

6. Identity and factors that influence it

6.1 *Homosexual ... or gay?*

In the last chapter, we started this report by looking at the main segments within the whole population of regional, remote and isolated Queensland men who have sex with men.

We did this by focusing on demographic factors as much as possible (age, marital status) but could not, even at this early stage, ignore psychographic characteristics (attitudes, beliefs and values).

The most striking of all demographic characteristics is identity, or 'the attitude and values-based labels that one attaches to oneself. For example, there is a world of difference between 'I drink Coke' and 'I'm a Coke drinker'. 'I drink Coke' is a statement of behaviour and thus a demographic characteristic. It might apply to anyone from 10 to 100 who acts, without thinking, to slake their thirst. 'I'm a Coke drinker', on the other hand, is a statement that a person identifies with the values so strongly associated with Coca Cola through it's advertising: young, hip, cool, sporty, fashionable, even risk-taking.

The relevance of this analogy is understanding a very important distinction between 'homosexual', and 'gay', and equally between 'heterosexual' and 'straight'

6.1.1 What's the difference between 'homosexual' and 'gay'?

Not much, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. The dictionary defines 'homosexual' as 'sexually attracted to people of one's own sex'; and 'gay' as 'homosexual; of or pertaining to homosexuals; intended for or frequented by homosexuals'.

Yet if you look carefully, you see a fine distinction between the two. One is about the sex act itself, and the attraction behind it. The other is a somewhat broader picture: unnamed things that 'pertain' to homosexuals, or are 'intended for' them.

Trawl through references to 'gay' and 'homosexual' on the Internet and this fine distinction becomes clearer. References to homosexuality are clinical, abstract and mainly deal with physical or psychological matters. References to 'gay' are sociological and cultural: they talk of communities, of art, literature and politics, and of how people choose to define themselves. This is perhaps best put by the OED's footnote of 'gay pride' as 'a sense of strong self-esteem associated with a person's public acknowledgement of his or her homosexuality'.

So there is, after all, a difference between 'homosexual' and 'gay'. It is a difference between behaviour and identity: between what a person does for sex, and how they see themselves and the culture they identify with. A person may well engage in homosexual acts but not see themselves as gay, or identify with a gay culture.

In fact, as this report will argue, regional, remote and isolated men who have sex with men in Queensland commonly see themselves as straight.

Another way of looking at the distinction between behaviour and identity is the ongoing 'nature versus nurture' debate. According to QUT's *Inside Out*¹:

¹ INSIDE QUT, October 7-20, 1997, Page 3

'QUT senior lecturer Dr Michael Dunne and Dr Michael Bailey, a visiting researcher from Northwestern University in the USA, said preliminary findings from their six-year research project had shown that sexual orientation in men was primarily determined by genetics, but expressing that sexuality depended on environment.

'It's pretty clear that the expression of something like sexuality really depends upon the time in which you live,' Dr Dunne said. 'It's much easier in the 1990s to express some genetic predisposition to being homosexual, to being sexually adventurous, than it was in the 1950s or 1930s.'

6.1.2 How respondents see themselves

The distinction between engaging in homosexual sex, and being (or seeing yourself as) gay, is a key distinction, and a good example of how clear language can help progress dialogue and understanding about important issues. Yet in everyday life, the two concepts are often confused, or used interchangeably.

We asked survey respondents what the words 'homosexual or gay' meant to them, if that was their chosen identity. The largest number did not differentiate between the two: it all meant 'men who had sex, or a desire for sex, with other men'.

Some implied a difference between the two when they were quite emphatic about homosexuality only being about sex acts or sex attraction, and not about the bigger issue of how one lives one's life (or, as one said, 'homosexuality is only a small part of the whole persona'.)

Another group did not differentiate, but saw the behaviour and identity elements. Generally the differentiation was either simplistic or confused:

'A person who falls in love with and/or finds the same sex sexually appealing.'

'Being attracted emotionally and physically to other men'

'Gay = sleep with men and am happy about it and well-adjusted'.

Equally, there were those who did differentiate between gay and homosexual, but also had either simplistic or confused definitions:

'Gay means more inside ... Homosexual- more legal, human rights situation'

'The difference between a gay man and a man who has sex with men is a gay man can love another man'

'I'm a man who has sex with men, is sexually attracted only to men and wants to identify as not heterosexual.'

Lastly, there was a small group for whom the distinction between gay and homosexual was a distinction between identity and lifestyle:

'Gay = identification both sexually and culturally with a sub-culture of the mainstream.'

'Homosexual = person who has sex with members of the same sex, normally used for guys. Gay = more open/natural/relaxed about his/her sexual preferences.'

'They mean I am gay out and proud.'

'Gay means that I speak fluent fag, party and love Monday nites on free-to-air TV'

'To me, the terms homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual refer to the physical/sexual/emotional attraction a person feels, whereas gay and straight refer to lifestyle the person chooses to live. For example, it sounds contradictory, but I believe a person can be homosexual, but not 'gay' (live the gay lifestyle).

This distinction was made in several cases to point out while they had sex with men, it was not their identity, such as in:

'Being gay (sic) is my sexual preference, not my lifestyle.'

One survey respondent identified as queer: 'which has political connotations'

Most of the (small number of) people who identified as heterosexual or straight saw these as describing their sexual attraction to women, which fitted them best. They described their attraction to men either as a curiosity (implying they were either pre-action or early experimenters); or very occasional or rare encounters; or into transsexuals.

One went straight to the heart of the identity issue when he said,

'Straight means that I'm a man.'

6.2 *So where does that leave bisexuals?*

Our analysis of the difference between identity and behaviour raises the important question of whether 'bisexual' best describes one or the other.

It clearly describes behaviour. A much larger number than identified as heterosexual identified as bisexual, and most of those who identified as bisexual were clearly describing it as a desire to have sex with both men and women. As one respondent said,

'A bisexual is a person who has no firm preference on the gender of their sexual partner. They enjoy sex with either.'

While a few expressed a leaning toward a preference for either men or women, almost all did not. Several expressed a main attraction to their girlfriend or wife, and pointed out how much they enjoyed sex with them, but wanted (oral or anal sex with a man).

The men who didn't think about their identity had mixed reasons for doing so, mostly because they rejected labelling of what they felt was a fluid, unclassifiable aspect of their lives.

Interview and survey responses did not help us answer the question of whether 'bisexual' can describe identity as well as behaviour. We had initially expected that such an identity might be something libertine, sexually progressive, with a 'best of both worlds' flavour; that it might be something like a 'swinger'; and positively held at least by people engaging in bisexual behaviour. Despite our inquiries, we did not get a sense that people adopt that identity in regional, remote and isolated Queensland.

6.2.1 What the survey said

Table 15 shows how respondents see themselves sexually. Half identify as homosexual or gay, just over a third as bisexual and a small percentage as heterosexual or straight. This did confirm an impression gained from the interviews that men might refer to themselves as heterosexual / straight to the broader world, but to the interviewers preferred either bisexual or homosexual / gay. As noted above, the interviews would suggest that 'bisexual' is used to describe their sexual behaviour, rather than their identity.

TABLE 15: HOW RESPONDENTS SEE THEMSELVES SEXUALLY

Sexuality	No	%
Homosexual / gay	125	48%
Bisexual	95	37%
Heterosexual / straight	21	8%
Don't think about it	19	7%
No answer	22	
Total	282	

6.3 *Factors that influence identity*

We previously quoted QUT senior lecturer Dr Michael Dunne as say that expressing one's sexuality depended on one's environment. While this is true, it doesn't tell the whole story. Social marketers (such as those who design anti-smoking and drug use interventions) categorise factors that influence behaviour and identity into three groups:

- **personal factors** (the life skills and abilities that one uses to influence and control events in one's life, including one's perception of oneself)
- **interpersonal factors** (the influence of people close to oneself and one's reactions to those influences)
- **environmental factors** (the cues and pressures about what is acceptable / desirable or not to one's broader community).

We agree with the hypothesis advanced by Dr Dunne (and by many, many others) that desire to have sex with other men is essentially genetic, or at the least not something that a man has a choice about. Their choice is whether they act on their desire or not.

The story told by interviewees is fairly consistent with this hypotheses: that, fairly early on in life, they identified a sexual interest in other men; they consciously or subconsciously made assessments of the degree to which this behaviour would be supported by others; and then undertook behaviours and adopted identities based on the personal skills they had to reconcile the conflict between what they wanted to do, and what they saw as socially acceptable.

For a few, this appears to be a conscious process; for , it's intuitive and rather 'the way that things work out'.

This means that to understand what 'causes' identity, we must understand the personal, interpersonal and environmental factors that determine it.

6.4 *Environmental factors*

We cover environmental factors first because from the interviews and surveys, respondents identified these factors as by far the most important in influencing their identity.

6.4.1 **The all-pervading creed of machismo**

Defined (loosely) by the OED as 'a show of male virility and masculine pride', machismo was identified by many respondents as being alive and well and a strong influence on life in regional, remote and isolated Queensland.

As one said,

'This is a harsh environment and traditionally male-dominated. There's all the hardship associated with living on the land, and the sacrifices of the pioneer life. It's about mining and cattle. It's very heterosexual and macho.'

These attitudes have a practical and enduring effect on the way young men are raised, and the expectations on them. As two respondents said,

'The macho things starts very young. Kids are raised by their dads to fight and drink and be tough. I suspect there's as much of that as there always was. The fact that there are more gay guys visible would help some of them, but there are still a lot of today's kids who are going to have a shit life.'

'The thinking is, "If you're a man, you have to get married and have kids, be a brawler, drink beer, play sports ... there's a great deal of pressure in that direction. How much pressure depends on their friends and family.'

Definitely, sex with other men is not part of any interpretation of machismo:

'The attitude is that it's OK to get pissed and to beat up the wife and kids, but any feelings for other men are completely taboo.'

'Obvious displays of heterosexuality (pig shooting, rodeos, trucks and bikes) are the norm.'

However, it's worth reminding ourselves that machismo is an environmental, cultural factor. This means that its influence will vary from community to community, as was pointed out by several respondents. As two noted:

'(How people feel about homosexuality) depends on how 'macho' the local culture is. I've lived in various parts of Western Australia and Queensland and it varies markedly. In some outback mining towns, there is total denial of any gay or bisexual activity.'

'(This town) is very much a melting pot, a lot of people from different Indigenous communities come in from outlying areas to do their shopping and to access services. Sex with men is pretty much taboo in most (Indigenous) communities, even more so in those where the young men still go through initiation ceremonies.'

Equally, the influence of machismo on individuals within communities varies: as three respondents noted,

'The young ones are under a lot of pressure to identify as macho, and so identify as straight or as 'new vogue bisexual'. They'll stand around telling you how much they want pussy, then they'll disappear out the back and have sex with a guy.'

'There's a distinction between group and individual behaviours. There is such a strong macho culture, an all-pervading heterosexual environment, and it's not just that it's really easy to fit into it, it's a requirement for a quiet life out here. Standing at the urinal or at the bar for a beer, you'll hear them talking on about how they're out for the night to 'get a bit of pussy'. But in private, their views are different, much more tame.'

'Those people who go off and be nasty to gays I think are afraid of their own desires and thoughts, afraid of maybe being attracted to men themselves. But separately, they also want to be seen as super-macho. It's a childhood belief that's drummed into their heads that "you don't have sex with other men ... it's a no no ... it's a sin".'

6.4.2 'Everyone is straight here'

Fortunately, Australian culture being what it is, 'machismo' is generally regarded at the extreme end of the spectrum of thought about male/female roles. Queensland communities tend not to ostentatiously, openly (and, importantly, legally) display macho values in the same ways as, say, the Latin American cultures from which the term derives.

Instead, the acceptable face of machismo is 'being straight'. This is universally held to be getting married and having children – and definitely not looking sideways at your peers in the shower block.

The advantages of 'being straight' are evident and considerable, and young country men face intense pressure to marry and have kids. They live in the community, they understand the expectations on them, and they meet those expectations. In the country, no-one is brought up to be gay. As two respondents said,

'Family life offers men an identity, stability and most of the things that are held by society to be desirable. It's an extremely attractive package.'

'In country towns, everyone who knows you and has grown up with you has the expectation that you'll get married and have kids. That's enormous pressure.'

Although it was seldom verbalised by respondents, it became clear that the default condition of a straight identity was to avoid any hint or rumour of sexual interest in other men, rather than marry and have kids. Single men are accepted as straight so long as they are rumour-free. However, marriage and kids is an effective talisman against rumours: the presumption that 'he can't be gay, he's married and has kids' still apparently widespread.

6.4.3 Homophobia and discrimination

Equally, the disadvantages of not being straight are very evident and very considerable in regional, remote and isolated Queensland. While life might appear to be fun and even 'trendy' (superficially at least) for small numbers of gay men close to the centre of Brisbane, the ability to live unmolested even a private gay life is fast evaporating by the time one reaches the outer suburbs and survives against significant odds only in small pockets throughout Queensland. Most respondents reported anti-gay sentiment as very much the cultural norm.

At the extreme, there is homophobia, defined by the OED as 'a fear or hatred of homosexuals'. One respondent told us,

'In this district, in the past two years, men have been murdered, bashed, lost jobs, been discriminated against at work, ruined, treated very badly by health services, and have had their house burned down – because they were gay or perceived to be gay. And that doesn't count the men who committed suicide or who left town.'

Commentators have suggested a number of reasons for homophobia. One was that mentioned several times by respondents was the equation, 'gay = paedophile = threat to my kids'. This (while basically a malicious, ignorant slander) has the apparent virtue of protecting the family unit and thus is an acceptable 'straight' position.

Others talked of the fear of 'being hit on': as two respondent said,

'You have people who think "poofter, faggot, you stay away from me" ... but now that I've been around some gay men who don't try to pick me up, I'm much more relaxed about it than I used to be. Lots of straight guys don't have problems with lesbians, but they have big problems with two guys together.'

'It seems to be easier for lesbians. There are quite a few around, and it doesn't seem to be an issue. I guess lesbians are every straight guy's fantasy, whereas straight men tend to think of "the act" when they think of gay sex. They think of anal sex which they see as dirty and unnatural, as in, "I don't want any poofter bastard trying that on me".'

Next down from homophobia is a more generalised discrimination. As one respondent noted,

'People still feel that homosexuality is legitimate grounds for discrimination, unlike disability or Aboriginality. They still tell poofter jokes in bars and in the pubs, and they still tell derogatory jokes about gays in the workplace. There's a general feeling now that you shouldn't tell these types of jokes about Aboriginals or people with disabilities, but you can still tell them about gays.'

6.4.4 Religious fundamentalism

In most Queensland towns, religious organisations play an important part in social and cultural life, through the influence of their leaders and followers. The research indicated some minor acceptance by mainstream churches for being gay, it was felt that none of the fundamentalist sects view homosexuality positively, with disapproval ranging from strong to fanatical (as in the OED's use of the term as meaning 'their fanatic sense of righteousness, their absolute certainty that ... they alone had God's ear').

While there is an extensive literature on the problems young Catholics have had exploring their sexuality (and one quote is included below to remind us of the flavour of it), most concern was reserved for the fundamentalist sects. As respondents noted:

'The Anglicans encourage the participation of men and woman who are not practising homosexuals. With the Catholics, you have to renounce it completely. With the fundamentalists, you are damned no matter what. Nothing you can do will make God love you more or less than he does already, so there's nothing you can do.'

'The fundamentalists are those that take a literal interpretation of scripture to condemn gays. The major churches acknowledge gays and have made some sort of space for them, whether formally or informally. But with the fundamentalists, it's vilification and hatred from the pulpit. They feel quite free to play on the hatreds and fears of people.'

'These churches are dangerous: they're like cults. We look kindly on things called churches because we have an expectation that they are loving, caring communities. But they're not; they're breeding grounds for intolerance, prejudice and bigotry, full of people with personal problems. These churches suppress the desire and imagination in people. It's not healthy.'

'I became a fundamentalist Christian when I was 19. They were a very conservative, racist, homophobic group of people. They had an expectation that you were heterosexual; anything else was considered extremely abnormal.'

'I'm a Catholic myself, and that's one of the things that made me hate myself so much, and made me feel so guilty about my sexuality ... but when there's no alternative (to being gay), it's me, it's the way I am, then you just have to fight through your sense of guilt.'

Several respondents puzzled over why the sects were so vehement in condemning homosexuality, given that there are many behaviours in the bible that are condemned. One respondent extrapolated from his own experience that it might be because sect followers are running away from their feelings of homosexual desire. We will look at this in the next chapter, under Taking up religion.

Others see more worldly (mercantilist and populist) reasons behind the fundamentalists' position:

'It's popular. It's motherhood. It gets support from everyone. The few people who don't agree are too scared to contest it. It's a hook by which to make the cult more popular. It gets bums on seats, and that means extra income.'

'There are lots of Christian outreach churches here and lots of churchgoers. They play unashamedly to family values. People like it here, they come here because they see it as being a 'family town': no drugs, no kidnappers, no drive-by shootings, no paedophiles.'

As one Indigenous respondent noted, the churches historical role in communities is also important:

'All the communities have sistagirls, but some are more accepting than others. The influence of the church and the histories of communities as missions is a big factor that affects how accepting communities are, especially in Cape York and the Torres Strait. In some communities, they're fairly open and sistagirls have been elected to local government. In others, it's the opposite'

While respondents were almost uniformly negative of the role of churches, one did note that:

'There are some clergy who are supportive, but I don't know how many men look to the clergy for support.'

6.4.5 Small town values

While small towns are often portrayed as bigoted, small-minded places where everyone knows everyone else's business, some respondents felt this image to be unfair. While gossip about one's private life is obviously of great concern to MSMs, this needs to be offset against a 'live and let live mentality' that is often, too, found in the country. As two respondents said,

'People out here tend to be open-minded and friendly. I feel in some ways that smaller communities are more accepting. People get on with their lives ... people don't care ... gay guys are everywhere.'

'In the country, the feeling is that unless you go out and make yourself offensive, there's a collective realisation that everyone has to live together. In everyday terms, it boils down to demeanour and dress (*as well, of course, as not being caught in the act*). There's a threshold of what is acceptable, as long as you don't exceed that, you're OK. Most people are happy to leave it at, "Well, he could be or he couldn't be".'

The latter comment may go some way toward explaining the varying attitudes encountered by out gay men. Our general impression from interviews was that the straighter the out men acted, the more acceptable they were. Or, as one respondent noted,

'The ones that tend to have the easier time of it are the ones who aren't effeminate, or who are less effeminate.'

This would tend to suggest that abandonment of the straight identity might be as much an offence against values as the actual sex act itself, fundamentalists notwithstanding. While some might interpret this as a somewhat tolerant attitude, its effect is to encourage MSMs to look straighter than straight men themselves, and thus reinforces the hegemony of the straight identity.

The above notwithstanding, another respondent had a different explanation for how the small-town dynamic worked, saying,

'In small towns, men having sex with men is seen as freaky and unacceptable. And people are perhaps more open in their views about these things than they are in the big cities. This makes men afraid of being identified, because they will be a target of rumour and harassment, sometimes even violent. It restricts your social life, because it's hard to go to nightclubs and not get harassed, for example.'

It is also worth noting that 'small town values' vary widely between locations. While some respondents found their localities to be reasonably accepting places, others did not. As one respondent said,

'This is the most insular city on the whole east coast. It's provoked by difference: difference creates attention. It's a matter of xenophobia as much as homophobia. If anybody's 'different', the response is, 'Well, he's not from here, he's just passing through. (Homosexuality is not talked about in (this town). Everyone's too scared to talk about it. I think that other towns are more accepting. This town has a very low tolerance for diversity. They've been steadily been knocking down public toilets for years, which has driven it into the shopping malls and out of town.'

As noted before, the other main environmental factor about small town living is the relative lack of anonymity. As three respondents said,

'Everyone knows everyone else's business. If you don't know what you did last night, you've only got to ask your neighbour. Because of the gossip factor, it has to be very closed door. You've even got to put the cat out, or else the cat will have something to say!'

'You don't have the anonymity in a small town. For example, I had people calling up my friends and asking them if I was gay ... and I didn't even know these people!'

'A lot of the small towns are real busybody places where you can't do anything without the rest of the town knowing about it. It's very hard for men who have sex with other men, not so much from the macho pressure as from trying to make sure that the neighbours don't find out. It's not denial, it's just the reality of their life. Out of town they'll open up, but not at home.'

6.4.6 Negative perceptions of being gay

The other main environmental factor affecting the lives of MSMs is what 'gay' means in the country.

On the one hand, TV is felt to have a positive effect in showing gay lifestyles: in fact, it is the only environmental factor that supports gay identity. Shows like *Queer as Folk*, *Queer Eye*, *Big Brother* and *Australian Idol* with their gay characters show being gay as acceptable. As one respondent noted,

'People watch these shows and talk about them. If it keeps going, it will make life a lot easier. It makes it easier for guys to make a decision about it.'

On the other hand, positive role models are few and far between on the ground. One respondent felt'

'If you acknowledge your feelings for other men, you believe you're going to have a life of creeping around in the bushes looking for sex, or joining the church to molest little boys.'

Another respondent from a fairly gay-friendly city noted.

'(MSMs) almost never come into contact with any gay men who feel good about it. We ran a group once to introduce them to other men, but the problem was that although this was meant to be a positive, reinforcing experience, there was no-one in the group who felt positive about it. Most had never had any social contact with a man who identified as being gay.'

The norm in the country is that 'gay' is not seen in positive terms. As one respondent said,

'Most people identify "gay" in pathological terms ... it's a problem. It's a negative label, so gay men think, "I wish I wasn't ... it's my bad luck in life If I was born again, I'd have it differently ... now, I've got to do the best I can". Poofter equals stigma, shame, denial, secrecy, being scared.'

One respondent even identified gay community attachment as a health and social risk:

'(What are the risks?) Heavy drinking in gay bars and getting involved with people I wouldn't normally ... isolation due to friendship just not forming cause they want your cock only'

6.5 Interpersonal factors

Interpersonal factors are those to do with the relationships between a person and those close to them: mainly family, workmates and people they mix with socially. This also includes people (such as those who physically or psychologically harass the person, or anonymous sex partners) who carry messages about sexuality from the person's general environment into their immediate space.

6.5.1 Physical violence

At the most extreme end of these factors is the threat of physical violence from being known to, or suspected of, having sex with men.

Opinions varied on the extent of violence. Table 16 shows survey respondents level of concern about violence, discrimination and trouble with police, through looking for and having sex with men. While a majority were concerned, almost a third were not, and one in ten weren't sure.

TABLE 16: AGREEMENT WITH PROPOSITION THAT 'I AM CONCERNED ABOUT VIOLENCE, DISCRIMINATION AND TROUBLE WITH POLICE, THROUGH LOOKING FOR AND HAVING SEX WITH MEN'

Agreement	No.	%
Strongly agree	73	33%
Agree	58	26%
Not sure	24	11%
Disagree	26	12%
Strongly disagree	43	19%
No answer	60	
Total	284	

Many interview respondents felt that there was little or no violence in their locality. Others, when talking about violence, were talking about episodes between six months and several years ago. On the other hand, many respondents did report instances of bashings on beats (generally as an occasional phenomena) and did rate it highly as a safety concern. As one said,

'There's the occasional basher, and you can certainly be in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

There was also the well-publicised bombing of the Townsville AIDS Council, which is well-remembered throughout Queensland.

Several respondents mentioned violence, and particularly self-harm and violence within same sex relationships, that is so often connected to alcohol misuse.

Although violence did not appear to be a major issue, violence or the threat of it can have a profound and lasting effect. One respondent summed up what are probably common experiences for many MSMs:

'People swearing at you because you're a gay man ... people walking up to you and punching you in the face. If they know they can get away with it, they'll do it ... Being at a beat and straight guys come in and catch you doing something ... having people put you down and want to fight you ... getting beat-up at gay beats. Coming across some aggressive or angry/confused gay/bi/straight guys who are looking for sex at beats ... some people swear at me, some physically hit me ... idiots driving by in cars yelling faggot, people calling me a faggot at work ...'

THE POLICE

Table 17 shows the survey respondents level of interest in reporting violence or discrimination against men who have sex with men to the police, and have action taken. While almost half wanted to, a third did not, and one fifth were undecided. This would suggest that it is not an important issue with significant number of MSMs (the 'not sures')

and that many others (the 'disagrees') perhaps have significant barriers (like fear of disclosure) to doing so.

TABLE 17: AGREEMENT WITH PROPOSITION THAT 'I WANT TO REPORT VIOLENCE OR DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN TO THE POLICE, AND HAVE ACTION TAKEN'

Agreement	No.	%
Strongly agree	63	28%
Agree	36	16%
Not sure	42	19%
Disagree	17	8%
Strongly disagree	65	29%
No answer	61	
Total	284	

The general tone of interview responses was that the police were much more accepting of homosexuality than in the past, no doubt due to the Police Liaison to the LGBT Communities Program, and related training. It was suggested by several that the perceived reduction in violence may be due to it having filtered through to potential bashers that the police were now not the natural allies they might once have appeared to be. While police appeared to be an increasingly-recognised resource, it was felt that the program was weakening in some areas, and not effective in others.

Being picked up and harassed by police was also rated as a concern by several respondents. Indigenous respondents expressed the greatest concern. As one said,

'I get worried when I get questioned by the police. A lot of people die in jails. The inquest might say that I'd killed myself, but I'm not the type with any inclination to kill myself ... although I'd say that the 'bully men' aren't as bad as they used to be.'

Another respondent had been stopped by someone claiming to be a police officer and harassed, although it was not clear whether the harasser was in fact an officer or not. There were also reports of beat workers being harassed by plainclothes and uniformed police for 'loitering' and for suspicion of being gay (with one person being told that homosexuality is a criminal offence in Queensland). However, the possibility exists that some so-called plainclothes police are in fact impersonators, since men are generally too intimidated to ask for identification.

There also appeared to be some confusion on-the-ground about whether the brief of liaison officers extended to straight-identifying MSMs, or whether its boundary was the gay community.

We were not able to gauge the way in which the work of liaison officers promotes health education. While it is appreciated that health education is not necessarily the work of liaison officers, their work has significant sexual health consequences (and within that mental health consequences) and these should be better understood and communicated to liaison officers.

RECOMMENDATION

- 5. Given the valuable role of the Police Liaison to the LGBT Communities Program, that this program be evaluated with a view to addressing deficiencies and defining possible linkages with health education.**
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6.5.2 Harassment, intimidation and ostracism

Next on from physical violence is the more general harassment and intimidation that men face, or expect they would face, if their sexual behaviour was widely known.

Openly-gay respondents reported being called a fag in public places, sneered at and taunted in shopping centres, abused (and in one instance hit) in pubs and night clubs and otherwise made to feel distressed. Openly-gay have had 'fag' scrawled in paint across their cars, and had abusive letters left in their mailboxes.

Harassment was also reported in slightly less subtle form of mischief-making. As one respondent reported,

'A gay guy I knew had as neighbours a group of young people from religious backgrounds who would play loud music and make lots of noise and play anti-gay religious propaganda till the early hours in the morning. He talked to them about it, and they made it clear in a roundabout way that they thought he was a 'faggot with AIDS'. That he was, in fact, HIV+, only made it more distressing for him.'

For some, the possibilities of ostracism are comprehensive and potentially devastating:

'I'd be banished if anyone found out ... I'd have to go packing ... loss of friends and family ... contempt; ridicule ... being excluded from "couple"-dominated social events ... homophobia from some people ... I dread to think!!! ... If friends found out they wouldn't talk to me, I wouldn't get a job on the farms and couldn't drink in the pubs ... being treated badly by members of my sports team. I also coach a kid's sports team and wonder whether children would be withdrawn from the team because parents probably link homosexuality with paedophilia ... public humiliation ... burned at the stake! ... people don't like that sort of stuff, there would be problems ...'

6.5.3 Rejection by family & friends

The most powerful of factors of all types reported by respondents was fear of rejection by family, and by friends. As two respondents said,

'How tough it is for guys to come out depends very much on the reaction, or the expected reaction, of the family, on whether you think they're going to love you or hate you.'

'The biggest factor of all is whether they feel they can talk to their family. The biggest thing these guys of all ages want is acceptance.'

In the first instance, this severely affects young people exploring their sexual identity, as two respondents reported.

'One young guy I know, when he came out to his family, they burned all his clothes, and tore up all the family photos with him in them. They saw themselves as the good Christians and him as the black sheep of the family. They've come to regret what they did, and have tried to mend the bridges, but he's giving them back now what they gave him.'

'All the time the kids are hearing "fucking faggots this, fucking faggots that". There's a huge amount of pressure, especially if you've got a redneck parent. The daughter who's pregnant, or the son who's gay, will simply be kicked out of home. This is what ends up in youth suicide. If the kids have these tendencies, where do they go? The services aren't well-publicised, and often don't exist in the country.'

When we wondered at the sort of mentality that would cause such strong reactions from parents, respondents were more than happy to enlighten us – while at the same time indicating that in many cases the hurt heals with time. As three respondents said,

'Every parent wants the best possible for their child, and they think that gay men grow up to be lonely old men who don't give them grandchildren, and they don't want that. They want them to grow up to be model

heterosexuals. There's also the thinking that gays are all paedophiles, so they pose a real threat to their children.'

'My dad doesn't accept it, but he understands. A dad's pride is a dad's pride. I think he's disappointed. I've got a half-brother, but I'm the only real son he's got. I'm the only male that carries dad's name. He used to go on about it, with things like, "If you're a fag, then all those generations of history will stop". He was an arsehole about it at first ... but he's better about it now.'

'I've seen kids who've been thrown out on the street by the father (not usually by the mother). It's almost like they feel that they've created a deformed child who they can't love. Fathers have such high expectations for their sons. Having a gay son is a major shock. It can break up the whole family. Often, the son moves away.'

'Many people see gays and lesbians as a threat to family values, and somehow our "choice of lifestyle" is an attack on families. It's like they see us as somehow opposed to them, even enemies of them. Of course, it takes an enormous amount of self-centeredness to see someone else's choice as an insult to you, but this is the way they seem to think.'

The situation is no less difficult for men with established families, with little to mitigate the gloomy picture for men considering their options. Many towns have strong communities based on religious or ethnic affiliation (Catholics, Muslims, Italians, Yugoslavians, Albanians, Middle Eastern nations were just some of the groupings reported), which in a rural, foreign country context only emphasises strong family bonds. As one respondent said,

'These men are often brought up in big, extended families – married, with two or three kids, granny in a flat on the property – and they have substantial holdings, cane, fruit, avocados, whatever. They are cemented into their situation, and it would be extremely hard for them to extract themselves.'

The way that social life revolves around sport and get-togethers opens up the possibility of group harassment. Wives will be shamed; children will be harassed at school and their fathers humiliated in front of their peers. Most of all, they might lose everything they have, their whole lives. As one respondent said,

'They perceive they will lose jobs, friends, wives, girlfriends, families; they'll be beaten up by their mates; they won't be able to have a beer at the pub; they won't be able to live the life they want to live. They don't want to live a gay life: they want to live a straight life, but they need to have sex with men. They fear their possible losses greatly.'

This fear of loss is perhaps the strongest factor of all. These men fear losing their wives, their children, their in-laws, their friends, their careers, their businesses and their homes. And they routinely believe it to be either a strong possibility or an inevitability: of losing everything, of being cast out, of having 'nowhere to go', of having no support. As three respondents said,

'Usually, when relationships of whatever type break up, one or both of the partners have to leave town. So you lose your family and your kids.'

'I've seen some men who have decided to come out. Some have had to leave their partners, children and jobs. Only over time have they managed to win back some of the things that they've lost.'

'It's harder here than other places. If it goes wrong, they expect that they'd have to leave town. By going wrong, I mean that wives, families and friends don't accept it, so they don't have any support or anywhere to go.'

It is therefore not surprising that most MSMs don't want to be identified or associated with the gay community, because of the possible ramifications.

While one respondent simply stated that 'family disclosure would be devastation', it is worth noting that this is not always an accurate perception. As we shall see in the next chapter, sex with men often occurs with some wife or girlfriend involvement or permission. The larger

towns (Cairns in particular) do offer looser family connections and a greater degree of anonymity). Also, as Table 18 shows, many survey respondents have people that do know about their situation and life presumably goes on for them. Respondents who had come out described the process as often difficult, but something they managed. As one respondent said,

'Of course, (rejection and family devastation) can, and does, happen, but you can get through it if you're brave enough and don't care what people think. When they finally tell people that they like sex with men, the reaction is often, "I've always known that". If you really trust a person, it will be OK.

TABLE 18: WHO KNOWS THAT RESPONDENTS HAVE SEX WITH MEN

Who knows?	No	%
Male partner	146	51%
Close friends	92	32%
No-one	78	27%
Most people	67	24%
Close family	65	23%
Close workmates	41	14%
Female partner	22	8%

Therefore, it would appear that fear of losing friends and family is a primary concern of MSM, and a particular concern for young MSMs. This may significantly affect their ability to make life choices and may, as we shall see later, lead to a range of mental health issues. There is a role for Queensland Health, as both a sexual and mental health matter, to raise with parents that their children may be different, and to create a 'space' where both young MSMS and their parents can talk about the issues. Such promotional efforts would also be expected to create a more supportive environment within the families of older MSMs.

RECOMMENDATION

- 6. That Queensland Health undertake promotion and information activities to advise parents that some children are attracted to the same sex, the social and health importance of supportive responses and suggested supportive responses.**
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6.5.4 Lack of support

'Lack of support' is the flip side of the same coin as 'rejection by friends and family'. The anticipated hostile reaction of friends and family man that they have no-one important in their lives to talk to. As three respondents said,

'In my town, if a guy came out, he would have to move out. I can't imagine his previous social milieu continuing. There would be no social support. He'd be divorcing and moving out, because suddenly he'd have no-one to talk to.'

'What young men need most is support from their own kind – friends, family, trusted people. The social structure just isn't here. These issues are kept quiet. They feel that if they seek help, they'll get kicked in the teeth.'

'Families aren't comfortable talking about sexuality. So lots of guys won't talk about it because they're afraid of the reception that they'll get.'

They often can't talk to their families or friends, don't talk to the men they have occasional sex with and don't know any other MSMs that they can talk to. There is no support and, even worse, there are no role models. In many towns, there seems to be simply no-one to talk to – or no-one whose confidence and motives can be trusted. As two respondents said,

'There's simply no-one here in town to talk to. When I was coming out, I needed someone to talk to. There were only dirty old men, who wanted sex with me but they didn't want to talk to me about it. A (particular sexual health worker) is there now, and he's great, but most people don't know about him, and how he can help them ... and he's just one person, he mightn't work there for ever.'

'Even though I'm 'out', people think that I'm far too butch to be gay. When they finally believe it, they often hassle me for too much information about sexuality issues and what I do sexually. And none of it is supportive ... you get the feeling that they're looking for gossip that they can use against you in the future.'

There is little doubt that many MSMs are looking for someone to talk to in a meaningful way; opportunities to reflect, input, talk. They want to know how other men in their situation are dealing with the issues. As four respondents said,

'What do they ask me? Am I unique? Am I the only person the planet like this? Are there others like me? How does my experience compare with others? And where can I go to talk about this?'

'There are a few guys who phone me for advice, and to talk about it. It's not really a friendship, and it's not for sex. They just want to talk to someone. The more they talk, the more comfortable they are. They just don't have anyone else to talk to.'

'People come here stressed, drunk or high and want someone to talk to ... they just want to talk ... how it started, when they first discovered they were like that, their degree of comfort with it, whether they're happy with it, whether their children know, whether they accept it ... and also their terror at being outed.'

Despite our previous observation that MSMs want no public contact with gay men (or the gay community where it exists), it stands to reason that a visible gay community would be of some benefit to MSMs. Unfortunately, gay contact does not seem to have been a wholly-positive experience for some respondents. As four respondents said,

'There are a few cliquey groups in town, but because it's such a small (gay) community, everyone bitches about everyone else, and they stick to their own circles.'

'I know this 21 year old guy who had a lot of trouble coming to terms with his sexuality, because the only thing he knew about being gay was what he saw on TV about the Mardi Gras. He wondered how he could be gay, because he knew that *he wasn't like that*. It caused him a lot of trouble.'

'There are very few opportunities to meet people for meaningful exchanges. There might be other gay people, but they're not necessarily the sort of people who you'd choose as friends. And it's an incestuous environment; everyone knows each other's business. There are few people to turn to for advice.'

'This town is bible belt, Pauline Hanson territory. The gay community is not visible, it's very much a ghetto mentality, you either fit in, or you don't. It's black and white, there's no in-betweens.'

6.5.5 Discrimination at work

Discrimination at work, ranging from loss of job through to the 'cold shoulder' was reported as a reality by several out gay men and as a fear of many who were not.

Several respondents reported losing their job, or not getting a job. As one said,

'I've been knocked back for being gay or more precisely for "being too open" about my sexuality ... where I was working some people found out I was gay, they didn't want me back on the premises despite having been congratulated before on my work. Other workers wanted to tell the public, which created a problem for me. When I'd walk into the panel shop they'd say "fucking fag, don't come in here, don't let me catch

you talking to my mates". They used to pick on me all the time. One day I answered back to some other workers in front of my boss and he didn't stand by me, he told me not to stand up for myself. Two of the other were picking on me. They might have been gay themselves, they were in their late 40s and didn't have wives or girlfriends. If someone liked you and couldn't get you they'd pick on you ...'

A very similar story was told by another respondent,

'A bisexual guy knew about me, and the news went from him to this other "heterosexual" guy who outed me. This "het" guy was in fact having sex with guys, and he had put the word on me for sex, but I had rejected him. Then he outed me by telling other workmates that he thought I was queer.'

Although it has no doubt happened to more than one or two men, we did not get the impression that being sacked for being gay was a routine occurrence. The fear was more of being discriminated against, through ostracism, lack of promotion or general harassment. As three respondents said,

'It often wouldn't be formal (like being sacked), but rather sideways looks and glances and the ostracism from social networks.'

'Especially in the public service, such as in local government or a public organisation in the bush, anyone who is looking for a career would have to be very careful about how they were identified. Being gay is not an advantage. Politics works in very indirect ways, and it's easy for your career to stall, for you to be left out in the cold, and for you to find yourself looking for something else. I think in other industries it's possibly more relaxed, so long as you do your job well.'

'I was harassed by other workers. There was verbal abuse, and I was sent to Coventry. I was shunned and ignored, and the company tried to make sure that our customers – the people I dealt with - didn't find out I am gay.'

This picture is consistent with the findings of a December 1999 study titled *The Pink Ceiling Is Too Low*² which examined the work experiences of more than 900 homosexuals in Victoria, NSW and the ACT. It found that almost 60% had been subjected to either assault, verbal harassment and abuse, destruction of property, ridicule and homophobic jokes.

Maintaining a macho image, not revealing anything about one's sexuality, and keeping a barrier between the personal and professional lives, seemed to be the order of the day for respondents. As one respondent, a confident young 'straight-acting' men who is out to a wide range of people, said,

'My boss doesn't know, but he doesn't need to know. It's not the sort of thing you put on your resume. If you have a good relationship with people at work, you might tell them, but I don't know my boss well enough to say anything.'

Negative attitudes and behaviours by managers were also reported by several respondents employed by local and State government agencies (actually, in the latter instance, by Queensland Health).

Table 18 above shows who knows that survey respondents have sex with men. Given that the number of female partners who know (many respondents not having them) is naturally very small, then 'workmates' constitute the group who know the least.

² At

http://www.ilga.org/Information/legal_survey/asia_pacific/supporting%20files/australia_lesbians_and_gays_ridi.htm

While Australia does not have federal law outlawing discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation, the HREOC can investigate complaints of discrimination in employment and occupation due to sexual preference, and resolve complaints by conciliation.

The Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act 1991 protects lesbians and gay men from discrimination on the grounds of lawful sexual activity (with some exemptions). It has anti-vilification provisions.

Many studies have established that legal compliance (or rather fear of legal penalties) is a powerful motivation for change in small and medium enterprises. Further, many large enterprises oppose discrimination as a matter of policy. One respondent of a major organisation, while reporting ostracism, also mentioned that he had been approached by a senior manager, told that the organisation did not tolerate discrimination and that the senior manager would personally intervene to stop it if the respondent ever wanted to report it to him.

This suggests that it might be relatively easy to encourage employers to reject if not vilification then at least employment discrimination, given the right information and approaches. As one respondent said,

'I think that more could be done in workplaces. I'm sure there are lots of managers and bosses who know about it, but who don't do anything about it, either way. It's a pity that there's not information available for bosses who would like to be a bit more supportive, at least to tell them about anti-discrimination provisions and what their responsibilities are. There might be a way of tackling it through employers and giving them the knowledge and the tools to help out.'

RECOMMENDATION

- 7. That Queensland Health work with other government agencies and industry representative bodies to raise the profile of anti-discrimination legislation as it affects MSMs, and employer responsibilities under the legislation.**
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6.6 *Personal factors*

Personal factors have also been called 'self-efficacy' factors: the belief in one's competency to take action, and the knowledge, skills and ability to take action.

6.6.1 **Inability, unwillingness to talk**

The main personal factors identified by respondents was the ability to talk about their situation, and therefore move toward resolving their situation through discussion hearing themselves speak, and by listening to the views and experiences of others.

While MSMs might lack the opportunity to talk, it appears equally true that they are often unwilling, or unable, to talk about having sex with other men when the opportunity arises. In the next chapter, we will suggest some reasons for this: fear, a habit of hiding away, a habit of denying that the sex is actually occurring.

Whatever the reasons, the inability to express oneself if the chance does arrive robs people of powerful opportunities to explore and understand their world. As one sage once said, 'I never knew what I thought about love until I heard myself say it'.

It is often observed that most men, not just MSMs, appear to have difficulty verbalising their feelings and there are some reasons to believe – machismo, isolation, the hard life, the need to

get on with life without complaint, the few opportunities to open up – that regional, remote and isolated men have a harder time of it than city men. As two respondents said,

'These guys find it very difficult to talk about what they're feeling. My questions about how guys are feeling go straight over their heads. Men generally don't know what they're feeling. When they do open up, they say things like 'my wife doesn't know ... no-one at work knows ... I don't want to be known as a poof ... I don't want to lose my family'.

'Their circumstances don't allow for discussion, especially when they're frightened, ashamed and embarrassed. They don't talk much, and they're hoping that it won't be mentioned to other people.'

As our respondents reported (in relation to beat conversations), they'll talk about 'fishing, footy and beer' but seldom about themselves,

'They'll talk about how busy or how quiet the beat is. They'll ask me what I'm doing, talk about the weather, have chitchat, nothing of any personal consequence.'

'Straight men don't ask questions, unless it's about fishing, footy and beer. I have an interest in motorcycles, so that's often an effective icebreaker.'

'They certainly don't talk about their wives or girlfriends.'

Given this inability or unwillingness to discuss personal matters, especially with strangers, it's hardly surprising that they don't want to talk. People are generally uncomfortable talking about sex. As two respondents reported,

'Kids are scared about sexuality – they don't want to ask questions. Neither do the older guys who are living a double life.'

'I'll only go in to the health clinic if there's (a specified person who he trusts) there. I went to the health clinic recently, but I wouldn't go in because (the particular person) wasn't there that day. I didn't know if I could talk about (STIs) to anyone else. I think my carry-over guilt stops me from talking about some sex things. Sex is still a taboo subject. Parents don't talk about it. People make dirty jokes about it, but you never actually discuss it.

If it's hard enough to talk about sex in general, then it's even harder to talk about this secret part of their lives can further involve fear, shame, guilt and denial. As three respondents reported:

'As a beat outreach worker, I often get the impression that when I engage guys on the beat it's the first time they've ever talked about it with anyone. Their attitude is, "I just do it. I don't want to talk about it. I don't need to share it". They don't ask about anything. They just sit there in a sexually provocative pose and I have to make them feel comfortable and safe. They don't ask anything, they don't talk about anything, it may take an hour of wandering around and small talk to get them to open up.'

'Usually they don't say anything or ask questions. It's part of the denial, the avoiding being identified.'

'Most of the men I have casual sex with don't want to talk, don't want to ask questions, or show emotion. It's just a release of lust thing. They want you to suck them, or fuck them, but they won't kiss you or connect emotionally.'

Our telephone interviewers fielded quite a few calls from men who had almost nothing at all to say after their initial 'hello'. While the interviewers were very adept at getting callers to open up, it was often difficult to get even a simple 'yes' or 'no' response to the most straightforward question, and callers frequently hung up shortly into the interview. One interview respondent explained this behaviour as:

'They simply don't know how to talk about it. They've probably never spoken to anyone about it in their whole life. They might have been thinking about making that call for years, possibly even decades, but

when they finally get the courage to do it, and when someone picks up the phone on the other end, they just don't know how to go through with it.'

The inability to talk about personal, and sexual matters, would appear to have a number of consequences. It reduces or prevents the person's ability to negotiate sex matters, such as safe sex, which is key to preventing the spread of STIs. Combined with the interpersonal and environmental factors previously covered, it reduces or prevents the establishment of formal or informal peer networks that can influence people to engage in safe sex. It also sets up a prison for men: as far as sex matters go, they are effectively in solitary confinement, trapped with no escape from their fears and concerns.

6.6.2 Other personal factors

There are also a whole group of personal factors that relate to a MSM's ability to deny, handle and ultimately resolve the severe environmental and interpersonal pressure put on him to be straight. These include communications skills, decision-making skills, ability to withstand peer and environmental pressure, ability to negotiate outcomes, levels of self-esteem, sense of control over situations, and the influence of feelings of shame and guilt.

Although it was not part of this study, we could confidently predict from general observation of human nature that men with positive attitudes and skills would find it easier to handle and act on their feelings toward other men. However, we could also predict that the skills and abilities of many MSMs in regional, remote and isolated Queensland would be severely tested in the process of responding to interpersonal and environmental pressures; and that they would fail the test; and that such failures would result in a comprehensive catalogue of personal problems. This is in fact what we found, and is the subject of the next chapter.