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**Sexual Inequalities**  
and  
**Social Justice**

**edited by** Niels Teunis and  
Gilbert H. Herdt

**with a foreword by** Richard Parker

**introduction by** Niels Teunis and  
Gilbert H. Herdt

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## Childhood Sexual Abuse and HIV among Latino Gay Men

*The Price of Sexual Silence during the AIDS Epidemic*

SONYA GRANT ARREOLA

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In the mid-1980s, I worked as the director of an AIDS-prevention program in Long Beach, California. This program provided education and counseling to gay men who were struggling to avoid HIV infection or coping with being infected with HIV. The program evolved to include workshops for Spanish-speaking gay men, and I quickly learned that simply translating into Spanish the workshops designed for English-speaking gay men was woefully insufficient. Although the gay men who attended the clinic had much in common, it became clear that the differences between Latino gay men and non-Latino gay men went beyond the complexities of managing issues of discrimination, immigration, and language. Being Latino in a culture that did not value what they loved most about themselves led to feelings of invisibility. Over the years I was there, these men repeatedly tried to reveal themselves to me, hoping, and sometimes explicitly stating their wish, that I be able to capture their experiences and somehow give them voice.

Many years later, I still think of these young men fighting to be heard and wanting to make a difference for future generations. Among many of the stories they would share, their accounts of sexual initiation were particularly salient and seemed to be inextricably linked to their adult sexual experiences. Many related experiences of forced sex in childhood that sounded more severe, longer in duration, and more buried in secrecy than those I would hear from the men in the English-speaking groups. At that time, I was unable to make sense of what I was witnessing. Since then, I have learned of the dramatic influence childhood sexual abuse has on later risky sexual behaviors that are related to risk for HIV infection, and I have

begun a research agenda that asks why and how it is that early childhood sexual experiences (especially abusive ones) have such a strong effect on later sexual risk-taking behaviors among Latino gay men. Most important, I recognized the central role of the subjective experiences of those whose lives we intend to interpret.

In the summer of 2001, after researching what little was known about childhood sexual abuse among Latino gay men, I had the privilege of interviewing Latino gay men who were eager to influence the discourse about the sexuality of Latino gay men generally, and childhood sexual abuse specifically. In this essay I will present some of what I have learned about Latino gay men, childhood sexual abuse, and HIV, drawing from the existing literature, my own quantitative research, and the voices of Latino gay men themselves. I will begin by presenting some of the epidemiology of HIV infection among Latino gay men, as it is precisely the disproportionate representation of Latino gay men among those infected with HIV in the United States that has, among other issues, motivated me to focus on this vulnerable population.

### Risk for HIV among Latino Gay Men in the United States

Latino gay men comprise one of the most vulnerable groups in the United States for transmission of HIV. Latino gay men have higher prevalence and incidence rates of HIV and are twice as likely to be infected with HIV as white gay men (Valleroy et al. 2000; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2001a). Further, Latino men who have sex with men have accounted for an increasing proportion of AIDS cases and have had smaller proportionate declines in AIDS incidence and deaths (Valleroy et al. 2000; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2001a). Even as high as these estimates are, the reported prevalence and incidence of HIV infection and AIDS among Latino gay/bisexual men probably underestimate the actual prevalence and incidence, owing to low rates of testing among ethnic minorities who engage in high-risk behaviors. Thirty-five percent of Latinos with perceived HIV risk or reported HIV risk behavior report never having been tested for HIV infection (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2001b). Nonetheless, the high rate of infection is consistent with the finding that Latino men report the highest rates of unprotected anal intercourse, compared to men from other ethnic minority groups (Díaz 1998).

More than 50 percent of Latino gay men report having had unprotected anal sex within a year of being asked, in spite of substantial knowledge about HIV, accurate perceptions of personal risk, and strong intentions to practice safer sex (Díaz 1998). These findings indicate that knowledge and the intention to practice safer sex may not be sufficient causes for the actual practice of safer sex. As a result of the qualitative interviews I conducted with Latino gay men, I would suggest that a history of childhood sexual abuse alters boys' cognitive and emotional orientation to the world, thereby inhibiting their ability to integrate their intentions to practice safer sex with their actual behavior. In particular, I believe the silence around sex generally, and around sexual desire for men and childhood sexual abuse specifically, all contribute to impeding integration of intention with actual behavior. In the following sections, I will present quantitative and qualitative findings that illustrate the enormous cost of silence concerning sex, especially childhood sexual abuse, to the well-being of Latino gay men. First I will explain why this question is so important: because of overwhelming evidence of a link between childhood sexual abuse and risk for HIV infection.

### Childhood Sexual Abuse and Risk for HIV Infection

There is compelling evidence that a history of childhood sexual abuse increases the likelihood of both psychological (e.g., depression, post-traumatic stress disorder) and biomedical (e.g., sexually transmitted infections) outcomes. One of the most robust findings is the link between childhood sexual abuse and HIV infection (Jinich et al. 1998; Paul et al. 2001). One explanation for this link is that men who have histories of childhood sexual abuse are more likely to engage in unprotected anal intercourse and to be infected with HIV (Jinich et al. 1998; Paul et al. 2001).

Compared to non-gay/bisexual men, the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse is higher among gay/bisexual men based on research comparing homosexual to heterosexual samples, as well as comparing sexual orientation in abused and nonabused samples (Cameron et al. 1986; Cunningham et al. 1994; Johnson and Shrier 1985). As high as the prevalence is among gay/bisexual men, it is even higher among Latino gay/bisexual men. Latino gay/bisexual men are twice as likely to have experienced childhood sexual abuse as non-Latino gay/bisexual men (Jinich et al. 1998; Arreola et al. *In press*). Not only is there a higher prevalence of childhood sexual abuse among Latino gay/bisexual men compared to non-Latino

gay/bisexual men, the abuse is generally more severe among Latino boys: compared to African American boys, Latino boys are more likely to have been sexually abused by an extended family member such as a cousin or uncle, to have experienced more genital fondling, to have been exposed to more sexually abusive behaviors, and to have experienced more anal abuse (Moisan, Sanders-Phillips, and Moisan 1997; Lindholm and Willey 1986).

What struck me most about these findings is how they highlight some of the measurable costs of childhood sexual abuse (HIV infection, in this case) and make clear that Latino gay men are particularly vulnerable. However, they fail to explain how childhood sexual abuse may contribute to an increased likelihood of engaging in behaviors that lead to risk for HIV infection. Additionally, as I tried to understand these issues, I realized that researchers' assumptions varied regarding what constitutes childhood sexual abuse, and in some cases, researchers based their criteria for childhood sexual abuse on personal or political agendas.

## Definitions of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Although researchers attempting to define childhood sexual abuse all struggle with the cut-off age that distinguishes childhood from adulthood, generally ranging from thirteen to eighteen, definitions tend to fall into three conceptual categories. The first category emphasizes age differences between the child and the perpetrator of the abuse, usually of five or more years, noting that this age difference creates a power differential that presumably constitutes an abusive relationship. The second category focuses primarily on the subjective experience or self-report of a coercive or forced sexual episode. This may include specific descriptions of the actions of the perpetrator that would constitute pressure or force. Finally, the third and most restrictive category combines both the age differential and the subjective report of the respondent. For example, an individual would be considered to have experienced childhood sexual abuse if he or she reported having had sex, which he or she considered to be forced, before age sixteen, with someone five or more years older.

As a result of varying definitions or operationalizations of childhood sexual abuse in the literature, research findings attempting to document the effects of childhood sexual abuse in childhood also vary in their ability to capture the outcomes under investigation. Nevertheless, the finding that childhood sexual abuse increases risk for HIV-related outcomes

is consistent regardless of how childhood sexual abuse is defined, though strongest when the most restricted definition is applied. My own research suggests that it is important to take into account the subjective experience of sexual encounters as well as age differential if we are to understand the mechanisms that explain the link between childhood sexual abuse and risk for HIV infection.

## Childhood Sexual Abuse and Risky Sexual Situations

When I performed preliminary quantitative analyses of a large representative sample of self-identified Latino gay men along a series of sexual-risk outcomes, I found no differences between Latino gay men who reported no sex before age sixteen and those who reported sex that was *not* against their will before age sixteen with someone five or more years older. These findings indicate how important it is to understand the subjective experiences of those whose lives we intend to interpret. It has been assumed that sex in childhood or adolescence with someone older is necessarily abusive, based on the implied power differential between the younger and older person. However, these data show that men's interpretation of early sexual experiences as voluntary predict outcomes that are similar to the outcomes for those who do not initiate sex until much later. In other words, those who initiate sex voluntarily before age sixteen, even if the partner is much older, are at no greater risk for HIV infection than those who do not initiate sex until much later.

I did, however, find significant differences between those reporting having had sex before age sixteen with someone five or more years older when it *was* against their will and those who had either no or voluntary sex before age sixteen. Specifically, compared to those who had no sex before age sixteen and those who had voluntary sex before age sixteen, those who reported nonvoluntary sex before age sixteen were significantly more likely to report sexual situations involving: (1) drug and or alcohol use, (2) an escape from loneliness or depression, (3) a nonmonogamous partner, and (4) difficulty maintaining an erection. Notably, there is a strong relationship between these risky sexual situations and actual sexual risk-taking behavior such as unprotected penetrative anal sex with someone whose HIV serostatus is unknown.

The findings that (1) sexual risk outcomes among Latino gay men who had voluntary sex before age sixteen are indistinguishable from those who had no sex before age sixteen, but (2) those who had nonvoluntary sex

before age sixteen had riskier sexual profiles than the first two groups have political implications that go beyond the health implications mentioned earlier. They indicate that careful attention must be paid to the definition of childhood sexual abuse if we are to: (1) avoid betraying children abused in childhood by ignoring the abusive behavior and its effects, as well as (2) refrain from blindly labeling all juvenile sex as abusive and potentially providing ammunition for discrimination based on sexual orientation or ethnicity. I would argue that definitions of childhood sexual abuse must be specific and restrictive to include criteria based on actual subjective and objective empirical data.<sup>1</sup>

The link between nonvoluntary or forced sex before age sixteen and later sexual risk profiles also led me to wonder what it was about these early childhood sexual abuse experiences that led to risk for HIV infection. The data are important, as they point to some of the situational risks that help explain the link between childhood sexual abuse and risk for HIV infection. However, they did not capture the subjective experiences of the men whose lives I wanted to understand.

## The Latino Gay Men's Sexuality Study

After learning as much as I could from the existing literature and conducting some of my own preliminary analyses, I realized that I knew only other researchers' theories regarding the link between childhood sexual abuse and HIV, and that in my own investigations I asked questions using these same assumptions. I did not have any sense of how Latino gay men experienced childhood sexual abuse or how and whether they felt it was related to their current sexual lives. In the summer of 2001, I had the privilege of interviewing thirty self-identified Latino gay men living in the San Francisco Bay Area in two-hour-long individual in-depth interviews. The men were invited to participate in a study on Latino men's sexuality, and they were recruited from gay venues such as clubs, bars, social gatherings, and groups in the San Francisco Bay Area. I had thought that I would have to oversample for childhood sexual abuse in order to get a sufficient number of interviews with men who had experienced childhood sexual abuse. However, I accepted the first thirty men who met the criteria for the study, including: (1) age between twenty and forty, (2) self-identified as nonheterosexual, and (3) Latino or Hispanic. I was surprised to find that these first thirty men fell into three categories in thirds: Those who had had no sex before age sixteen; those who had had sex before age

sixteen that they described as having been volitional; and those who had had sex before age sixteen that was forced. Their stories were consistent with the quantitative findings reported earlier, in that the first two groups described similar narratives regarding their adult sexuality, whereas the third group (those who reported forced sex before age sixteen) reported the most difficulty negotiating their adult sexual lives. I was struck by how often the men explained that they rarely or never talked about some aspect of their sexual development or the concerns they had about it with anyone. I was intrigued by their theories of how this silence influenced their adult sexual lives.

### SEXUAL SILENCE

All the men described some degree of silence about sex generally when growing up, and about gay sex particularly. Some men were able to articulate how this affected the way they approached sex as adults. For example, Juan, who had never been forced to have sex, explained that the silence around what it meant to love or have sex with another man led to his initiating sex with a young man his age (twelve years old) with the conviction that it was dirty and bad. He contrasted this with how proud he thought his father would have been if he had initiated sex with a girl. Juan tried to explain how this affected his adult sexual life: "The idea of keeping it a secret and feelings of guilt and shame around it are still really present when I start having sex as an adult." Juan went on to describe how he "never talked to anybody about it [sex] and it's something that I did in secret." This resulted in his sexuality becoming "kind of separate from my—my sexuality with men was separate from how—my individuality. It was like another persona."

Juan, like many of the men, tried to elucidate how attached his erotic life was to feelings of shame and guilt, and how, by extension, this made it difficult to integrate his feelings of desire for men with his sense of who he is as an individual presently. I believe it was adaptive for Juan to keep his feelings of attraction to men separate in the context of a family and environment that would denigrate him for having these feelings. However, the inability of his family and social environment to facilitate his making sense of and assimilating his developing sense of desire for men with loving and warm feelings resulted in his need to keep his sexual feelings separate (or silent, even to himself) from the rest of his developing sense of self. It is no wonder, then, that as an adult it would be difficult for him to integrate messages of safe sex into sexual situations and contexts that

are already laden with feelings of guilt and disgrace. Or as Juan would say, “There was a whole separate secret identity around sex and I knew how to hide that and how to live with that, so it was easy to take living—it is easy to take that—keeping my sexuality a secret.” The men would look to adulthood for a way to cope with these hidden desires.

Pablo, another interviewee, characterized the effect of growing up believing sex with men was evil as “confusing.” He described reaching adulthood and seducing men as a way of feeling in charge. When I asked how he felt about it, he said: “Successful. I felt like a spider and they were like flies on my [web] in my trap. I got it. I’m going to get some [sex] tonight. I would feel like I got laid and it was just like an accomplishment, like I did it.” Afterward, however, he “would feel like a tramp. At the same time I felt like a slut; I felt like a tramp; I felt cheap; I felt sleazy.” Pablo was not unusual in his attempts to use sex as a way to feel better about himself, or in his apparent feeling of success during the encounter followed by a let-down and a need to cope with the ensuing self-condemnation. Pablo noted that it was in the context of telling me about these encounters that he could recall these feelings, since usually he tried to “not think too much” about them or about sex. I believe that the silence the men felt they needed to maintain regarding sexual feelings and behaviors in order to be in the world was critical for managing the dissonance between their feelings of love and desire for other men and the internalized sense of shame and guilt.

Another way the men looked to ease the tension they experienced when negotiating silenced internal desires that conflicted with societal and familial norms was by abandoning their homes for a place where they might feel more accepted. In the interviews, the men generally began by discussing how they had immigrated to the San Francisco Bay Area, or “gay Mecca,” and what it meant to them to leave their homes in Latin America, the Caribbean, or other parts of the United States. They came seeking refuge from environments in which they felt they had to be silent about their sexual identities, and they believed that in the Castro district (the gay neighborhood in San Francisco), they would discover the acceptance and freedom they had longed to find. Many did not find what they were seeking. Juan explains: “I think the Castro is really a complex situation because I think it is kind of politically designed to kind of—I think exclude people who are not white and gay. I don’t feel like it is an inclusive society. Often when I’ve gone there I’ve always felt like an outsider.” Instead, they described finding themselves accepted as fetishized objects (“For the white guys it is just something different to be with a Latino guy,” said Federico), who were appreciated for their exotic otherness in

sexual encounters but ostracized from the rest of the cultural, economic, and intellectual life of San Francisco, unless, according to Alberto, “You look like the jeans guy.” In spite of this objectification, some of the men said that they enjoyed and even played up their Latinoness, finding temporary distraction and pleasure in sexual encounters, but left these episodes feeling empty and lonely, and longing for intimacy and affection in their everyday lives. It was clear from the interviews that the manner in which Latino gay men are accepted into gay life reinforces their experience of separation of their sexual identities from the rest of the way they see themselves.

### SEXUAL INITIATION

Consistent with the quantitative data presented earlier, the men who described voluntary sexual initiation before age sixteen described as varied experiences as those who initiated voluntary sex after age sixteen, independent of the age difference between the partners. Although some men who initiated sex before age sixteen did so with partners their own age, many did so with much older partners. Carlos tells of his first love and sexual encounter at age thirteen with “a much older man”:

One summer I would spend at my cousin—my other aunt’s house in the beach area—I went to see my other cousin play soccer. I was biking and I just saw this very handsome man and we started talking. Next day I said oh my God, I’m in love I think. The next day I went to see him again and he was not playing. He had hurt himself and—it was so obvious that when I saw him, I got a hard-on and he noticed. It was so, so awkward that he noticed and he knows what was up. So the next day he invites me to bike around. He took me to this outdoor area and we had the great sex. It was first time I was penetrated. I know he was much older. I don’t know how much. He was an adult.

Carlos also gives voice to the possibility of experiencing mutually respectful sex with someone much older:

And he was very careful and he probably was my first time. I didn’t feel much pain. Anal sex can be painful. He was very tender and careful. It was great. It was very great and the next day there I was happy to see him again, and I went to visit his girlfriend. That was the end of it. But I still remember him with a lot of tenderness. I still remember him really well, the way he looked.

Finally, Carlos links his initial sexual experience with his adult views of his own sexuality: “How he treated me, which I think probably influenced

the way I had sex from there on. I think it was a good experience, therefore, I see sex positive.”

Carlos’s story is testament to the importance of considering the subjective experience of sexuality when trying to understand childhood sexual abuse. Under some definitions, his experience would be construed as childhood sexual abuse, even though his narrative is full of fondness for the older man and their experience. Indeed, he attributes his positive sexual attitudes to this very encounter. To define Carlos’ experience as childhood sexual abuse undermines the constructive power of his tender initiation, as well as the destructive and wounding effects of early coercive sexual experiences. One has only to read Ramon’s story to fully grasp the difference between the two experiences.

#### CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE

Ramón was eight years old the first time his uncle forced Ramón to have sex with him. Ramón captures the horror of a sexually abusive encounter when describing his memories of this abuse:

He would put his leg over me, or sometimes he would just put his arm and leg over me just to kind of hug me like an uncle. Like something that is nurturing me, but at the same time I would feel—I guess this woke me up. I would feel his erection and then I would feel his penis pulsate. You know how it pulsates. Then that woke me up and I guess he was horny and then he was just moving too much. Then he got my hand and he unzipped his pants and he pulled it out. He pulled out his dick and then he got my hand and he placed my hand on his dick. That completely woke me up and then I went into tremors and I started shaking. I remember I was shaking so much. I was so scared. I was petrified; I was nervous. I had never gone into like, you know, a nervous state like that before. I was just so nervous and I’m like oh my God. I was so scared. Then he would, without words, he would just grab my hand and he would go like this, like stroking. I want you to stroke my dick. And then he would say *volteate*, like turn around, and then he would turn me around. Then he pulled down my pants. I have shaking; I was nervous. Then he would pull down my underwear and he would spit on his hand and then lubricate me back there. Then he would lubricate his own and he would do me. All that happened in one night. So he, he penetrated me all the way. No protection.

Ramón’s account reveals his initial confusion between the nurturing he expected from his uncle and the actuality of his uncle’s blatant sexual objectification of young Ramón. When Ramón is finally “completely” awake, he is consumed with fear and anxiety. Ramón goes on to explain

his disorientation: “Then I was just so nervous. I didn’t know what was going on. What is he doing? I didn’t sleep that night. I was just like wow, what happened? I was really scared like what happened. I didn’t know what to think?” How could Ramón know what to think?

Ramón explains the importance of secrecy in maintaining his uncle’s prospect for continued abuse:

I felt like something had happened that wasn’t supposed to happen. That’s how I felt. Something happened that wasn’t supposed to happen. I just felt weird; I felt awkward, especially being around him. Then there was a moment the next day in the afternoon. He caught me by myself and then he grabbed me. He just kind of pulled me towards him and he’s like—he spanked my ass and he’s like this is my ass and this is our little secret. Don’t tell anybody that we’re doing this. Don’t tell your mom; don’t tell your brothers and sisters. This is our little secret. You are mine.

When asked whether he ever did tell anyone about this when he was a kid, Ramón exclaimed: “No, never. How can you talk about sex in a [Latino] family, in the traditional [Latino] family? How often do you talk about gay sex for that matter? How often do you talk about rape? Did I know what to do at that age? I kept it a secret.” Ramón exemplifies what has long been documented in the literature about secrecy surrounding childhood sexual abuse.

Of the men who were abused sexually in childhood, about half stated that they had never talked about it with anyone else, and all said they had not talked about it with anyone else during childhood. This need to keep their experiences of childhood sexual abuse silent did not surprise me. I was, however, astonished by the deep levels of silence within themselves. In the stories of childhood sexual abuse, I was struck by the ability of the men to distance themselves from their experiences so dramatically as to be able to narrate these incidents as if they had happened to other people. This ability to dissociate themselves from the experience may have been an adaptive strategy for dealing with conflicting impulses in childhood. However, I believe that maintaining this split in adulthood contributes to some men’s inability to integrate intended behaviors, such as safer sex, with actual practice. Keeping secret (especially from themselves) these early traumatic experiences makes the sense of humiliation and shame associated with sex that these men have internalized unavailable to consciousness. To the extent that the unwanted thoughts and feelings from the past are mingled with sexual desire in the present, sexual impulses are acted on without the benefit of creative mindful choosing.

Many of the men explained that the initially traumatic childhood sexual encounters were soon confused with the experience of pleasure. Of note, the men who reported being forced to have sex in childhood were forced into unwanted sexual activities over periods of time ranging from one summer to several years. None of the men reported an isolated incident of childhood sexual abuse. This is consistent with the finding that childhood sexual abuse is more severe among Latino gay men than among non-Latino gay men (Moisan, Sanders-Phillips, and Moisan 1997; Lindholm and Willey 1986). It made sense to me that they would want to keep silent about their experiences when they explained the rationale that perhaps they had deserved to be forced into having sex at such young ages, given that they would eventually get pleasure from it. However, when asked directly whether they believed they deserved it, they all said no.

Matched by social norms to maintain silence regarding childhood sexual abuse, it is no wonder that these men find no space in which to openly explore what they survived. Roberto tried to make clear how he thinks silence about sexuality affects his sexual behaviors: “Ah, well, I think it might lead to me having sex when I have said that I’m not going to, or changing some decisions, personal decisions I have made because I’m trying to please other people or kind of fit expectations or something.” Roberto learned to put the wishes of others above his own. He goes on to give an explicit theory about the link with HIV: “my working theory about HIV being spread is that people don’t really have a love for themselves or don’t at the very heart of it think that they are worth protecting—so I’m not sure. I’m not sure to what degree that is true but that is the only thing I’ve been able to come up with as far as HIV spreading so quickly within communities of color.”

## Conclusion

Roberto’s theory regarding the importance of self-worth and self-love to HIV prevention was echoed throughout the interviews. Is it any wonder that Latino gay men would find loving themselves difficult, given a long history of repeated subtle and explicit messages signifying the worthlessness of gay men? These messages—communicated through life-long statements disparaging men loving men in sexual ways; silence regarding those who are brave enough to do so; implicit suggestions that they are acceptable only as fetishized Latino sexual objects in the gay world; unacknowledged acts of violence against young effeminate or gay

boys; and, in many instances, the unwitting or willful complicity of families, societies, and the legal, health-care, and scientific communities in these crimes—are powerful obstacles to Latino gay men's attempts to love themselves. It is easy to imagine Latino gay men who have grown up with these cumulative insults vacillating between feeling outraged and fighting against these insidious messages, and simply accepting them as truth, even if unconsciously. I believe that these implicit beliefs, fueled and maintained by harmful sociocultural norms, impede Latino gay men's intentions to protect themselves. These norms are all the more detrimental to the extent that they are conveyed silently or without recognition. It is harmful enough that some of these Latino gay men's sexual initiations were violent and abusive. It is truly reprehensible that their experiences were then silenced, leaving them to grow up attributing fault to themselves, thereby confirming to them that the feelings they had for other boys or men were inherently wrong. The commingling of shame and guilt with sexual desire makes open, caring, mindful sexual relationships very problematical.

The results of my research to date suggest several things. First, they highlight the critical roles of both qualitative and quantitative research in building a theory to explain complex human behaviors such as sex. Although my early quantitative data provided some grounding for the importance of the question, I could not have imagined the depth of the impact of childhood sexual abuse on the men's adult lives without having heard their stories. More important, their voices are what breathed life into my beginning understanding of the mechanisms that shape this process.

Second, the results direct the next steps in a research agenda that asks why and how it is that early childhood sexual experiences have such a strong effect on later sexual risk-taking behaviors among Latino gay men. Although childhood sexual abuse is only one of the issues of disempowerment that contribute to risk (see chapter 2), it is clearly one that deserves further research. It is important now to discover whether the themes I heard from Latino gay men between the ages of twenty and forty hold up among an older cohort of Latino gay men. Once the major themes are captured, coupled with theoretical implications from research in other areas, it will be beneficial to build and test a model that reflects these hypothesized mechanisms among a large representative sample of Latino gay men. Armed with data that show the contributing factors, including the sociocultural factors, that maintain this process, I think it will become more difficult to blame individuals for unsafe behavior and make it easier to point to the responsibility we all share for supporting individuals'

intentions toward health. To the degree that sociocultural, -economic, and -political will contribute to accepting and supportive environments, individuals will be better able to comply with their stated intentions. Or, as Roberto implied, they will come to believe that they are worth protecting and loving.

Finally, these preliminary findings already point to the need for interventions targeting the sociocultural norms that support these devastating negative attitudes about gayness and preserve the silence that allows childhood sexual abuse to continue. It is unconscionable to place the burden of change exclusively on already-vulnerable individuals who are struggling with repeated powerful messages of worthlessness. Although I can understand the pressures, growing out of personal or cultural values, to remain silent, I think it is essential that we begin to challenge them if we want our Latino gay brothers, sons, cousins, and friends to live long, satisfying, and loving lives.

## Note

1. I thank the reviewers of this manuscript for highlighting the political implications of childhood sexual abuse definitions.

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