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Contexts of Sex-Based Exchange: A Cultural Analysis of Risk Perception and Behavior

Introduction
HIV prevention programs and activities often focus on risk reduction, but there is not always a clear understanding of how risk is understood by the people who are the target of the programs. This project addresses that gap to see how people understand their own risks, so that more effective outreach programs can be developed. To do this, I designed an ethnographic analysis of risk perception, particularly HIV risk, among women in North Lawndale and East Garfield Park on Chicago’s West Side in order to better understand how they viewed HIV risk in relation to their daily activities. The research participants were regular users of crack cocaine and/or heroin and also routinely engaged in sex-based exchange activity. I conducted a cultural analysis of risk that squarely placed the participant’s perceptions of the risks they associated with their sex-based exchange activity within the local communities and the individual’s themselves. This work shows that in order to understand local perceptions of risk one must understand the settings and cultural contexts of which risk perception and risk behaviors are part.

Methodology/Findings/Results
This research used a combination of ethnographic data collection methods (e.g., focus groups, extended individual interviews, and survey research methods) to elicit research participants’ perceptions of risk as a component of various sex-based exchange contexts. Ethnographic analysis of this data develops an understanding of events from the perspective of the actor(s). For conceptual framing, this research drew upon the “cultural theory of risk perception” (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983, Douglas 1985, 1992), and also incorporated concepts of “contextual structure” and “context” (Bateson, 1958, 1972, 1979).

Conclusions
The research participants’ cultural models of risk were based on the premise that the closer and more familiar they were with the parties to a relationship, the less risk the relationship posed to them. Based on these models, they developed strategies for managing and manipulating the risks that they viewed as constituent components of their sex-based exchange transactions. For example, they were willing to engage in riskier acts if they were familiar with the customer. However, this means that when the women’s perceptions are compared with the observer’s model, there is a paradoxical outcome. This study shows that the relationship perceived by the participants as having the least risk, in fact has the highest risk of infection, especially HIV, while the relationship perceived to have the highest risk of infection, in fact has much less risk.

About Our Researcher
Paul A. LaKosky, Ph.D., earned his Bachelor of Arts in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Minnesota and his Master’s and Doctoral degrees in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Illinois at Chicago. He has held a variety of positions, with both governmental and non-governmental organizations, that informed his emphasis on an ethnographic approach to public health investigation. He has worked in public health abroad, as a Peace Corps volunteer (Cameroon, 1992-1994), and domestically, in New York City and Chicago. From 1997-2008 he worked for the Chicago Department of Public Health, Division of HIV/AIDS Public Policy and Programs where he most recently served in the position of Director of HIV Counseling, Testing, and Partner Services. He can be contacted at paul.lakosky@gmail.com for additional information regarding this research.

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