



An Update on a Syndemics Approach to HIV Prevention among Gay Men

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Goals of Talk

- To show that there are numerous interconnected epidemics (syndemics) operating among gay men that together drive the AIDS epidemic
- To show that the experience of homophobic attacks, particularly at a young age, may be contributing to syndemic production
- To suggest approaches based on syndemic theory to raise health levels among gay men

The Urban Men's Health Study

- Population-based, RDD accessed sample of 2,881 MSM
- 92 zip code areas, where 1 in 7 US MSM are estimated to reside, sampled
- First (and still only) general health survey of MSM; none exists for WSW
- Interviews conducted 1996/7; average length, 75 minutes

Health Profile of Urban Gay Men

Very High Rates of Distress and Depression

Mills, T., et al., Distress and Depression among Urban MSM, Am J Psychiatry, 2004; 161(4):776

Very High Rates of Attempted Suicide

Paul, J., et al., Suicide attempts among gay and bisexual men: lifetime prevalence and antecedents. AJP 2002 92:1338-45.

High Rates of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Paul, J., et al., Understanding childhood sexual coercion as a predictor of sexual risk-taking among MSM. Child Abuse and Neglect 1002 25:557-584.

Health Profile of Urban Gay Men

Very High Rates of HIV Infection

Catania, J., et al., The continuing HIV epidemic among MSM. AJPB 2001 91:907-914.

Very High Rates of Substance Use and Abuse

Stall, R., et al., Alcohol use, drug use and alcohol-related problems among MSM. Addiction 2001 96:1589-1601.

Very High Rates of Partner Violence

Greenwood, G., et al., Battering victimization among a probability-based sample of MSM. AJPB 2002 92:1964-1969.

Intertwining Epidemics among Urban

MSM (Significant OR estimates, controlling for age, education, race, income, HIV status and sexual risk)

	Childhood Sex Abuse	Partner Violence	Depression	Substance Abuse
Childhood Sex Abuse	-----	1.9	1.9	
Partner Violence	1.9	-----	1.6	2.2
Depression	1.9	1.6	-----	1.4
Substance Abuse		2.2	1.4	-----

Intertwining Epidemics Predict HIV Prevalence and High Risk Sexual Behavior

	No. of Psychosocial Health Problems			
	0 (<i>n</i> = 1,392)	1 (<i>n</i> = 812)	2 (<i>n</i> = 341)	3 or 4 (<i>n</i> = 129)
Recent high risk sex	7%	11%	16%	23%
HIV prevalence	13%	21%	27%	22%

All associations have p 's < 0.001. All p values are two-tailed.

From Stall et al., 2003

Syndemic:

- (n.) *a cluster of epidemics that act additively to predict other epidemics*
- (adj.) *of or pertaining to such a cluster*

From Singer, 1994

Syndemics in a Life Course Perspective

- A large literature shows that most of the syndemic phenomena are in place among very young gay men/adolescents
- This suggests that a life course perspective on syndemic theory is necessary.
- Most explanations of gay men's health have emphasized adult phenomena over the experiences of youth.

Socio-Cultural Stance Toward Sexuality & Gender

Positive/Negative Sex Culture

Machismo Complex: Possibility of Failed Masculinity

Socio-Cultural Stance Toward Sexuality & Gender

Masculine Socialization Stress

Violence in Sexual Initiation

Sexual Silence

Sex with females as a means of establishing successful masculinity

Violence/Shame accorded sexual minorities

Socio-Cultural Stance Toward Sexuality & Gender

Masculine Socialization Stress

Formation of
Minority
Identity

Socio-Cultural Structure Toward Sexuality & Gender

Masculine Socialization Stress

Gay Male Culture

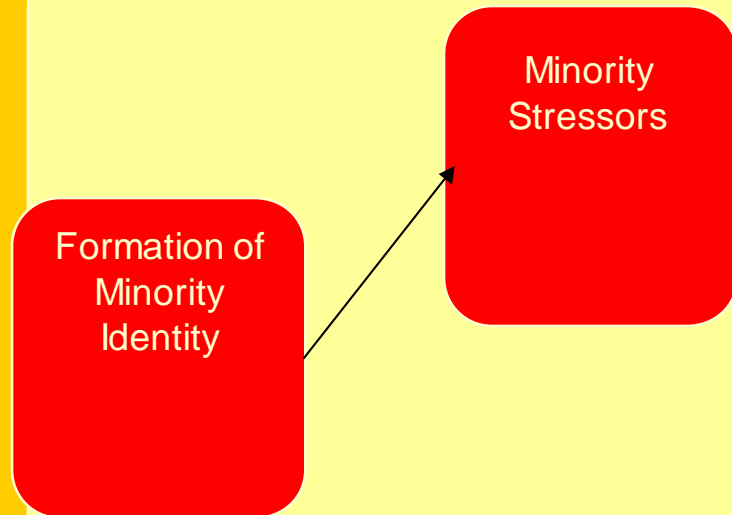
Gay liberation as cultural resistance
Urban ghettos as a haven for refugees
Difficulty of establishing family
Sexual pleasure as a valued goal
Competition/Individualism as a core value

Formation of
Minority
Identity

Socio-Cultural Stance Toward Sexuality & Gender

Masculine Socialization Stress

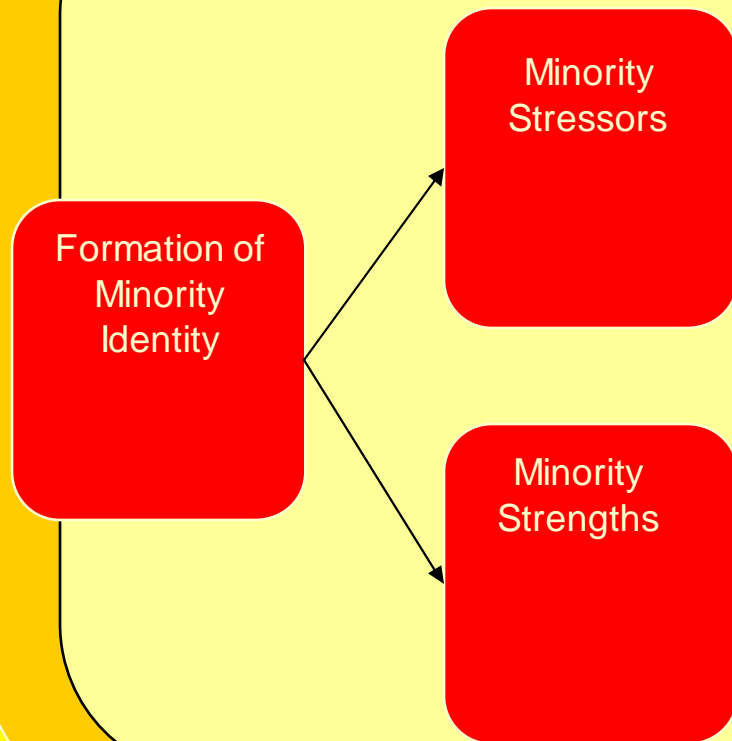
Gay Male Culture



Socio-Cultural Stance Toward Sexuality & Gender

Masculine Socialization Stress

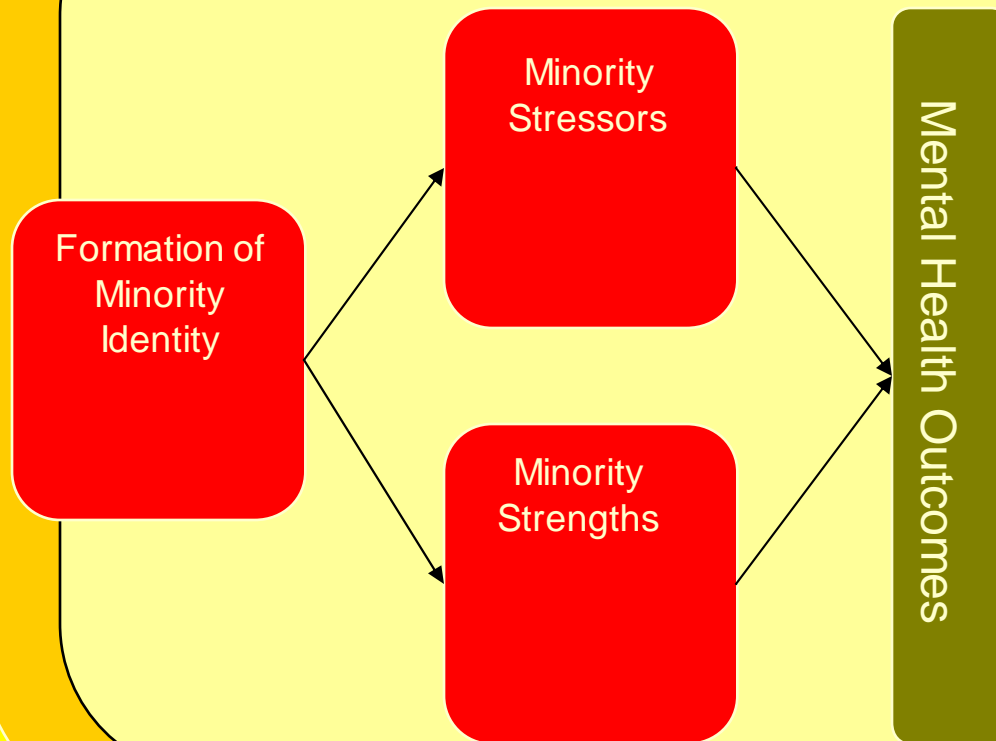
Gay Male Culture



Socio-Cultural Stance Toward Sexuality & Gender

Masculine Socialization Stress

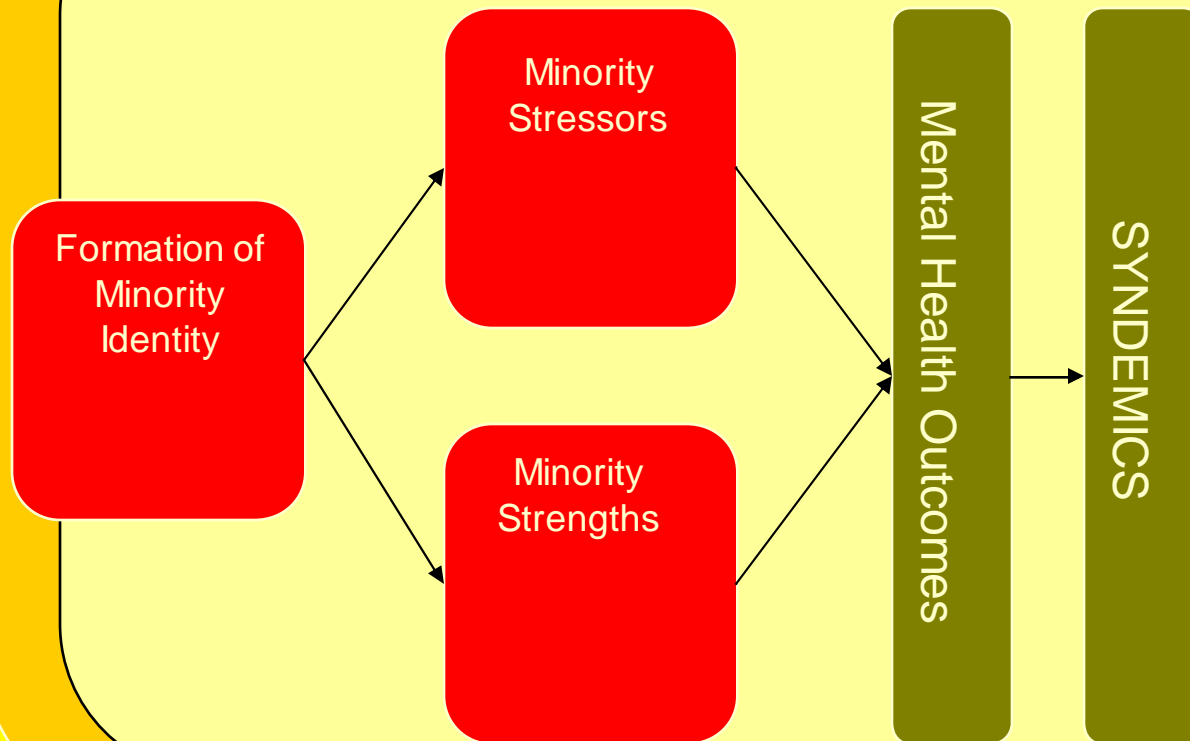
Gay Male Culture



Socio-Cultural Stance Towards Sexuality & Gender

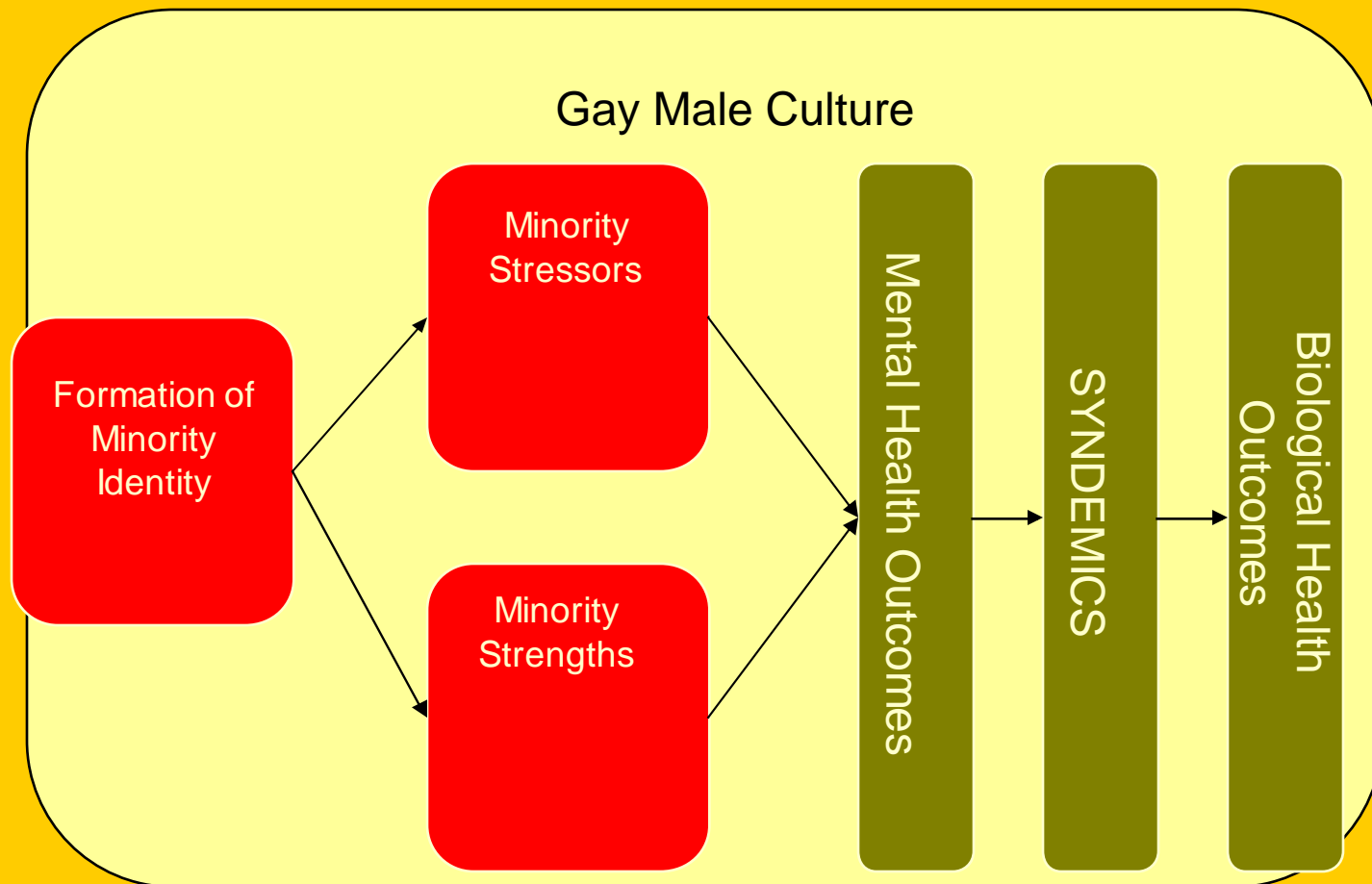
Masculine Socialization Stress

Gay Male Culture

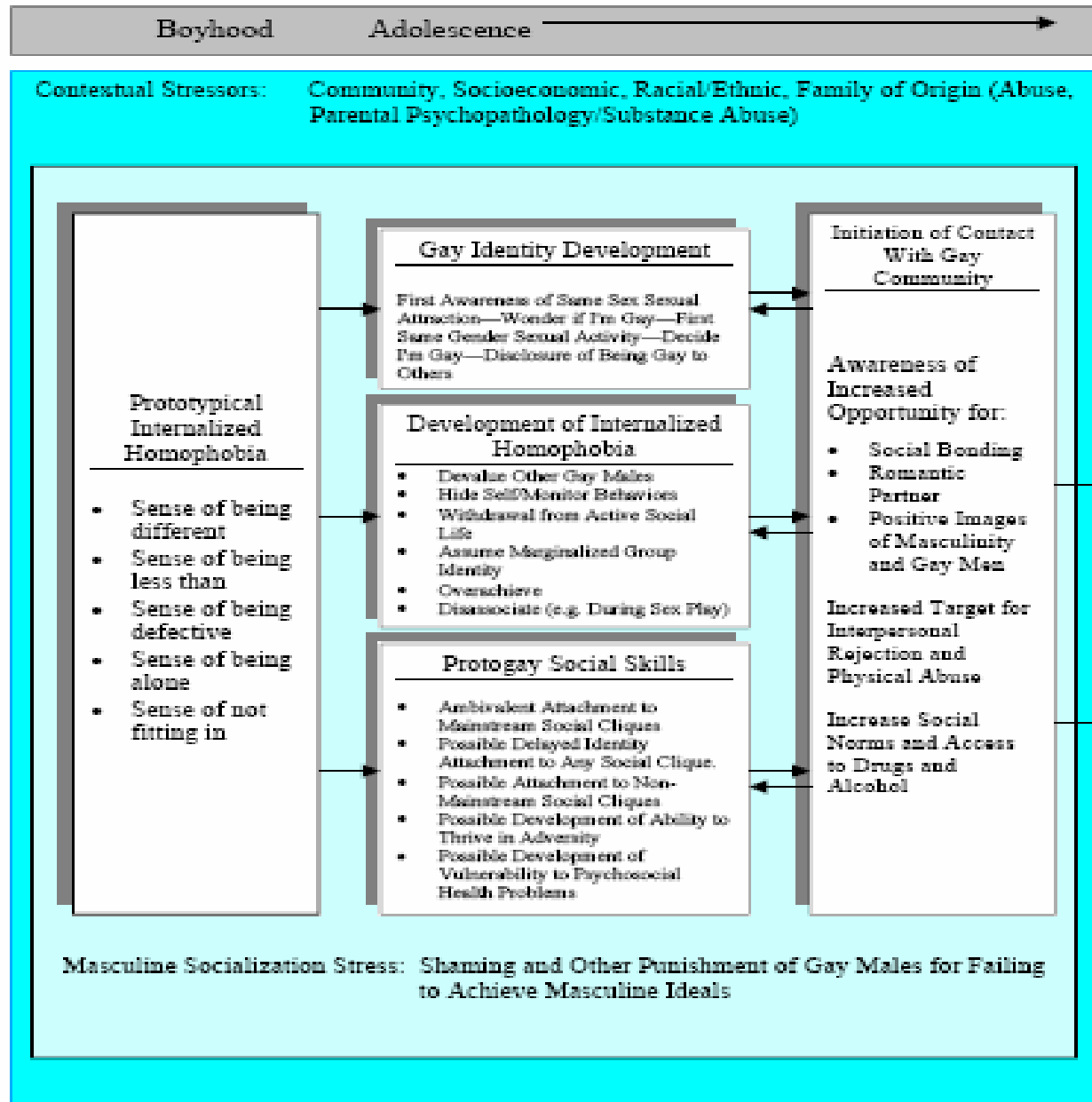


Socio-Cultural Stance Toward Sexuality and Gender

Masculine Socialization Stress



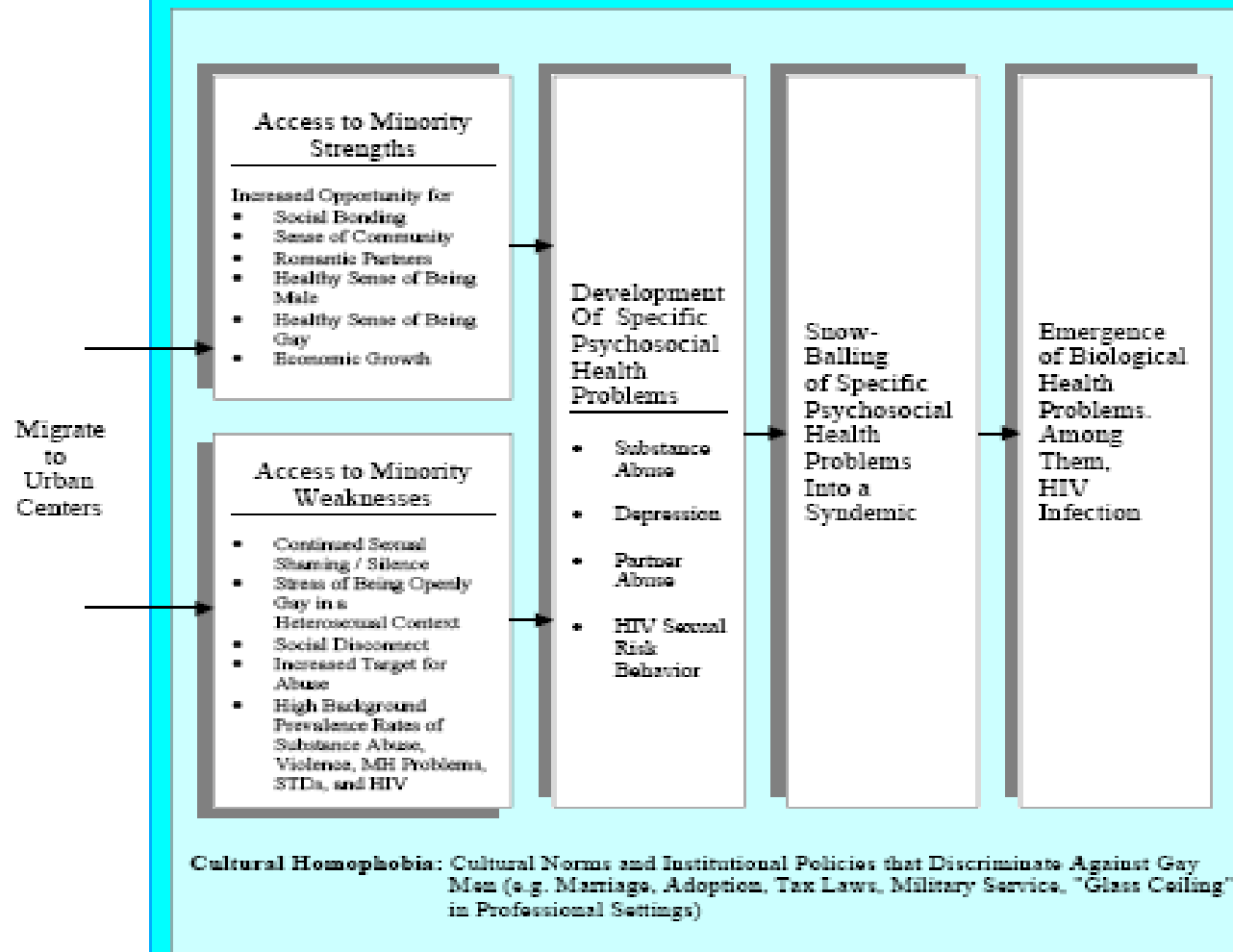
SYNDEMIC PRODUCTION



SYNDEMIC PRODUCTION

Adulthood

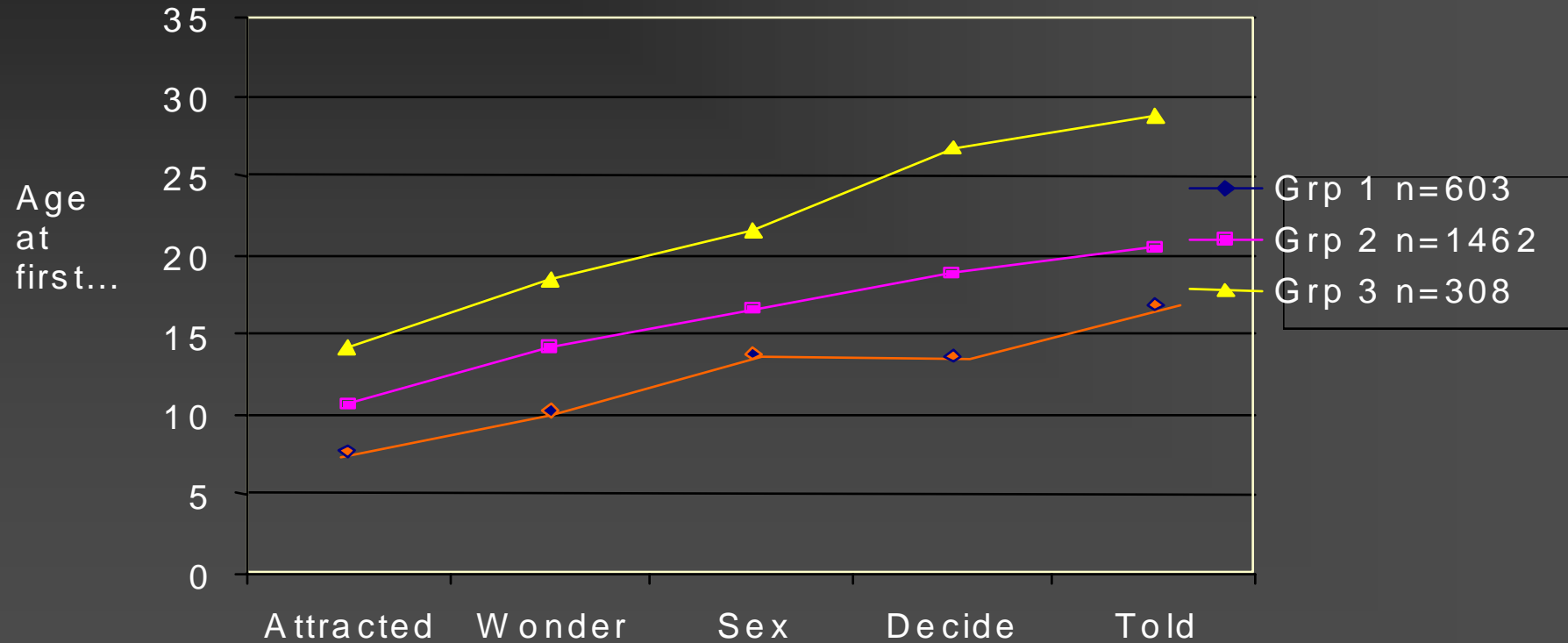
Contextual Stressors: Community, Socioeconomic, Racial/Ethnic and General Stressors of Urban Life (e.g., Higher Costs of Living, Relative Anonymity)



Is Violence Associated with Syndemics?

- Violence victimization in adolescence predicts poor health outcomes within the general population
- Could the experience of homophobic attacks at a very tender age predict the emergence of syndemic situations?
- We examined the relationship between age of “coming out”, experience of homophobic attacks and health problems in adulthood in the UMHS

Gay Male Developmental Markers

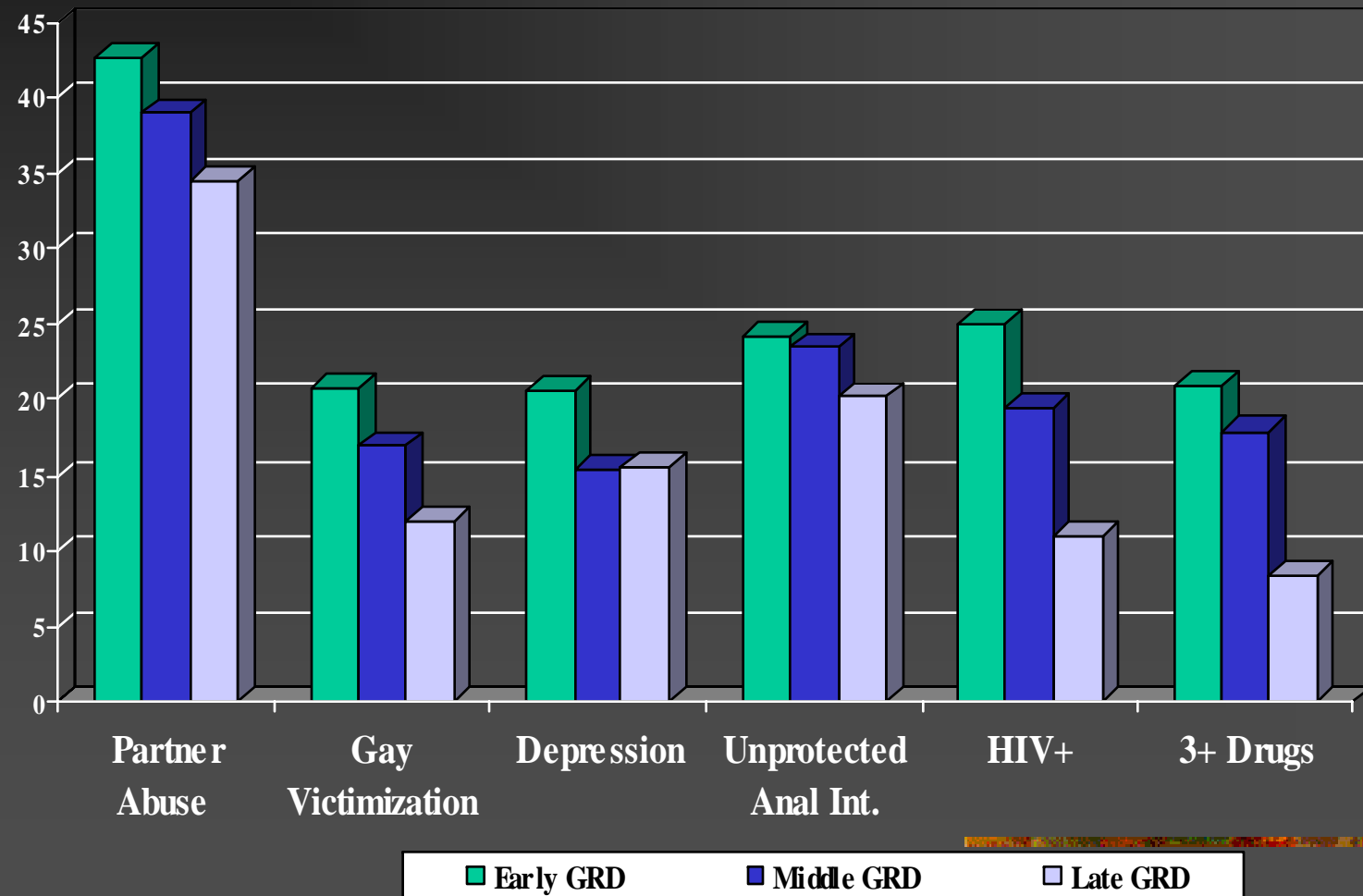


Gay Male Developmental Timing and Violence Victimization

Gay-related development	Parental physical abuse (2+ times, < 17 yo) ^{1**, 2**} %	Harassed for being gay (2+ times, < 17 yo) ^{1**, 2**, 3**} %	Forced sex (1+ time, < 18 yo) ^{1**, 2*} %
Early (n=603)	26.2	76.8	21.6
Middle (n=1462)	19.2	67.1	14.4
Late (n=308)	17.6	46.4	14.6
Total (n=2373)	20.8	66.9	16.3

1=Early-Middle Comparison 2=Early-Late Comparison 3=Middle-Late comparison
 *= p<.05 **=p<.01

Developmental Profiles and Health of Gay Men



Concluding Thoughts:

- Multiple dangerous epidemics afflict urban gay male communities; each of them important and each interacting with the other.
- These epidemics interact to drive HIV risk and HIV infection among gay men.
- Progress on fighting any one of these epidemics is likely to be limited by lack of progress in fighting other interactive epidemics in tandem.

How do you raise all of the boats?

- Partnerships should be formed across the health bureaucracies that serve gay men to coordinate activities, referrals and services.
- Attention should also be paid to the policy front: are improvements in citizenship rights for LGBT populations associated with improved health?

Maybe it's not the homosexuality; maybe it's the *homophobia*

- Violence victimization of young gay men is commonplace
- Violence victimization in adolescence predicts poor health outcomes among the general population as well as gay men
- The experience of homophobic attacks at a very early age may be a root cause of syndemics within gay male communities

Thinking upstream...

- Protect our youth
- Support gay male community building within urban centers and within communities of origin
- Adopt a life-course perspective on gay men's health

Thinking upstream...

- Improve public health practice for gay men
 - Address minority/low SES health issues for gay men
 - Fight stigma by supporting the growth of gay communities in all American cities
 - Understand resilience among gay men
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