

Are skin color and body mass index associated with social network structure? Findings from a male sex market study

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Objectives: There is a growing burden of HIV and sex-related diseases in South Asia and India. Sociological research illustrates that key axes of social stratification, such as race and ethnicity, affect social network structure which, in turn, impacts sexual health and wellbeing. Research on networks has increasingly begun to examine the ways in which networks drive or harness sexual behaviors, but has largely neglected the influence of culture and cultural markers in this continuum. Furthermore, much of the existing scholarship has been conducted in the U.S. or in Western contexts.

Design: As part of an exploratory effort, we examined how skin color and body mass index (BMI) affected networks among 206 men who have with men (MSM) frequenting sex markets in Hyderabad, India. A novel phone-based network generation method of respondent-driven sampling was used for recruitment. In assessing how skin color and BMI drive these structures, we also compared how these factors contribute to networks relative to two more commonly referenced markers of social difference among Indians, caste and religion.

Results: Our findings suggest that skin color and BMI contribute significantly more to network structure than do caste and religion.

Conclusions: These findings tentatively illuminate the importance of individual-level heterogeneity in bodily attributes, factors which are seldom considered in conventional approaches to researching how social stratification and health inequalities are animated during the formation of networks.