

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Study of sexual practices and relationship patterns in men who have sex with men

Rajat M. Oswal^{1*}, Dinesh M. Rathor², Falguni M. Patel³, Kamlesh R. Dave⁴, Ritambhara Y. Mehta⁵

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Medical College Baroda, Vadodara.

²Associate Professor and Medical Superintendent, Institute of Mental Health and Hospital, Agra, U.P.

³Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry, SMIMER Medical College, Surat.

⁴Associate Professor, ⁵ Professor & Head, Department of Psychiatry, Government Medical College Surat, Gujarat, India.

ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Men who have sex with men (MSM) is a behaviourally determined group which forms a vital connection in HIV transmission. Their sexual practices and relationship patterns are less explored areas as this is a hidden population and the social stigma and legal issues associated with it. This study was carried to study the sexual behaviours, relationships and perception of HIV-AIDS risk in MSM. **MATERIALS AND METHODS:** Fifty MSM were studied who attended a community based organization for MSM. One to one interviews were carried out to study the sexual behaviours, relationships and perception of HIV-AIDS risk in MSM using a semi-structured questionnaire. **RESULTS:** The age of first sexual relationship with a male was less than 18 years in 82% of the subjects and it was coercive in 20% of MSM studied. Anal sex was the preferred sexual act with 88% engaged in receptive role while 48% engaged regularly in insertive role and 76% had ready availability of partners. 62 % were fearful of contracting HIV due to history of unsafe sex in recent past. Sixty two percent of the subjects were married. More than half (54%) of the MSM were having multiple sexual partners. **CONCLUSION:** Early first sexual relation is seen in majority of MSM and sexual coercion is a reality for many. Anal sex is the preferred sexual act and multiple relationships seem to be prevalent. Targeted interventions should keep these factors in mind in light of HIV transmission.

Key words: Sexual behaviour, relationships, Homosexual, HIV, MSM.

INTRODUCTION

MSM (men who have sex with men) is a self-explanatory behaviourally determined term based on their sexual activity. They are usually difficult to recruit in studies as they are a hidden population due to stigma and legal problems associated with it. It is still criminal offence to have same sex sexual relationship in India. ¹It is also considered taboo by society at large. court in 2009 only to be reversed by

Supreme Court in 2013.¹ So due to illegality MSM indulge in what is a criminal offence in India. It was decriminalized by Delhi high also MSM are not at liberty to discuss their sexual behaviour. Sexual practices of MSM constitute a major concern due to HIV transmission and need to be explored.

The relationships of homosexuals do not follow the pattern of heterosexual relationship both due to legal and social issues. Multiple partners and frequent change of partners is the norm and long term relationships are few and rare. MSM not only have sex with men but with women as well complicating the matters to a great extent. This also increases the risk of HIV transmission in the society. The sexual behaviours especially in the light of HIV infection have been of concern in this population. MSM also hide their

*Corresponding Author:

Dr. Rajat M. Oswal,
E 201, Vishranti Greens,
30 Meters off Gotri Road,
Opposite Yash Complex, Gotri,
Vadodara, Gujarat, India 390021
Contact No: 9426886276
Email: rajatoswal@yahoo.com

homosexuality their families and near ones. This exposes their spouses to HIV infection. They also avoid contact with general health care facility as well which increases their anxiety about the infection.

There are hardly any studies from India exploring the sexual behaviours, relationships and perception of HIV-AIDS risk in MSM. The study aims to better our understanding about MSM especially with regards to their sexual behaviours, their relationships and perception of HIV-AIDS risk.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study included 50 MSM (men who have sex with men) attending a community based organization (CBO) working for prevention of STD/HIV/AIDS among MSM. In India it is difficult to recruit MSM as they are not forthcoming due to social stigma and legal issues regarding such relationships. We have used convenience sampling as the recruiting technique to study this population. Interviews were conducted in privacy and confidentiality was maintained. Information collected included the demographic profile, sexual behaviours & relationships and perception of HIV-AIDS risk using a semi structured Proforma. Interview was conducted only after obtaining written informed consent from the participants and in a language they understood clearly. They were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they could pull out of the study at any time. They were also informed that they could refuse to answer any question if they were not comfortable answering it.

All the findings were analysed statistically using Microsoft excel and an attempt was made to compare the results of the present study with similar other studies available.

RESULTS

Fifty (50) MSM were studied who gave informed consent to participate in the study. All of them were residing in Surat city of Gujarat in urban locality. The data generated was analysed and the results are as follows.

The mean age of the population was 28.6 years and majority (84%) of them were literate. Occupation wise, 52% were doing a job, 28 % ran their own business while 14% were engaged in labour work. Most of them (66%) belonged to lower socioeconomic class. 40% of the subjects lived in joint families, 30% lived in nuclear family, and 24% of them lived singly, while 6% lived in extended families.

36% of the subjects were exclusively homosexual, 26% were predominantly homosexual but more than incidentally heterosexual, 14% were predominantly homosexual only incidentally heterosexual, 12% were equally heterosexual & homosexual and only 12% belonged to predominantly heterosexual group with occasionally homosexual relationship.

Table 1: First homosexual encounter

Sr. No.	Sexual Practice	Number of subjects n(%)
	Age of first homosexual relationship	
	<12 years	17 (34)
	13-15 years	19 (38)
	16-18 years	5 (10)
	>18 years	9 (18)
	First homosexual relation by your will?	
	Yes	40 (80)
	No	10 (20)

It was shocking to note that the debut of sexual relationship occurred in 82% of the subjects before the age of 18 years and for 34 subjects it was even below the age of 12 years. 20% of the subjects reported that their first sexual relationship wasn't consensual. Most of them (76%) had ready availability of partners and 54% had multiple sexual partners increasing the risk of HIV transmission. Among the participants less than one third (28%) were in a steady relationship with a partner. Among risky sexual behaviour anal sex is the riskiest for HIV transmission irrespective of being in insertive or receptive role. In our study 88% engaged in anal sex in receptive role while 48% engaged regularly in insertive role. All

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of them were educated in safe sex practices at the CBO they attended but still engaged in unsafe sex practices and 62 % were fearful of contracting HIV due to history of unsafe sex in recent past.

Table 2: Sexual practices and relationship

Sr. No.	Sexual practices and relationship	Number of subjects N (%)
	Type of sexual activities	
	Homosexual	25 (50)
	Bisexual	25 (50)
	Sexual activities performed with your homosexual partner	
	Wet Kissing	50 (100)
	Embracing	49 (98)
	Masturbating one's partner	22 (44)
	Being masturbated	15 (30)
	Fellatio in receptor role	34 (68)
	Fellatio in inserter role	29 (58)
	Inserter role in anal sex	24 (48)
	Receptor role in anal sex	44 (88)
	Preferred role in homosexual relation	
	Penetrative (Panthi)	10 (20)
	Passive receptive effeminate partner (Kothi)	33 (66)
	Both (Double decker)	7 (14)
	Ready availability of partner?	
	Yes, most of the times	38 (76)
	Occasionally	11 (22)
	No	1 (2)
	Long term homosexual relations	
	Steady with single homosexual partner	14 (28)
	Single partner but occasional sex with others	9 (18)
	Multiple sexual partners	27 (54)
	Marriage	
	Unmarried	19 (38)
	Married	31 (62)

DISCUSSION

This study explored the sexual behaviour and relationships of MSM and their beliefs regarding homosexuality and reaction of their families and society at large.

The sample consisted of 50 MSM in the age range of 18 to 55 years with mean age of 28.6 years. Most (84%) of them were literate and 52% were doing a job, 28 % ran their own business while 14% were engaged in labour work. Sixty six percent belonged to lower socioeconomic class. 40% of the

subjects lived in joint families, 30% lived in nuclear family, and 24% of them lived singly, while 6% lived in extended families. Eighty two percent of the men in the present study were below 18 years at the time of their first homosexual encounter. Out of them, 34% of the subjects had first homosexual act before the age of 12 years, while 38% had their first homosexual act in the age range of 13-15 years. This finding is similar to that of Prajapati et al who in their study in Ahmedabad found that 74.6% MSM had their first sexual act in adolescent age group (10-19 years).²Ravikumar et al in their study done in Mumbai reported that 56% of the respondents had initiated sex before completing 15 years of age and 81 % of MSM had engaged in sexual act before completing 18 years of age, the minimum legal age for men to engage in consensual sex in India. Debut of sex at young age leads to physical, sexual, mental trauma and increases the risk of contracting STI and HIV.³Jafar (1999) reported that age of first sexual encounter with another male was below 18 years for 98% of the respondents. ⁴ NACO reported that nationally the median age at first sexual experience among MSM was 16 years.⁵Mmbaga et al report the weighted mean age of sexual debut to be 12.2 years.⁶ Glick et al reported the mean age at same-sex sexual debut was 16.5 years among UMHS (Urban Men's Health Study)MSM and 17.0 years among SEA (Seattle Surveys)MSM.⁷

In the present study 80% of the subjects had their first homosexual relation by their own will. This data may vary among studies depending on the sample studied. Ravikumar et al reported more than half of the respondents (57%) had experienced consensual sex with the male partner while 31% reported that their first sex was coercive.³NACO also reported that about one fourth of MSM (25%) were forced at the time they had first sex with a male.⁵

Half of the participants were homosexuals while other half were bisexuals. The most

preferred sexual act was anal sex. They were involved in various sexual acts including but not limited to wet kissing (100%), embracing (98%), masturbating one's partner (44%), being masturbated (30%), fellatio in receptor role (68%), fellatio in inserter role (58%), inserter role in anal sex (48%) and receptor role in anal sex (88%). Most (76%) had ready availability of partners.

Ahm reported that according to MSM respondents various non penetrative and penetrative sexual acts were found. Out of them Kissing 170 (85%), touching 15 (7.5%) masturbation 45(22.5) frotting 30 (15%), and femoral sex 35 (17.5%), fingering 25 (12.5%), irrumatio 10 (5%), rimming 10 (5%) oral sex 75 (37.5%) and 189 (94.5%) anal sex. The most common act was anal sex.⁸

As far as relationship patterns were observed only 28% had steady relationship with single homosexual partners, 18% had single long term partner but would indulge in occasional sex with others, while 54% had multiple sexual partners. Verma et al reported that among MSM 56.9% of married men and 34.0% of single men having had three or more partners.⁹ Deb et al also reported that 58.3% of MSM had multiple partners in the last month with some having upto 8-9 partners.¹⁰

In this study 20% identified themselves as panthi (penetrative), 66% identified themselves as kothi (effeminate passive partner) and 14% were double deckers (both active & passive). Mmbagaet el reported that majority of the participants (83.3%) had a fixed positioning preference in penile-anal sex; 65.3% reported mainly preferring the receptive position while 18.0% preferred the insertive. The remaining 16.6% indicated that they practice both insertive and receptive penile- anal sex.⁶ Ravikumar et al in their study found that 43% of the subjects were kothi, 19% were panthi while 15% identified themselves as double deckers.³ A majority of MSM in IBBS study self-

identified themselves as predominantly Kothi (51%), followed by double decker (24%) and Panthi (19%).⁵

Sixty two percent of the subjects were married which is similar to the findings of Ahm et al which is 66%. Social norms make marriage desirable and to some extent with compulsion as well.⁸ Prajapati et al also report that half of the participants in their study were married.² Salve et al report that 55.9% were ever married.¹¹ Go et al reported that 57% of the MSM were married.¹² NACO in their report National Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance (IBBS) found that overall 64% were never married but in Gujarat almost half of them were married.⁵ Despite not desiring to marry many succumb to the pressures of family and end up marrying. These married MSM become a crucial link in the transmission of HIV.

CONCLUSION

The sexual debut of MSM occurs at a relatively early age with majority experiencing it well before the legal age for consensual sex even if we leave aside the legality of same sex sexual relations. The first experience is coercive in at least one fifth of the population. Most of them engaged in anal sex as preferred sexual activity and almost 3/4th had ready availability of sexual partners. More than half of them had multiple sexual partners which could increase the risk of HIV transmission. Less than a third had steady relationship with a partner and unsteady and short relationships seems to be the norm. Majority of them were receptive partners, many of whom were married leading to increased risk for HIV transmission. Due to social compulsion 62% were married and end up being a crucial link in HIV transmission. Despite being aware of HIV infection and how it spreads 62% were

afraid of contracting the virus due to history of unsafe sex in the recent past.

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