

7. How MSM respond to identity pressures

In the last chapter, we saw the personal, interpersonal and environmental factors that act on a MSM in regional, remote and isolated Queensland, as they struggle to create a viable identity while also engaging in the taboo activity of having sex with other men.

Basically, to do this, they must attempt to sidestep or minimise the negative factors, and maximise the positive factors, so as to create a stable and workable identity within their (overwhelmingly straight) communities.

This is often wholly successful: a straight identity can be maintained indefinitely, while the man continues to have regular or irregular sex with other men. Often also, it appears to lead to various states of questioning and confusion about their identity, the most notable feature of which are the mental health risks attendant. These survived, many men appear to move on to some form of resolution, whether through a permanent accommodation with the female partner (and the adoption of a bisexual identity), or through some level of coming out as a gay man, or a combination of both.

7.1 *'Straight strategies'*

7.1.1 We're all totally straight

The first, most obvious and most popular strategy adopted by MSMs is simply to identify as straight: straight to the bootstraps, in most cases. Many respondents were emphatic that these men present themselves as totally straight. As one respondent said,

'These guys see themselves as totally straight. I don't think they're going to talk to anyone, including you, about having sex with men. They don't admit it in any context except for picking up ... the guys I used to see wouldn't admit being anything other than straight even to me, and I was having regular sex with them! They don't see themselves as different in any way to the macho stereotype.'

Many respondents also noted that 'straight' also means 'definitely not as gay'. As three respondents said,

'They do not think of themselves as being gay. They have a rigid, stereotypical view of what a gay man is, which is 'lonely, sad and unsuccessful'. They look at coverage of the Mardi Gras and feel that that sort of flamboyance is clearly not for them. That's what they see gay men as being like, and they don't want any of it. They don't realise that a gay man can be anything he wants to be, because they almost never know an out, proud, happy gay man, and there are no images of them in the media.'

'They attach a very negative connotation to being gay; and they know that any public disclosure of gayness is risky, dangerous.'

'They're fathers and husbands, with that identity, and they're living a double life. They don't identify with the gay stereotype because they don't want to have anything to do with 'gay', for fear of being identified.'

There is in the 'totally straight, not at all gay' identity the not inconsiderable contradiction that straight men don't have sex with other men. Many MSM sense or acknowledge this contradiction, and adopt strategies to deal with the confusion and anxiety that it creates. These strategies are dealt with in the next section of this chapter.

Many MSMs, however, don't appear to even recognise the contradiction. Their private version of the straight identity cuts them the slack to have sex with other men

The first way of doing this is to see the sex with other men as a purely physical act with absolutely no other consequence: as inconsequential as scratching an itch. As one respondent said,

'They don't think of themselves as gay or bi ... it's just a matter of getting their rocks off. They don't rationalise about it, it's just "blowing a load", getting sexual release. I suspect that sometimes they don't even acknowledge to themselves that the sex has happened. I've seen one or two who have still been pulling off the condom as they've been walking out, they're in such a hurry to get out of here, and you won't see them for weeks or months.'

This is very similar to another attitude identified, which is to simply put the behaviour in a box and isolate it off from real life. As the respondent above said, moments later it simply didn't happen. As two respondents said,

'They don't see themselves as gay, but as heterosexual. I don't think many of them try to stop and reconcile their heterosexual identity with the fact that they have occasional sex with guys. It's within their norm, something that they do occasionally.'

'There's a lot of deception and misery involved: the wife and kids are at home, and dad's out on the prowl. Wake up, go to work, check out the beats on the way to work, look for sex in the showers before and after work, on the way home do the beats, have tea, then go for a walk in the park. They may not even be wholly aware of the deception or the sex-seeking: it's just a routine work day, and the sex is just something that happens, it isn't acknowledged or explored.'

Taken to the extreme, this type of thinking can lead to a sort of 'I'm here but I'm not here' mindset while seeking and having, a type of total disassociation from reality that to observers seems ridiculous. As a police officer said,

'Some guys are very surprised to see us turn up at a beat. They seem to think that they're in an invisible bubble, that because they don't look abnormal, then they won't be seen as abnormal, they'll be perceived as normal. They seem to think that its quite normal for two perfectly average-looking blokes to disappear into the bushes together in a public park. Maybe they feel camouflaged by their normalcy, or maybe they're just lost in the moment.'

Two other respondents made similar comments:

'I'm not sure how these guys see things. They will drive over, and park the car outside for everyone to see, but then they'll come inside and ask me to close the blinds and turn off the lights, as if that isn't suspicious enough, after all, the neighbours know all about me. They think with their dicks, not with their heads. They're not thinking clearly, sometimes they're even panicking, they just want to get it over with.'

'There's another guy that I'm aware of who has a professional job, but who will sit for hours in the public toilet. I've gone there, gone away and come back hours later and he's still sitting there. I've wondered a bit about him. Like, where does he get the time to do it? Do his employers wonder where he is? Doesn't he get bored? Is he locking himself in a cubicle to get away from his life?'

Perhaps the answer simply is, as one respondent said, 'they're thinking with their dicks, they just want sex.'

A little on from this position is the man who acknowledges that he has occasional (or even regular) sex with men, but is quite confident and secure within his straight identity and the sex with men does not threaten that security or confidence. As three respondents said,

'Many of the married ones think of themselves as straight. They would be shocked if other people thought of them as bi or homo. Their occasional dalliances have nothing to do with their sexuality, or their identity ... they see it as 'not really sex'.'

'They don't see themselves as gay – homo – queer, but as straight men who just happen to like sex with men on the odd occasion. It's just a physical issue for them, a release, there's nothing emotional about it,

and therefore it's not gay. They're married, they're not gay. 'Gay' is often seen to mean having womanly, female tendencies.

'They see themselves as straight men who have sex with other men occasionally. This might just be when the opportunity presents itself: it is not always sought out. Then there's the straight guy who seeks it out. They might only do it occasionally, but they know where to go. Many are quite content to leave it at that. They don't want friendships or relationships. It's "I have sex, then I go back to my normal life".'

A little further on from this position is the MSM who is publicly straight but in private is somewhat more bent. As one respondent said,

'They're all straight. If you told them anything else, they'd probably punch your lights out. I know six guys like that, only one of which might sometimes identify as bisexual. They're living in a fantasy world. They present the macho image, but they're not really that person. Their image is straight, macho, a fighter, but behind closed doors, they're willing to learn and wanting to try anything ... often stuff their wives won't do.'

'Often stuff their wives won't do' was an often-repeated theme. Some men see male-to-male as a counterpoint and supplement to their heterosexual activity, and thus something that doesn't compromise their straight identity. It is nothing more than an 'enjoyable change' from an otherwise settled heterosexual routine. For some, being the passive partner is a release from being the dominant partner. For others, it's just a matter of getting more sex, more variety, and not being too concerned about labels. As three respondents said,

'they're married men who aren't getting enough sex at home, or enough sex variety ... the missus won't give me blow jobs, it's a "lights off, nightie on" situation.'

'They see themselves as straight. They're looking for more than they can get from their female partner. They say, "You make love to a woman, but you fuck a man". They appear to be happily straight – they like their wives, families, homes – but they want the enjoyment of male sexuality, too. Even though they appear to be happy, they would like to be more open about their sexuality.'

'I had sex with a guy in his late 20s. He was married with two kids and sexually, he wanted to do everything. As he put it, he "managed to escape" two or three times a year "for a feast" and he would go to a sauna and do everything that he wanted to do. He was from the country. He would identify as heterosexual, because he's in an ongoing heterosexual relationship.'

As the end-point in this particular spectrum, there would appear to be some men who just do what they want to do, without regard for labels. As two respondents said,

'An ex-partner of mine is still a married man. He doesn't identify as gay, but is quite happy going to gay parties and having sex with men, leading what we would understand to be a gay lifestyle.'

'Mostly, they don't see themselves as gay or homosexual. They don't want to be labelled. They might say that there's an element of experimentation in their behaviour. There's a danger that publicity that uses 'gay' will be wide of the mark, that they won't relate to it.'

7.1.2 No (or not many) worries!

The groups we just looked at not only identify as straight, but do not appear to see their homosexual behaviour as an issue or concern. At the risk of stating the obvious, these men are not part of the gay community. They spend their lives in the straight community, and firmly believe themselves to be part of it. And things seem OK for them.

There seems to be a common belief among gay men that there is something wrong with the lives of straight-identifying MSMs (or at the very least something that needs improving); that they are confused and unsatisfied; that they need to come out; and that life would be better for them if they did.

This does not appear to be the case with a substantial number of MSMs. In the same way that ignorance about the diversity of gay lifestyles breeds misperceptions by straights, so too does the lack of identified, happy straight MSMs breed a belief among gay men that this lifestyle is not possible. But many interview respondents, including many who are gay, believed it to be a workable lifestyle choice for many straight MSMs. As three respondents said,

'It's not necessarily painful or difficult for them. They get a blowjob on a Friday night and that's it. It poses no great dilemma. I'd venture to suggest that about half of them are quite happy with things that way.'

'They are happy with their straight identity, and many of them are comfortable with whatever compromise they have worked out to rationalise the fact that they have sex with men. If they don't think about it too much, this situation can be maintained indefinitely.'

'Some don't see the need to come out. They're having a fun time, happily married with a wife and kids and a male fuck on the side. They don't feel the need to go any further, and it can (and does) work for them, so long as he is having regular sexual health checkups and the female partner isn't at risk of STIs. That, however, is where the problem can lie: it's hard to convince them of the need for checkups, and for them to have the confidence to go and get tested.'

One respondent, however, felt that this accommodation might carry costs that were not obvious:

'Men who live in a heterosexual relationship, and that also have sex with men, are making a logical and sustainable lifestyle choice for the country. They may have to engage in considerable deceit and deception to maintain that choice, but it is nonetheless a popular lifestyle choice. From the ones that I know, that choice looks pretty attractive to me; although admittedly, I don't see the hidden costs of that choice, in terms of what it does to the man and to his relationship with his wife.'

Some men may be in a stable accommodation, not seeking to change it, but not happy about it either. As one respondent said,

'A common story (with married, 30s to 50s men) is that they're dissatisfied with the marriage but they don't feel a need to come out. It's a tortured life, but they appear to be happy to be in it. They are sexually dissatisfied, and the idea of having sex with a woman doesn't stimulate them. These are men who often made their life choices up to 30 years ago when there weren't many options, especially in the bush.'

This was primarily qualitative research, and we were unable to determine how many MSMs reach a stable and acceptable accommodation between their straight identity and their homosexual behaviour, but several respondents thought it to be a significant number: to several, half-and-half came to mind.

7.2 Questioning and confused

While many men might reach a stable accommodation, many do not. The seeds of questioning implant themselves at some stage, and at some level of the mind, and slowly grow, leading, it appears to increasing confusion about identity.

7.2.1 Homosexual and anti-gay

Respondent's comments indicated that there is a group of men who do have sex with men, and who do have anti-gay – and even violent anti-gay – opinions and behaviours.

We put this group within the 'questioning and confused' category rather than the 'straight strategies' group, because something has happened within their minds to evince an anti-gay attitude stronger than would be expected from environmental or interpersonal factors. We don't set ourselves up as psychologists, but several respondents suggested that at least one part of the explanation might be that for someone who is confused and increasingly anxious – let alone a card carrying member of a homophobic culture who feels the benefits and

comforts for him of that culture are increasingly under threat – it is easy for him to feel and act homophobic.

They deny what they do at the beats. They deny that they would prefer male-to-male sex. They deny who they are, and what they want. And yet it doesn't decrease the desire, only increase the discomfort until the two steadily resolve as self-hatred.

Commenting on this type, two respondents noted,

'There's the total denial type ... not only don't they not see themselves as gay or bi, they are often quite anti-gay. Their attitude is "I just let some faggot suck my dick, that's all it was". Once they cum, they get angry and aggressive. I've heard them blame gays for doing something they don't want to do; they feel they are coerced.'

'They're often the biggest cursers of gay guys. They act disgusted with them so they won't be identified or associated with them. The straight MSMs don't want to associate with the gay side of it at all. It's too dangerous for them.'

And from a police officer,

'The people we talk with down at the beats see themselves as normal people. Other police report that they can take great exception, and can get very agitated, if you suggest they're gay or homo. These are the sorts of people that can bash gays.'

7.2.2 Neither one nor the other

As we would expect, once the questioning process begins in earnest, its effect is to weaken the sense of being straight, rather than reinforce any sense of being gay. As two respondents said,

'They often don't know what they are, or what they want ... they feel uncomfortable, not knowing if they're one or the other ... and they seem to be trying to discover what they want. They're in between closeted and half-out. They say things like, "I'm not gay, I'm here for a social evening". They talk about their family, work. They'll often say if they're married; they often say they're not getting enough sex.'

'They have no idea of their self-worth when they step outside a heterosexual identity. There really isn't any well-defined or publicly accepted alternative identity, which is why so many stay with it, and so many have a major struggle creating an alternative identity for themselves.'

It reminds one of those Cold War movies, where the deserter crosses the foggy bridge from the known, stable but ultimately unwanted past to the exciting, unknown and potentially dangerous future. And there's still the danger of being rejected by both sides: of being caught in the middle. As one respondent said,

'Part of the struggle is to have a number of identities coexisting. One dual identity is "I'm a successful, well-educated professional" and "I'm a dirty hussy slut who's addicted to being fucked up the arse and filled with cum". There's no in-between, and no way out. One guy I know is married with four kids. He's a well-educated professional. I must have seen him 15 times now, and I've told him the safe sex message every time. Yet he still quite openly talks about getting fucked without a condom, which he still does, even after all this time. I'm starting to think that he doesn't even identify with his sexual behaviour, that the person who gets fucked unsafely is someone else, and that he will never get a STI. But I must admit I don't know what's going through his mind.'

7.2.3 Don't have sex

As Table 19 shows, 12% of respondents had not had sex with a man in the last year (more or less: the survey was conducted in October / November).

TABLE 19: WHEN RESPONDENTS LAST HAD SEX WITH MEN

Last sex	No	%
2003	219	88%
2002	13	5%
2001	7	3%
2000	2	1%
<2000	9	4%
No answer	34	
Total	284	

It appears that one strategy for addressing the questioning and confusion is simply not to have sex with men, while accepting one's homosexual feelings. This might be for lack of opportunity, not knowing how to go about it, or being too scared. Or it might be, as one respondent said, because the homosexual feelings are the basis of an active fantasy life:

'Some guys will fall in love with someone they know here in town, like the guy at the service station for example. That person doesn't know and, of course, they don't have sex. He has a fantasy that one day the guy will declare his love, and that they'll go off and live together. This can sustain him for long periods, without them actually doing anything about it. But one day the guy at the service station will start sending out very negative signals, or just disappear, and they will be devastated ... then they'll get in touch with our service about grief and loss issues'.

7.2.4 Take up religion

Many respondents, including several who had been members of fundamentalist congregations, thought that one strategy adopted by confused and questioning MSMs was to seek an outlet through the church: as one respondent said, to 'find a cosmic escape hatch to get away from something in our lives':

'I have thought long and hard about those years (when I was part of a fundamentalist congregation). I realise now that I was trying to run away from my homosexuality. My church had over 300 people, and I realised later that there were a significant number of gay people there – my guess would be upward of 5%. I've realised subsequently that what we had in common was that we were all trying to run away from something; we all had to find some sort of cosmic escape hatch to get away from something in our lives. So I guess it's not surprising that there were quite a few gay people there.'

Others offered other possible explanations of what these men might be thinking:

'Some of the born-again Christians have gay feelings. They're hiding from their own sexuality and their fantasies; they're denying and repressing them.'

'The mentality is like, "Homos are men who live in the big cities and don't care what other people think of them. They are big sinners. I'm only a small sinner because I immediately regret what I've done and want forgiveness. I need to believe this about myself in order to keep living this lie. I don't think about what I do, I don't analyse it, it's just something that happens, but it's not who I am".'

'Faith communities offer an escape from sickness and sin. I think that many of these men have identified their attraction to men as a moral sickness, a sin that needs to be taken away from them.'

As we saw in the last chapter, churches are generally not supportive of homosexuality, and some are strongly opposed to it. Several respondents conjectured that confusion and questioning by MSMs who take up religion may be driving anti-homosexual attitudes within these churches.

'When it comes up for discussion, it's discussed with a passion bordering on fanaticism. Maybe there's been an unfortunate instance in their lives, or in the lives of someone close to them.'

'I know a divorced man in his 30s who's got major questions about his own sexuality. He's just joined some obscure sect. In a discussion he initiated, he said in his opinion homosexuality is wrong and asked me for a copy of the bible so he could prove it. I think he's either frightened to admit it, or he's done it and he's terrified of thinking about it.'

'We had a very anti-gay Lutheran pastor here. He used to march down the street in town with a banner demanding that the Mardi Gras not be televised. I spoke to him about it, but there was no discussion, his mind was totally made up. He wanted the traditional family unit preserved and thought that gays were destroying it. I asked him why he was so obsessed about it, why it was such an important issue to him. He just turned his back and walked away. His reaction and other comments he had made me think, "Methinks thou doest protest too much".'

One respondent went further than conjecture, citing a particular instance,

"One man who I know who used to go to the sex clubs in Brisbane and was into heavy sex. As it happened, he was also a leading church identity, who was known to give lectures on the evils of homosexuality.'

While membership of evangelical communities may not necessarily lead MSMs to anti-homosexual attitudes, one respondent suggested that it doesn't lead to positive attitudes, either:

'They feel that the discrimination is something to be expected. They think, "It's the way things are, so I won't flaunt it, or be flamboyant". This leads to strong judgements about queeny, flamboyant gay men, like, "they make it hard for all of us by making it so visible".'

Society traditionally supports religious institutions and grants them significant benefits (such as tax-free status and freedom from anti-discrimination legislation) not only because so many people belong to them, but also because they are seen to be loving, charitable institutions and 'wellsprings of goodness'. However, the research suggests there may be a darker side: that men experiencing difficulties with their same-sex attraction are using these institutions to promote discrimination.

7.2.5 Have mental health issues

Questioning and confusion can in many situations be a normal part of resolving life's issues, especially with supportive friends, people to talk to, and expectation of societal support and the personal skills to work through emotional issues. Unfortunately, most MSMs don't have any of these. Worse, they might have spent ten, twenty, thirty years or more, hiding and denying, with no immediate hope of resolution. In many cases, the environmental and interpersonal pressures they face affect them so deeply, over so long, that mental illness becomes a major issue.

LIVING IN FEAR OF BEING FOUND OUT

Table 20 shows respondents level of concern about friends, relatives and workmates finding out they have sex with men. Over half were concerned, and almost half the sample were strongly concerned. Given that survey respondents were a fairly 'out' sample, this suggests how strong is the concern of being found out among men who have sex with men.

TABLE 20: RESPONDENTS CONCERN ABOUT FAMILY, FRIENDS OR WORKMATES FINDING OUT THEY HAVE SEX WITH MEN

Agreement	No.	%
Strong concern	92	41%
Concern	32	14%
Not sure	10	4%

Unconcern	33	15%
Strong unconcern	58	26%
No answer	59	
Total	284	

This concern translates into an abiding sense of fear. ‘Terrified, afraid, living in fear and scared’ were some of the ways were described as living their lives. The are afraid of the consequences of the environmental and interpersonal pressures described in the last chapter: rejection, homophobia, physical violence. As one respondent said,

‘I don't want people talking about me. No one would accept me if they knew ... I'm afraid of my friends finding out. I play rugby league, and I don't want anyone on the team to find out. My (female) partner doesn't know that I have sex with men, and I'm fearful that she would find out ... I'd hate anyone to find out what I am doing. I Also have two or three girlfriends and they don't know that I am that way either ... there's the humiliation of everyone knowing... I'm also concerned about my business and profile in the community ...

As one respondent noted, these feelings are also shared by openly gay men:

‘I have one friend in his late 40s who is known by a fairly broad circle as gay, but he's still terrified of being found out. It's very intimidating. Another guy who's fairly 'out' wouldn't sign a petition that was going around about recent changes to the law in Queensland. He was afraid that 'big brother' would go through the forms and 'out' people, he was terrified of a conspiracy.’

Those who identify as straight are afraid of admitting their sexuality to themselves, as well as losing their straight identity and its benefits. They are intimidated and do their utmost to keep their sexual behaviour a secret. Respondents described them as ‘furtive, and ‘isolated’ and said,

‘They wouldn't share it. They would lose their friends, they'd be disowned. A lot of these straight guys are afraid of losing friends, family, everything.’

‘They are primarily afraid that, as this is a small community, people will find out about them. Their circle of friends would be predominantly or exclusively heterosexual, and they risk being ostracised. . They also fear for the ramifications for their children (such as school-yard taunts); and the effect on their father-child relationships.’

‘They are fearful of being identified. For example a big worry is whether their car will be seen ... and with good reason! There's a local Christian here that lives opposite the big park that's a beat. She sits on her veranda, with binoculars, and takes down number plates and reports them to the police. She's put the local police under enormous pressure to “do something”.

The sense of fear leads MSMs to close themselves off, to isolate themselves and their feelings. As one respondent said,

‘I never let myself get too close to anyone, and I'd never let people get too close to me. People used to say, “You've always got this wall around you, you never open up, there's a big part of you that no-one can get to”. It was about not being able to deal with my sexual feelings. It's a defence mechanism. You grow up hiding a part of yourself, never letting people get too close to you.’

Table 18 above showed who knows that survey respondents have sex with men. About one quarter of respondents are known fairly widely to have sex with men (with close friends most likely to know, then most people, then close family, then close workmates). About one quarter of respondents feel that nobody knows.

Given that the survey was likely to attract people who are prepared to disclose their activities, the percentage of MSMs who feel that nobody knows is likely to be substantially higher. This

was borne out by interviewees, who emphasised that 'they keep it discreet'; 'they don't discuss it with anybody'; 'it's the "love that dares not speak its name"'; 'they don't talk to anybody, because they're scared that someone might find out'.

UNWILLINGNESS OR INABILITY TO TALK

The consequence of this fear of being found out is that MSMs are unwilling or unable to talk about their sexual behaviour. As we saw with 'straight strategies', this unwillingness to talk may not be an issue if the behaviour itself is not seen as an issue. But when fear becomes an increasingly-important part of life, as it seems to do with many MSMs, then it needs to be resolved. It needs to be talked about – which is just what they don't, or can't do. As respondents noted,

'They wouldn't discuss it, they're silent. They are afraid to talk because of fear of being identified. They're hiding their sexuality ... they're in hiding mode.'

'They understand that they want sex with guys, but it totally doesn't fit in with the rest of their life. They don't know how to come to terms with it. Who can they tell? Who can they talk with?

'Their mentality is 'don't talk about it, don't get caught, don't get sprung or all shit will come down on you'.

'They won't tell you much about themselves, even if you ask questions.'

'Perhaps not so much "no-one knows", as "it's never discussed".'

This lack of communication appears to extend in many cases to their sex partners. In general, they don't appear to talk to other men that they pick up on the beat for sex, and even several respondents with longstanding, straight-identifying sex partners knew almost nothing about them. And you never, ever say hello to someone in street that you've had sex with.

DECEITFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Not surprisingly, efforts to avoid being caught lead men to deceive their friends and loved ones. Only having gay friends around 'who look and act straight' and 'complicated excuses to explain their absence from home if required' were two strategies mentioned. There is also the stultifying effect on relationships. As one respondent noted'

'The common response is, "it's no-one's business except mine". On one level that's fair enough, but on another level, I think that my family and friends need to know the key aspects of my life, or else there can never be a caring, supporting, trusting relationship between us. Separation and secrecy aren't good for an intimate, trusting relationship.'

This bottling-up of issues, fears and concerns, the hiding, the deceit in relationships, all have their personal toll, as we shall now see.

LOW SELF-ESTEEM

Many respondents noted the low self-esteem that is both a reason for and a consequence of being unable to resolve the questioning and confusion about their sexuality. As they noted,

'I felt like the odd one out. All my straight friends go out with partners. I stay at home with my father. I want someone by my side, someone to lean on.'

'I don't look people in the face because I feel ashamed, I don't know what people will say.'

Low self-esteem afflicts not just the questioning and confused MSM, but the out gay men. The lack of environmental and social support can eat away at one's sense of self, as respondents noted:

'Lots of gay guys have low self-esteem, especially when they get to middle age and lose their good looks, and they can tend to let themselves go.'

'With the sistagirls, it is near impossible to have a relationship or long-term partner. This raises significant self-esteem and self-worth issues, and probably feeds into alcohol abuse.'

'There's this endless sense of not being normal, of not fitting in; even with all I've experienced in life, I start to think that I'd like to be other than gay.'

DEPRESSION

When asked what they saw as the major health risks facing MSM, about one third of interview respondents nominated mental health issues before they nominated sexually-transmitted infections. As two said,

'The mental health and sexual health issues are inextricably linked, and I think the mental health issues are more important. Desperation makes you vulnerable.'

First up are the mental health issues. The secrecy, the stress of keeping it secret can overwhelm them. They get depressed, go to doctors and get onto antidepressants.'

Respondents were mainly referring to depression, anxiety, stress and suicidality. As they said,

'Of all the gay men I know, I don't know one who hasn't been on antidepressants at some stage.'

'People have to spend a lot of energy hiding and disguising their sexuality. It leads to depression and to worse mental health problems.'

'That's why I see it as a mental health issue. You feel beaten up by what you hear said about gays. People talk in the most unpleasant terms, and you're always having to face the fact that they're talking about you.'

'Lots of guys turn up (at our sexual health clinic) from (the) mental health (clinic), stressed and depressed, and its often related to sexuality.'

'Aboriginals have fewer options than white people in terms of doing something about it, in terms of packing up and moving away. Some Aboriginal men I've known have had sex with men, and not known how to deal with it. That then raises issues like increased drinking, low self-esteem, sex with anything that moves, violence and homelessness issues.'

Two respondents described their own personal experiences.

'Emotional well-being and mental health are the important things for me ... dealing with the loneliness and isolation and the stigma and the sense of depression that comes with them. You take on a sense of detachment: I've become a lot more insular since I've moved back here (to a country city, from Brisbane).'

'I had chronic depression. I'd lock myself in my room for weeks on end. Till you experience it, you don't imagine what it's like ... I'd never thought of myself as someone who would get depressed. And it was all sexuality-related.'

As Table 21 shows, this picture of widespread loneliness and depression is borne out by survey respondents: almost four in ten usually felt lonely or depressed because of their desire to have sex with men. Three factors contribute to the impact of this finding: that the proposition says 'usually' rather than 'occasionally'; that almost two in ten strongly agree with it; and that this sample might be expected to be better adjusted to their sexuality than MSMs generally.

TABLE 21: AGREEMENT WITH PROPOSITION THAT 'I USUALLY FEEL LONELY OR DEPRESSED BECAUSE OF MY DESIRE TO HAVE SEX WITH MEN'

Agreement	No.	%
Strongly agree	41	18%
Agree	52	23%
Not sure	16	7%
Disagree	28	12%
Strongly disagree	88	39%
No answer	59	
Total	284	

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE

There is an extensive literature on the use of alcohol and other drugs to address emotional issues, and a small but growing literature on its use by gay-community identifying people¹. As one respondent said,

'I know one man who's been married to his childhood sweetheart for over 20 years. He sees himself as straight, but he's always checking out other men, and he has sex with men. He's split up with his wife three times, had problems with alcohol and drugs and violence. It's a miserable situation for him. He doesn't want to let his family and his kids down: he doesn't want to be seen as a disappointment. So he hides behind the myth of "he can't be one of them, he's married".

This picture of seeking escape in drugs was echoed by other respondents:

'There's this guy who comes to me when he's drunk. After we have sex, he sometimes talks about his emotions. He often says that he wants to do himself in, being gay. It's the stigma attached to it, most importantly the rejection, being rejected by the people he loves. He rationalises his situation through grog. It's what gives him the energy level and the willingness to go over to someone's house and do it ... it's the grog.'

'A lot of times the guys that I had sex with were drunk. Lots of the non-identifying guys drink heavily and smoke dope, and have done so from an early age, a lot of which has got to do, I think, with dealing with their sexual feelings. For these guys, having sex when you're sober is a shame thing.'

'Some "blame" their behaviour on the alcohol – "I'm pissed, so any hole will do".'

One respondent saw alcohol and drug misuse as a short step from broader self-harm:

'Some gay men get into major piercing and tattooing, which is pretty close to self-mutilation. Beyond that is the drug abuse. In (the small town that I come from), there are several gay guys with serious drug issues. So I see it as more of a mental health issue, which can then become a sexual health issue.'

VIOLENCE AND RAPE

While no clear picture emerged, one respondent claimed to:

¹ One example is Beyond Perceptions: A report on alcohol and other drug use among gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer communities in Victoria (Murnane, A. Centre for Youth Drug Studies, Melbourne, June 2000). The study found that dealing with emotional issues (coming out/establishing sexual identity, low self-esteem, depression, insecurity, sense of oppression, inhibition, family conflict, abuse [physical/sexual/verbal] were the main reasons for drug/alcohol use/misuse.

'deal with 10 or so cases a year of gay men who have been raped by so-called straights. There are probably many more.'

One police respondent also noted the occasional case of same sex domestic violence.

SUICIDE

Almost a third of interview respondents mentioned suicide considered by confused and questioning MSMs. 'If anyone found out about me, I'd have two options: leave town or kill myself' was a commonly-repeated sentiment. As one respondent said,

'There are big mental issues if you spend your life being frightened. The country mentality is that if you're discovered as a pofter, then suicide is your only option.'

Some told us they had contemplated suicide themselves:

'I thought about suicide. The only thing that stopped me was what it would do to my family ... but it crossed my mind plenty of times.'

'If I didn't have my head screwed on right, I probably would have committed suicide by now. There's nowhere to go to meet people.'

Others knew of situations where sexuality was a key ingredient in a suicide:

'There was one young guy I knew who only ever wanted his parent's support, but they banished him from the home and told him they'd never accept him. He killed himself eventually.'

'An 18 year old guy had been in and out of the mental health clinic for sexuality-related issues which led to alcohol and drug problems. They released him one Saturday. He borrowed a mate's car, lined up a tree in the main park in town and drove straight into it.'

'Several people I know in remote areas have struggled with their sexuality, and have thought about or attempted suicide. They'll all engaged in destructive behaviour.'

Although many respondents did not know of specific instances, many felt or had gained the impression that suicides (particularly by young people) were linked to homosexual feelings. As one respondent said,

'I think suicide is worse in smaller towns, but with youth suicide you often never find out what's really behind it. It's not like the father who's son suicides is going to tell everyone that they had a fight that morning about the son being gay, and that he was thrown out of the house. Police try to keep a tight lid on it for privacy reasons, and to discourage copycats. And they don't report suicides in the paper, they like to present an image of a happy family town'.

7.3 *Struggling toward resolution*

There appears to be a group of MSMs who have pretty much moved beyond the 'questioning and confused' stage but have not yet moved toward resolving their identity. One respondent described them as 'the honest type': they realise and accept their situation, they want to resolve it, but they haven't worked out what to do yet. How it works for some is,

'They see themselves as heterosexuals. But when they start getting turned on by men, they start questioning that. Then they fight it till they can't fight it any more. How long it takes depends on family attitude and religion.'

One respondent said of these men,

'They will be asking questions and wondering what a gay lifestyle would be like for them. They will be confused and anxious, looking for help but not knowing where to get it. They don't know who they ask, or

tell, or who they can trust. Their question is how do they get out of the current lifestyle and commitments. They need a safe environment to get information and come to terms with their sexuality at a pace that suits them.”

Another respondent described his own situation:

‘I was married, but I knew that I wanted sex with guys. I was happy with my wife, and monogamous when I was with her. But the more I realised that I wanted sex with guys, the more I realised that I shouldn’t be with her. And once you realise you shouldn’t do something, you shouldn’t do it.’

For some, it becomes a matter of costs and benefits:

‘The question for a lot of these men is whether the advantages of family outweigh the costs of secrecy and denial that they must maintain, and the costs of being exposed. I think that a lot of them know that their own personal balance is tipped in favour of coming out, but just can’t do it. The main question these marrieds struggle with is how to come out to the wives, kids, family and everyone else in a small town. It raises all sorts of uncomfortable issues.’

‘Then one day they realise their true sexual feelings and they think “oh shit”. They want to get out, but they realise that they have to maintain the façade.’

‘It’s more a matter of them stepping out of their comfort zone: the “happy heterosexual couple” is a very easy label to wear. By discarding it, they put themselves at risk.’

7.4 Resolution

Eventually, many MSMs reach a stage where they feel that they need to acknowledge their homosexual feelings, and so make them part of their identity.

7.4.1 ‘I’m bisexual’

The first and most obvious way to resolve these feelings into an identity is to label yourself as bisexual. This label appears increasingly popular in big cities, and particularly among young people, who like sex with both genders.

‘Bisexual’ appears to be both an honest description of sexual behaviour as well as a sort of halfway-house identity, that you first try on when reflecting on who you are. If you like the fit, you’ll try it out with others. Plenty of people are calling themselves bisexual (especially on the gaydar and gay.com websites where describing themselves as straight would be somewhat absurd) and in bars and among likeminded peers.

Because it means ‘straight-identifying’ as well as ‘available for sex with guys’, ‘bisexual’ appears to be used mostly in sex-seeking situations, and to be a private (or semi-private) rather than a public label. That implies there’s a conversation about sexual behaviour going on, which, as we have seen, is not common among MSMs; and it’s a harder conversation to have the smaller the community gets. Accordingly, we did not gain the impression that ‘bisexual’ was a popular or common label among MSMs outside sex-seeking situations. As one respondent said,

‘A small number will identify as “bi”, but even that becomes too complex. If you’re identifying as heterosexual, or live in a highly-heterosexual community, to label yourself as anything except heterosexual sets you apart from the community ... so they tend not to choose a label.’

A primary attraction of the bisexual label, as one respondent said, is ‘it’s not as bad as being a homo’:

‘It’s not as bad as being a homo (as in “I’m not a poof, I only do this occasionally” (such as when I go to Brisbane, or with a long-time friend). It implies a bit of licence to enjoy a range of behaviours. However, I

don't come across it as a positive image. There's an extroverted sexual type who projects their bisexuality as part of a libertine lifestyle. But it's usually fairly exploitative, where friends and contacts are consumed as sexual partners and discarded.'

Bisexuality is not only 'not as bad as being gay', but does give MSMs the feeling they still have one foot firmly in the straight camp. As respondents said,

'Lots of gays think that bisexuals are "only playing games", but it's not that at all. They need sex with men, like gay men do. But their heterosexual relationship is their safety. After they have sex with a guy, they can always go home to their family.'

'People think that if you're married, or if you've ever been married, or even with a woman, that you must be bisexual, that you can't be gay. That takes a hell of a lot of pressure off these guys.'

'Most of them, even the ones who are quite well networked with other country gay guys, would identify as bisexual rather than gay, an identity which would separate them from their family. And they would not use the label outwardly, but inwardly and personally.'

Tables 22 and 23 show the popularity of the bisexual label. It would appear that almost all (if not all) the men who had any sex with women identify as bisexual.

TABLE 22: HOW RESPONDENTS SEE THEMSELVES SEXUALLY

Sexuality	No.	%
Homo/gay	125	48%
Bi	95	37%
Het/str8	21	8%
Don't think about it	19	7%
No answer	24	
Total	284	

TABLE 23: WHO RESPONDENTS HAD SEX WITH IN LAST YEAR

Sex of person	No.	%
Men only	137	51%
More men than women	45	17%
More women than men	53	20%
Women only	14	5%
Man dressed as a woman	10	4%
Did not have sex in last year	11	4%
No answer	14	
Total	284	

7.4.2 'The wife / girlfriend knows'

As we explained earlier in this report, it would appear that many MSMs are married or in defacto relationships. The question then is whether their female partner knows of their homosexual activity. Of survey respondents who nominated as bisexual, 21% said 'yes'.

This would suggest the majority don't, which was also what interview respondents thought. Either they don't-know-don't-know, or, as one respondent said,

'Partners often "know, but don't know" ... there's a level of knowing without knowing. They pretend it's not happening.'

And, and as another commented,

'You get plenty of older guys on the bat who are quite effeminate: their hair is perfect, their nails are perfect, their clothes are presented perfectly. You think, "God, is your wife blind or what?" But the thinking seems to be, "They can't be gay, they're married". Sometimes I think that a lot of the wives know, but don't want to know: they've got a nice family, a nice car, regular income, kids; it's a lot to upset.'

A 1991 study spoke to women in South Australia who 'knew'². That study spoke of the distress felt by women about their partners homosexual behaviour (almost half of whom had left the relationship). We did not speak to female partners of bisexual men, and cannot tell their story, but one respondent said,

'When I do community or (social service) agency talks about this, most women find the notion that that their husband might be doing it with another man in a public toilet completely abhorrent. Their eyes widen in horror, they raise their hands to cover their mouths and they gasp.'

However, some of our respondents felt that many couples reached some sort of accommodation about his homosexual activity.

In the 1991 study, about one in five women knew about his homosexual interests before the relationships began. As one of our respondents said,

'I've known about my sexual preference since I was in primary school. I discussed it with my wife before we got married. There's a special bond between us, and it really works for us. But she doesn't like people to know about it; she'd be shocked if she knew that I was talking with you today.'

Others take a practical approach:

'I've been having occasional sex with a married guy for years. He's told his wife that he likes a man occasionally. She knows about me and accepts it. We never have sex at his place. I pick him up and drop him off, and she waves hello through the front window. That sort of situation is very rare. She understands that it's a side of him and something that he needs, but she's stipulated one person, and only occasionally.'

'I met a guy for sex who has been married for 30 years. His wife knows. She accepts his explanation that "it's an itch that has to be scratched occasionally". I also know a bisexual bodybuilder, whose wife knows. She was concerned about HIV; she was asking questions. She is aware that there's a possible problem.'

'I know one guy who's married and his wife is aware he has sex with men. Sometimes he has gay men stay with him, and his wife will make a quiet excuse to go to town for a while.'

'On rare occasions, the sistagirl and the wife might talk about it and come to some accommodation.'

'I do know one wife who suspects her husband. She watches *Queer as folk*, and one episode features a character she reckons is her husband. She taped it for him, and made jokes about it.'

Sometimes, of course, if the wife also likes sex with women, the accommodation might be particularly convenient for both:

'I know a gay guy who is married to a lesbian. They also have a house (away from here) and they don't live together much. Their kids know about the arrangement, but friends and neighbours don't. It works well for them, but it's not the sort of thing they could talk to work colleagues about.'

² Mahamati, *When the 'other woman' is really another man: a report on the needs analysis for the women partners of bisexual men*, AIDS Council of South Australia, Adelaide, 1991.

There were also several stories about bisexuality in the context of threesomes and sex with other couples. As one respondent said,

'I like both sexes. Me and my girlfriend sometimes have threesomes, she likes it a lot. She would rather we did that than I go off on my own to be with a bloke.'

If this sounds like a rosy picture of accommodation and acceptance, we would again caution that we spoke almost exclusively to male respondents, and did not hear first-hand of the grief and pain suffered by many women in this situation.

7.4.3 Coming out

As we saw previously, about one quarter of survey respondents are known fairly widely to have sex with men (with close friends most likely to know, then most people, then close family, then close workmates), and almost half see themselves as homosexual or gay. Interview respondents also felt that close friends (usually female) were the most likely to know.

There are, of course, degrees of outness and an MSM will only come out if it is his interests to do so. Although we have presented these interests as peace-of-mind and well-being in this report, there is also the very important interest of finding sex. As one respondent noted,

'A person generally won't disclose their identity unless there's an opportunity for sex. There's no point disclosing it. And when they do disclose it, it might be in subtle ways. I might put a lot of energy into striking up conversations to determine if you're available. I might start wearing a gold bracelet that hangs down a bit. I might hang around in newsagents looking at the muscle magazines. And if the opportunity arises for sex, I'll make sure that I look drunk.'

The degree of difficulty faced by out men varied markedly according to different respondents. On the one hand, there were the stories of harassment, violence, discrimination and ostracism we have already reported. On the other, many respondents felt that out men didn't have a particularly hard time of it.

Young people, particularly, were felt to be able to form supportive groups where varieties of sexualities were known and acknowledged. As one said,

'In country towns, everyone seems straight – but they're not. Everyone knows about me being gay. In (the last town he lived in, population 13,000), I hung around in a group – about 15 lesbians, 10 bisexuals and 10 gay guys.'

Other men reported that being gay was not a major issue, or that it had been overcome:

'I've never had any problems being gay here. I've never been harassed. My family never had any problems with it, and neither did my workmates.'

'A lot of the out gay guys are "born and bred". They don't seem to have problems; they've been accepted by their families.'

'With the middle class professional men, coming out might be some comfort for them. Some do not find it a difficult social transition. Some maintain healthy social networks, including friends from the past when they were married.'

'At the nightclub (in a remote mining town), there were a few out guys arm in arm and cuddling. People didn't care, they've known one of the guys for years, and he's been out since he was a teenager.'

Among respondents, it appeared that those who were the most 'straight-acting' reported the least problems, and vice versa. The offence may not be the homosexuality as much as, as straight people are still heard to say, 'the shoving it down our throats'. These sentiments were explained by an Indigenous respondent:

'In the communities, 'straight' men will usually be having sex with sistagirls. The community might be aware of the situation, but no-one says anything. While sistagirls may be accepted, 'flaunting' their sexuality is not. It's not talked about: the community don't want to know the details. Individuals might be accepted individually for who they are, but the homosexuality is not condoned.'

However, another respondent felt, as he said, that the 'Priscilla / Mardi Gras types ... don't seem to have a particularly hard life due to being gay:

'Most towns, even down to quite small sizes, have someone who is known or suspected or understood to be gay. These are generally people who think of themselves as gay, as in Priscilla / Mardi Gras gay. They often work in health, or in hospitality, and are typically in their 30s or 40s. They are generally not married. They either don't have sex locally (waiting till they travel) or they are selective about what they do, and who they tell they are gay. Sex partners might come from a particular set of late night drinkers, or from visitors to town.'

Although 'coming out' is the end of the spectrum of responses in this report, it by no means true that all out gay men live happily ever after. Some, as one respondent noted, succumb to the temptations of the straight life:

'One person I know came from a small town south of here. He was married with kids, then divorced, and then moved to Brisbane, came out and lived an openly homosexual life there for about five years. But then he went back to the country town, remarried and went back to being a model heterosexual. His new wife has no idea of this homosexual part of his life. Apparently, after his first divorce, he decided to explore his sexuality, but in the end couldn't deal with the fear that his mother and sisters would find out about it.'

Others, while recognising that accepting that a gay identity is the only path for them, nonetheless pine for the security and acceptance of the straight life they've left behind, often overlooking, as immigrants and exiles so often do, that the homeland they remember has itself changed out of sight:

'Country gay guys often say to me that they wish they were straight. One gay guy I know who wishes he was straight has a version of a man that is very narrow and misogynist. It's formed early from parents and school and sort of reinforced and even idolised by his knowledge of what he's missing out on. He understands the power that goes with identifying as a heterosexual white man. It's a very big thing to relinquish, and he knows that he gave it up when he came out.'

In the same light, others consider it a poisoned chalice: not a choice, but a tough hand that life has dealt them:

'I correct people when they talk about sexual preference, rather than sexual orientation. A man may prefer to have sex with another men, but it's not a preference in terms of a choice. It's the way we are, not a choice we make, like some people think. If you use the same logic, you must then say that all people have felt strong sexual and emotional desires for people of the same sex, but have "chosen" to be heterosexual. That's quite clearly absurd. It's equally absurd when you consider the benefits that accrue to being straight, and the enormous disadvantages of being identified as gay.'

Others convince themselves people don't know they're gay, or hope that they're seen as straight. As two respondents said,

'There's what I call the glass closet: when you live your life afraid that people will find out you're gay, when in fact everyone already knows. I know this mid-20s guy who's an absolute screamer: he minces around town flapping his wrists and being so camp. Yet he's terrified that "people will find out". I feel like grabbing him by the shoulders and yelling, "Everyone already knows".

'They would hope that the assumption was made about them that they are "het", rather than necessarily seeing themselves as "het". "Gay" is a label they take from the public domain and attached selectively and in bursts to themselves. To the world, they think they are seen as normal, straight guys.'

Finally, both the survey and interviews turned up respondents who considered themselves as gay but did not have sex with men (or only had sex very occasionally, and didn't seek it out). As one said,

'I'm happily married with kids. I'm gay, but not sexually active. I value my relationship with my wife more than having sex with other men. We've been together for 25 years. My sexual preference is gay. I'd choose men for sex and avoid sex with women; but I choose the lifestyle that suits me best, which is my marriage.'