



napwa

**Gay Men, Sex and Decision-Making
Action-Research Project**

**Report
November 2005**

Acknowledgements

This project, *Gay Men, Sex and Decision Making* represents a collaboration between a number of people. First and foremost AFAO and NAPWA wish to thank the men who agreed to be interviewed. They also wish to acknowledge the interviewers: Rebecca Reynolds, Gary Spence, Tony Blattman, Jonathan Street, Mark Ravenscroft, Brett Hayhoe, Daniel Donnelly, and Daniel Alderman; the trainers: Jeanne Ellard, Dean Murphy, Sean Slavin and Kane Race; and for advice on conduct of the project and research ethics: Jeffrey Grierson, Alan Brotherton, Bill Whittaker, Bernard Kealey, and Martin Holt. The project was conceived by Phillip Keen and developed with the assistance of Peter Canavan and Simon Donohoe. Dermot Ryan and Ross Duffin also provided input. Sean Slavin analysed the data and wrote the report.

Background

This report details findings of the AFAO action-research project “Gay men, sex and decision making”. It will inform HIV education work conducted by AFAO and its members.

Support has been provided to this project by AFAO and the Research Link Project (NCHSR) in relation to training in interviewing skills and techniques, and in analyzing qualitative data. Funding for the project, including payment for the interview participants, travel and accommodation costs were provided by AFAO.

The incidence of HIV has increased across the country in recent years. This occurred initially in Victoria in 2000 and in NSW and QLD in 2002. This project represents a part of ANET’s response to rises in new infections.

In 2003 NCHSR researcher Kane Race proposed an approach to HIV education that encouraged gay men to build on their capacity to invent and refine pleasurable ways of having sex that “don’t boil down to the unprotected fuck as the definitive act”. Race proposed that after years of HIV organizations directing safe sex messages to gay men it was timely to ask them about what they value about sex and relationships, and how this intersects with values around preventing HIV transmission.

This project takes inspiration from the concept of “Better Sex” to explore ways of encouraging gay men to build and reflect upon their own capacity to invent and sustain positive and satisfying sex lives. This is a conscious attempt to rethink the role of HIV risk in the maintenance of safe sex practices.

Further, this project addresses a key ANET goal to increase the capacity and skills of educators around the country to engage with the practice and interpretation of social research. Educators based in Melbourne and Sydney have close regular links with the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society and the National Centre in HIV Social Research. Educators in other locations have sporadic or limited exposure to social research findings and practice.

Methodology & Timepoints

Selection Process

AFAO and NAPWA invited employees and volunteers from member organizations to apply to participate in the project in May 2004. Selection was made on the basis of a short written application. Participants were required to already be involved in work that puts them in regular direct contact with clients. Written applications required:

- a description of the applicant's current duties or relevant experience in working with clients on a one-to-one basis or in group settings;
- a brief description of an example of the applicant's use of research data in their work, and/or participation in research;
- indication of support from the applicant's manager for time spent on this project ; and
- a statement about the anticipated benefits of participation in this project to future work.

Interview Training Workshop

The first component of the training process was a full day workshop in interview techniques conducted in Sydney in June 2004. The workshop included the following components:

- an introduction to qualitative research;
- an introduction to the *Better Sex* concept;
- detailed hands-on training in interview techniques; and
- a discussion of the proposed interview schedule.

NB: A copy of the interview schedule is included in appendix 1.

Interviewing in the field

Interviews began in early 2005 after an extensive discussion of research ethics occurred with the assistance of the Victorian AIDS Council's Research Promotion and Ethics Committee (Copies of the information and consent forms are included in appendix 2).

Interviews were:

- arranged by participants with support from their employer/volunteer organization;
- conducted by participants with support from AFAO and the NCHSR Research Link Project;
- forwarded to AFAO for transcription;
- returned to the interviewers for cleansing and de-identification; and
- reviewed by a professional qualitative researcher with feedback provided to interviewers.

Analysis Workshop

A workshop in thematic analysis techniques was provided for participants in Sydney in May 2005. This workshop covered the coding of data, identification of themes, interpretation of themes, and distillation into report format. The themes developed at this workshop form the basis of this report.

Findings

As of the end of June 2005, 37 interviews had been completed. The overwhelming majority of participants were Australian born, from Anglo Saxon or Anglo Celtic ethnicity. The average age was 39 years. The sample was a mix in terms of educational background and work status. Half had attended or were attending university. Around half worked in white collar jobs, a quarter in blue collar jobs and a quarter were unemployed or under employed. One third of men were in relationships but only two individuals had not had any casual partners in the six months prior to interview. The mean number of casual partners in the previous six months was 36 and the median was 12 partners. All except one man identified as gay; the exception identified as bisexual. One third of the sample said they were HIV positive and two thirds said they were HIV negative.

What is sex?

The men in this study discuss sex in a wide variety of ways and imbue it with diverse meanings. Sex is not in any sense straight-forward, despite the desire by some men to represent or experience it as a simple pleasure.

Participants were asked, at the beginning of the interview, what counted for them as sex. This elicited varied responses based on different interpretations of the question. Some men understood the question as concerned with what counts as 'real' sex, and answered by trying to draw a theoretical line between some sexual activities regarded as 'real' and others that were not. Needless to say there was little consistency among the men who answered the question in this way. Some thought only penetration was sex while others thought kissing could be sex, and the sample was divided on whether oral sex was 'real' sex or not. The following two participants exemplify this contrast:

I think Western sexual interpretation is very physical. I flirt a lot but I rarely follow through on flirting. I see a look, a touch, a nuance, a suggestive conversation as very sexual and titillating and arousing. And often the actual consummation of the act can destroy that magic. So I see sex as very much the whole process. (MR3)

Most times there's very little talking, because you're going for the sex so you really don't want to know too much about the person: you're not interested. You don't want a relationship with them. You're probably not going to see them anymore, only a one off. You're there for the moment and you're there for the time and so that's as much as you need to know. (RR2)

The divergence between these two views suggests a more extensive set of distinctions that permeated many of the interviews. Sex was regarded as social or not social; physical or emotional; about being in the moment or an unfolding process; as intimate or mechanical. It was also common to distinguish between sex and love, as in the following quote:

R: I think unlike a lot of heterosexual people I am able to separate love and sex, whereas I don't think a lot of people can, I think they are intertwined for a lot of people.

I: *You are saying you can just have sex as sex?*

R: Oh yeah, sex is a completely separate act.

(TB3)

While this comment is presented as axiomatic for gay men, as distinct from heterosexuals, a view shared in various ways by other participants, the narratives that the men presented in relation to their own sexual practices revealed a more complex and ambivalent reality. Later in the interview, this man revealed something about the effect of the distinction between sex and love.

The better I know someone the less likely I am to be able to have sex with them again. I think the main barrier for me is talking before sex. If I make a connection and start to have a conversation with someone then it is very hard to actually go on from that and have sex. Talking after sex is fine. (TB3)

The distinction between sex and love pans out for others as a distinction between sex that occurs in the context of relationships and casual or anonymous sex. This previous participant makes this distinction in such a way that he no longer associates casual sex with verbal communication, much less emotion.

At the heart of many of these distinctions was an overarching cultural belief that most participants shared: sex is 'natural'. The 'naturalness' of sex led many to struggle to reconcile what they felt were competing desires. They wanted sex to be spontaneous, exciting, and new: an expression of uninhibited desire. They also wanted it to be sustainable over time. In order for sex to be sustainable it required a social dimension, perhaps a relationship, or at least communication. These things, for some, made sex into an everyday activity that took away from its excitement. It became something that literally had to be worked at. The following quote captures both these tendencies.

R: At a pub it's a lot more natural [as opposed to an SOPV]. You just sort of talk to people. I suppose, instinctively I'm not just a sexual beast. I like something a bit more than that. I mean just being comfortable with a person more than anything. Some guys can just see a body and that will do and it's done for me as well. And it's starting to more and more. But generally I probably prefer to get to know someone. Even though over time being gay you start to learn to take emotion out of needing people. It just becomes habitual.

I: *What do you mean by habitual?*

R: Okay. Well if you're a person who looks for a bit more than just sex when you're meeting someone, I think it's pretty straightforward. And that was how I was. And how I still consider myself to be but I suppose being on the gay scene you learn habits of promiscuity.

I: *And disengage the emotions?*

R: Yeah. Which is a shame, but it serves a purpose. (RR6)

This participant is suggesting that the capacity to have emotionally disengaged sex is learned through gay culture, that in fact for him it is more 'instinctual' to prefer sex within a context of sociability. Later in the interview, however, when asked to give an example of good sex he presents the following view:

Well, the best sex that I've had is with the guys that I'm most attracted to. It's that animal attraction, magnetism and it's not so much based on the fact that you're compatible in a sexual activity sense, that you like doing the same thing or he's sucked my dick in a way that I like or whatever. It's just the fact that we've been really attracted to each other. And the sex has been cleanly and utterly natural.

(RR6)

Sex understood as a natural activity introduced a degree of ambivalence for many of the men about what they wanted emotionally. Most participants said they wanted both these things but many saw them as contradictory. Some participants had solved this riddle in innovative ways. The following man is a certain kind of example of how sexual fulfilment, desire and practice could be split.

It's a really good question because I suspect what I do doesn't necessarily count as sex for other people. It's what I do. I almost invariably don't get myself off. Guys come around, I give them a head job, swallow, and I throw them out. And then often I'll just go away to my bedroom and have a wank afterwards about the whole fantasy related to it. And that to me is sex. (MR2)

Other men approached this issue by self consciously working on their sexual practice in order to make it more fulfilling. These men were less concerned with the discourse of sex as a natural activity.

R: Well there is penetration but it's not particularly inspired, it's not going to go anywhere further, it's just a little bit of gratification at that moment. There often isn't much of a method to it. You know we both may get into the lazy fuck. It's terribly unimaginative.

I: *So there's still better sex to be had?*

R: Practice makes perfect. (RR4)

Taking this view to another level the following man regarded fisting as sex from his point of view. There's no doubt this practice is a highly acquired taste that requires a lot of practice.

For me what counts as sex... how I have sex is through fisting. Well to be blatantly honest I got bored with just the same old suck, fuck, but forget you sort of thing. You meet so many queens out there that just want to do you and they'll forget you the next time. If you're in a community like I'm involved in, which is a leather fisting gay community, there's a lot of friendship, companionship.

(JS3)

While not necessarily offering a recommendation for fisting in particular, this participant does suggest that to practise sex is to practise sociality, or at least connectedness. At the same time fisting is not 'natural' in any conventional, romantic sense that many other participants employed.

It is worth noting the highly normative views held by almost all the participants about gender, in particular masculinity. Gay sex, it was asserted over and over, was sex between 'men', i.e. 'real' men. Gay men who were effeminate were rejected as sexual choices because, as one participant put it, "if I wanted to sleep with a woman I would". Given the value placed on masculinity it is worth considering the extent to which gay men pressure themselves to conform to masculine norms in order to be sexually attractive to others. It is also worth asking to what extent does this conformity inhibit gay men from exploring sexual and emotional intimacy: something that the majority of participants said they wanted more of in sex.

Sexual Career

Notwithstanding the belief on the part of many participants that sex was natural or instinctual, when asked about how they learned about sex most gave accounts of lengthy periods where they were taught or experimented with different kinds of sexual practice. For most this began when they were boys, a reality that belies the contemporary legal or moral view that this should not occur.

So my younger brother was sent somewhere else while my father sat down and drew pictures of male and female genitals and explained to me how sex occurred. And my memory is that I was halfway through a chapter in a Biggles book and couldn't wait to get back to it. It never occurred to me to be interested in girls. I don't know whether I can blame Biggles for this, but the homo-erotic quality of those stories made me feel that the

sensible role model for me to take would be Ginger Hepplethwaite. You don't know these books of course. Well Biggles was the World War II fighter pilot and his best friend was Ginger Hepplethwaite, and I mean from an adult point of view it's obvious that they were rooting each other silly, but at the time they were just good mates. And I thought that that's probably what I should do, is to have a good mate.

I had my first orgasm at school, with another boy who must have been a couple of years older than I was, whose name I can remember. He was reasonably attractive and he took me into a disused room at the school and pulled me off. I don't think I even had a wet dream at that point. I was about 12. But he managed to pull me off and the feeling, the memory of the feeling of that first orgasm, was really very, very intense. And of course it wasn't very long before I discovered that there lots of other boys at school who liked to do that. And other boys at school who liked to suck me off. So by the time I was 13 I was having regular sex with boys at school. (JS4)

A further theme that occurred across a number of interviews was the experience of gay sexuality starting out relatively conservative and becoming more adventurous or inventive over time — usually years. Some participants saw this development as a linear progression that peaks, in terms of mental and physical capacity, in the mid-30s.

I think just a head job or missionary style is bloody, blatantly boring, and I don't like people who don't experiment. When I first came out 22 years ago my sex was very vanilla, but the more you experience... You read Tom of Finland magazines and you think, 'that's hot', and you go to Sydney or to Melbourne and you see some of the guys in the leather bars, well some of them are quite unattractive, but there are some there that look quite stunningly hot. And you go to America or to Europe, and there are all these guys there in their leather, and they're not overweight or anything like that, they're very desirable men, and they look absolutely stunning in their leather. So you try that. (MR1)

It is interesting to consider the notion of a sexual career, which for some men only peaks in their mid thirties, in light of the fact that the average age of HIV diagnosis among gay men is currently 37 years.

Connection

Many participants spoke of their desire for a greater sense of connectedness in sex. This desire was predicated, in many instances, upon the distinction between sex and love, the physical and the emotional, discussed previously. It was also predicated on the practical distinction that all the participants made between casual sex and relationship based sex. The next participant evinces some of the ambivalence arising from such distinctions.

R: I think sex and emotion are two very different things for gay men, because we get sex literally whenever we want it, almost. So it's just a very easy thing. So for a lot of gay men I think sex is just purely the instinctual thing of going out and getting your rocks off. I find, personally, that if I get emotional with someone, I find it very hard to separate sex from emotion, whereas some guys can.

I: *Tell me just a bit about the sex that you have.*

R: I love kissing, kissing's an extremely erotic part of the sexual process. And indeed most men are actually quite good kissers, most people I have sex with. (GS1)

Another participant made the following comment about the kind of sex he was willing to have with casual partners outside his primary relationship: "I find kissing too intimate. I don't really get into kissing with anyone."(GS4) The fact that kissing is regarded as erotic and intimate

suggests that for many participants who commonly did engage in kissing with casual partners, such sex is not entirely devoid of emotional content. Indeed it could be argued that any erotic activity involves emotion in one form or another.

The following participant captures some of the difficulty and ambiguity of trying to distinguish between sex in the context of relationships and sex in casual contexts.

I: What influences the type of sex that you have?

R: Well it depends on my connection with that person. If it's a lover then it's much more a negotiation, I think, in terms of how it unfolds. The more anonymous, spontaneous sex is really dictated by the eroticism of the moment I guess.

I: So would that be different with different people.

R: Yes it would be more intimate, more sexual with a lover than with a casual partner.

I: What about the location, does that again influence the type of sex that you would have?

R: Yeah it's a different type of activity. Yeah one is much more um, responsive to the other person.

I: And what about your moods and emotions, does that influence the type of sex you're going to have?

R: Well if you're in a horny kind of mood then that can create a desire for quick fulfilment. Quick gratification.

I: And if you were in love with somebody?

R: Yeah. It's an intimacy issue, emotional, physical intimacy. It's romantic, that becomes a big feature yeah.

I: And is that something that you are able to explore often, that side of you?

R: Not as often as I would like. No it's not actually. (GS3)

This man seems quite unsure how to go about obtaining the kind of sex he says he would like. This difficulty, a kind of tentativeness, was relatively common among participants who were not in relationships.

Some participants, who were single at the time of the interview, were very open about their desire for a relationship. The following man described a particular scenario in response to a question about his sexual fantasies:

Sunday morning with the papers, sitting on the balcony, having coffee and croissants and juice, as a couple. But it's very hard, it's very dangerous to focus on wanting to be a couple with somebody. Because it may never happen. And then you've got to be realistic; you can end up being disappointed, which is why I'd be happy with just dating, but seeing somebody very regularly I guess. My personal opinion on gay men and sex and intimacy is that we don't connect very well with each other. We don't like intimacy issues, when sex is taken care of, we can get on with the rest of the day. Instead of going to the effort of actually developing something with somebody.

(RR1)

The tentative nature of the desire expressed here suggests a broader experience of disappointment. The view that gay men have difficulties with connection and intimacy might just as well apply as an observation of masculinity, regardless of sexuality. Perhaps the most striking element of this quote is the image of coupledness, which is both romantic and everyday. It is an image that seems reasonable to want, but it is also slightly clichéd, as though borrowed from the wider culture of advertising and media, a relationship that is both normative and ideal.

Not all participants linked intimacy with relationships. The following man describes casual sex that satisfied him emotionally.

R: I had an amazing Mardi Gras and then managed to hook up with two guys: a couple from the States. We spent the day after Mardi Gras in their hotel room, fucking like

bunnies for the better part of 14 hours. And they both happened to be positive as well, so we weren't worried about safe sex or anything like that. It wasn't drug fuelled. I'm sure drugs played a part, but we weren't topping up. And so it just had an element of play where it was all good as long as we were having fun, but there was still an element of caring. I didn't really know these guys from a bar of soap, and haven't spoken to them since. But there was a mutual atmosphere of care. One had gotten-over being sick fairly recently. But for me as well, like "do you want something to eat? Are you okay?" I was perfectly content to snuggle three in the bed or two in the bed. If one got up to do things. And it was a damn good way to spend the day after Mardi Gras.

I: And what made it so memorable?

R: To not worry about what was going to happen afterwards. A clear time in my mind. The intimacy felt lovely and the sex was mind blowing. (RR4)

This quote announces that intimate sex is indeed possible outside a framework of romance or a relationship. In fact 'care' seems a promising alternative to those two concepts. However, in cultural terms at least, relationships are what symbolize intimacy for most participants. This is not just a question of individual belief or morality, as is clear which the following quote.

For whatever reason, I both physically and emotionally feel that sex is so important because it brings you so close to someone. In a way, I'm a little bit envious of people who can just have sex on a very casual level, because sex is so enjoyable, and having all these emotional hang-ups can sometimes get in the way. (RR8)

Unlike the tendency of some participants to romanticize relationships, this man sees his sexual preference as almost a draw-back. The next participant's experience was the complete opposite, saying that sex in his relationship lacked the connection that he sought.

R: It's probably a bit harsh to say boring, but with my boyfriend, when he wants to have sex it usually just amounts to a wank. And while there's nothing wrong with that, I mean it's a bit boring. I mean it's the sort of thing you can actually do yourself. I mean it is nice to have someone there I suppose and I do like him.

I: So what contributed to you finding it boring or not enjoyable?

R: Well the fact that it didn't seem to have much emotion or involvement. It was just an act, like 'hey let's get the sex over and done with'. I mean no that's harsh. And I don't think he'd think that either. But it's just that I like to have sex in a bigger context. A more emotional one, where there's more feeling. (JS6)

While sex in a variety of contexts can become mechanical and lack connection, few participants had a practical sense of what strategies may be useful in pursuing connected sex, beyond fairly romantic ideas of falling in love. The following man did suggest some strategies when asked what better sex would be like for him.

It would be in my bedroom. It would be with someone who I could communicate with. It would be related. It would include eye contact and touch, and those conversations that you have about what pleases you and what doesn't, and it would have nice music. I just bought the music, so I'm one step along the way. It would not become focused [on coming]. So it would be about intimacy and arousal, and then about satisfying each other's needs as they emerged. I don't have a prescription around my partner must do everything that I want him to do. But to feel free to ask for that. (JS2)

It is worth considering whether attention to such sexual techniques such as verbal communication, as mentioned by this participant, may prove more fruitful in helping gay men to have better sex. And whether intimacy may, in some instances, follow technique rather than precede it.

Negotiation, Decisions, Control and Consent

When speaking about the nature and meaning of decisions in relation to sex, a common theme that emerged from the interviews was the complexity of negotiation, the implications this sometimes had for consent and the provisional nature of many decisions. Negotiation was more often verbal in the context of ongoing relationships and frequently non-verbal in casual or anonymous contexts. In speaking about negotiation, participants overwhelmingly focused on whether or not condoms were to be used. In speaking about control they also had in mind the safety of the sex, understood more broadly than condom use alone.

The following participant used a personal advertisement to regularly recruit sexual partners. He had learned to be very direct in his initial negotiations, in particular with regard to expectations.

I: How do you negotiate what sort of sex you'll have?

R: Oh, I've just got this little speech that I can spin off, almost without thinking about it. I just ask them if they've rung before. So I say to them "the deal is really straight-forward, I really like getting guys off by giving them blow jobs, I don't expect you to do anything back to me in return. I live in [Perth suburb]. That's all it is. You come around, watch the porn, whenever you finish I'll throw you out." And most people are really surprised initially. And then I'll say "can you tell me a bit about yourself?" And they'll often say, "what do you mean?" And I say, "I just want to know your height, your weight and generally what you look like." And then I take it from there. (MR2)

This kind of directness was not common among participants. More often it was a drawn out business underlaid with ambivalence and uncertainty. For the following HIV positive participant, sexual negotiation involved the question of serostatus and responsibility.

R: You've also got to negotiate about being HIV positive as well. So you are a lot more honest about things.

I: How does that translate for you in sex on premises venues?

R: Sex on premises venues—I actually think it's up to the other person to protect themselves. I think everyone's there for sex. And I think it's that person's responsibility to protect them self, though I see a lot of barebacking at sex on premises venues. There really is. And it's that person's responsibility not your responsibility. But I only say that for sex on premises venues. Not for other sex.

(RR2)

The practice and experience of responsibility varied among HIV positive participants. For example the following man had a strong sense of personal responsibility around safe sex, and saw this in terms of self-control and control over sexual situations:

I may flirt with someone and kiss or whatever when I'm drunk but I certainly won't put myself in a position where... I won't play with people who aren't in control in some sense. So if I'm drunk I'm happy to kiss and whatever in a pub, but I'm not going to go home with that person, and I'm not going to play with him. Nor will I head to a sex on premises venue. That's due to things that have happened to me. I'm just not prepared to put myself in potentially bad situations. And the other thing that makes me very wary is

that because I'm HIV positive, I want to make sure that my ability to control safer sex isn't impaired. (RR4)

Across the sample the two major factors that affected decisions whether to have safe sex were passion, either in the sense of lust or emotional intensity, and drugs, including alcohol and cannabis. The following participant is a man who said: "No risk is an acceptable risk, as far as I'm concerned." (TB1) Nonetheless he reported unsafe sex in a group sex context that also involved the drug GHB:

R: I was invited to an orgy. It was the first time that I had multiple partner sex. And I was given a drug and I was not really sure what it was but I took it anyway.

I: *Could you guess what it was afterwards?*

R: It was GHB. I was judgementally impaired and had lots of sex, lots of unprotected sex.

I: *With different people?*

R: Actually just the one person, but masturbation and oral sex with other people. Quite memorable and not in a good way. I spent the next day at the clinic and got post exposure prophylaxis. (TB1)

The effect of GHB on the capacity to make decisions about safe sex came up a number of times. The following participant evinces some of the problems with consent that have sometimes been associated with GHB, also known as the "date rape drug":

I have once used drugs but not really by choice. It was a guy I met on the internet, he was a very nice bloke from Holland, came out here for Mardi Gras last year and he was staying with me, I got to know him quite well. He stayed with me and we went out to dinner and he came back home. I was not really attracted to him and I think he realised that probably sex wasn't going to occur. I was happy to spend some time with him but I was not really happy about sleeping with him, because he was not my type. Then he said, "I have got this stuff with me that might help you relax," we had had a few drinks anyway and I said, "What is it?" He said it was GHB, which I had not really heard about. And I said "I am not into drugs," and he said "This is a natural occurring substance," and he was very, very good at talking me around, he said we just take it with orange juice; it is something your body naturally produces. And I was at the stage of trusting him and then he got me to relax completely and he was just gigantic and he ended up screwing me and I think because I was completely out of it, it was probably without a condom. (TB4)

GHB was not the only factor involved in this event of unsafe sex, indeed the sexual partner was trusted as a result of socializing with him over a period of time. Nonetheless it seems to have played a pivotal role.

In the following account it is not consent that was blurred, but control. This occurred in the context of crystal methamphetamine use.

R: The first night that I had crystal meth was with my current boyfriend. I was on crystal meth and I had unprotected sex with him that night. I made a choice that night that usually I would not have made.

I: *So that clouded your judgment?*

R: Usually I would not have had anal sex with someone without a condom on. But on that occasion I did. Even though we had discussed HIV status before we did it. I accepted his answer. And the answer he gave me was what he believed was true. That wouldn't have been my normal practice, wouldn't have been previously. But with him

that wasn't the case. And then, because we'd had unprotected sex on the first night, we continued to do it afterwards. But 6 weeks later it came back that he was positive.

I: And so you'd only tried the crystal meth once is that right?

R: No, probably had it four or five times. And on those other occasions I've not had anal sex, but I know that I was very sexual and quite driven with having sex.

I: And that was the crystal meth had encouraged you to feel that?

R: I felt that I was less inhibited. (GS2)

Control and consent are, of course, related concepts. Most of the participants were clear about the kinds of sex they liked and were prepared to engage in, and what kinds they were not. Most men, accordingly, had strategies for extricating themselves from boring or unpleasant situations. For the following participant, this was straight forward:

I: Can you describe a sexual experience that was really boring or unpleasant?

R: Yeah I have had boring sex where I have just been thinking, "god when is this going to end?" I just lost interest and I closed it off.

I: Closed it off?

R: Said "finished, sorry," or "I'm going to take shower," "I am out of here."

Occasionally, if it has not been harming me or I have been able to hide the boredom I have let them continue.

(TB4)

The last comment points to a more complex set of issues around consent, signifying it is not a singular decision, but mutually negotiated between sexual partners: something that unfolds throughout a sexual encounter. This is made clear in the following quote where consent was successfully renegotiated during sex.

I: Can you describe a sexual experience that you found boring or unpleasant?

R: Probably the only one that really springs to mind is, I got picked up by a barman from a Sydney club and arranged for him to come back to my motel room, and he wanted to dominate me. I am really not into that. I actually stopped performing oral sex on him and he said, "Who said you can stop?" And I just thought 'get over it'. So we were able to negotiate that we could still have sex, as long as he was not going to try and dominate me.

I: So in that situation there was a negotiation process?

R: Yeah, basically, I said "well if you insist on dominating me then I am not interested, but if you just want to have a bit of a play around then that's fine." I'm not really into role playing.

I: Was that OK?

R: It was, he wasn't particularly happy, but he continued. He would've preferred to...

I: Have it his way?

R: Yeah, call the shots, but I wanted it my way as well and I won in the end. (TB3)

For some participants, sex acts and fantasies sometimes involved playing with control and consent, particularly s/m sex. In such sex it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between actual control and fantasies that sometimes involve relinquishing control. The following participant provides an example:

I: Can you describe a really memorable sexual experience and it doesn't have to be a good one or a bad one, something that's memorable?

R: Yes. There was a guy from Sydney here and we had sex. It was chemistry, and we smoked a bit of pot and he fucked me every night for 14 days. And it was just heaven. In

fact, I wonder at times whether I might have actually acquired HIV from him, but anyway that's a bit of a moot point now. But yeah, that was really, really good sex.

I: Do you have sexual fantasies?

R: Yes.

I: Would you be able to describe one?

R: Yes. A German man, shaved head, being tied up, against my will, by maybe three or four very masculine German men, with chemicals in tow, and they'd administer them to me and fuck me stupid. But that's a fantasy. I mean, I would never expect that to be reality because I like to maintain some kind of control over what I'm doing.

I: Is there part of that that you'd like to do?

R: I imagine it, certainly. But I wouldn't want to do it because I wouldn't be comfortable with relinquishing control.

I: You like to be in control?

R: I think so, yeah. (GS1)

Despite the clear declaration that he likes to be in control, this participant gives two examples of where the meaning of this varies. One is in his fantasy life, but the other was a situation where desire and passion won out over his normal practice of safe sex.

Fantasy and desire are complex phenomena that are related to a range of emotions and, for some men, go to the heart of their identity. The following man expresses shame about aspects of his own desire:

Well, there are sexual practices I do that I'm embarrassed by. Because I'm embarrassed that I have sex with people that I think are ugly, or who I don't like, or who I have sexualised because they've got a big dick, and I don't want to know anything else about them. I want to imagine that I'm embarrassed by the fact that there's aspects of S&M that appeal to me, but I'm not, I just want to have opportunities to explore them in a kind of way that suits me. I'm embarrassed that I... I don't know, I think there's a back-lash in myself against what I do and the fact that I do it. It's quite a high risk in terms of unsafe sex. (JS2)

That people sometimes have sex, which is not what they think they want, or which is unsatisfying is not surprising. This fact however should be a reminder that decisions in relation to sex are not always rational, well thought through, or in one's own interests. For some men the idea of negotiation and decision-making is overly simplistic.

Context

Unsurprisingly, participants said that the kind of sex they had varied according to context, and context played a role in the extent to which some could exercise control over themselves and the situations they were in. Drugs, as discussed previously, were a significant feature of some contexts that worked in this way, influencing control. Another notable feature of context for men not living in Sydney or Melbourne was what happened when they visited one of those two cities. The following participant comes from Adelaide and describes some of the feelings that were associated with a change in geography for him:

R: I guess I'm in a happier mood, and more relaxed, and I find in Melbourne that the people there are more open for sex and having fun. Over here in Adelaide they're a little bit more conservative.

I: Is it that you're more anonymous when you're away from home?

R: That's right, people don't know you. Being anonymous is a bit of a turn on I guess. People don't know you and you're not likely to bump into anyone in the street in a couple of weeks' time. You feel more like you're a naughty boy (laughs), I guess. (GS5)

Even for men who did come from Sydney or Melbourne, most made a distinction between the kind of sex they had at sex venues and the kind they might have at home, either casually or within a relationship:

R: Sex at home with a partner can be standard type sex. The sleaziness that is around sex venues and saunas is not there at home. There's more the inclination to be a little sleazier and a little more promiscuous in a sex-on-premises-venue.

I: So does that make sex with a boyfriend at home boring?

R: Well it doesn't make it boring. The sex at home is more intimate. The sex in sex-on-premises-venues is just that, exactly. (BH3)

A further significant sexual context in the lives of most participants was the Internet. For the men in this sample, it was regarded as sexually enabling and a tool for overcoming geographic and social isolation. For the following man, the internet was a context in which he felt more comfortable disclosing his HIV status to potential partners.

In the Gaydar chat room we were both on-line one night, and HIV Status started coming up again. He had been home with somebody who said I had a reputation at [SOPV] as the boy who barebacks. I had come up in the discussion. So then we talked on Gaydar. And some time later we met at [SOPV], and he came up to me at the end of the night and we were just standing there hugging each other. And he said he's got to go home with this current boy he's seeing. I gave him my phone number and said we really must talk over a coffee. He was really instrumental in making me be more up-front, certainly on Gaydar, disclosing my HIV status. Sex club disclosure is a lot more difficult. (RR1)

Condoms

The majority of participants expressed a strong dislike for condoms, and some reported difficulties in using them. For some this was a factor in unsafe sex, and for others it had the effect of modifying their sexual practices. The following participant sums up a general feeling among this sample about condoms:

I hate condoms, but I realise that they're a necessary evil. I actually find them to be, as they are quite often called 'passion killers', you know, I find that they disrupt the flow. The act of putting on a condom means I'm likely to lose my erection. It's a loss of spontaneity. I just find them completely unsexy.
(TB3)

The following man uses condoms consistently, but mentions one significant effect they have had on his sex life, in the context of a relationship with an HIV positive partner.

R: I use condoms all the time. The one time that I did not use them I got quite upset with myself afterwards over it, so that was that.

I: So let's talk a little bit about what you like and dislike about condoms.

R: I have been in long term relationships where we have gotten tested over quite a considerable period of time, and been exclusive partners, and have stopped using condoms, and, well, it felt great, and felt really nice. But it is not negotiable, and no risk is an acceptable risk as far as I am concerned. And that became a problem in my

relationship [with an HIV positive partner]. So, you know, we would have unprotected oral sex, which at the beginning I could see as an acceptable risk, but as the time went on, you know, I eventually came to the conclusion that no risk is an acceptable risk.

I: Did that become an issue if you had already started having unprotected oral sex?

R: It *did* become an issue; I began shying away from sex a lot more. (TB1)

The following participant raises problems with condoms on a physical level:

I: How do you feel about condoms?

R: Dislike them. I've never been able to sustain an erection unless I receive.

I: Why do think that would be?

R: I don't know. As soon as I put a condom on, my erection will go down. They're not part of the way the head works. "Oh no stop, I'm just about to stick my huge cock into this gorgeous man, but I'll just put on a condom". Men don't *think* they want a fuck. If someone wanted me to fuck them, and I knew that I had to wear a condom and my cock would go down, I would prefer not to fuck them. And I'll just make an excuse. If I had had a Viagra, yeah, because then my dick will stay up, but otherwise it doesn't. Indeed I heard one guy say recently that, we were talking about sex and I can't remember who it was, but he said you know, "people say, safe sex is normal, but you know it's not. Sex without condoms is what people would normally do." They're just not natural. They don't feel natural. I don't get much out of sex if I have a condom on. Just doesn't do much for me. (GS1)

The fact that condoms are a problem of some significance to these gay men suggests it may be worth re-examining the meaning and experience of condoms, in order to identify new strategies to support their use. Polyurethane condoms, for example, may be a solution for some men, but awareness of their availability is seemingly not high. Likewise, different size condoms may be a solution for some men, but again few participants who said they experienced difficulties with condoms said they had experimented with different types.

Concluding Remarks

The themes arising from the interviews suggest a number of features of contemporary gay men's sexual culture. There are a number of tensions in this culture that mean, for some men, they do not have the kind of sex they say they would like to have, they do not know what kind of sex they would like to have, or they do not know how to have this kind of sex. These tensions occur through three overarching issues:

1. There is a strong belief among participants that sex is natural, and therefore should come naturally. This belief militates against sexual learning, which may lead to better sex. In some men it works against sex that is intimate, which many say they desire.
2. Normative masculinity is salient among these men. They say they desire 'real men' and they feel that to be desirable one must act like a 'real man'. This form of masculinity places limitations on sexual experience and sexual and emotional expression.
3. Many participants said they wished to have more intimacy in their sexual lives. A number of cultural forms worked against an exploration of intimacy. These included masculinity, romance and a distinction between casual sex and relationships.

A number of issues arose from the data that highlight difficulties in maintaining safe sex practices.

1. Participants' capacities to negotiate safe sex were strongly influenced by desire, context and drugs. The men who negotiated the best were the ones with a commitment to verbal interaction. Non-verbal negotiation was prone to failure in various ways.
2. A number of men expressed ongoing difficulties in using condoms. These were so serious that they either, led to unsafe sex or significantly altered the participant's sexual practice.
3. Cultural beliefs around the naturalness of sex or desire based on normative masculinity sometimes contradicted the intention or the wish to have safe sex.

Following is a non-exhaustive list of questions for HIV educators to consider:

- What role does HIV education play in producing and reproducing the cultural idea that sex is natural? What are some examples of this in recent education and what are some of the possible effects?
- Images of normative masculinity are ubiquitous in gay culture including the gay media, on the Internet and on the gay scene. Should education adopt such images in order to capture the attention of the target audience or should it challenge them? What are the possible effects of either?
- Gay men are deeply committed to romance, like the rest of the population. Is this something education should challenge or work with?
- When gay men say they want more intimacy in their sexual lives what do you think they mean? What are the implications of this for HIV education?
- How might educators help gay men navigate the contradiction that exists for some between the beliefs that good sex is non-verbal, while good sexual negotiation, around various issues, is verbal?
- How might educators assist gay men in improving their experiences with condoms?
- The thirties are the age when gay men often begin to explore and experiment sexually. It is also, on average, the age when gay men are most likely to become infected with HIV. How might educators address the specific needs and challenges of this cohort?

- There is considerable evidence that HIV- and HIV positive men negotiate sex and serostatus differently. How might educators bring these two groups close together in terms of their expectations and beliefs about negotiation?
- Do drugs and alcohol affect the quality of the decisions that gay men make about sex? How might better decisions be made? Should educators think critically about the centrality of alcohol/drugs in gay culture?
- Some men in this study spoke of complex relationships between consent and control, and fantasies and desire that involved seceding control. What implications does this suggest?
- Can we be said to always make 'decisions' about the sex we have? Doesn't it just sometimes happen? What does this suggest for education?
- The different contexts that men meet in and have sex in play a significant role in determining the type and quality of the sex. What are the implications of this for education?

Outcomes

Through this project AFAO has gained an improved understanding about gay men's sex and the enjoyment they derive from a variety of sexual activities. Through this discussion with gay men, we can now critically reflect upon what value gay men attach to particular activities, and how this may impact upon sexual decision-making. From here we may be able to offer gay men insights into what they value, why they value particular activities and how they might seek to enhance their sex lives safely.

Informing Campaign and Resource Development

The results of this project will help to inform future education work in the community HIV sector by improving educators' understandings of important aspects of gay men's decision making in relation to sex, and what gay men value and seek in relation to sex. It is also envisaged that particular campaigns or resources will be developed by AFAO and/or some of its member organisations using the insights gained from the project. Such campaigns or resources may utilise particular quotes, testimonials or case studies from the project.

AFAO will host a workshop for educators in 2006 to develop ideas and strategies for campaign development, on the basis of the project report.

Increased Capacity in Action-Research Methodology

This project has focused on open-ended interview techniques. Acquiring skills in interview techniques has increased the skill and confidence of participants in ways that are applicable to their work.

Furthermore, the project has sought to improve the skills of educators to undertake small-scale research projects involving qualitative interviews, including the simple analysis and interpretation of qualitative data.

Most importantly this project has given participants an insight into how qualitative research is conducted and the kinds of data it produces. This will increase the capacity of participants to meaningfully engage with the results of future qualitative social research projects.

Appendix 1

AFAO Decision-making Action-Research Project

Interview Guide

Instructions for interviewers:

These questions and themes are to serve as a guide only and not as a strict interview schedule. Remember that the idea is to build the interview out of what the participant has to say, a sort of 'guided conversation about sex'.

Although the material we gather in these interviews will be used to develop HIV education and prevention campaigns, the interview is not specifically focused on HIV and risk per se. Wait and see if these themes emerge in the process of discussing sex in a broader context, as they very likely will. Only explore these themes if the participant introduces them. At the end we will have a few questions about HIV, status and risk in case they do not come up earlier in the interview. Remember to listen. Use terms like "I am interested in" "Can we unpack that further" "How does that make you feel" "Could you describe what happened" rather than asking Why?

After you have settled in, filled out the consent form and established ground rules around language, taking breaks etc, start off by asking the demographic questions below. Then the interview proper should start with the opening question 'What for you counts as sex? Apart from the following introductory statement (below), that is the only question we expect you to ask in a set form and a specific time.

READ THE FOLLOWING THREE PARAGRAPHS TO THE INTERVIEWEE

The purpose of this interview, as you probably already know, is to contribute to a study into how gay men are thinking about and having sex at this point in the HIV epidemic. The way we have decided to focus this is on sexual pleasure: how you decide what type of sex you like and want; how you choose your sexual partners and negotiate having sex with them.

Before we begin, though, I want to reiterate that I am going to be asking you about some very personal aspects of your life: your HIV status, who you have sex with, how, where, when, and maybe, why? I want to reassure you that you will remain anonymous in the transcript of this interview and that the tape, itself, will be kept secure at all times and destroyed when no longer required.

Please feel free to ask me to stop the tape, or even to stop the interview, if it makes you at all uncomfortable.

Demographic and other details

All participants should be asked these questions

Age

Country of Birth

First Language spoken

Ethnic identity

Work

Full time

Part time

Casual

Type of work

Highest level of education

Sexual identity (gay/homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, other)

Number of casual sex partners in the last 6 months

Are they currently in a relationship? (For how long?)

'Open' or 'closed' to other sexual partners (Is this agreed, discussed or assumed?)

What, for you, counts as sex?

Tell me a bit about the sex you have.

Ask about the specific practices they include in their sex, for example:

Kissing

Oral sex

Anal sex

Fingering

Mutual masturbation

Touching

Role play

Also ask how important the following are:

Flirting

Cruising/picking up

Pornography

Fantasy

Explore why various practices are important

What influences the type of sex you have?

Explore:

Partner type: boyfriend, lover, casual, anonymous, group sex. Location: sauna, sex-on-premises venue, beat, home, internet/virtual space. Moods/emotions. Drugs. Familiarity with person or the location. Love

Ask them what their expectations around sex are.

Explore this in relation to emotional, physical factors: e.g. does it vary depending on partner, location?

Find out where they look for sexual partners?

Explore whether where they look is influenced by what they want e.g. particular sexual practices, emotional experience

Ask them how they communicate/negotiate with a sex partner to get the sex they want?

Ask them to describe in detail a first time sexual encounter (e.g.) with a new partner.

Explore where they met, did they have sex the first time they met, what sort of things did they do and how was the sex negotiated?

Did they enjoy the experience? Do they think the partner enjoyed it?

Was there pleasure in the fact that it was a new partner?

I am interested in how and where you learned about sex and what kinds of sex you like.

(Prompts for this question include: partners, films, television, friends, magazines, music, gay spaces such as sex venues and HIV education materials.)

Ask them to describe a sexual experience where they were introduced by a sexual partner to something new or different

How was it negotiated/communicated?

Did they enjoy it?

Ask them to describe a sexual encounter where they introduced a sexual partner to something new?

How did they go about this?

Did the partner like it? Did they like it?

Ask if they think what they do sexually will continue to evolve.

Ask them to describe a really memorable sexual experience?

(Do not assume it will be a good one just a memorable one)

Explore with them what made it memorable

Ask if there are things they are interested in sexually that they are embarrassed by or uncomfortable with?

What makes them uncomfortable with this desire? And is their discomfort a barrier to exploring this desire.

I am interested in whether you have sexual fantasies?

Describe one?

Would you like to actually do it, or is the fact that it is something you only imagine or fantasise about part of the pleasure?

Describe a sexual experience you found boring or unpleasant?

What contributed to you not enjoying it or finding it boring?

Tell me about some of the things you don't like sexually (How do you know?)

Are there things you would not do sexually?

How do you communicate during a sexual encounter that you're not happy with what is happening?

How do partners react when you do not want what they want?

Is there anything you are afraid of sexually?

Explore reasons

Do they find that some sexual partners make incorrect assumptions about the sex they are willing or unwilling to have based on age, appearance, ethnicity?

Ask if they use drugs and explore what types.

Do drugs influence the kind of sex they have

Do drugs have an impact on their sense of control?

In what ways, and is that good or bad?

Would they like to have better sex than they currently have?

How do they think that might be achieved?

Is anal sex a central part of their sexual practice?

Explore their answer – in what ways is it central or not?

How do they feel about condoms?

Explore with them what they like and dislike about condoms.

If and when they use them.

Apart from condoms, what other strategies do they use to reduce or manage the risk of HIV transmission, or exposure to HIV?

How do they feel about these?

What do they do to reduce or manage HIV risk while getting the most enjoyment they can out of sex?

Demographic and other details

If the interviewee has not already offered this information, ask:

HIV serostatus

Partner's HIV status

Appendix 2



Gay Men, Sex and Decision-Making Action-Research Project

Information for Participants

The Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO) is the Australian national peak body representing Australia's community-based HIV organisations. The National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA) is the Australian national peak body representing Australia's community-based people living with HIV/AIDS organisations.

AFAO and NAPWA, through their education team, (ANET) are running a national action-research project to investigate aspects of gay men's decision-making in relation to sex.

This information is provided for men who are considering participating in this project through consenting to a recorded interview conducted by a member of the project team. This information is intended to:

1. Provide you with an overview of this project, including why it is being undertaken and what we hope to learn from it;
2. Outline procedures that will be followed to protect your identity and information that you provide;
3. Describe how information from your interview will be analysed and reported;
4. Outline what is being offered to you in terms of payment for your time and access to support in relation to any distress related to your participation in this project; and
5. Provide you with contact details of the project co-ordinators should you wish to discuss anything about your participation in this project.

1) Overview

Why AFAO and NAPWA are Seeking Your Involvement

AFAO, NAPWA and their member organisations develop campaigns and resources for use in HIV education and support work with gay men and HIV positive people. In developing these materials, we seek to address current issues that are important to gay men and HIV positive people. One of the ways we do this is to seek involvement from gay men and HIV positive people in the development of our products. Your involvement in this project would assist us in the development of future HIV education materials.

What This Research Project Is About

AFAO and NAPWA hope that the results of this project will improve our understanding of important aspects of gay men's decision-making in relation to sex, what gay men value and seek in relation to sex, and what part HIV plays in relation to these.

We expect that HIV education resources will be developed using the insights gained from this consultation. Such resources may incorporate de-identified quotes, testimonials or case studies about people interviewed in this project.

Interviews for this project are being conducted in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, and the Northern Territory. This project is seeking the involvement of both HIV positive and negative gay men.

Capacity Building

In addition to its research aims, this project is intended to build the skills and capacity of staff and volunteers at community-based HIV education and support organisations. The person who would conduct your interview has been selected from among employees and volunteers of AFAO's and NAPWA's member organisations and has been through a training program to prepare for this interview. They will be receiving professional support while this project is running, however, you should understand that conducting interviews of this nature is not part of their usual day-to-day duties.

Your Interviewer

The person conducting the interview may also be employed, or involved in a voluntary capacity, to provide any of a range of services which you may wish to access in the future (e.g., peers support groups, outreach programs, etc.). While the interviewer is bound by a confidentiality agreement not to divulge or otherwise utilise any information obtained through the interview process, you may want to consider the likelihood of, and your level of comfort in, accessing services provided by them. You may wish to request that your interview be with an alternative interviewer.

The names and roles of the interviewers in your state/territory are:

- Daniel Donnelly, Volunteer and Board Member, PLWHA Victoria.
- Brett Heyhoe Volunteer and Board Member, PLWHA Victoria.

Analysis and Reporting of Results:

AFAO and NAPWA will compile the results of this project into a report that may be published. A copy of this report will be sent to you if you wish to receive one.

2) Procedures That Will Be Followed:

Consent

Before you commence any recorded interview, your prospective interviewer will give you this information sheet, along with a Consent Form to be signed by you and your interviewer. The consent form outlines the steps that will be taken to protect your identity and the recording and transcript of your interview.

Should you wish to proceed with the interview, the interviewer will ask you to sign the form. If you change your mind about participating in this project at any point before, during, or after the interview, you can withdraw your consent. In this case, please ask your interviewer to destroy or give to you any tapes or transcript of the interview.

Confidentiality

Your interviewer may need to know your identity for the purpose of arranging an interview location and time, although if you wish to give only a first name, that is sufficient. Any details you provide about your identity will only be available to your interviewer and the person who transcribes the recording of the interview. Both of these people are bound by signed confidentiality agreements that require them to keep your details confidential.

You need not disclose your identity to anyone else involved in this project, unless you wish to complain to one of the Principal Investigators.

When your interview has been completed, the taped recording of your interview will be sent directly to the transcriber. While transcribing the taped interview, the transcriber will also change or remove any names or identifying details that you may mention.

If you wish the interviewer to send you a copy of your de-identified transcript they will do so. The tape of your interview will be sent to AFAO for supervised destruction.

Payment

A payment of \$50. is available for your time and expenses in getting to an interview. Your interviewer will have this available in cash at the time of your interview. Should you wish to remove consent after the interview, you are not obliged to return that payment.

Support

Should it become necessary, your interviewer will be able to refer you to a range of support services. In the event of your participation in this project creating distress, limited counselling services will be made available to you at no cost; these can be arranged through your interviewer, or through one of the Principal Investigators (details below).

3) Principal Investigators

For more information about this project, or to discuss any concerns that you may have please contact:

Phillip Keen,
ANET Educator
Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO)
PO Box 51
Newtown NSW 2042

Ph: (02) 8568 1116
Em: pkeen@afao.org.au

or

Peter Canavan
HIV Living Policy Analyst
National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS (NAPWA)
PO Box 51
Newtown NSW 2042

Ph: (02) 8568 1152
Em: peter@napwa.org.au

The logo for the National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS (NAPWA) features the lowercase letters 'napwa' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Each letter has a thick white outline, giving it a three-dimensional, blocky appearance.

AFAO¹ and NAPWA² Education Team (ANET)
Gay Men and Decision-Making Action Research Project

Revocation of Consent Form

I hereby wish to withdraw my consent to participate in the above project.

¹ Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO)

² National Association of People with AIDS (NAPWA)

Signed: _____

Date: ____/____/____

Print Name : _____

Please give this form to the person who interviewed you.

Interviewer contact details: