

### Future directions

These results suggest that a lack of access to multiple power domains may increase HIV-related vulnerability for men who have sex with men of colour. Men who leveraged their sexuality in a situation of material deficit were limited in negotiating safer sex. As one participant explained, because of the inherent power differential with more affluent men, he is often reluctant to “rock the boat” by insisting on protected sex despite being knowledgeable about the risks of becoming HIV-infected. Relative to their partners with access to multiple domains of power, men who lack access to multiple power domains are at a disadvantage within these partnerships, and individual vulnerability is likely to increase over time. In contrast, current findings suggest that access to multiple domains of power, even if some of them are less interchangeable than others, may factor importantly in how risk-adverse men are over time—the building block of resilience (Herrick et al. 2011) and a crucial next step in future work. The challenge for HIV research is to inventory individuals' strengths (power) and their deficits (lack of power) and where they are strong at leveraging power to gain power in ways that increase resiliency.

The present study offers an important first step toward scale development and model testing with larger samples of men who have sex with men of colour. It also represents a foundation from which to further study the construct of power interchangeability, particularly over time and across situations. For example, certain domains (e.g., sexuality) may be more dynamic in some situations (e.g., a nightclub) but not in others (e.g., a family function), thereby limiting its interchangeability across location and time. In contrast, power in domains that do not alter across situations (e.g., socioeconomic class, race), may be more interchangeable across myriad situations. Further, leveraging power from certain domains such as Community and Social Ties or Sexuality may ultimately garner less power over time. More work is necessary to identify the relative degree of interchangeability across different contexts over time in order to fully understand how power interchangeability impacts HIV-risk.

By deriving examples of power interchangeability from a sample of men who have sex with men of colour, the study illustrated how a social-ecological consideration of power from domains that vary in their interchangeability across myriad situations has short- and long-term implications for increasing resilience and decreasing vulnerability. Such work has the potential to shed light on persistent HIV disparities among men who have sex with men, as well as to broaden our current intervention approaches.

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Table 1

Types of Power, Instantiations of Power, and Example Uses of Power.

Power to Meet Needs	Instantiation of Power	Illustrative Excerpt of the Use of Power
Material resources	Money	"I'm making good money now...allows me to pay my bills, [and] to do the things that I want to do."
Knowledge and Competence	Education	"These days I'm reading a lot of books. I love that—I feel like I'm at the point I need to know more about life. I'm trying to organise my financial situation. I'm reading the books like how to just take more control of my financial situation."
Health and Wellness	Physical and mental well-being	"Having a regular routine [that has] been very helpful...to [keep] myself mentally and physically healthy...Having time to go to the gym really takes off some stress, and something that I can look forward to, like a regular class that I go to."
Social ties	Friendship	"I can call her and cry, she can call me and cry. We help each other a lot in terms of dealing with my depression and hers and my negative thoughts that come up..."
Legitimacy and Status	Group identification and solidarity	"I understand the collective struggle that our community goes through. So depending on who I talk to, if they want to know more about what cultural background I came from, then I'll tell them, you know, my ethnicity and further geographically where I came from. But in general...I identify myself as a Pan-Asian person, an Asian-American person."
Sexuality	Sexual attractiveness	"You become sort of special if you're gay and black and young because...[the men from Silver Lake or West Hollywood are] looking for something different from young black gay guys...so it allows me to be on the arm...of a nice man...I use it as a resource, really, because otherwise I'm excluded."

Table 2

Examples of power interchangeability in Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Latino men who have sex with men.

Power Interchangeability	Illustrative Excerpt
Using <b>Sexuality</b> to gain <b>Material Resources</b>	<i>"I usually go in and he offers me something to drink, like gives me a 7-Up, that's what I like to drink. So he gives me a 7-Up and then he usually has like really good pot, and we smoke a couple bowls of that. And then he gets the videos out. I like to watch videos or whatever. So then I take my shirt off [and we have sex]. And then gives me my 40 bucks or 60 bucks and I'm out of there."</i>
Using <b>Sexuality</b> to access to affluent lifestyle ( <b>Legitimacy &amp; Social Status</b> )	<i>"Walking into the apartment was just like sort of awe-inspiring, so of course you would want to come back. So whatever you had to do to... get that again is awesome, you know, rather than going back to your... one-room apartment to share with your mom. And of course you want to sit like in a hotel in like Beverly Hills and it's awesome..."</i>
Using <b>Sexuality</b> in exchange for social companionship and intimacy ( <b>Community &amp; Social Ties</b> )	<i>"And I met someone at a bar who was clearly looking for a—was planning where to like stay for the night. And so I'm like all right, you know. I didn't want to be alone and he was looking for a place and, you know, maybe there was a chance of having sex and so yeah, he stayed for the weekend and yes, we did have sex."</i>
Using <b>sexuality</b> to gain social and physical intimacy ( <b>Community &amp; Social Ties</b> )	<i>"I guess with M. I thought, you know, it would just make me closer to him or he would love me more. But I think he would have been totally fine if I asked him to use a condom. Somehow I thought, you know, I would get his validation even more if I didn't let him use it."</i>

**Table 3**

Examples of power gains in Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and Latino men who have sex with men.

<b>Power Interchangeability</b>	<b>Illustrative Excerpt</b>
<p>Combating discrimination, stigma, and disclosure issues through <b>Community &amp; Social Ties</b> to gain an integrated social identity (<b>Legitimacy &amp; Social Status</b>)</p>	<p><i>"[The organisation is] very fulfilling. I mean, we do a lot of minority, people of colour, multi-issue work, I mean, a lot of self-determination, the youth of colour get to make decisions and do stuff and a lot of leadership. It addresses the things we probably struggled through when we were growing up, whether it's homophobia, heterosexism, the difficulties of telling your parents, stuff like that."</i></p>
<p>Recognising and honing personal skills (<b>Knowledge &amp; Competence</b>) to improve physical, mental, and social well-being (<b>Health &amp; Wellness</b>)</p>	<p><i>"I do my public cable access show. I have a dog. I go bike riding. I go to the gym. I get massages. I talk to my friends and stuff. I still go about living life. I'm moving forward and I don't do some things that I used to do. And as I'm moving forward...I'm getting back into some old things that I really liked so, you know...I keep my mind busy and active. [The past is] not important. It was only for them to get off and it was for me to get some money in my pocket, but for the most part it's not something that they would acknowledge outside of this so I don't sit up and think twice about it after it's happened."</i></p>
<p>Using privacy afforded by independent housing (<b>Material Resources</b>) to maintain <b>Health &amp; Wellness</b></p>	<p><i>"I have my own apartment now so that's very good. I have all the privacy in the world. I needed to get an apartment for myself, so that way I can steadily take my medication and things like that and have all the privacy I want, which I do have now, and I have been taking my medications steadily and try and take better care of myself."</i></p>