

DISCLOSURE AND SECRECY AMONG GAY MEN

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## ABSTRACT

A shift has occurred in how mental health professionals, gay activists, and sociologists view the disclosure of homosexuality to others. While secrecy was once viewed as more desirable, disclosure is now seen as more advantageous. In this context, I look at how a sample of gay men manage information concerning their sexual preferences. I document their patterns of secrecy and disclosure and their rationales for being selectively open and secretive. I also show that gays face an interactional dilemma in the several types of relationships they have with nongays, regardless of whether they are open or secretive. I also examine the men's ideological beliefs about disclosure in the context of the new view of secrecy and disclosure. I conclude my thesis with a discussion of the management of stigmatizing information and psychiatric expansionism.

## RESUMÉ

Il y a eu un changement dans la façon dont les professionnels de santé mentale, les sociologues, et les militants gais perçoivent la révélation de l'homosexualité aux autres. Quoique la discrétion ait été tenue pour désirable, ils considèrent aujourd'hui qu'il est avantageux de se révéler. Dans ce contexte, j'examine comment un échantillon d'hommes gais contrôlent les renseignements concernant leur orientation sexuelle. Je documente leurs modes de se révéler et de pratiquer la discrétion, et les raisons qui motivent leur discrétion et leur divulgation. Je démontre que les gais se retrouvent face à un dilemme dans tous les types de relations qu'ils ont avec les personnes hétérosexuelles, qu'ils soient ouverts ou non. J'examine également leurs positions idéologiques vis-à-vis la révélation de l'homosexualité et la discrétion. Je conclus ma thèse par une discussion du contrôle d'informations stigmatisantes et de l'expansionisme psychiatrique.

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## CHAPTER I

### OPENNESS AND SECRECY:

#### A SHIFT IN VIEWS OF DISCLOSURE

Most sociologists, mental health professionals and gay activists currently agree that gays should disclose their sexual orientation to others. "Coming out," especially to nongay others, is considered to be psychologically advantageous to the individual gay person and politically advantageous to the gay community. Conversely, remaining "in the closet" is considered to express personal and social pathology. This position is relatively new. Secretiveness about one's homosexuality was once considered more psychologically normal and politically desirable than overtness; openness about one's homosexuality, conversely, was considered to express personal and social pathology.

In this chapter, I will argue that in the process of "normalizing" a form of behaviour once viewed as deviant, gay activists, mental health professionals, and sociologists have participated in the creation of a new form of deviance: the "closeted gay."

#### SECRECY AS NORMALITY: DISCLOSURE AS DEVIANCE

Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, mental health professionals, gay political activists, and sociologists

argued implicitly or explicitly that gays should remain secretive about their sexual orientation. While authors from these three perspectives agreed that it was desirable for gays to exercise discretion in the expression of their homosexuality and to avoid making public disclosures about their sexual preferences, they had somewhat different rationales for their points of view.

#### 1. Mental Health Professionals

The dominant clinical position on homosexuality during the 1950s and 1960s held that it was a psychopathological condition. In the American Psychiatric Association's list of mental illnesses, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-I, homosexuality was listed as a "sociopathic personality disturbance" (APA, 1952). When DSM-I was revised in 1968, homosexuality was listed as a "sexual deviation" along with fetishism, pedophilia, transvestitism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, sadism, and masochism.

As others have observed (Morin, 1977; Weinberg & Bell, 1972), most psychological research of this period examined questions relating to the etiology, classification and treatment of homosexual preferences. Leading psychoanalytic authors (Bergler 1957, 1961; Bieber, 1962; Socarides, 1968), dominated the clinical view of homosexuality with their etiological view that a homosexual orientation in adulthood was the result of disordered psychosexual development in childhood. For instance, Bieber (1962) argued that the



presence of a seductive or dominant mother, or a detached and hostile father was an important cause of homosexuality in men. The goal of psychiatric treatment was to "cure" the individual by helping him develop heterosexual interests.

The clinical literature did not explicitly address the issue of coming out. Implicitly, however, it suggested that such disclosure was undesirable. The subjective distress or guilt of the homosexual patient that kept him from revealing his homosexuality to others was seen as evidence of a promising degree of normality, and therefore as a good prognostic indicator that heterosexuality might be achieved through psychotherapy. Bergler (1957:25) argued for example, that the individual's guilt about being homosexual is "the vehicle for therapeutic changes in psychotherapy." Similarly, Bieber (1962) stated that the patient's motivation to become heterosexual is an important factor in his successful treatment. Bergler (1961) stated that those homosexuals who are distressed by their sexual orientation suffer from "neurotic" homosexuality, while those who accept their sexual orientation and are more likely to tell others about it suffer from "perverted" homosexuality. "Perverted" homosexuals, viewed as fixated at an earlier stage of psychosexual development, were seen as suffering from a more profound form of psychological disturbance than "neurotic" homosexuals.

Disclosing one's homosexuality to others flouted social convention and was more characteristic of perverted homosexuals than the neurotic patient. Such revelation was not

seen to be an expression of self-acceptance, but as an attempt to "satisfy neurotic pseudo-aggression" (Bergler, 1957:281). Bergler regarded a homosexual patient's claim that his homosexual preferences were acceptable and healthy as itself symptomatic of his disturbed psychological condition. Revealing these preferences was a further indication of the individual's degree of psychological disturbance.

\* \* \* \*

From the clinical point of view dominant during the 1950s and 1960s, covert homosexuality was a more normal form of deviance than overt homosexuality. Overt homosexuality was the most disturbed variant of an already psychopathological condition.

## 2. Gay Political Activists

The publication of the Kinsey Report (1948) on male sexual behavior helped spur the growth of an organized gay movement in the United States during the early 1950s (Humphreys, 1972:59; Sagarin, 1969:82). The report indicated that homosexual behavior was much more widespread than had previously been believed, and argued that it should be seen as a natural, and therefore nonpathological phenomenon. Like Kinsey, other researchers (Ford & Beach, 1952; Hooker, 1957) began to provide the new gay movement with the intellectual and rhetorical resources it needed to contest the dominant psychiatric view of homosexuality as pathology and to organize an effective political force (Bayer, 1981).

Historians of the gay movement in the United States (Humphreys 1972; Voeller, 1980) suggest that there have been three stages to the movement since 1950. I refer to the first period (1950-1968) as the reformist stage, the second period (1968-1972) as the radical stage, and the third period (1972 to the present) as the contemporary stage. During the reformist stage of the political movement, groups formed to advocate for the increased tolerance, acceptance, and integration of gays into the society-at-large. Modelled on the early civil rights movements of blacks and women, the gay movement during this reformist period adopted a civil libertarian orientation towards change (Murray, 1984:22); political groups provided basic social and legal services to gays, and favoured education about homosexuality and the social situation of gays as a central strategy for increasing tolerance and the gradual acceptance of gays.

The homophile movement during the reformist stage advocated tolerance and integration, but it did not advocate open disclosure of one's homosexuality to others. In fact, the first major national gay group, The Mattachine Society, founded in 1950, was named after the "medieval court jesters who told the truth to kings while hiding behind masks," and stressed the importance of remaining secret about one's homosexuality (Humphreys, 1972:52). As Conrad and Schneider (1980:202) observe, the gay movement during this reformist period was "deferential" in its efforts to promote social change. The stance of the Mattachine Society and similar

homophile groups was to avoid confrontation with nongays, as it was felt that "flaunting one's sexuality" would hinder gays' chances for acceptance by offending nongays. The Mattachine Review stated in 1954, "The Society is determined to seek [its goals] through EVOLUTION not REVOLUTION" (quoted in Bayer, 1981:70). The overt homosexual risked severe social sanctions such as rejection, arrest, or harassment. These risks were realistic concerns, particularly during the early 1950s, when MacCarthy managed to link homosexuality to the Communist anti-American threat (Humphreys, 1972).

\* \* \* \*

During the first stage of the gay movement (1950-1968), homophile groups regarded the decision to maintain secrecy about one's homosexuality as appropriate. Disclosure was viewed by those in the early gay political movement as dangerous both for the individual and for the gay community more generally.

### 3. Sociologists

Leznoff and Westley published a study in 1956 that was one of the first sociological studies of homosexuality. It was the first major ethnography of an urban homosexual community and the only study until the early 1970s to deal directly with the issue of secrecy and disclosure. Their analysis is of particular interest because it is organized around the distinction between "secret" and "overt" homosexual men. They observed that the Canadian homosexual community they studied

was composed of two distinct groups: men who kept their homosexuality secret from nongays and men who did not. According to Leznoff and Westley, "secret" homosexuals held higher status jobs, found themselves compelled to conform to social demands, were conscious of their social position, and sought occupational mobility and prestige. Members of secret homosexual social groups were seen to hold diverse interests and occupations. There were informal standards of admission to the groups and members exercised discretion in the manner in which homosexuality was practiced and took extensive precautions to conceal their homosexuality.

Overt homosexuals, by contrast, were seen to "retreat from the demands of society and renounce societal goals" (Leznoff & Westley, 1956:260) and hold lower status jobs than secret homosexuals. Members of overt homosexual social groups were described as spending their time "in endless gossip about the sexual affairs of the members." It was also observed that there were no standards of admission to overt groups, and an "unselfconscious and unrestrained practice of homosexuality" was noted (Leznoff & Westley, 1956:262).

It is significant that Leznoff and Westley reported that the majority of homosexuals are "secret," noting that "most homosexuals find themselves compelled to conform outwardly to societal demands" (1956:259). Since the study is a descriptive ethnography, this evaluation presumably reflects the predominant beliefs of gays during that time. In other words, being "secret" was the correct way to be gay, while

being overt was the less valued and less correct way to be gay.

\* \* \* \*

From the sociological perspective, secretive gays were viewed as more socially adjusted and more likely to comply with the expectations of others, while the social behavior of overt gays was seen to be less conforming to societal demands.

#### DISCLOSURE AS NORMALITY: SECRECY AS DEVIANCE

By the end of the 1960s, some gay activists, mental health professionals, and sociologists began arguing against the position that gays should remain secretive about their sexual orientation. The new position, contrary to the previously dominant view, stated that remaining covert was undesirable for gay individuals and the gay community. Covertness came to be seen as the result of personal and social problems. Again, authors from the three perspectives agreed on this new position for somewhat different reasons.

#### 1. Gay Political Activists

By the late 1960s, the gay movement became more militant. Rather than requesting understanding, tolerance, and gradual integration, as the reformist groups had done, gay groups during the radical stage of the movement demanded legal rights and social opportunities, adopting an overtly political

orientation. The major strategies used by radical gays were public confrontation and political action.

The radical gay groups' position on disclosing one's homosexuality to others was opposite to that of the groups of the reformist stage. The secrecy of the earlier stage was seen by radical activists to be an example of self-oppression, and was considered to be one of the major reasons for the continued oppression of gays. Radical activists argued that all gays had to disclose their sexual preferences to others if social change was to occur. Disclosure became "the gay movement's central political act" (Jackson & Persky, 1982:224). Whitman's political essay, the "Gay Manifesto," stated that the first imperative is to "come out everywhere" (1970:341). The individual and the community were both seen as benefitting from self-disclosure.

First, coming-out to others was the most important means available to the individual to overcome his self-oppression, self-hatred, and shame about being gay. For example, Hodges and Hutter stated, "only by public, indiscriminate, indiscreet self-disclosure can this shame be denied" (1974:18). According to the gay radicals, coming-out was a prerequisite to the development of a positive and self-accepting gay identity. One review of the gay movement stated, "...to come out of the closet was an affirmation that gay is good. It was the proud assumption of a homosexual identity" (Jackson & Persky, 1982:224). On an individual level, disclosure was seen to be an important means of

achieving a positive gay identity and an indicator that one no longer held ideas and attitudes which might lead to self-oppression.

The second function of coming-out to others was to promote broader social change. A popular political slogan of the movement was "the personal is political" (Birch, 1980:87). By publicly revealing their sexual orientation, individual gays identify themselves with the gay movement and increase its visibility. In 1975, Hannon stated that coming-out "is the aggressive statement of what I am and what I am fighting for. It is part of my refusal to be invisible" (quoted in Hannon, 1982:10). Increased visibility was said to promote change in three ways: by showing that gays are a sizable minority, by breaking down the negative stereotypic images of gays, and by helping younger gays more easily recognize and accept their sexual preferences.

The radical stage of the gay movement was relatively short-lived. By 1972, Humphreys noted that most of the radical groups had ceased to exist. The most recent stage of the movement, the contemporary stage, is characterized by an increased reliance of gay groups on already existing political and social institutions to promote change. Altman (1980, 1982) observes that recourse to the legal system for protection from physical aggression and discrimination has markedly increased, and that the gay movement now relies on political lobbying and the national political parties to promote change.



Increasingly, gay groups have access to the mass media in order to publicize their claims (1).

The calls for gays to disclose their sexual preferences to others have continued since the mid-1970s, albeit with some modifications. The new position argues that gays should be selective and careful in who they reveal themselves to, and that the public behavior of gays should be respectable and "politically correct" (Altman, 1982:120). It is nevertheless significant that this latest position on coming-out continues to view covertness as a result of the individual's difficulties in accepting his homosexuality and as a political liability to the movement's efforts to promote social change.

## 2. Mental Health Professionals

In the 1960s and 1970s, some mental health professionals began to support the claim that homosexuality was not a psychopathological condition (e.g. Hoffman, 1968; Marmor, 1973; Tripp, 1975; Weinberg, 1972), although there was still considerable support for the conventional pathology-based view of homosexuality (e.g. Bieber, 1973; Hatterer, 1970; Ovesey, 1969; Socarides, 1970, 1975). During this period, some clinicians began to explicitly address the issue of disclosure (Bell, 1976; Freedman, 1974; Hoffman, 1968; Hooker, 1965; Myrich, 1974; Weinberg, 1972).

These authors agreed that many of the social and psychological problems which confronted gay men stemmed from their covert existences. For example, Hoffman (1968)

considered that the inability of gays to tell their families and friends about their sexual orientation led to feelings of estrangement from others, a sense of alienation from society, and a tendency to isolate sex from emotional commitment and affection. Bell (1976:210) said that covertness leads some gays to "compartmentalize their sexual lives in ways that do them little good. They frequently experience a great deal of tension in pretending to be what they are not, [and] a profound disparity between their inner and outer selves." Myrich (1974) associated covertness with low self-esteem, social isolation, and a sense of powerlessness and incompetence. In these ways, disclosure began to be linked with psychological well-being and conversely, secrecy was linked with psychological maladjustment.

As the result of mounting pressure from gay activists, a debate developed at the beginning of the 1970s in the American Psychiatric Association over the official definition of homosexuality as a mental illness (see Bayer, 1981; Conrad & Schneider, 1980; Marmor, 1980; Spector, 1977). Gay activists and some mental health professionals argued that homosexuality is a non-pathological variation in human sexual expression and a lifestyle, and that it should not be considered as a pathological condition (Marmor, 1973; Silverstein, 1973). The opposing view was held by those psychiatrists who believed that homosexuality should continue to be considered and classified as a mental disorder (Bieber, 1973:1209). A compromise position was reached between the opposing positions

in 1973, leading to the introduction of a new diagnostic classification, sexual orientation disturbance, and the deletion of homosexuality as a diagnostic category (American Psychiatric Association, 1974). This decision was eventually endorsed by the American Psychological Association (1975) and the National Association of Social Workers (1977) (2).

Homosexuality per se was no longer officially considered to be a mental disorder. Sexual orientation disturbance referred to those gays who were distressed by their sexual orientation and who wished to become heterosexual. In the late 1970s, the APA's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, (second edition), DSM-II, was revised and the third edition of the APA's list of mental disorders was published. In DSM-III, sexual orientation disturbance was replaced by the new category, ego dystonic homosexuality. Since this new classification did not significantly modify the earlier compromise, few gay groups challenged its inclusion (Bayer, 1981), despite the fact that homosexual desires may sometimes continue to be viewed as an indicator of mental disorder.

The declassification of homosexuality and the creation of sexual orientation disturbance reinforced the shift towards viewing covertness as psychologically problematic. The new diagnostic category is an example of the growing acceptance among mental health professionals of the notion that accepting one's homosexuality is an important component of a "healthy" gay identity. According to the new professional position,

acceptance of one's gayness is contingent upon revealing one's sexual orientation to others. Since the reclassification decision, several clinical models of the coming-out process have been offered (Berger, 1982; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; O'Dowd & Heneken, 1977). Most of these models aim at organizing the major "milestone events" in a stage-sequential process. An important milestone event in all of the models is coming-out to others. MacDonald observes that "achieving a positive gay identity appears to be contingent upon disclosing one's sexual orientation to significant nongay others" (1984:54). Plummer, when noting the link between disclosure to nongays and the development of a positive gay identity, clearly concurs when he states,

Coming-out to the straight world is often the first sign that the homosexual person has successfully navigated his own problems and has moved on to those of others (1981:102-3).

Movement through the stages described by the models is assumed to be "positive growth" and therefore, psychologically desirable: those gays who are at a more advanced stage of the process are more psychologically healthy than others. For example, they are seen as being "less defensive" and more capable of fostering "greater tolerance for others" (Coleman, 1982:481), and as being less likely to develop a "negative or self-hating identity" (Cass, 1979). Coleman states that movement through the stages leads to "a healthier and more mature outlook" (1982:470). The man who completes the coming-out process, in which disclosure to others is an

important part, is said to be more psychologically adjusted and socially skilled than those who do not.

The new clinical view does not, however, advocate indiscriminate disclosure to others. Coleman (1982:474) states that gays "should choose carefully those people...they want to know about their sexual identity" and that "calculated risks should be taken." One of the therapeutic roles of counsellors is seen to be helping the gay individual decide who to tell, and how to make the revelation (Woodman & Lenna, 1980). Parry & Lightbown (1981:162) also suggest that professional counsellors should discuss the risks of overtness and the advantages of developing "an integrated self-concept" with covert gay clients. But they offer this caution:

The gay person who says, "I accept my homosexuality, but I don't see why I should tell anyone else about it, it's my own business," is likely, in our experience, to be whistling in the dark. Such a statement may reflect considerable uncertainty about whether one is deep down lovable, basically OK (1981:162)

Parry & Lightbown view secrecy as a priori evidence of problems in psychological adjustment, even if the client feels happy and well-adjusted.

\* \* \* \*

By the mid-1970s, homosexuality was no longer seen to be a mental illness by the professional associations and by many clinicians. Overt homosexuality has come to be seen as associated with "greater adjustment, satisfaction, acceptance, and happiness" (Coleman, 1982:481). At the same time, covert

homosexuality came to be seen by mental health professionals as psychologically problematic.

### 3. Sociologists

The current sociological view of disclosure differs markedly from the position expressed by Leznoff and Westley in 1956. From 1970, sociologists began presenting overt homosexuality in positive terms and covert homosexuality in negative terms. When compared to overt men, covert homosexual men were seen to have a lower self-concept (Weinberg & Williams, 1974), more health related complaints and psychophysiological symptoms (Humphreys, 1970; Weinberg & Williams, 1974), a greater degree of social isolation (Dank, 1971; Humphreys, 1970; Weinberg & Williams, 1974), a greater likelihood of internalizing negative images of homosexuality (Dank, 1971; Weinberg & Williams, 1974), and a greater degree of guilt and anxiety relating to their sexuality (Lee, 1977; Weinberg & Williams, 1974).

For example, Humphreys' (1970) analysis of impersonal sex in public washrooms argued that covert gay men are more likely to suffer from psychological problems than are overt gays. Humphreys referred to one of the five types of gays he described as "closet queens," a term that expresses the shift in how disclosure is now viewed; Warren has observed that the term is a derogatory one which implies that one is an outsider

of the gay community (1974:114). "Closet queens" were seen by Humphreys to experience higher degrees of psychophysiological symptoms, self-hatred, and loneliness than any of the other four types of gay men he described. Dank (1971) also employed the term closet queens, and suggested that they were more likely to internalize negative images of homosexuality than overt gays. A similar view is presented in Weinberg & Williams' study (1974) on the problems and adaptations of gay men. Their most covert subjects are those who worry about exposure, who anticipate discrimination, and who pass most often as heterosexual. These men are more likely than overt gay men to feel guilt, shame or anxiety regarding homosexuality, to suffer from depression, psychophysiological symptoms, social awkwardness, and isolation. They are also seen as having a low degree of social involvement with other gays and a greater tendency to see homosexuality as a mental illness than others.

While current research indicates that coming-out to others is often helpful to the individual, the contemporary sociological position, like the psychological position, does not unequivocally support coming-out to others. Some authors, such as Sagarin (1976), Lee (1977) and Warren (1980) note that the individual has to pay costs for either becoming overt or remaining covert. The risks of overtness include ostracism, the loss of friends, family conflict, and the loss of employment. In his study of the development of gay identities in men, Weinberg (1983) observed that coming-out to others can

have either a positive or a negative effect on the individual, depending on the circumstances.

\* \* \* \*

Sociological studies observe that most gay men continue to be covert, or pass as heterosexual in most of their social interactions (Lee, 1977; Warren, 1974; Weinberg & Williams, 1974). During the two decades which followed the Leznoff & Westley study, however, sociologists have increasingly come to associate covertness with personal or social problems. Leznoff and Westley's view of coming-out to others implied that most gay men dealt with their homosexuality in an acceptable manner, that is, they kept it hidden. Recent studies of homosexuality view the manner in which most gay men deal with the issue of coming-out as problematic; researchers continue to recognize that most gays are covert, yet now see this strategy as psychologically and socially undesirable.

#### SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have shown that a significant shift has occurred in how mental health workers, gay activists, and sociologists view disclosure of sexual preferences. Whereas disclosure was once seen as more psychopathological, socially deviant, and politically dangerous than remaining secretive, in the late 1960s, it came to be seen as advantageous and desirable. All three perspectives held similar views of disclosure, first seeing it as undesirable, then seeing it as



advisable.

In the process of "normalizing" homosexuality, gay activists, psychologists, and sociologists have paradoxically participated in the creation of a new form of deviance, the covert or "closeted" gay. Furthermore, the new view of disclosure implies that: gay men are consistent in how they manage information relating to their sexuality; that their decision to be overt or covert is an attribute of a stage of sexual identity development; and that both overtness and covertness are relatively simple and unproblematic modes of adapting to being gay.

It is in this context, where overtness is more positively evaluated than covertness, that I examine how gay men manage information relating to their sexual preferences.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

In Chapter Two, I review my research method and describe some of the possible implications of my sampling procedure for my findings.

In Chapter Three, I examine how the respondents manage information about their homosexuality when interacting with nongays and illustrate the strategies which are used by the respondents to disclose or conceal their sexual preferences to others and their reasons for doing so.

In Chapter Four, I show that the men face a dilemma in their interactions with nongays, and that their problems vary in different types of relationships. The respondents are consequently inconsistent in how they present information about their homosexuality.

In Chapter Five, I examine the respondents' beliefs about disclosure and secrecy. I show that there are two basic positions, the psychological and the political ideologies, and that the respondents' stances with regard to disclosure and secrecy are flexible, often changing from situation to situation, or over time.

In Chapter Six, my concluding chapter, I discuss the contributions of my empirical findings to the sociological study of categorization of deviance, psychiatric expansionism, and the management of stigmatizing information.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) The mass media has been an important vehicle for the gay community's response to the AIDS epidemic: many gay men with AIDS have been willing to publicly identify themselves. This also demonstrates that the ideology that "the personal is political" continues to be an important tenet of the contemporary North American gay movement (see Altman, 1986). Altman further suggests that AIDS has led to a fundamental change in gays' sexual behavior, providing a clear example of how personal and political issues can be linked (1986:172).
- (2) Despite the debate within the APA and the eventual declassification of homosexuality, the World Health Organization's (1977) International Classification of Diseases (IDC-9) continues to classify homosexuality as a disease. The WHO system is widely used by Canadian clinicians.

## CHAPTER II

### RESEARCH METHOD

#### SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

Research on homosexuality has been seriously hampered by problems with sampling. The theoretical population of "gay men" is poorly defined and it is impossible to recruit a representative sample (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Morin, 1977; Weinberg, 1983; Weinberg & Williams, 1974). Previous research has shown that gay samples recruited from different sources differ on variables such as the age of respondents, their age when they first realized that they are gay, their degree of involvement in gay and nongay social worlds, their frequency of sexual contact, whether they are involved in an ongoing intimate gay relationship, and their history of heterosexual involvements (Harry, 1986; Weinberg, 1970). My sampling procedure does not aim at obtaining a representative sample of gay men, but illustrating the range of ways in which men manage potentially stigmatizing information; recruitment of respondents from three sources permitted me to "maximize the differences" between respondents on this variable (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). My sample is a nonrepresentative sample of gay men.

I recruited gay men for my study in three ways: by placing posters in public gay establishments, by placing paid

classified advertisements in two newspapers, and through personal contacts. Consequently, my sample is composed of a diverse group of gay men: those who frequent gay commercial establishments (posters), those who may be relatively isolated from other gays (classified ads), and those involved in a gay social world, but who do not necessarily frequent gay bars (social contacts).

Posters: In January 1985, I placed bilingual posters in several gay establishments in Montréal: two popular gay bars for men, a sex shop which specializes in articles for gay men, a gay and lesbian bookstore, the offices of a gay political organization, and an adult cinema for gay men (1). All of the establishments are located in the east-end of Montréal, and most are in a section of the city called "Le Village de l'Est," an area known for its high concentration of gay residents and gay businesses. The posters read:

#### RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Gay men wanted to volunteer for a sociological research project on gay identities.

--Confidentiality assured  
--Participation entails one hour-long interview  
--Interviews given in either French or English

\* \* \* \*

#### PARTICIPANTS DE RECHERCHE

Hommes gais demandés de participer à un projet de recherches sociologiques sur les identités gaies.

--confidentialité assurée  
--une entrevue d'une heure  
--entrevues offertes en anglais ou en français

I recruited a total of twelve men through the posters. Six of these men were francophone, one of whom was sufficiently bilingual to be interviewed in English. All but two of the men live in Montréal; one respondent lives in Québec City but saw a poster during a business trip to Montréal, and a second respondent lives in a small town about 30 miles outside of Montréal.

Classified Advertisements: In January 1986, I placed two advertisements in the classified sections of a French and an English daily newspaper in Montréal, La Presse and The Gazette. The ads, which appeared in the "personal classified" sections of the papers (2), read:

Gay male volunteers needed for a sociological study on disclosing homosexuality to others; Men open about being gay and those who are not open are needed; 1 to 2 hour interviews; Strictly confidential.

Hommes gais demandés de participer à une étude sociologique sur la révélation de l'homosexualité aux autres; hommes qui sont ouverts et ceux qui ne le sont pas sont demandés; entrevue d'une à deux heures; strictement confidentiel.

I received over one hundred telephone calls as a result of these advertisements, and eventually recruited a total of seventeen men for interviews (3). Eight of these men were francophone and nine were anglophone. Three of the francophone respondents were sufficiently bilingual to be interviewed in English. All respondents lived in or around Montréal.

Personal Contacts: I recruited my third group of respondents through social contacts or by asking participants whether they knew people who might agree to be interviewed. Nine men were recruited to the study in this manner. One participant was francophone, but was interviewed in English. One respondent lives in Toronto, one in Ottawa, and two live in Syracuse, a city in Northern New York State. The remaining two respondents live in Montréal.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Age: The ages of the men in this study ranged from nineteen to forty-nine years, with a mean age of thirty-one years.

Education: My sample is relatively well educated. Most of the men (34/38) have completed at least their high school education. Several men (19/38) reported having had some college (CEGEP) or university education.

Religion: Given that the research took place in the Province of Québec, where the majority of the population is Roman Catholic, most (27/38) of the research participants expectedly reported a Roman Catholic up-bringing. Eight men were Protestant, one was Jewish, and two professed no religious affiliations. Only two of the men, an Anglican and a Catholic, claimed to regularly attend religious services.

Place of Residence: All the men currently live in urban or suburban areas.

Nationality: All but three of the respondents in this study are white; two men are Chinese and one man is from Trinidad. One man was born in England, and another was born in Lebanon. Three respondents are American.

Motivation: Because it was generally necessary for the men to take the initiative to call in response to a poster or newspaper advertisement, arrange an interview, and then keep the appointment, the sample is self-selected and composed of highly motivated respondents.

Overall, the sample is composed of relatively young, educated, Catholic, urban, and motivated men. A range of involvement in the gay world is represented by the sample: two men report that they have never talked to another gay man before (they have had several sexual experiences with men who did not identify themselves as gay), while several men report that are very active in an organized gay community. There is also considerable range in their degree of overtness: two men state that no nongays know that they are gay (although some people might suspect), while several report that virtually everyone who knows them is aware of their sexual identity.

My sampling method may, however, fail to include some patterns of disclosure and secrecy. I only interviewed men who live in or near urban areas, thereby ignoring the situation of gays who live in relative isolation from an organized and visible gay community. The Province of Québec, and Montréal in particular, is seen as "liberal" and "open" when compared to

other Canadian settings, so gays who live in more conservative settings may face different problems or may manage information pertaining to their sexual identities in a different manner than the men in my sample. The fact that my respondents are self-selected and highly motivated may mean that they have strong personal motivations for participating in the study (i.e., wanting to speak to someone because of loneliness or confusion about their sexuality, or wanting to promote their own political view of disclosure). The relative youth of the sample may also introduce a bias into my findings, as previous research has shown that age is an important factor in determining characteristics of gay male samples (see Harry, 1986; Weinberg, 1972). Age may be a particularly important factor in my study of disclosure and secrecy, given the recent shift in political and professional views of the subject. Older men may be more likely to hold "reformist" views on disclosure (e.g., "one should not come out to others and risk offending them"), while younger men may hold more "radical" views (e.g., "one must actively assert one's homosexuality").

#### INTERVIEWS

Data for my study were collected through semi-structured interviews with thirty-eight gay men. Respondents were given the choice of being interviewed at my apartment, at my office in a social service agency in downtown Montréal, at their home, or in a neutral setting, such as a restaurant. Most of



the men agreed to be interviewed at my apartment, although two interviews were conducted at my office, and nine were conducted at the homes of the respondents. No respondent asked to be interviewed in a neutral setting. The duration of the interviews ranged from one hour to three and one-half hours, with the average interview lasting about two hours. Twenty-seven interviews were conducted in English and eleven were conducted in French.

The interviews were based on a general schedule which was organized to elicit the "disclosure history" of respondents. The interviews were organized around the following topics: Who knows that the respondent is gay, and how did these people find out? What were their reactions to the disclosure? How does he decide who is to know and who is not to be told? What are the perceived benefits and risks of disclosure? What contact does the man have with other gays? When and how does he try to keep his sexuality a secret from others? To what degree does he think that being open with others is desirable?

#### DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were tape recorded and verbatim transcripts were prepared. The transcripts were cut into paragraph-length quotes, which were pasted onto "McBee sorting cards," permitting me to sort the data according to the theoretical categories I had constructed. For example, one of these

categories was "disclosure" (which would indicate that the quote on the card referred to an incident of revelation). By sorting the cards using several categories, such as "disclosure," and "parents," I was able to examine the data relating to incidents of revelations to parents.

### TERMINOLOGY

Homosexual/Gay: There is little agreement in the literature about how to define who is "homosexual." For instance, some authors refer to the existence of homosexual personality types or specific intrapsychic dynamics (e.g., Bieber et al., 1962; Ovesey, 1969; Socarides, 1968), or participation in homosexual behavior, while other authors rely on the individual's self-identification as their defining criterion (e.g., Troiden, 1977; Weinberg, 1983). For his part, Kinsey argued that the term, homosexual, should be used to describe overt behavior, not people (1948:617).

The respondents of my study define themselves as gay in that they answered advertisements which called for "gay men" to participate on a research project; the criteria I use is their self-definition as gay. As a result, I exclude those men who engage in homosexual behavior, but do not identify themselves as gay, such as the "peers" described by Reiss (1962), the men described as "trade" and "closet queens" by Humphreys (1970), or men who frequent highway rest areas (Corzine & Kirby, 1977; Troiden, 1974).

I use the terms "homosexual" and "gay" interchangeably, whereas numerous authors differentiate the two concepts (Chesbro, 1981; De Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Morin & Schultz, 1978; Warren, 1974; Weinberg, 1972). For example, Warren stated that "homosexual" describes the individual's sexual orientation, while "gay" refers to his "affiliation with the gay community in a cultural and sociable sense" (Warren, 1974:149). Cass (1983/1984:117) observed that proponents of this differentiation suggest that a gay identity is more "advanced" developmentally than a homosexual identity; the gay individual rejects the negative stereotypes often associated with homosexuality and more likely identifies himself with the organized gay community and its politics.

Coming out: The term "coming out" is also used in an inconsistent manner in the literature. Plummer (1975:147) has noted that most social scientists favour Simon and Gagnon's use of the term to describe "the point in time when there is self-recognition as a homosexual and the first major exploration of the homosexual community" (Simon & Gagnon, 1967:181). Here, the term describes self-definition and initial contacts with other gays. In contrast, Dank (1971) used "coming out" in reference to the process of identifying oneself as gay, irrespective of actual contact with other gays. A third meaning to the term is found in the gay political literature, where it is used to refer to disclosure of one's homosexuality to others.

To avoid any confusion, I will use the terms, "disclosure" or "revelation" when referring to the context of "coming out to others." The phrase, "identity development," will be employed in reference to "coming out to oneself."

French Terminology: Excerpts from the eleven interviews which were conducted in French are not translated into English and are presented verbatim in the text of the thesis. Some French terms are more or less equivalent to English expressions. For instance, use of the terms "homosexualité," "homosexuel," and "gai" are equivalent to the terms, homosexuality, homosexual, and gay. Some expressions, however, do not have a direct translation. There is, for instance, no French equivalent to "coming out." The verb "sortir" is sometimes used in Québec much in the same way as "coming out" (i.e., "Je me suis sorti à ma famille"). The closest translation of disclosure would be "se révéler" or "se divulguer," although neither term is an exact equivalent. Some francophone men may say, "je suis aux hommes," in order to identify themselves as gay. Translations of derogatory expressions such as "faggot" or "fruit" would include, "une tappette" or "un fifi." Occasionally, francophone respondents used English expressions while speaking French, which appear in quotation marks in the excerpts.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) I had originally intended to study the development of gay identities as well as the disclosure of homosexuality to others, but after several interviews were completed, I decided to narrow the focus of the study and only examine disclosure and secrecy. Because some of the data gathered in the initial seventeen interviews were no longer pertinent to goals of the thesis, twenty-one more interviews were completed. The later interviews examined questions on disclosure in greater detail, and therefore, they tend to be cited more frequently in the body of the thesis than the earlier interviews.
- (2) An additional result of the study's narrowed focus is that the classified advertisements addressed disclosure more directly than did the posters, which stated that the study was on identity development among gay men.
- (3) The remaining callers either did not wish to make an appointment for an interview or failed to appear at the arranged time. Some callers simply telephoned for information about the study, while several men called thinking that my personal ads were "disguised" advertisements for sexual encounters.

### CHAPTER III

#### Stigma and Strategies of Disclosure and Concealment

Disclosure and concealment of homosexuality are the two basic means available to the gay man for managing the potentially damaging information regarding his sexual preferences and identity. Gay men engage in varying degrees of disclosure and concealment about themselves, and are not simply either overt or covert. The man's degree of overtness is not merely a function of fixed personal characteristics or an attribute of a developmental stage. The man differentiates among situations when deciding how to manage potentially stigmatizing information, leading him to be changeable in his level of openness. Furthermore, while choosing to be overt or covert in a particular situation may seem straightforward, both options involve complex interactional strategies; disclosure often entails careful planning and execution, and concealment requires the man to attend to many aspects of his social presentation and lifestyle which would ordinarily go unnoticed.

Despite their significance for the gay man's social relationships, disclosure and secrecy have been treated in a simplistic and taken-for-granted manner in much of the psychological and sociological literature. The development of

gay identities has become an important concern in the literature on homosexuality during the past decade, but relatively little attention has been paid to disclosure and secrecy among gay men. Even when these issues are addressed, they are generally treated as secondary concerns in discussions of identity development. Or, authors simply present basic statistics about how many people are "overt" and "covert" in a given sample. Only a few studies have examined the strategies involved in managing information concerning homosexuality in a systematic and detailed fashion (e.g., Ponse, 1976; Warren, 1974; Weinberg, 1983), but the primary interest of even these authors is the process of sexual identity development.

Much of the literature also suggests that disclosure and concealment are strategies used by gays in a consistent manner; those men who accept their gay identities are portrayed in the literature as open, while those who are at earlier stages of their sexual identity development are portrayed as secretive. In contrast, I will show that gay men use a wide variety of strategies in their interactions with nongays. These strategies are, therefore, not primarily a function of self-acceptance or identity development, but are instead situational choices.

This chapter has two aims. First, I will show that the respondents in this study view their sexual preferences as discrediting and potentially stigmatizing, and that this recognition leads them to carefully control information

related to their sexual behavior and identity. Second, I will illustrate the complexities of disclosure and concealment, and the various aspects of the work involved in the management of information relating to homosexuality.

#### STIGMA AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

A stigma is a personal attribute, such as a physical deformity, an undesirable psychological trait, or a tribal feature, like one's religion or race, which discredits the individual's identity (Goffman, 1963:4). Becker (1973) and Schneider & Conrad (1980:34) have shown that the individual must recognize that he possesses a discreditable trait before it will have any significance for his self-definition or his social interactions; the mere possession of a particular trait is not a sufficient condition for feeling stigmatized.

That homosexuality is a devalued form of sexuality is well known; our culture teaches that homosexual expression is immoral, sick, or otherwise undesirable (Conrad & Schneider, 1981; Tripp, 1974; Weinberg, 1972). Because these beliefs are so widespread, gay men do not have to personally experience ridicule or rejection to know that their sexual preferences and identity are viewed negatively by most others. Like the person with epilepsy (Schneider & Conrad, 1980) and the childless couple (Miall, 1986), gays are aware of the potential stigma associated with being homosexual without ever having been personally stigmatized.



Homosexual sexual preferences, at least in this period of history, lead others to view the gay individual as fundamentally different from heterosexuals (MacIntosh, 1968; Foucault, 1979; Plummer, 1975, 1981; Weeks, 1981) and most respondents recognize this cultural "fact." They know that if other people discover they are gay, they may be seen as a different "type" of person; other people may make many assumptions about their behavior and personality, imputing negative characteristics to them solely on the basis of their sexual orientation. As one respondent stated:

J'ai réalisé...qu'ils pouvaient penser  
que je pouvais être une espèce de  
monstre, que la société ou la famille me  
voit comme un malade ou comme un  
monstre, que je n'étais pas normal. (16)

Few respondents in this study report having actually been rejected by others because of their homosexuality, yet all of the men are careful about how information about their sexual preferences is presented to others. The unfavorable cultural attitudes held with regard to homosexuality often lead gays to hold negative views of their own sexuality. Virtually all of the men report that they felt badly about themselves when they initially realized that they were gay. Being gay is something that respondents had to "accept." Implicit in their need to "accept" homosexuality is their view, at least initially, that it is undesirable. One man explained his feelings in the following manner:

I would ask myself why I am like this, I didn't ask for it. I wanted to be normal. At that time, I was still refusing to accept it. (21)

Given that almost all of the men once felt badly about being gay, it is not surprising to find that many experienced feelings of depression and despair when they first began to realize that they might be homosexual.

Secrecy about sexual preferences and the development of a gay sexual identity are closely linked (Plummer, 1975; Richardson, 1984; Troiden, 1979; Warren, 1974; Weinberg, 1983). An individual is already aware of the potential for stigmatization by the time he comes to suspect that he may be gay, so he carefully controls information relating to his sexuality from the beginning of this realization. Secrecy becomes a conscious strategy, since passing as heterosexual is a means of protecting himself from potential stigmatization. Having reached the point where he defines himself as homosexual (or at least potentially homosexual), the man begins a life-long process of information management concerning his sexual preferences and identity.

\* \* \* \*

The gay man generally starts his career by concealing his sexual preferences, and then, for various reasons, begins revealing himself to selected others. Even when he accepts his sexual identity, there remain good reasons for him to conceal his homosexuality in certain situations. In the following two sections, I review the motives for disclosure and concealment

of homosexuality, and the various strategies used by the respondents to manage information relating to their sexual behavior and identity.

#### TYPES OF DISCLOSURES

In their study of how people with epilepsy manage the potentially stigmatizing information related to their condition, Schneider and Conrad describe two types of disclosure: "telling as therapy" and "preventive telling" (1980:39). Miall's (1986) study on the management of discreditable information among childless couples also found these two types of disclosures. Miall also describes two additional types of information management: "deviance avowal," accepting the label and assuming responsibility for the deviant behavior, and "practiced deception," a strategy which is a preplanned and rehearsed distortion of the circumstances by both partners in the couple (1). These two studies are relevant for my study in that they examine how individuals who possess a potentially stigmatizing attribute manage related information.

The social situation of gays is, however, different from the situations of epileptics or childless couples in several respects. Gay political and social communities exist, whereas no comparable social organizations exist for the other two groups. The gay community is of significance to the individual's efforts to manage stigmatizing information in that it allows him to recognize that at least some gays are

open about their homosexuality, and because it promotes an ideology which is supportive of telling others. The current gay ideology legitimates disclosure and presents it as a more viable option than concealment. Homosexuality, epilepsy and involuntary childlessness differ in another sense; epilepsy is a discreditable attribute of the individual and childlessness is an attribute of the couple, whereas homosexuality has both individual and relational aspects: a man can "be" homosexual and "be involved in" a homosexual relationship. As a result, the gay man must manage information concerning his personal attribute and his social relationships.

Glaser and Strauss' work on awareness contexts (1964, 1966) is also relevant to my study. They propose four types of contexts: an open awareness context, where each person knows the other's identity and is aware of how he is seen by the other; a closed awareness context, where the person knows neither the other's identity nor how he is seen by the other; a suspicion awareness context, where the person suspects either the other's identity or how he is viewed by the other; and the pretense awareness context, where both people are fully aware of the other's identity and how they are viewed, but pretend not to be (Glaser & Strauss, 1964:670).

The situation where the gay man has told another person about his homosexuality is an example of an open awareness context. Those situations where he has not told the other person and does not know whether the other suspects that he is gay is a closed awareness context. Often, particularly with

family members and close friends, the gay may suspect that the other person knows, but he is unsure. This is a suspicion awareness context. The situation where the gay man knows that the other person knows that he is gay (he may have been informed that the other person was told by a third party), but continues to interact with him as if he did not know is a pretense awareness context.

My study extends the work of Schneider & Conrad (1980) and Miall (1986) insofar as it identifies several other types of disclosures used by a group of potentially stigmatized individuals. It contributes to Glaser and Strauss' (1964, 1966) work by illustrating interactional tactics used by gay men to maintain the various types of awareness context or move from one context to another.

My data reveal six types of disclosures: therapy, relationship-building, problem-solving, prevention, politics, and spontaneous disclosures. The categories are not mutually exclusive. A man may tell his friend because he wants to develop a closer relationship with her (relationship-building), but at the same time, he may want to ensure that she does not find out through third party (prevention) or he may be offended by some of her statements about gays (politics). These categories indicate that there are a variety of reasons why a man discloses his sexual preferences to others, and that disclosure can serve different functions for the man in varying circumstances.

Therapy: Schneider & Conrad (1980) and Miall (1986) have observed that stigmatized individuals often tell others about their identity in order to feel better about themselves. Many respondents in my study disclosed their sexual preferences to another person because they felt guilty, isolated or otherwise burdened by their homosexuality. Telling another person is a means to "enhance self-esteem or to renegotiate personal perceptions of stigma" (Miall, 1986:275). In other words, the man reveals himself to another because he feels badly about himself and is looking for support or help.

I was really depressed...I just had to tell him. After he told me how he took it, it just boosted my confidence. I couldn't get home quick enough to tell my brother, my sister, my friend, everyone. The more people I told, the better I felt. (21)

When you are in the closet a long time, it's not a question of coming out of the closet, but getting the pressure off of your back. If you are under pressure full time, there is always a feeling that you are going to make a mistake, like leaving a gay magazine around the apartment. You are always worried that someone will catch you looking at someone. You are forever checking yourself. You can't get close to people because you're afraid that they might find out. (29)

Not all disclosures, however, lead the man to feel better about himself. Some respondents report that a disclosure to another person actually led them to feel worse. For example, one respondent seeking absolution confessed to a Catholic priest about a sexual experience he had:

I went to see a priest, a Jesuit priest and I told him that I thought I was a homosexual. At the time, I looked at it as something terrible or awful--I must have, if I went to see a priest about it. He said to me, "how many times did you go with someone?" I said, "three times" and he said, "if you do it again, you are a homosexual." (4)

The priest's reaction only led him to feel more guilty and sinful, especially since he did in fact have further gay experiences. The negative reaction he received increased his feelings of depression and his self-degradation. The absolution he received only provided temporary relief:

I went to confession and it was alright. The priest was disgusted...but after the confession, it was okay for about a month or so, but then, all of a sudden, the urge came back again. (4)

However, most men report that early in their sexual careers, when most of their interactions take place within a closed awareness context, disclosure is often motivated by confusion, despair, or other such negative feelings, and that telling another person helped them feel better about themselves. Most men are initially careful about who they tell and are unlikely to tell those who they perceive as likely to reject them. As Weinberg (1983:112) has shown, gay men often actively seek out supportive reference groups where their homosexuality is more likely to be seen in a positive light. Almost all respondents state that once they began to be more self-accepting, depression or other such negative feelings were less often motives for disclosure.

Relationship-Building: A second type of disclosure refers to those revelations where the gay man aims at improving his relationship with the other person. Most men state that they cannot consider themselves to be close to another person if they hide their homosexuality.

I couldn't live with someone or be close to someone who doesn't know about my sexuality...If I'm going to get close to the person, then I think it's a prerequisite. (18)

Je ne suis pas le style de parler de la partie du hockey ou de parler de la politique...je vais peut-être plus parler sur un niveau émotionnel que rationnel et quand j'ai à parler des relations humaines, je n'aime pas parler au monde qui ne connaît pas ma situation. (19)

They have the whole picture, they don't think I am someone else. It's that they know the real person, knowing that I am not attracted to women, that I probably will never be married. If you are going to be close to someone, I feel they should know that, to be honest. (25)

Hiding an important aspect of oneself, like one's sexuality, is seen as a major impediment to developing close relationships, so disclosure removes that hindrance, permitting the man to feel more open and honest in the relationship. An open awareness context is often seen by respondents to be a prerequisite to a close relationship.

Problem-Solving: Respondents report that they often tell someone about their homosexuality as a means to resolve a situational or interactional problem. One respondent told his



friends because they would often tease him about being gay:

Mes amis faisaient des remarques. On se connaissait beaucoup. Au magasin une fois, on a vu un revue de style "Mandate" et ils ont dit "veux-tu qu'on te l'achète?", des remarques comme ça. Une fois, je me suis assis pour dire carrément d'arrêter de m'envoyer des niaiseries, que j'étais tanné de tout ça et oui, je suis gai. (15)

This disclosure aimed at ending perceived harassment. Several other men report that telling family and friends relieved them of the problem of always having to confront questions about their whereabouts or their social activities.

Ils me demandaient pourquoi j'avais pas de blonde, pourquoi je me trouve souvent seul...ils me demandaient qu'est-ce que j'avais fait la veille, si j'avais rencontré quelqu'une...ils posaient des questions du monde qui m'appelaient. J'étais tanné, c'était comme j'avais honte...je ne me sentais pas honnête avec eux. (19)

These probing questions are particularly difficult for the man who continues to live with his parents.

It's saved me from problems with my parents...before I told them [about being gay], my mother would say, "where are you going?" and I would say, "I'm going out." It was hard on me too, because I always had to lie about it. Once I told them, that cleared up, I didn't have to lie anymore. I could be honest. (22)

Most of the problems respondents attempted to resolve through disclosure in this manner related to their secretive gay lifestyles or to the heterosexual assumptions of others. Only one man reported that he revealed himself as a strategy for resolving a problem which was not related to his sexual

preferences or identity. This respondent told his superiors in the army that he was gay in order to be discharged from the service. This problem-solving strategy is not, however, always successful:

When I decided I wanted to get out, I tried several reasons. After everything failed, I tried to get out by saying I was gay, but it didn't work, they didn't believe me! That was frustrating, finally telling someone--it took me so much to tell someone--and when I finally did, it took me about half an hour before I could open my mouth. When I told him, he just laughed. He looked at me and said, "is this another one of your tricks to try to get out?" (22)

Prevention: Some disclosures are made in an effort to avoid future problems. The most common problem which preventive disclosures aim at addressing is the risk that someone might find out about the respondents' sexual preferences through a third party.

I was really scared that the person was going to hear from someone else and be really hurt that I didn't take the time to tell them myself. (28)

Two men reported that they revealed themselves during job interviews, to ensure that problems would not arise later in their careers.

When I go for a job interview, I say, "look, I'm gay and unilingual..." They know all the "problems" and if it's a big deal, then it ends there. If not, I go in knowing that I have the company to fall back on. (29)

I went for an interview in Toronto with the president of this company...He made me the offer and I said, "before accepting the offer, I have to tell you something." I told him bluntly that I was gay. He hesitated for a few minutes. I said that he could withdraw the offer and that I wouldn't be upset. After a few minutes, he said, "if you are frank and honest enough to disclose something serious like that, you will be honest in your job." I stayed with the company six years and never had any problems. (32)

Another man even tells prospective landlords:

I have had so many problems with renting apartments and not telling people, that I make a point of it nowadays. I don't want to deal with anybody who doesn't accept me. Like when I rented this apartment, I brought my lover with me, so the landlady would see that it was two men renting the place...I would much rather that they know. I wouldn't want them to hate gays and then find out that they have gays living in their place.  
(4)

Several men tell their medical doctors that they are gay, as it alerts the physician to check for possible sexually transmitted diseases. In these instances, the disclosure is a preventive measure aimed at ensuring proper medical care.

Politics: Here, disclosures are made for political or ideological reasons. The man tells another person because he feels he is helping the social or political situation of gays by doing so. He tells another in order to change that individual's attitudes, to promote social change with regard to gays through education, or to help other gays who may be having a difficult time with their own sexuality. For

instance, some men tell others about their homosexuality because they feel that others need to be educated on the subject.

As much as I can, I try to promote it [the gay movement] by telling everyone that I'm gay, and I try to tell them as much as possible about what being gay is and why we are not any worse than anyone else...what I want is to make heterosexuals know that we're people just like them. (5)

J'ai une cousine avec qui je me sens près, sauf que je n'ai jamais dit que j'étais gai. J'ai toujours senti qu'elle avait certains préjugés. En tant que gai, je m'est dit que le travail que j'ai à faire c'est de lui dire que je suis gai. Elle va arrêter d'avoir des préjugés comme ça. (19)

Political disclosures can sometimes be precipitated by a specific issue, such as a television program or a news item. For one man, the media attention to AIDS is an issue which he sees might lead him to tell others:

I have never yet come out to someone because of the AIDS issue, but I have come out to people because of media misrepresentation...you listen to the stupidity, I can see it having an effect on me, in coming out to someone. It has to. I can see very easily being provoked into coming out to someone if they are making AIDS jokes or ranting on about AIDS. For instance, I can see coming out to my family...they would be sitting around the table and saying totally uninformed things about AIDS. I could say, "you're absolutely wrong. Here's the story..." They would ask me how I know so much and I would say, "well, I'm gay." That would be a nice way to let the bomb drop. (28)

Other times, the issue leading to disclosure could be more directly personal. For example, in a closed awareness context, the other person might unwittingly say something personally offensive to the man:

One girl, the only reason I told her was that she has all these assumptions about gay people. Like lesbians are very promiscuous and all gay men are only interested in sex and things like this. She was saying such crazy things I just had to interject. I said, "you are wrong and I should know..." looking her straight in the eyes. Then it dawned on her, and she almost fell out of her chair. (25)

For one man, at least, disclosures are a way to help younger and less experienced gays. He hopes that by helping inform others, he will help prevent their going through the same difficult experiences that he did when he first realized that he was gay.

The thing that was sad for me was that I didn't have any role models. I thought I was the only one...that's maybe why I am so much out of the closet, that's why I am so open. Out of the whole thing, being alone is the worst. (25)

By being open and visible, this man hopes to teach his friends to be more sensitive to the situation of gays. He also hopes to be available to others who may be coming to terms with their own homosexuality.

Spontaneous Disclosures: Not all revelations are planned or even necessarily desired by the gay man. For instance, two

men reported that they told their families about their homosexuality when their brothers revealed themselves.

Le jour où j'ai décidé de le dire à ma famille, j'étais chez une de mes soeurs ici à Montréal avec un de mes frères. On parlait puis il avoue son homosexualité, puis moi aussi, j'avoue la mienne. (34)

The fact that the brothers disclosed themselves seems to have provided a "good opening" for the respondents, as well as providing a source of support within the family.

Another man also told his sister in an unplanned manner, but unlike the two men mentioned above where the disclosure was a spontaneous but conscious choice, this man's disclosure was not. He describes his revelation as an accidental "slip".

My sister came to ask me about a sexual problem...I told her what my friends had told me about contraceptives and what to do. She looked at me and said, "I know that you have been having sex, so tell me how it feels"...Somehow, I don't know what you call it, a Freudian slip or something, I said "me and the guy" and she looks at me and says, "what do you mean, you and the guy??" (26)

Some unplanned disclosures occur because the man feels unusually comfortable with the other person, leading him to feel that the disclosure would not be inappropriate and that it would likely be received in an accepting manner.

I went to Toronto and met the wife of the regional manager at a party. We sort of struck it off. I found it easy to talk to her. As the evening went on, I don't know how we got on the subject, but we just started talking about things and she made some reference to gays. I

felt comfortable with her and that it wouldn't do any harm, so I told her...It was strange. In fact, I was surprised afterwards. (27)

Spontaneous disclosures are unplanned revelations resulting from an "on-the-spot" decision or an accidental "slip."

\* \* \* \*

My findings show that there is a variety of reasons why respondents choose to tell another about their sexual preferences. The respondents generally cite various reasons for telling different people. Their motives for disclosure are not consistent, but are situationally-determined.

#### STRATEGIES OF DISCLOSURE

Selection of an Audience: Disclosures require a person to whom the revelation is made, and respondents often carefully choose their audience so that their disclosure is not received in a negative or hostile manner. Goffman (1963) describes two categories of supportive audiences for disclosures: the "own" and the "wise". The first group, the own, are "sympathetic others who share his stigma" (Goffman, 1963:20), in this case, other gay men. Most respondents state that they find it easier to disclose their homosexuality to gays than to nongays.

It's not the same with straights, even if I know them for a long time...[With gays,] you know that you understand each other and have shared certain things in common. You can talk about absolutely everything with another gay...it's a strength about being gay. (28)

However, as Ponse (1976) found in her study of lesbians, respondents do not necessarily view all other gays as trusted audiences for disclosure, an issue which will be discussed below in the section on concealment.

The second group described by Goffman is composed of nongays whose special situations are seen by the respondents likely to make them sensitive and sympathetic to gays. For example, a man is more likely to tell a friend if he is aware that this person knows gay people and accepts them well.

I knew she would react properly because she knows other gay people, she had talked to me about that before. That's why I said it to her first. (5)

All of the men report that they carefully select those nongays to whom they disclose their sexual preferences. They look for cues as to how the other person will likely react, such as how he reacts to conversations on homosexuality, or their degree of comfort as expressed by their eye contact or body language. Respondents can feel they have a "sixth sense" in knowing how people will react to a disclosure.

Je le dis si la personne est réfléchie, ça dépend de comment je sens la personne. Je sens beaucoup de monde, je peux presque dire qu'est-ce que la



personne pense. Je peux dire ce qu'elle pense juste en la regardant. Je sens la mentalité de la personne, si elle a la mentalité de Montréal ou d'une petite ville. (17)

I sense it. I look for eye contact. If they are really looking at me and really interested in my as a person...I just say, "I'm gay." (26)

The sex of the other person can play a role in this selection process:

Personally, I find it harder to tell men than women...I don't know what it is with men...There just never seems to be an opportunity with men. I have found that with straight men, the right time hasn't come. (27)

Many respondents report that they only tell people to whom they feel close and whom they see on a fairly regular basis. These people are generally family members and close friends.

I am especially open with family, friends, and people I work closely with, people who have no choice in accepting it! (4)

I look at the relationship I have with the person. I have to feel comfortable with them. (27)

Il y a des gens où c'est important pour toi qu'ils sachent. Les autres sont peut-être moins importants, mais ces gens qui sont près de toi, ceux qui ont de la valeur pour toi. (30)

Revealing themselves to someone to whom they already feel close provides the men an opportunity to further develop their relationship with that person, and increases the likelihood that the other person's reaction will be positive.

Testing: A few men developed strategies for "testing" others, to "feel out" their audience before making a personal statement.

C'est rare qu'ils vont parler de ça. Il faut provoquer la conversation pour savoir des opinions. Je lâche une blague...Quand je lâche la blague, ils vont dire "pour moi, c'est ci, moi, c'est ça"...Je parle toujours de mes voisins [qui sont gais], juste pour voir comment ils pensent, juste pour provoquer les réactions. "Moi, ça ne me fait rien" ou "c'est terrible d'avoir des voisins comme ça..." On voit les opinions comme ça. (13)

I find out if they had any other experiences with gay people or if they had gay friends, how they feel about things like Culture Club and Boy George, anything like that. (28)

In a similar fashion, another respondent steers conversation to a discussion about nightclubs and bars, and then introduces the topic of gay bars, to determine the other's degree of acceptance of gays without risking his own identity.

The process of testing and carefully selecting their audience for disclosure is a protective strategy used by respondents. By carefully choosing who is to be told, the man increases his likelihood of acceptance by the other and reduces his chances of being stigmatized. One respondent credits his lack of negative reactions to his selection strategy:

If I choose to tell someone, it's because I don't have any hesitations or doubts, so I haven't had any bad experiences. (23)

Preparing the Audience: A few men report that when they feel that his selected audience is not "ready" for his disclosure, they try to prepare him or her. This tactic aims at moving from a closed awareness context to a suspicion context. Preparation might take the form of correcting the other person's vocabulary:

Si quelqu'un dit "c'est une tappette,"  
je dirai, "c'est un gai" ou "c'est un  
homosexuel." (13)

By correcting them in this manner, he hopes to make people more sensitive about gay issues. This man also makes statements at work such as "Je me suis trompé de bar, je suis rentré dans un bar gai," in order to raise homosexuality as an issue for conversation, permitting him to "feel out" the others. Jokes, like saying he is gay then "taking it back," are used to sensitize people to the possibility of his being gay. Another respondent tries to prepare his family for his eventual revelation by placing a poster of a man on his bedroom wall, as well as material from a gay man's resource group on AIDS. He also tries to draw his parents' attention to gay-oriented movies and television programs. In these ways, he moves from interacting with his parents within a closed awareness context to a suspicion context.

I have AIDS pamphlets and safe sex pamphlets and a Calvin Klein poster [of a man] on my bedroom wall, and I try to videotape gay shows or movies. I taped "An Early Frost" [a movie about a gay man with AIDS] and left it on top of the television for my parents to see...I try to give them clues now. (26)

By creating a suspicion context, he hopes that his future revelation will be less of a shock to his parents, therefore increasing the chances that it will be well received.

How the Disclosure is Made: Disclosures are often made in a direct statement, such as, "I am gay" or "I am homosexual." This is not, however, the only way in which respondents tell others of their homosexuality. One respondent states:

Each time it's a different explanation and a different amount of time before you come around to tell them, if you tell them. Some people want to know, some people ask, some people couldn't care less and consider it none of their business. (28)

"Disclosure" actually constitutes a range of possible interactions. Here is how some of the respondents have told others that they are gay:

I have homosexual tendencies. (1)

I said, "I am bisexual." I didn't say that I was homosexual. I think I was trying to soften the blow, but wanting to be honest. (3)

Mais oui, je suis une tappende, je suis une christ de tappende. (19)

I am taking a personal interest in the gay community. (28)

I am not normal, I'm different. (31)

I prefer men to women, not that I don't like women, but I am closer to men, sexually speaking. (32)

Planning and Timing: Disclosures may occur spontaneously, but often, the man plans out the timing and the nature of the encounter. Planning is particularly likely in difficult disclosures, such as to one's parents or close friends. Plans do not always work out the way the respondent hopes. One man describes a planned disclosure to a close friend in the following manner:

I figured that we would go out to dinner and somehow during the course of the evening, I'd tell her. I hoped that there would be some sort of opening in the conversation, but it wasn't until I drove her home--just before she got out of the car--that I told her. (27)

A precipitating factor is sometimes cited as leading the man to tell at that time. Such factors might include planning a vacation with the other person or the respondent's first sexual experience with another man:

Je leur ai dit après ma première expérience. J'ai dit tout de suite que je suis de même, "je suis homosexuel." Je leur ai dit le lendemain parce que je n'ai pas couché chez nous ce soir là. (13)

Mode of Communication: Respondents can use different strategies to communicate their message. Men do not always tell the other person in a direct statement. A few men, for instance, asked a third party to tell someone for them:

My parents were told by a sister. I took the easy way out and asked my sister to do it for me...we had discussed it for a long while, "I should do it, but no, I can't do it." She wasn't too keen on it, but said, "yea, sure I'll do that." (18)

Disclosures do not necessarily have to be verbal, they can be in a written form. This is one way for the men to make a disclosure, even if they are having a very difficult time approaching them personally.

Je leur ai écrit une lettre de trois pages et j'avais écrit un papier sur l'homosexualité de 50 pages. Je l'ai laissé traîner à la maison et mes parents l'ont lu. (15)

When I moved from home, I left a note for my mother. I don't remember exactly what I said in it (31)

Disclosure is not always something that the gay man has to "do." It is not always a conscious or rational decision on his part. Others' discovery of his sexual preference can be an unplanned consequence of his daily lifestyle. The gay man's discussions about himself or his conversations with others who are "in the know" may lead people to deduce that he is gay, without it ever having been directly discussed.

Now people find out just by being with me in a group where the people I am with know. We are always kidding each other in all ways. Anybody who comes into the group has no choice but to find out. There are tall jokes, straight jokes, gay jokes. It doesn't take them long to figure things out. (29)

Respondents' participation in a gay social world often indicates their sexual preferences to others, making verbal statements unnecessary.

We never discussed it, but it was always there. I would bring my lovers home, but we never talked about it. It was there. (12)

Dans le party de Noël, un gars qui était très gentil m'a demandé de danser un "slow" avec lui. Il y avait beaucoup de straights, des gais, tout le monde. Je m'est dit qu'ils vont l'apprendre aujourd'hui...J'avais les jambes qui shakaient. Je sentais des gens regarder. Là, tout le monde l'a su. (16)

There is no way that we would have done this volleyball league three years ago...We travel from state to state to play other gay teams. To think that I put it all together, that I go down and put my name on the form for the school gym for a gay team! (38)

This is particularly true in non-urban settings. Living in a small town makes one's gay lifestyle apparent to many people, often leaving others to deduce the man's sexual preferences for themselves:

Tout le monde savait, deux hommes qui restent ensemble, qu'il n'y a jamais de filles. Dans une petite ville comme ça, c'est assez visible. On n'en a jamais parlé. (33)

Other times, people know that the man is gay, and the respondent is not able to say how they found out. The other person may simply pick up subtle cues in the man's behavior.

I didn't tell them, but somehow some of my students have found out. After they graduated they would have lunch with me, we would be quite close. They would come for a social visit. (20)

I guess most people I know find out in basically the same way, just through knowing and caring. They just pick up enough hints that they figure it out. (29)

Participation in a public gay demonstration, walking hand-in-hand with another man, or kissing another man in public are strategies for disclosing oneself. These forms of visibility are problematic, however, as many respondents recognize that they may be seen as offensive.

Girls and guys kiss on the street even if they offend other people. Lots of people are offended to see a girl and a guy kiss. Some older people are offended about everything sexual. (12)

Kissing in public is disgusting. Anyone. I think that is really disgusting, man-man, man-woman, woman-woman. (20)

Writing a term paper on homosexuality or public speaking on the subject are two other means used by respondents to make a public disclosure. One respondent frequently made class presentations on homosexuality while he was in university.

I did this sort of thing in just about all of the courses during my last year of university. I was on a real kick about it...I would get the list for a project and I would look for a way to twist the topics around to make it a gay topic. I wanted to open other people's eyes. That could be in a Shakespeare class or whatever, I was always "screaming." (28)

These class presentations were political statements as much as they were an academic exercise for this respondent:

I was saying, "not only am I gay, but here is a whole set of knowledge that I am going to force on you." (28)

However, the audience may not necessarily have interpreted his presentation as a personal disclosure. He would have had to make a statement like "I am gay and my



presentation is on..." in order to be sure that his personal disclosure was understood by everyone in his audience.

Demeanor: The demeanor of the men during disclosures also changes. The first few disclosures are particularly difficult and emotional for many respondents.

I was shaking. I said, "I am going to tell you something that you will never believe, I'm gay." (5)

J'étais dans une période excessivement émotive. Je ne l'avais pas dit avec fiérité...moi, je pleurais. Elle ne pleurerait pas. (30)

As the men become more experienced in telling people and more comfortable with their sexual identity, they tend to become more assertive and self-assured. Later disclosures tend to be offered more forcefully and can have a defiant tone:

Quand je lui ai dit, elle s'est mise à pleurer. Moi, je ne pleurais pas. J'ai demandé pourquoi elle s'est mise à pleurer. J'ai dit si elle pleure c'est son problème si elle ne l'accepte pas. Elle n'avait pas à avoir de la peine. (19)

In a suspicion or pretense context, respondents sometimes confront the issue in a fairly aggressive manner.

J'ai dit, "je pense qu'on a assez joué de jeux, je suis certain que tu as des questions...elle m'a dit "oui, je sais ce que tu vas me dire." (36)

Elle m'a demandé comment ça se fait que je n'avais pas de blonde. J'ai dit quelque chose comme "voyons, tu connais ma situation." Elle a dit, "non..." donc j'ai dit, "sinon, c'est parce que tu ne veux pas te l'avouer." (19)

Disclosures need not be stressful or confrontational. Many men treat their sexual orientation in an undramatic and matter-of-fact fashion.

I had this friend for supper with a gay friend and Mary. It was very matter-of-fact, we were just generally talking about love and relationships. The other friend sort of implied that maybe he was gay, so I just mentioned "you have probably assumed that we are gay..." He said "yea" and sort of brushed it off.  
(27)

#### OTHER-INITIATED DISCLOSURES

The gay man does not always initiate the disclosure of his sexual preferences. The literature shows that many disclosures are brought about by others. For example, Saghir & Robins (1973:309) found that about one-third of their sample reported that their parents discovered that they are gay through a third party, such as school officials, police, or a vengeful ex-lover.

Several respondents reported that others were informed of their sexual preferences by a third person. This can sometimes be viewed by them as helpful or supportive:

I think my mother asked me whether I wanted to keep it between us or whether it was okay to discuss it with other family members. I said, "sure, tell whomever you want." (18)

This type of disclosure appears to often occur within families. When one parent finds out, he or she often seems to tell the other.

My father asked my mother. He said, "Is he a fag?" She said, "yes, he is." (9)

We've never said anything. I'm sure my mother told him, but I can't say how I know that. It's obvious that he does know. (22)

Third party disclosures can, however, be done in an unsupportive or malicious manner.

I didn't want my cousins and aunts to know, because I thought it was none of their business...My cousins found out through my sister. I didn't like that, I didn't like the fact that she told them. And then there were a lot of problems between my cousins and my aunt because of it. To get at my mother, they said, "look at her two kids, one is a whore and one's a fag." That's what they were saying, things like that. (22)

Gossip is another way that other's can find out about a gay man's sexual preferences. As is often the case, the subject of the gossip does not appreciate people talking about his personal life.

I go to the Chinese Presbyterian Church on Sundays, but gossip has it that I am gay, so I stopped going. Somehow word got around that I was gay, I don't know how it came up. I don't mind them knowing the truth, but I don't like them talking behind my back. I just feel that gossip is really low of people, even though this time, it is the truth. (26)

Gossip is, however, not always seen as undesirable. One respondent reports that he appreciated the fact that his co-workers found out about him through gossip.

Ça n'a même pas pris deux semaines avant que tout le monde au travail le sait parce que le message était passé. Moi, je trouvais ça préférable que tout le

monde le sait, que ça soit clair. Avant que le monde le sait, ils ont des doutes, ils sont mal à l'aise. (34)

Disclosures can also be made in response to a direct inquiry by the other. These would most often take place in a suspicion context. For instance, one man's mother suspected that he might be gay, so she tried to get him to tell her directly:

For a couple of days she was hinting that she wanted to talk about it and I was pretty nervous...I would always try to avoid her in the house. She would say, "how come you never tell me where you are going or who you are going with. You know you can talk to me..." Stuff like that. She probably said one thousand times, "do you want to talk to me about something?"...One day she just asked, "how are you, how are you made?" and all that. I told her. (22)

Another man's mother questioned him in a direct fashion, but only after he had two gay friends visit him, which led her to suspect that he, too, might be gay.

J'étais chez mes parents puis je recevais de la visite de deux copains, deux gais. Ma mère me demande pourquoi je me tiens avec du monde comme ça, tout le monde sait qu'ils sont gais. Elle dit, "écoutes, es-tu gai aussi?" J'ai dit "oui". (34)

Inquiries such as this can be precipitated by a particular setting or event:

[The first person in the family to know was a cousin], she came to a party, it was a party that my lover and I had. There were some gay men there. The following morning, she just said to me, "are you gay?" I said "yes." (20)

What happened was that a friend and I were both ostensibly straight and we had a mutual gay friend at university who worked at a gay bar. We kept saying that we should go visit him, like the nice-liberated-white-middle-class types that we were...so we bombed off to this bar. While we were there he said, "well, I suppose that this would be a good time to ask...Have you ever slept with a man before?" I didn't think twice about it, I said "sure." (28)

This is the kind of revelation a man might make if he followed this man's philosophy:

I have a philosophy at this time: "if they ask, I'll tell them." For me, they will already know if they ask. (23)

A direct inquiry may be less stressful for the man because he may feel that the other person already knows and is only looking for confirmation, and because the other person takes responsibility for the disclosure and its "aftermath:"

There has never really been a personal crisis to deal with in my family and I don't particularly feel like being the one to throw a wrench in the works...To me, it's almost like trying to cause trouble. That's why I leave it to the formula "if they want to know bad enough, they'll ask me and I'll tell them." [...] If they want to bring that sort of grief upon themselves, I feel sorry for them, but I'm going to take up the challenge. If they are upset, then it's "well, it's your fault, you asked, you wanted to know." (28)

The other person takes the initiative for bringing up the subject by posing a direct question, and then has the responsibility to bear for his own reaction.

In sum, the motives and strategies of disclosure vary from person to person, and from interaction to interaction; there is no one way to tell another person about one's homosexuality. Disclosures are generally done in an ad hoc manner: the reasons for the revelation and the way in which the other person is told are determined on a situational basis. Revelations may be planned in advance, particularly early in the man's sexual career. The respondent's choice of words, his means of communicating the message, and his demeanor during the interaction can change. The nature of a given disclosure depends on how nervous the man is, the nature of his relationship with the other person, his degree of acceptance of his homosexuality, the perceived likelihood of acceptance or rejection by the other, and the immediate context of the revelation.

The following section will show that respondents also cite a variety of motives for concealing their homosexuality, and use various strategies to ensure that select others do not discover that they are gay.

#### TYPES OF CONCEALMENT

My data show that there are several reasons why respondents choose to hide their homosexuality from select others. In this section, I organize these motives into five

types of concealment: inappropriateness, the lack of a "pay-off," deference, avowal of responsibility, and politics.

Inappropriateness: This category represents those instances where the man feels that disclosure of his sexual preferences would be irrelevant or incorrect in that particular interaction. Several respondents report that they are not close to certain family members or that they rarely talk about anything personal at home, so disclosure of their sexuality would be inappropriately personal:

They never ask any questions. We aren't a family who talk a lot to one another. We're close, but we don't talk much, so they never really ask questions about me. (11)

I don't tell anyone anything in my family. I didn't even tell my mother when I bought a color television. She found out from the lady who owns the store. (31)

Distance can also be due to an ongoing conflict in the family.

J'ai rien à dire à ma famille, absolument rien. J'ai très peu de contact avec eux. Je les vois deux ou trois fois par année...et après une demie-heure, j'ai une "overdose." (19)

My father and I have opposite views on things. We really don't ever speak to each other. Just polite shit. (24)

My whole family doesn't get along with each other. It's a very funny family...It's none of their business, but if they knew and my father never spoke to me again, it wouldn't bother me. (38)

The perceived inappropriateness of disclosure is sometimes due to the fact that the respondent and the other person rarely see each other, rather than conflict. Several men feel that when they infrequently see the other person, it is unnecessary to divulge details of their personal lives.

Well, I see them once a year. I don't see any purpose in telling them. They don't tell me about their sex lives, I don't see why I should tell them about mine. (18)

The only people who might not know, I say might not know, are an aunt and an uncle. It has never come up with them...Something like that, why bother? If I bump into them once or twice a year, why should I tell them? (29)

Some men carefully compartmentalize their personal and work lives and feel that discussion of their sexuality at work would be inappropriately personal.

I work with them for 50 hours a week. My private life is my private life. I don't see reasons to tell them. Work is work and that's it. My spare time, that's my business. (23)

One man stated:

That's very personal. That's something you keep for yourself. You can tell some people, like friends and family...people come to me for their problems. I don't think it would be professional to tell them about my private life, my sexual life. (32)

This type of concealment is not necessarily related to the respondent's degree of acceptance of his homosexuality or his self-esteem. He may consider that in a given social situation, disclosure would simply be unnecessary or improper:



I don't go out telling people how I am. Not that I am ashamed, it's not like I don't want to tell them. I just don't think that there is a reason for them to know. (22)

If they want to know, then they'll ask. If not, they'll consider it none of their business, which is how I consider it. (28)

Lack of a Pay-off: Respondents may also consider whether a revelation is "worth the bother." Respondents sometimes decide that telling a particular person is not worth the problems it could likely bring. An individual may feel, for example, that the risks of telling someone outweigh the costs of remaining secretive. Respondents often talk in terms of "benefits" or "accomplishment" when discussing this decision:

I guess I look at it on the basis of what would be accomplished if they knew? Who would it cause frustration to? I want to cause myself as little frustration as possible and I want to cause other people as little discomfort as possible. (27)

Unless there is a perceived return or pay-off, such as closer interpersonal relationships, a greater sense of honesty, or greater self-respect, the man may feel that disclosure is simply "not worth it."

Maintenant, je ne ressens pas le besoin de le dire à tout le monde...je ne veux pas un drame. Ça ne vaut pas la peine, c'est pour ça je n'en parle pas. (16)

Fear that the disclosure will be poorly received often leads respondents to remain secretive to avoid anticipated problems.

I don't like lying but I feel there is no reason to say anything if I don't have to because it doesn't make me a better or worse person. I know what I am and I know how I feel about myself, that's all that's important...I lie just to avoid all the talk and the ridicule that can come from it. Why have all the irritation if I don't have to? (9)

I have a very good reputation at work. They are promoting me, I'll be the youngest chief engineer in the fleet. I have a good reputation and a good working relationship with everyone. I wouldn't want anything to come into that...Being gay is just so far out of their reach of understanding, I fear what might happen...working on a ship full of guys, some things might get out of hand in that context. (21)

I don't want a few professors to know about it for the sole reason that it might affect their views when they sit on the graduate committee when I apply. (25)

For many respondents, the decision to reveal themselves or remain secretive becomes a type of "cost/benefit analysis." They decide whether revelation is worthwhile in light of the anticipated risks in that given situation.

Deference: Some men state that they conceal their homosexuality in deference to others' feelings or beliefs. This type of concealment is similar to the previous category, although here, the respondent emphasizes the "costs" of the disclosure for the other person, rather than risks he faces personally. The man may feel that disclosure will lead the other person, particularly parents, to feel hurt, so he chooses not to tell them.

Ma mère ne comprendrait jamais, je ne vois pas pourquoi je le dirais. L'autre génération, ils ne comprennent pas l'homosexualité, la mentalité est complètement différente qu'aujourd'hui. (16)

I was going to tell my parents, but it would have hurt them, so I didn't do it. I didn't want to hurt them, they were good parents. (32)

Age is also often cited as a reason to not tell someone. Those who are considerably older, such as aging parents or grandparents, are often seen as being unable to understand, so the man may decide not to tell them.

My mother might not even equate the two things: being gay and not being interested in women. I don't know if my mother is even aware of homosexuals. Her generation, she's practically 90 years old, they didn't have too much to do with homosexuals...they don't know what they are. (3)

Mes parents étaient très âgés. Je m'est demandé qu'est-ce que ça donne d'annoncer à une personne de 75 ans, qui est malade, que t'es gai? (30)

In a similar fashion, younger individuals are seen as being incapable of appreciating the disclosure or comprehending the notion of homosexuality:

My little niece asks about my ex-lover once he stopped coming over...she likes him a lot. She really doesn't grasp what was going on. They are not even aware of their own sexuality, I think, so it's very difficult for them to try to understand anyone else's. (18)

My youngest brother is fourteen. What am I going to talk to him about? (25)

Other men conceal their sexuality out of respect of another person's strongly held convictions. He may decide that the disclosure may cause problems or upset the other, so he decides not to tell them.

At that point, I still loved the Church and the people. I was questioning the doctrines, I didn't give a damn about the doctrines, but I didn't want to upset those people's beliefs. (2)

The man may also be prepared to become more secretive if he were to begin a relationship with another man who is more covert than him, deferring to the other's need for secrecy.

Si j'étais pour commencer une relation avec quelqu'un qui avait une vie sociale assez importante où ce n'était pas possible d'être aussi ouvert, je changerais...je serais prêt de faire certains compromis dans ma vie. (33)

Avowal of Responsibility: Here, the man cites a personal characteristic as the reason for why he does not tell others that he is gay. The respondent locates the reason for his coyness within himself and accepts responsibility for his secretiveness.

I don't have the courage. If I was going out with someone for a long period of time, then I would tell them, but it's not happened. (23)

I'm still socially insecure...nobody's going to ask you to go to a party because there are going to be women there. It's not that it's important to be asked to a party or anything, it's just that I think people drop you. (24)

Another respondent who was still in high school, feared that telling his parents and dealing with their reactions would hinder his performance at school.

I know if I tell them while I am studying, I won't be able to concentrate. I'll always be thinking about them, it would bother me. I would always be thinking that they know and what things they would say. (7)

As in the case of "deviance avowal" (Miall, 1986:277; Turner, 1972), where the individual identifies with and accepts the deviant role as a means of dealing with potential stigma, these men assume personal responsibility for their secrecy. The respondent implies that overtness is more desirable than covertness, but that some personal attribute stops him from being open with others.

Concealment as Politics: This category refers to those instances where a man chooses to hide his sexual preferences for political or ideological reasons. Some men, like the gay reformists of the 1950s and 1960s (Humphreys, 1972), feel that disclosure, particularly if it is not done "carefully," may offend others and consequently hamper the gay movement's efforts to increase acceptance of gays by nongays.

As gay people, I think we should do nothing which brings society's scorn or rejection upon us. It makes our lot harder. There's nothing I'd love more dearly than to be more open, in a proper sort of way. (2)

It turns people off. You're always going to have the goddamn priests being against us, the Jerry Falwells. (38)

One respondent objects to telling family members and co-workers that he is gay because nongays do not have to declare their heterosexuality. He feels that homosexuality and heterosexuality should be treated equally and that by telling people he is gay, he is treating his sexual preferences differently than a nongay would treat his heterosexuality. This man's general mode of disclosure is to live his gay lifestyle in a matter-of-fact manner, and his refusal to actively tell others is an ideological stance:

I tell them just by living my life...if it isn't getting across, then that's their tough beans...I don't feel that I should have to spell it out to people. This is my lifestyle...I just feel that, goddamn it, that if my sister and her husband were together for ten months, I would not have to ask if they were a heterosexual couple. Gay couples have to be looked at just as a straight couple is perceived. No differently. (20)

\* \* \* \*

In summary, several motives for concealment are cited by the respondents. The decision to conceal their homosexuality is a conscious strategy selected by the men to deal with particular social circumstances. None of the men stated that they concealed their sexuality because they thought it was sick or immoral.

### STRATEGIES OF CONCEALMENT

Previous research has identified several strategies that gays use to maintain secrecy about their sexual orientation. They sometimes develop a "heterosexual front," remain neutral when they hear derogatory comments about gays, carefully attend to aspects of their dress and mannerisms, avoid certain situations, and separate their gay and nongay lives (Plummer, 1975:188-193; Ponse, 1976:317-327; Warren, 1974:93-97).

Similar strategies for maintaining a heterosexual image are used by the respondents in this study. They are organized into three general categories: lying and otherwise misleading others, compartmentalizing their lives, and counterfeit secrecy.

Lying/Misleading Others: This category includes those strategies where the man consciously misleads others into believing he is heterosexual through his statements or behavior. Lying and making-up stories is the most frequently used strategy of respondents. One man, for instance, lies to his nongay roommate when he spends a night or an evening out.

I tell him I'm going to visit a friend.  
If I sleep out, I tell him that I slept  
at a friend's place because it was too  
late to come home. It's very easy to do.  
I'm a very good liar when I have to  
be--I prefer the word "actor." I  
certainly wouldn't tell him that I was  
going to a gay bar. (25)

Appearing tired after a night out, another respondent tells his co-workers about a non-existent girlfriend.

Ils ont une faussee image de moi...Si j'ai fait l'amour le soir avant, et je suis fatigué, je dis, "elle était énervante, elle n'a pas arrêté, je ne pouvais pas dormir." (13)

A few other men consciously date women in order to mislead others. One man tried to move from a suspicion awareness context with his parents to a closed awareness context in this way:

I would bring home two girls to show them that I was straight...I would talk to them like I talk to my sister.

(You would consciously think of bringing a girl home just to show your parents?)

Yea, especially if she was rich, so my parents would think that I was bringing home a good girl. (26)

Previous relationships with women facilitate some respondents' efforts to mislead others into believing that they are heterosexual. They do not actively do anything to maintain a heterosexual image, but they fail to correct others' misconceptions about them, thereby misleading them indirectly.

No one up North would believe it. I've had some crazy things happen, you know, like a little gang-bang, we were all involved with this girl. You know, these stories go around. They wouldn't believe it because they know me too well, supposedly. (21)

What complicates all this is the fact that I have had girlfriends in the past. My parents met a couple of them, and there was even an abortion at one point by the famous Dr. Morgenthauer. (25)



At times, the man tries to manage conversations which might threaten his heterosexual image without actually lying to the other person. In this way, he misleads them without being directly dishonest.

I have a way to change a conversation, if I don't like it. I'll switch if certain subjects come up, but that doesn't happen often. (23)

Maintaining a noncommittal stance when asked a question or when confronting a potentially damaging situation is another strategy for passing. The man does not admit to being gay, yet he does not assert that he is heterosexual either, thereby avoiding movement to an open awareness context.

Once some girls at work said, "you're queer," because I wasn't interested in the women at work. I simply said that "they're such fucking dogs...that doesn't make me queer." I never denied it. (3)

I just say that I don't have a girlfriend, that's all. [This man at work] is always trying to matchmake me and his daughter. I just stay clear. I won't say that I have a girlfriend, I just say that I don't have one. (22)

Sometimes, if we are out for a drink, and someone says "look at the girl," I don't pretend to be interested, but I don't say that I am gay. (29)

Even when confronted with a direct question, some men try to be as noncommittal as possible:

My niece asked me if I am gay, she's 24 or 25. I didn't say yes and I didn't say no. She knows that I am but I didn't tell her that I am. Now, do you follow that?...she still won't have that 100% certainty. (38)

The man can also maintain his heterosexual façade by "neutralizing" his speech. For example, by choosing the word "roommate" instead of talking about his "lover", the man can often talk about his lover, without raising suspicions that he might be gay.

When you are gay you usually tend to say "this person" instead of "this guy" or "this girl". You sort of go into neutral...I would speak about "someone." I would say "I'm seeing someone" or this person I am seeing..." (18)

When I was asked to bring a date to go out with the people at work, I could always say that I prefer going alone or that "my friend" wouldn't know anyone there. I would never talk about a special friend. (23)

In order to maintain a closed awareness context, the man must exercise care when discussing certain topics, as he has to make sure that he does not appear too informed on gay-related issues. Maintaining a heterosexual façade requires the man to appear equally misinformed or uninformed on gay-related issues as others in his entourage.

One thing is you are always thinking about it. At supper, you are sure that it will pop up one day. It happens all the time, it happens to every gay person. There is nothing worse than Christmas dinners. You are sitting around watching the television and there is a gay character or something. It happens. I don't know of anyone who does not sit there sweating up a storm thinking about how are you going to deal with it. (28)

He must also make sure that he is not overly sensitive to anti-gay statements. Some men may confront the statement, but only after having distanced themselves:

My nephews may call each other "faggot" or something or a singer like Boy George might be dragged over the coals because he is homosexual...I would make a point of saying, "I'm not gay, but..." and then give an honest opinion about the situation...When Boy George came up, I said, "I don't like the way he dresses, but I do like his music. Who cares if he is gay. I bet he is not gay, but if he is, who cares? I like his voice. (6)

In this way, he confronts the anti-gay sentiment, while not identifying himself as gay.

When passing as heterosexual, men often try to ensure that they do not appear too stereotypically "gay" when interacting with nongay others. This means that they may try not to dress too flamboyantly and, sometimes, that they will pay attention to their mannerisms or speech, as was observed by Ponse (1976:319) in her sample of gay women. The open expression of affection is also avoided in order not to appear gay in certain settings.

Some gays also attend to certain aspects of their living accommodations, whether they share an accommodation with another man or live alone. They may feel the need to be careful about the artwork they place on the walls of their apartment or the books which appear on their bookshelves, keeping gay-related titles hidden away. Even choosing one's neighborhood can be complicated, as one respondent, a member of a close-knit Jewish community, notes:

I am looking for a new apartment. Eighty percent of the people I know in this neighborhood live on this one street, you can't go up or down this street without being seen by someone. So I don't want to move to that street. If I go home with someone...I could say he's a friend, but I'd rather not have to lie. (31)

Compartmentalization: Men may isolate themselves from nongays or carefully separate their gay social worlds from their nongay friends and family in order to remain secretive in certain situations. This strategy does not aim at maintaining a heterosexual façade, as much as it is an attempt to avoid situations where the man would be forced to choose between consciously passing or disclosing himself.

I can't remember specifically telling. Well, there were a couple of times when I told someone "I'm a homosexual" but in general, I kept to my world. I didn't have too much to do with the straight world. (3)

I still don't like being around straight people. It's like a fishbowl atmosphere. They're there to see how we act. When straight people come to gay parties, I'm beginning to accept that, but four or five years ago, I wouldn't go. (38)

This man's lover (who was interviewed at the same time) describes the problems of this self-imposed isolation:

You become a segregationalist yourself. That's how [his lover] used to be. Going with straight people into a bar was like going to Mars or something. You forget that men go with women because you haven't been doing it. You lose contact with people, you become a sort of shut-in. (6)

Respondents' social worlds are often divided into those friends who are "in the know" and those who are not. This means that the man has to ensure that his gay social contacts and his nongay contacts remain separate, so that his heterosexual façade is not threatened. Sometimes, this leads the man to limit his gay social life to a different city from where he lives and works. If the two separate social worlds come into contact with each other, there is always the risk of an inadvertent disclosure. Mixing the two worlds is sometimes attempted, but special precautions have to be taken so that unplanned revelations do not occur.

Last week these straight friends invited me out. I suggested that we go to the Pipeline. I said it was mixed. They don't know I'm gay, so when I said mixed, they thought new-wave and punk and leather and whatever, not necessarily gay and straight. So we went there...when I saw my [gay] friends, I shook their hands and said "don't kiss me." Usually we would shake hands and kiss each other. I just said "don't kiss me" very softly to them. (26)

Another way some men compartmentalize their lives is to try to avoid certain other gay men. Those men who are exceptionally open with others may be viewed as "indiscreet," and they consequently are viewed as a potential threat to the respondent's efforts to pass. For instance, one man belongs to a choir where there are several other gay men. The nongay choir members do not know that they are gay:

In Church you have to be careful, especially because it is a men and boys' choir. We have to be more careful...we had the situation two or

three years ago where someone came into the choir. He was what I would consider to be openly gay. He was very extroverted. I guess some of us sort of reacted and tried to tame this guy down. This guy would run around asking everyone if you are gay or not...To me, this fellow just did not know how to handle it [being gay]. He liked attention and one way to get it was to really show himself...[we were concerned] that he would blow everyone else's cover...He soon found that there were very few people to talk to. People shunned him and criticized him...I just tried to keep my distance from him. (27)

Another gay man who knows that the respondent is gay can be a threat to his heterosexual façade, just as a heterosexual individual might be. This man was seen as indiscreet and therefore, untrustworthy, so the other gay men shunned him.

Other gays may also be avoided in the respondent's efforts to compartmentalize his gay life and his nongay life. Gays who appear "obviously gay" because of their dress or mannerisms are often avoided in public settings, because the respondents fear "guilt by association." If the other man clearly appears gay, then others may suspect that the respondent is also gay, if he spends any time with him. This is particularly true if the other gay man is seen as aggressive or offensive in the manner he relates to others.

I have a friend, but he's really a faggot, you know, he looks like a girl...to walk down the street or when we say hi to each other in the clubs, I'm a little embarrassed...It's obvious that he's a fag. (7)

There's probably only one or two people in our volleyball league who I wouldn't want to be seen with in public. They are very effeminate. They like to put straight people on the block and shoot gay people right down their throats. I think that is horrible. I feel very uncomfortable being with people like that. (38)

At times, respondents may even feel self-conscious being in any group of gay men in a public setting, because people may automatically suspect that they are all gay. One man reports that he used to be like this, but no longer:

I didn't like to go out eating at restaurants and be seen with a bunch of guys...like going to movies with other guys. I never would do it. (6)

As Goffman (1963) observed, one's "own" are often viewed as a supportive audience for a disclosure, but certain members are seen as a potential risk and, consequently, are avoided in certain settings. For at least some men, members of one's "own" group are a safe and supportive audience for disclosure only if they exercise a certain degree of discretion in their own lives.

Counterfeit Secrecy: Counterfeit secrecy is a term employed by Ponce (1976:323) to describe situations where there is an unspoken agreement between the gay and his audience that his homosexuality will not be discussed or openly recognized between them, yet both people "know that the other one knows." This category relates to Glaser and Strauss' (1964) pretense awareness context. Several respondents report

knowing that another person knew, but that it was never openly discussed between them.

My sister gave me hints...we were at parties and she tells everybody that she is an open-minded person and that she'll accept everybody as they are. Once, I smiled to her and she smiled back. It clicked. (23)

I am pretty sure that my mother knew...there were vibes, I guess. She would communicate it to me. Like when I sleep out, she would say where and I would say with a friend. She would say, male or female. I would say male and she would sort of clam-up and change the topic. (25)

The closest I have come, which is really neat, is that we had a discussion about a distant cousin who was gay. Well, we came to the conclusion that the whole strength of our side of the family is that there is a degree of respect for privacy about everyone. (28)

In this way, a pretense of secrecy is maintained. There is a tacit acknowledgement that the man is gay, yet both people continue to "pretend" that the issue does not exist between them.

#### SUMMARY

This chapter has shown that there are several motives for disclosure and concealment of homosexuality, and numerous strategies for controlling related information and moving from one type of awareness context to another. Categorization of gay men as either "overt" and "covert" is an oversimplification of how they adapt their social



presentation. The man's motives for choosing disclosure or concealment and the strategies he uses in a given situation are selected on an individual or ad hoc basis, leading him to be flexible in his behavior and statements to others.

Disclosure and concealment are not, however, always conscious or rational decisions and the men do not feel that they are "always poised on the brink of disaster" (Weinberg & Williams, 1974:459) lest their homosexuality be discovered. Information about the men's potentially stigmatizing identity and behavior is often regulated through their daily routines and lifestyle; they do not have to make a rational decision at every social encounter. Most respondents did not report feeling overwhelmed with a constant series of choices about how to manage information about their sexual preferences or identity.

My data also indicate that while respondents do not generally view their homosexuality as sick or deviant, they all report instances where they are covert with others. Despite the fact that most of the men accept the new positive evaluation of overtness, all respondents continue to be secretive on a selective basis.

#### FOOTNOTE

- (1) The last two categories described by Miall (1986), deviance avowal and practiced deception, will not be discussed further, as my data did not reveal comparable strategies among my respondents. These categories are, however, theoretically possible in a gay sample. A man who views his own homosexuality as immoral or sick might use tactics similar to deviance avowal to deal with his identity (e.g., by stating, "I am a homosexual, I am a pervert"). In this way, the man accepts the label, as well as its negative connotations. Practiced deception might be employed by a gay couple who are secretive in certain areas of their lives, such as with their families of origin.

#### CHAPTER IV

### Dilemma: The Social Contexts of Disclosure

Gay men regularly face a dilemma in their social encounters which is not faced by nongays; they confront problems whether they choose to be open or secretive about their homosexuality. Passing as heterosexual shields the gay individual from the possible negative reactions of others, but it means he must work at protecting his nongay façade. Choosing to reveal his sexual preferences to others, on the other hand, enables the man to avoid problems often associated with a secretive lifestyle, but it is not always easy or appropriate to discuss matters relating to one's sexual preferences or behavior. Disclosure rectifies some of the difficulties which result from secretiveness, but in doing so, it creates others. In effect, by revealing himself to others, the gay man replaces one set of problems with another.

The dilemma posed by disclosure is due in part to the stigmatized nature of homosexuality, but certain structural features of social relationships also play an important role. These features have little to do with the man's sexual orientation per se or how he chooses to manage related information; they characterize the social relationships of everyone, not just gays. This chapter shows how these features of social relationships along with the potential for

stigmatization generate dilemmas regarding disclosure and secrecy.

### RELATIONSHIPS AND SECRECY

An important feature of relationships which relates to disclosure and concealment of homosexuality is that we live in a society which assumes that people are heterosexual (Ponse, 1976; Richardson, 1981). This assumption has been described in the following manner:

the assumption [is] that outside of a homosexual setting, a person is heterosexual unless proved otherwise (Richardson, 1981:122).

People generally expect men to become involved in heterosexual relationships. As a result, once he has begun to identify himself as gay, the man must accommodate his social presentation either by telling others that they are incorrect in assuming he is heterosexual (i.e. disclosing himself as gay) or by consciously working at maintaining a heterosexual façade.

The rules and conventions which structure social relationships create difficulties over-and-above those which result from possessing a discreditable attribute. Certain problems characterize all of gays' social relationships, while others are specific to a particular type of relationship. The first two sections of this chapter examine those problems which confront gays in all of their relationships. The

subsequent sections correspond to the major types of relationships between respondents and nongay others: parents, friends, siblings, wives, and strangers. In each of these later sections, I will show how features particular to that type of social relationship make both disclosure and secrecy problematic.

#### THE PROBLEM OF BETRAYAL

Simmel (1950) observed that relationships develop on the basis of shared knowledge, but that this knowledge is never absolute or total; people select what information they wish others to possess and what they prefer to keep secret. People reveal various aspects of themselves in different relationships, and secrecy is an integral element of all social relationships:

Relationships, being what they are,  
[...] presuppose a certain ignorance and  
a measure of concealment (Simmel,  
1950:315).

The individual, however, does not have complete control over what others know about him: sometimes this knowledge is revealed automatically through social interaction.

Betrayal is a risk inherent in all secrets. Simmel (1950) noted that secrets contain a "tension." Sharing personal information about oneself entails a risk: it gives the other person considerable power.

The secret is full of the consciousness that it can be betrayed; that one holds the power of surprises, turns of fate, joy, destruction--if only, perhaps, self-destruction (Simmel, 1950:333-334).

Because of this power, secrets are often fascinating, and there is always the temptation of betrayal of the other's confidence. There is an inherent bind in telling another person a secret: telling a secret may bring the two people closer together by demonstrating their mutual trust, but it also risks destroying their confidence in each other.

Rejection is often seen by respondents as the ultimate risk of disclosure, and while this is a relatively rare occurrence, it sometimes does happen. One respondent reported that he was rejected by his brother and two sisters after he told them he was gay.

They didn't say anything directly. They didn't say that they didn't want to see me, but they didn't encourage me to see them. I stopped at their house once, but I knew I was not welcome, I could feel it...I never saw my brother afterwards, from 1970...I tried to contact him. I made the first step many times, but he was never available. (32)

He explains that this rejection was not a major concern for him, as his is not a close-knit family:

I was sent to boarding school when I was very young, so I never knew my parents that well. My brother and sisters went to boarding school, but not the same as mine, so I never really knew them either. We would see each other in the summer, but even then, we were sent to camp...I didn't have a hard time with their reaction. I knew I wasn't accepted, but that didn't hurt me. I accepted their nonacceptance. (32)

Rejection by siblings is, however, more significant than rejection by friends, even if the man does not come from a close-knit family. One can always make new friends, but this is not the case with brothers and sisters. If a friend does not receive the disclosure in an accepting or supportive manner, the relationship generally ends. If a sibling does not accept the disclosure, the relation continues, but it can become strained or conflicted.

Many respondents are also concerned that by telling one person, they risk losing control over information concerning their homosexuality. By disclosing himself to another, the man shares an important secret, and there is always a risk that the other person will consciously or inadvertently tell a third person. In fact, several men reported that a disclosure resulted in other people discovering that they are gay:

Everyone at work knew I was gay. I was working with my dad. He just more or less took care of it for me. He told everyone on the job that I was gay, just to cause me trouble. (10)

Ma mère n'est pas une femme délicate. Elle a dit ça à tout le monde...elle disait que j'étais une tappette, une moumoune, une fifi...Quand j'étais couché au lit, elle parlait au téléphone. Elle pensait que je dormais. Elle disait, "mais oui, c'est une tappette, je ne peux rien faire..." (19)

Respondents may, in a preventive manner, tell others in order to avoid inadvertent disclosures by a third party, such as a mutual friend.

Étant donné que je l'avais dit à une personne, je me sentais obligé de le dire à d'autres personnes. Je ne voulais pas qu'il y ait juste une qui le sache et les autres ne le sachent pas. (19)

I guess the only one I really had to sit down and tell was Bob because he had been hurt a lot in his life and I didn't want to risk hurting him...if he found out elsewhere, he might feel that I was dishonest with him. (20)

### STEREOTYPES AND NEGATIVE REACTIONS

Another risk characteristic of all types of relationships is that the other person may hold stereotypic and negative views of homosexuality. The other person, for example, may view all gays as mentally ill, perverted, or immoral. The man may want to tell him that he is gay, but he may not be able to deal well with his preconceptions of homosexuality:

Ils avaient des questions, des questions de détails comme "comment ça se fait que tu ne mets pas de rouge à lèvres" ou "pourquoi tu ne t'habilles pas comme une femme?" Pour eux autres, des homosexuels étaient presque comme des femmes. (13)

In deciding to disclose himself, the gay man has to be prepared to receive negative comments and reactions. Disparaging comments from others are risks of revelation.

My mother will sometimes say things when we are watching television when something gay comes on. I think that she does it on purpose to say bad things about me. (7)



These reactions can anger the respondent, sometimes further impeding ongoing discussion:

Il y a cinq ans, j'aurais sauté dessus ma mère. C'était peut-être avantageux pour elle de ne pas en parler. Dans le temps, je me sentais très coupable d'avoir fait ça, mais elle a rien fait pour m'aider. Au contraire, elle me ridiculisait. (19)

One respondent reports that a friend who did not accept the revelation well continually tried to convince him to change:

He tells me that what I am doing is wrong, he gives me the whole Adam and Eve thing...I say "do you see me trying to change you? Do I tell you what you are doing is wrong?" I just tell him to skip it, but the next time I see him, he starts all over again. (22)

Others' negative views of homosexuality may lead to the end of their friendship with the gay man, or it may create strained relationships within the family.

\* \* \* \*

Betrayal and negative reactions are risks which gays confront in making a disclosure to anyone. In the following sections, I discuss those problems which differ across various types of relationships.

#### PARENTS

Parents are expected to be concerned about the well-being and life-plans of their adult children. Family members often discuss issues such as girlfriends, marriage, or future grandchildren, but these ordinary concerns become complicated when the adult child is gay. Parental concern about their

adult children's welfare is considered appropriate, but discussion of their sexuality is not. Cultural conventions make the discussion of sexual matters, particularly unconventional variations like homosexuality, uncomfortable and awkward for adult children and their parents alike. Given that confronting the issue of the child's homosexuality means dealing with his sexual desires and behavior, disclosure to parents is difficult.

A conflict exists between the parents' concern for their adult child's welfare, the child's desire to maintain a positive and supportive relationship with them, and the social discomfort regarding conversation about sexual matters. This conflict is clearly expressed by one respondent:

I think they know, but subconsciously, they are not going to let it bother them. It's really none of their business, as long as I am happy. (6)

Sexuality is an acceptable area of parental concern only insofar as it affects one of the areas of legitimate parental responsibility or interest. Even then, discussion of such matters will generally elicit feelings of discomfort.

Passing: Passing to parents is a common means of dealing with this conflict. About one-half (18 out of 38 respondents) have not told their parents about their homosexuality. Some respondents deal with their discomfort by avoiding the topic. Others simply see it as none of their parents' business.

I don't even know that they would even think about it...do you think that parents wonder who their children are sleeping with...? If they ask me, I'll tell them...if not, they'll consider it none of their business, which is how I consider it. (28)

Most respondents who pass inevitably confront questions or concerns about girlfriends and marriage. The fact that they are not married or do not have a girlfriend often becomes a more pressing issue as the men become older.

The family are always asking me when I am going to get married...I tell them I am not interested in girls, maybe in my thirties. That's kind of the truth...I usually lie to them. (7)

When they ask me why I am not married, I tell them that I am a looker. I'm looking, but I'm not finding anything. (31)

One respondent's job in the Northwest Territories helps him cope with questions from his parents. Working in the North for six months during the summer, he spends the winter months with his parents in Montréal.

I would be with my parents for about six months, and at about the time that they would begin asking questions about me getting married, I would be returning up North. (21)

He also travelled frequently during the winter, further alleviating the pressures he felt from his parents.

I've done a lot of travelling during my time off. In a way, it was trying to stay away from the reality of the situation. (21)

Even if he does not confront questions about marriage, the man who passes may be expected to display a certain level of interest in women.

I don't go around chasing girls. All of a sudden you realize, it doesn't take long if the person is not purposely putting on a false air. If the person does not appear to be interested in women at all, then it doesn't take long at all to deduce. (29)

One respondent recalls the following interaction with his parents:

I remember walking down the street with my father and mother and we saw this girl who was a window dresser. I remember him saying "look at that girl, she's nice looking" or something like that. My mother said "you know he's not interested in girls..." (3)

In this situation, the parents did not know that their son was gay, but he did not show the level of interest in women they expected from him. The respondent's silence during this interaction allowed him to maintain a "neutral stance", failing to contradict his mother by actively asserting a heterosexual image.

In addition to their concern about his amorous relationships, parents are also generally interested in the man's friends and his social life. The man's efforts to pass to his parents, particularly if he continues to live with them, are further complicated if he socializes with other gays. The parents may begin wondering why their son is always spending time with other men, especially if these men appear to be gay themselves.

I have been out with girls, of course, but never with the same girl for that long...I had a lot of friends who were men. I think that they suspected because I was so often with other men, rather than girls. It is very suspicious. (32)

The problem of social involvement with other gays can become particularly acute if the respondent has a lover and spends most of his free time with the same individual, as the parents may begin to question the nature of their relationship. Sharing an apartment with a lover further compounds the difficulties. This problem is an increasing risk to the man's heterosexual image as he becomes older. The gay couple can try to allay parental suspicions by ensuring that each partner has a separate bedroom in the apartment. In this manner, it is not immediately apparent that they sleep together, in case a parent should come for a visit.

Disclosure: Disclosing one's homosexuality to parents, like passing, also presents problems. Disclosure requires the respondent to transgress the cultural convention which discourages discussion of sexual issues between parents and children, thereby creating discomfort and anxiety. Telling his parents after years of passing means that the man implicitly admits that he has systematically told lies to them in the past. The parents may, as a result, begin to doubt the reliability of other statements he has made to them.

The disclosure can also blur the boundaries which previously defined acceptable topics of conversation with the

parents, leading them to become inappropriately personal in their inquiries.

She asks, "what do you do with a guy that you can't do with a girl?"...What do you say to her? I tell her "what did you do with Daddy? I do it with another man." I'm not good at answering or expressing myself. I didn't know what to tell her. (9)

The respondent answered his mother's question about what he does in a sexual relationship by saying he does the same thing that she and her husband do. By answering her question in this manner, he responded to her concern without further transgressing the convention discouraging discussion of sexual matters between parents and children. This response, in effect, may be seen as an attempt to re-establish or clarify the boundaries in their relationship, as well as "normalizing" his sexual behavior.

Because of the difficulty in revealing their sexual preferences to their parents, some respondents ease their discomfort in discussing their homosexuality by postponing their revelation until they have a lover. They can then disclose the relationship rather than their sexual preferences per se. Framed in this way, the man can stress the emotional attachments and similarities to a traditional heterosexual relationship. This strategy may also permit the men to avoid possibly having to confront questions which deal with more sexually explicit issues, such as cruising, meeting men, and in recent years, AIDS. An ongoing relationship, if nothing

else, provides the respondent with a concrete reason to tell his parents.

I feel that if I meet somebody and we decide to spend time together, then if they are to know, then that's the time...if I do settle down in a permanent relationship, that's when they should know. To a certain extent, I hide it from them...that will be my reason to tell them. (27)

If eventually I meet someone and live with him, maybe it would be important for me to tell my parents...I would tell them that I am gay, I would show all my cards. I'd say that I was living with that person...it's difficult to tell them, so I am postponing the discussion, if it ever comes...I'm just putting it aside right now. (23)

Waiting to be involved in an ongoing relationship before revealing himself provides a device for de-sexualizing the issue of homosexuality. This reframing makes the discussion more appropriate in the context of the parent-child relationship and reduces the level of discomfort experienced.

The convention discouraging discussion of sexual matters between parents and their children can sometimes lead the parents to attempt to avoid the topic of the son's homosexuality after the initial revelation. This avoidance puts the men in a difficult position, since they do not want to raise the sensitive issue unnecessarily, but they do not want it to be forgotten. By bringing up the issue in face of parental reluctance to discuss it, the respondent risks upsetting his parents or creating overt conflict. One

respondent let his parents avoid discussing his homosexuality, rather than risking conflict with them.

Je n'ai pas de problèmes avec mes parents. Je ne sais pas s'il reste quelques tensions, par exemple, mais j'ai pas le goût de vérifier. Peut-être mes parents comprennent mal la question de l'homosexualité, mais je pense que ce qu'ils voient ne les dérange pas. (15)

Parental resistance to discussing the matter after the initial disclosure means the respondent has to decide whether to risk having his homosexuality "forgotten" or to "re-disclose" himself occasionally, thereby risking discomfort or parental hostility.

Disclosure can also create other difficulties. Respondents know that the disclosure may cause their parents worry and emotional upset, and they may feel responsible for having caused them distress. One man's father was so upset at the thought of his son being gay, that he began seeing a psychiatrist. Parental worry may be particularly acute during the current situation with AIDS.

I can't stand it. I wake up some days and my mother's crying because she reads an article about AIDS in the paper. I tell her that my doctor tells me that there is nothing to worry about for me. I can't explain to her why there is a very low chance for me to catch it because of the kind of sex I like. It's not something that you tell your mother...I told her to go see my doctor, who is very good, but she won't go see a "fruit doctor." (9)



Disclosure can create difficulties for the parents in their social life. Their friends or other family members might ask why their son is not married or why he never seems to have a girlfriend, which puts them in a position of telling them about their son's homosexuality, trying to avoid the issue, or lying. As parents often feel uncomfortable with other people knowing about their son's homosexuality, some men pass, in deference to their discomfort.

Au niveau de la grande famille, je suis toujours accompagné par une fille pour pas mettre mes parents mal à l'aise. Dans les parties de famille ou les mariages, j'emmènes "ma chume". On danse ensemble. On s'amuse, malgré tout. (15)

\* \* \* \*

Parental concern about the well-being of their son, which includes his future plans and present lifestyle, creates difficulties for the gay man. In order to deal with these concerns in an open and honest fashion, he needs to tell them that he is gay, but this requires him to discuss his sexual desires and behavior. Explicit discussions such as this will likely be difficult for both the man and his parents. Disclosure creates other difficulties in the man's relationship with his parents, because they might hold negative views of gays or because they might feel stigmatized as the parents of a gay man.

## FRIENDS

The boundaries defining acceptable topics of conversation do not exist to the same degree in relationships with close friends as they do with parents. Indeed, people are generally expected to share intimate details of their lives with their close friends, although, as Simmel notes, shared knowledge is nonetheless selective and incomplete (1950:326).

Goffman has described the social convention which structures such relationships and the dilemma it engenders for the "discreditable" person:

[...] he will find that intimate relations with others, ratified in our society by mutual confession of invisible failings, cause him either to admit his situation to the intimate or to feel guilty for not doing so (Goffman, 1963:74).

Friendships are based on mutual obligations, one of which is not to withhold information about oneself from one's friends, even if this means discussing one's discrediting attributes. Failure to reveal such details leads to feelings of guilt on the part of the "discreditable" individual and a sense of betrayal on the part of the friend.

One of my friends, I went over one night and he goes, "we have to have a talk" and he started asking me questions. Then he goes, "how come you never talk to me? I'm supposed to be your best friend" and all that. (22)

Passing: This convention for openness notwithstanding, disclosing sexual preferences to friends, particularly initial disclosures, is difficult. As a result, passing remains an

important strategy used by respondents in their relationships with friends. Passing with friends is something which does not just happen; a gay man cannot unintentionally pass with a friend, as he might with a stranger. Passing to friends is a conscious strategy.

Not all of my friends know. Some I don't tell because I don't really see them much. I don't see the point in telling them...if I see them a lot, they know. (22)

I don't tell friends. Things would change, not for me, but with them. They couldn't deal with it. Why should I lay that on them? Am I improving something by saying anything? I don't see any benefit...you just don't throw them a spitball when they are expecting a curve. If there was a reason for it, maybe, but now, why? If it's unprovoked, why? (24)

The conscious hiding of one's homosexuality transgresses the expectation that one should share personal information with close friends. Sharing personal information demonstrates and confirms trust in the other person, so passing is often seen by respondents to indicate a lack of confidence in the friend and nonacceptance of his own sexual identity.

Je n'osais pas leur parler. Je me sentais pas honnête avec eux. C'était comme j'avais honte. (19)

I don't like the idea [of not telling him]. We are open about everything under the sun, except that. I don't like the idea of hiding it or lying about it. I would prefer that he knew. (25)

Disclosure: Many respondents do disclose their homosexuality to their friends. Closeness is a major reason

cited by the respondents for telling a friend that they are gay. The reasoning is circular: you tell the other because they are close to you; they are close to you because you can tell them such things.

I felt better. All of a sudden I wasn't hiding from him. I could be 100% true to him. I could be myself, nothing mattered. (21)

It's really strange because it is very personal, but when you share that with someone, it feels good. You are sharing a part of your life. I don't have to hide anymore with some of my friends. (26)

Despite their felt closeness and the expectation to share personal details, respondents often have problems actually making the revelation, even once they have decided to tell the other. Many of the men who eventually reveal themselves to their friends try to avoid the issue as long as they can.

It took a while for me to tell them. They had figured it out for themselves. (22)

Others, intent on telling a friend despite their fears, develop detailed plans for the disclosure. For example, one respondent visited a friend in Ontario with the intention of telling him, but once there, he could not bring himself to actually say that he is gay:

I went down to see him and his wife to tell them, specifically to tell them that I was gay. I could not come out to them I don't know why, but I couldn't. She's into psychology, so I knew that she would understand and she did. She said, "try to tell John, if you can't, tell me." That's what happened. I asked her to tell him. (21)

Disclosure changes the boundaries of the friendship. Sometimes these changes are advantageous. For instance, close friendships with women may create problems because the woman may interpret the closeness as more than just "friendship." Several respondents purposely disclosed themselves to women because the friend was interested in initiating a sexual relationship. The disclosure clarifies the boundaries of their friendship, "de-sexualizing" the relationship.

J'ai fait une exception pour une bonne femme qui est extraordinaire...elle a tombé en amour avec moi. On est allé souper ensemble et j'ai expliqué si j'étais straight, je tomberais en amour avec une fille comme elle, mais je suis gai, j'ai un chum, je couche avec des gars, et je suis sûr de ma décision.  
(15)

There was Cathy...we lived nearby each other. She didn't like it because she had a crush on me. She was pretty annoyed. (18)

La première personne qui savait était une amie de longue date. Elle voulait faire l'amour avec moi. Elle m'harcellait avec ça. Moi, je ne voulais pas. (19)

Disclosures to men, on the other hand, may "sexualize" the relationships, possibly leading the friend to fear that the respondent is interested in a sexual relationship.

Pour les filles, ça fait un ami de gars de plus, mais pour les gars, c'est comme ils croient que je les cruise. C'est pas ça de tout. Ça remet tout en question.  
(19)

He said something like, "you are just after our asses" and I said, "you have fuck-all to worry about." Christ, I really hurt his feelings. I almost had to make a pass at him to make him like me again. (29)

Disclosure to a nongay male friend, on occasion, can actually lead to a sexual encounter.

J'avais 16 ans, il est gai, lui aussi. Pendant les années, on a toujours douté d'un et l'autre. La concrétisation de nos doutes s'est faite à l'âge de 16 ans. (30)

Since I have come out, some strange things have happened to me. I have two extremely close friends who are married and have kids. One of them wants to have an affair with me. He's not gay, but he figures he's "bi". The other one, I went down to see him and his wife to specifically tell them that I am gay...one night, at one-thirty in the morning, he comes into the room and jumps into the bed with me. (21)

Obligations and expectations between friends are mutual. Just as one is expected to be open with his friends, they are expected to respond to this openness in a supportive and positive manner. "Real" friends are expected to accept revelations without reacting negatively.

If you are my friend, then you should be able to understand that...You know, it was sort of up to them, how they were going to take it. (28)

My real friends all know I am gay, whether they are gay or straight...I make a point to tell my friends. I want them to know the truth about who I am. If they don't accept me, then they don't deserve my friendship...If I am honest with them, then they are going to be honest with me. It works both ways. That's the way I see it. (32)

## SIBLINGS

Siblings as Family Members: Relationships with brothers and sisters have many features which are found in parental relationships. As a result, the dilemma which confronts gay men in deciding whether to tell their brothers and sisters about their sexual preferences is often similar to that which they confront in their relationship with their parents. For example, siblings can be close and supportive, or they can be distant and hostile. One does not choose one's siblings and ties are generally maintained with them, regardless of the quality of the relationship. Siblings are not necessarily close confidants of the respondent, so the man may feel no compulsion to tell them that he is gay. Personal and sexual manners are often seen to be an inappropriate topic of conversation between siblings, as is often the case with parents. Respondents may fear telling their siblings they are gay, and they may feel they are letting them down by not marrying and raising a family.

Despite the difficulty of disclosures to siblings, the man may feel obliged to keep his brothers and sisters informed of certain aspects of his personal life, so they do not worry or concern themselves unduly.

I would tell my older brother and eldest sister, I figure I owe that much to them...I figure that I am 28 years old, most people I knew in high school are all married now. They might wonder if and when I am getting married. I owe them enough to tell them that I am gay and may never get married. (25)

I just wanted to play fair with them. I wanted them to know that I never married because I was gay. They would always ask, "how come you don't get married?" So, I told them I was gay and that I was not attracted to women sexually. (32)

Siblings can play a special role in the family, because they have loyalties to the respondent as well as to their parents. Parents sometimes approach a brother or sister for "inside information" on the respondent, placing the sibling in the position of "go-between" for the parents and respondent. For instance, if a parent suspects that the respondent may be gay, he or she may ask a sibling for information, or may request that the sibling seek out more information on the respondent's situation. A brother or sister may know that the parents are concerned, so he or she may push the respondent to be more open in the family, pressuring the respondent to tell his parents. In this way, the sibling becomes a "coach" for the respondent (Schneider & Conrad, 1980:36).

She talked to me because my mother talked to her and was trying to get some information out of her. But my sister wouldn't tell her anything, she said, "why don't you talk to him?" Then she told me, "you should talk to her, she wants to know." (22)

In contrast, some siblings coach respondents to be less open, as not to risk upsetting his friends or parents:

She told me to go back into the closet and not wear my pink polo shirt! I said, "I don't flaunt it, you know I don't." She said not to mention anything. I don't talk about gayness. (26)



Because of the siblings ties and loyalties to their parents, the respondents are often more concerned about betrayal by siblings than in other types of relationships.

Siblings as Friends: Relationships to siblings also have characteristics similar to relationships with friends. Siblings are often close in age and share similar interests. They may socialize together and many respondents reported that a brother or sister is a close confidant. Several men reported that they told their siblings because they were close to each other and often discussed personal issues between themselves. Disclosure can be a means of expressing and maintaining a close relationship.

We are really close. We have a long relationship which is kind of intense. We were just really good friends. (28)

Failure to disclose himself to a close brother or sister may also be perceived as a betrayal of trust, as in the case with friends. Because of their closeness, siblings may be at liberty to ask personal questions of the respondent which parents would not be permitted to easily ask. Closeness may also lead respondents to share personal problems with a brother or sister. Discussing problems with a sibling is sometimes an important opening for the disclosure.

The only one who knows [in the family] is my older sister. I told her in a long letter. She was going through some serious personal problems of her own, and I figured that if I told her about some of the things I had to go through, it would help. And it did. It helped her

out tremendously. Things are much better and it brought us much closer too. We're more close now than we ever have been only because we shared something very personal. (1)

I was going through a depression. My sister noticed it. I have been pretty lucky with family and friends. She realized that something was bothering me...She asked, "you're not gay, are you?" (29)

Respondents often socialize with their brothers and sisters. One man told his sister that he is gay so that she could go to gay nightclubs with him and his lover.

I had just started seeing somebody and I was going to see the person. He works in a gay club. I was taking her along and she wouldn't know. I wanted her to meet him. We were in the car going to the place, so I told her in the car. She goes, "I thought so, but I never really wanted to admit it." (22)

\* \* \* \*

Disclosure to siblings often poses similar problems as disclosure to parents. Because they are family members, the man often feels a responsibility to keep his brothers and sisters informed about certain aspects of his life, but at the same time, he is not necessarily comfortable in discussing his sexuality with them. Siblings can play a special role in the family, providing a communication link between the man and his parents. Finally, the situation with siblings may also be similar to disclosure to friends, where there can be an expectation for openness, despite the difficulties which are presented by the revelation.

## WIVES

Spouses are expected to share personal information and secrets, discuss their personal shortcomings and weaknesses, and remain sexually "faithful" to each other. As spousal relationships entail a different set of obligations and expectations than relationships with parents, siblings, or friends, the dilemma of disclosure is different than in other types of relationships. Two types of revelations are considered in this section: those which occur prior to marriage, and those which occur following marriage. Five respondents have been married to women and one of these men is still married. Of these, three are of the first type (pre-marriage disclosure) and one is of the second type (post-marriage disclosure). The situation of the fifth man is not considered below, as he never revealed himself to his ex-wife. He does not believe that she ever suspected or that his sexual preferences affected their relationship.

Previous psychological and sociological research suggests that a sizable minority (between 10% and 20%) of gay samples have, at some point in their lives, been married. Saghir & Robins (1973) found that 18% of their homosexual sample had been married. Weinberg & Williams (1974) reported a figure of 17%; Dannecker & Reiche (1974) reported that 10% of their sample were either married or had been married in the past; Bell & Weinberg (1978) found that 20% of the white males in their sample had been married, as compared to only 13% of

the Black males; and Masters & Johnson (1979) reported that 17% of their sample had been married. Ross (1983:25) suggested four major reasons for marriage among gay men: a response to social pressure, an effort to de-emphasize homosexuality, a means of having companionship, and a result of falling in love. Weinberg & Williams (1974) observed that over one-third of the married men in their sample told their wives of their sexual preferences prior to their marriage.

Pre-marriage Disclosure: The three respondents here who revealed themselves prior to marriage all state that they got married because they fell in love with their wives and all three report being aware of their homosexual preferences at the time of marriage. Two of the these three respondents had an extensive gay social life prior to marriage, and their wives were actively involved in their socializing with other gay men.

C'était une grande amitié qui a finalement tourné en amour. Dans cette époque là, j'ai laissé la vie gaie parce que j'aimais Marie...imagines, j'ai finalement retrouvé ma vie gaie en 63. En 64, j'ai rencontré Marie, puis en 65 on était vraiment ensemble. On a vécu ensemble pendant 3 ans. (8)

On est devenu de plus en plus proche...on est devenu vraiment impliqué mutuellement. Je me suis dit, "cette femme est différente que les autres, tu l'aimes, tu dois être honnête avec elle." (30)

None of these marriages could be considered "defensive" or as a conscious "flight from homosexuality" as some

marriages between gay men and heterosexual women have been described in the literature (Ross, 1971; Dannecher & Reiche, 1974). The respondents recognized their homosexual preferences at the time of their marriage and they state that their sexual attraction to men did not change as a result of their marriage.

J'ai tombé en amour avec elle. Tout le temps que j'étais avec elle, je ne pensais même pas aux gars. C'est sûr quand j'ai vu un beau garçon, j'ai remarqué. Même si on était ensemble, on remarqué "mon Dieu, c'est un beau garçon." On a partagé nos commentaires ensemble...On a meme sorti ensemble aux bars gais. (8)

Telling their wives was important to the respondents because they wanted to begin their relationships honestly with them. Two men told their future wives from the very start. The third man did not have to make a direct disclosure, as he and his wife originally socialized in the same social group. This group was largely composed of gay men, so his sexual orientation was always evident to her.

Because the issue of disclosure was dealt with at the beginning of their relationships, the revelation itself did not pose a problem in any of these marriages, at least from the point of view of the respondents. However, the disclosure made the men's homosexual desires and behaviors an open topic of conversation between the couple. The men's sexual preferences can be an important dynamic in their relationship;

two of the men report that their marriage ended largely because of their homosexuality.

C'était sûrement à cause de mon homosexualité que j'ai laissé ma femme. Même si je l'aimais beaucoup, même si c'était avec elle que je voulais faire ma vie, je me suis rendu compte que ma vie n'était pas ça. C'était de vivre ma vie gaie que je voulais, pas d'être marié et avoir un enfant...J'étais malheureux. Pourquoi vivre ma vie dans une façon que me convient pas? (8)

C'était l'éternel déchirement pour moi. Mon coeur est à l'une, mais mon sexe est à l'autre. Notre relation sexuelle était relativement bonne, mais c'était basé sur les sentiments. Je n'ai jamais eu avec elle la même "lust" que je peux avoir pour un homme. C'est drôle de faire une différence entre l'amour et le "lust". Elle avait mon amour, mais pas le "lust". (30)

The third man reports that he and his first wife decided to end their marriage because of problems in their relationship which were unrelated to his sexual preferences. He notes, however, that he and his current common-law wife experience problems as a result of his homosexual attractions and his ongoing sexual contacts with men.

Sometimes we talk about it. In the beginning she wanted to know what we did, but now, she says "go slowly." We have to establish a more stable relationship. When she knows more where we are, it should be easier. (12)

\* \* \* \*

Disclosure in these three instances was not viewed by these respondents as problematic, apart from the usual difficulty in revealing one's sexual orientation to another

person. The disclosures were made to avoid future problems in the relationship, but while the revelations per se were not problematic for the men, they exposed a potentially destructive dynamic in the marital relationship which led to problems for all three of these respondents.

Post-Marriage Disclosure: One respondent did not tell his wife that he was gay until seven years after their marriage. Unlike the three men discussed above, this man did not marry because he loved his wife.

I knew when I got married that I was gay. But I believed that being a homosexual was a sin that God could correct and that getting married...zip...all of a sudden a miracle would happen and I would become straight and I would live happily ever after. (2)

His marriage would fall under Ross' (1984) category of those gays who marry to de-emphasize or change their homosexuality. Through the course of his marriage, the man came to the conclusion that his sexual orientation would not change. When he finally disclosed himself to his wife, she did not react adversely to his disclosure, largely because of her religious beliefs:

I told my wife two days before my birthday that I was gay and that we would no longer sleep together. I promised her that I wouldn't bring any men home and I also promised her, very foolishly, that I wouldn't have any affairs. It was okay if I was of a homosexual orientation with her as long

as I wasn't, as Adventists say, "living in open sin," practicing something which was in opposition to the tenets of the church. (2)

His wife's acceptance (or tolerance) of his disclosure ended when she found out that he was having an affair with a man. When she was told about this relationship, she became very upset. In her anger, she told his employer, the Adventist School where he worked as a teacher:

My wife xeroxed my diary and gave a copy of it to the school board chairman. Then all hell broke loose, then copies of it were floating around the Church...I got a phone call that night at my lover's house and was told that the school board committee was at my house and wanted to have a word with me...the next day, I went to school and the principal asked me for my keys. I was not allowed to go to my classroom...as I was leaving the school, one of the kid's parents came by and accused me of molesting her child and told me that she was starting a court case against me. (2)

His wife also emptied their apartment of furniture and moved. She took his car, took out a \$5000 bank loan in his name, and ran up all their credit cards to their limit.

The man's decision to reveal his homosexuality and his disclosure of an extra-marital affair with a man changed the rules of their relationship.

\* \* \* \*

Disclosure, whether it occurs before or after the marriage, can lead to difficulties. The man's revelation after marriage redefines the relationship and can lead the wife to feel deceived and betrayed. Pre-marriage disclosure also may



contribute to problems, even if the revelation itself is relatively unproblematic. The man's openness about his sexual preferences and behavior can lead him to acknowledge his desire for sexual experiences with other men or admit to actually having had extra-marital relationships. This openness may lead the wives to experience feelings of jealousy, confusion, or betrayal, feelings which Ross (1971) observed in his study of marriages between gay men and heterosexual women. The wife's inability to accept their husbands' infidelity and the men's growing realization that they would prefer a homosexual relationship were the reasons cited for the dissolution of three of the four marriages.

### STRANGERS

There are few ongoing ties in one's relationships with casual acquaintances and strangers, and distant social contacts generally have little knowledge of the individual's life history. As a consequence, issues relating to disclosure and secrecy of sexual preferences to distant social relationships are considerably different from those which present themselves with closer social contacts. In most situations, strangers and acquaintances assume that the gay man is heterosexual. In effect, the man unintentionally passes in most of his social encounters. Some men are assumed by certain others to be gay because of "stereotypically gay" behavior or dress, but most often, the heterosexual assumption

of others is left unchallenged in the gay man's relationships with strangers and acquaintances.

Passing: Passing to strangers is easier and more straightforward than passing to people who know the individual well (Goffman, 1963). The man often has fewer qualms about keeping secrets from people who he does not know well than from friends or family members, and distant social relations can more easily accept the individual's untruthfulness (Simmel, 1950:313). As strangers and casual acquaintances are less knowledgeable about the man's personal life and biography, he does not have to assume as active a role in creating a heterosexual image as he does with people he knows well. Strangers are also less likely to ask personal questions, so there are fewer reasons for the man to lie or actively create a false heterosexual image than with closer relationships.

Disclosure: While it is easier to pass with strangers, it is also emotionally easier for the man to reveal himself to a distant social contact because he has less emotional investment in relationships with strangers and acquaintances than with family members or friends.

I find it infinitely easier to come out to someone I don't know. There is a whole set of apprehensions about coming out to people you know. (28)

Gay political activists have often stated that the relative ease of passing with strangers and the general invisibility of homosexuality are its greatest political liabilities (Hodges & Hutter, 1974; Hannan, 1976) and argue that gays should make a conscious effort to become more openly gay in their day-to-day interactions. Some strategies are available to men who want to be more visible in public, where a personal statement ("I am gay") would be ineffective or inappropriate. Some politically active gays wear a pink triangle on their clothes (1). The triangle functions, in Goffman's terms (1963:43), as a visible identifier, but most people do not know what the symbol stands for, so it is generally rendered ineffective. In the end, wearing a identifier such as this may only serve to reveal oneself to other politically active gays or knowledgeable (and likely sympathetic) non-gays. More direct and unambiguous visible identifiers are available (a button which reads "Glad to be gay" or "Gay Pride"), but perhaps because these identifiers are seen to be provocative or offensive, they are rarely seen except in gay-oriented settings or events. Wearing a sign which unequivocally identifies a man as gay puts him at risk of being publicly ridiculed or even physically beaten.

Disclosure to strangers may be emotionally easier, but situationally more difficult than disclosures to close relationships; it is sometimes simply not possible to tell the other, even if the man wants to be open.

I went to the local store, where I know one of the guys behind the counter. We know each other well enough to chat or joke around. One day, he made some comment about a woman customer and then said "Women, I can live without them." Then he stopped, said that he couldn't live without them and implied that he needed them for relationships or for sex. He then asks, "how about you? I guess you do too." I wasn't about to lie to him, but I really couldn't say, "no, I prefer men..." Maybe in different circumstances, but not in the middle of the store. I just made some non-committal noise like "uhm" and changed the subject. I don't like being dishonest, but that wasn't the time or place to make any big personal statement.

\* \* \* \*

The dilemma for gays in their relationships with strangers and distant friends is that they will usually be assumed not to be gay. If the man wants to continue to pass as heterosexual, he must attend to certain details of his social behavior and presentation. The relative ease of passing to strangers is identified as a problem by politically active gays. Because the man is assumed to be nongay by most strangers, he effectively passes in most of his social interactions, even if he does not want to. If he wants to be open, the man must confront this assumption, but it is often difficult to do.

#### SUMMARY

Neither disclosure nor secrecy provide a problem-free resolution to the dilemma which the gay man faces in his interactions with nongay others. Betrayal and negative views

of homosexuality are problems relating to disclosure which confront the man in all types of relationships. Other problems vary according to the type of relationship he has with the other person. The stigmatized nature of homosexuality accounts for some of his difficulties, as the man tries to avoid being treated differently because of his sexual preferences, but the man's dilemma is not due entirely to the discreditable nature of his sexual preferences. The conventions which structure his social relationships define sexually explicit information as improper to share within certain types of encounters.

The heterosexual assumption of others sometimes makes it easy for the man to conceal his homosexuality, but at the same time, this assumption often constitutes the biggest threat to the man's heterosexual façade. The man can often pass as heterosexual because others automatically assume he is nongay, but as a result, he must deal with their related assumptions about his interest in women, girlfriends or plans for marriage. In specific circumstances, the man can resolve this dilemma by disclosing himself to the other person, but in many of his social encounters, he finds that disclosure is neither appropriate nor easy to do.

Despite the current claims in the literature that gays should be open, or at least strive to be open with others, discussion of one's sexuality is a personal matter and it is not acceptable to raise the topic in conversation in all social contexts or relationships. As much as a man may want to be open with others, he is unable to control all elements of a

social encounter. For instance, the man can be self-accepting and want to tell someone, yet he cannot change the fact that a disclosure to a stranger might be awkward and inappropriately personal. Because certain factors remain outside of the man's control, he cannot be consistently overt, even if he tries to be, despite the implications of the current views of gay activists, psychologists, and sociologists.

#### FOOTNOTE

- (1) The pink triangle is a symbol used by many contemporary gay activists. The Pink Triangle Press, a Canadian gay publishing house, describes the symbol in Hodges and Hutter's Essay, "With Downcast Gays:"

During the Third Reich in Germany, the Nazis developed a simple and effective system for identifying the various undesirables and "enemies of the state" imprisoned in concentration camps. Each group had to wear an identifying symbol sewn to its clothing. One group was singled out by a pink triangle worn point down on the left arm of the jacket and on the right pant leg. These were the homosexuals. Tens of thousands wore this symbol to their deaths in the gas chambers and forced labour camps of Nazi Germany. We have chosen the pink triangle as a symbol. A symbol of the history that other hands have tried to obliterate, the history that we must recover. It is also a reminder of where gay oppression can lead if gay people neglect the active struggle for their rights. (Pink Triangle Press, 1974).

## CHAPTER V

### IDEOLOGY AND DISCLOSURE

There are currently two major ideologies that support disclosure. The first is promoted by clinicians who argue that gays must be open in order to be self-accepting and emotionally well-adjusted. The second ideology is promoted by political activists who argue that gays must disclose their homosexuality to others in order to overcome self-oppression and to bring about their acceptance by nongays. These two perspectives both view disclosure as a prerequisite for the development of a positive gay identity.

The belief that overtness about one's homosexuality is good for both the individual and the gay community was first widely expressed by activists in the late 1960s. Mental health workers later incorporated this view into the new clinical view of homosexuality as a nonpathological variation in sexual orientation. While the two positions are now largely consistent with each other, the political stance extends the psychological position by stressing the social benefits which result from personal revelation. The political ideology stresses the role of disclosure for social change, while the psychological position emphasizes its role in promoting personal growth.

Many gays agree with these positions and because the two positions are not mutually exclusive, many respondents in this study professed both views: that overtness is a sign of psychological adjustment, and that it is an important political strategy of the gay community. Respondents are, however, more equivocal in their statements than much of the literature; the men tend to qualify their views on disclosure with terms such as, "most of the time" or "for most people." A few respondents reject the psychological and political positions entirely, arguing that they are wrong and possibly harmful.

This chapter has two aims. First, I will show that the general principles of the psychological and political ideologies which underlie much of the literature on disclosure are expressed by respondents, but that they are not held by everyone. Second, I will show that despite their more or less consistent position that disclosure is desirable, the respondents' views are flexible and their behaviour often contradicts their own stated beliefs on the subject.

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL IDEOLOGY

The psychological ideology presents disclosure as an indicator that the gay man is accepting of his sexual identity. Most respondents believe that disclosing homosexuality is often psychologically beneficial to the gay individual. This position was most clearly expressed by one respondent:



I think it's very bad for anybody on earth to be obliged to hide their feelings. That's really not healthy. That's what makes criminals. I think the best thing you can do to make criminals is to force them to hide their feelings. If everybody could live his emotional life openly, there would be many fewer criminals, there would be much more harmony. (5)

At the same time, covertness is presented as an indicator of emotional problems. Many respondents believe that secrecy reflects or contributes to psychological maladjustment.

If you can't be open, it's because you still don't feel good about your homosexuality, there is still something that you don't feel comfortable with. (5)

De se sentir pleinement soi-même, c'est une question d'assurance, c'est une question d'autonomie psychologique. L'homosexualité est une partie importante de la personne, elle ne peut pas garder ça à l'intérieur. Psychologiquement, c'est lourd à porter. (30)

Je pense que quand t'es moins ouvert, t'es insécure. Si t'es sécure, t'es ouvert. (34)

One man states that he would like to be more open, as he sees his own level of covertness as an indication of emotional problems:

I want to be more open, that's the ultimate: not to have any personal hang-ups, to be able to tell people I am close to...I guess if I didn't have any hang-ups, I wouldn't have any problems, I'd just tell everyone. [By "hang-ups" he means:]...being afraid of the consequences, an insecurity, a lack of confidence in dealing with the reactions. (27)

The psychological ideology maintains that telling others is part of a developmental process. Respondents often see disclosure as an indicator of psychological and social growth: as the gay man matures, he becomes more comfortable with himself and, as a result, is more likely to reveal his sexual preferences to others. For example, in discussing his desire for his lover to become more openly gay, one man states:

I hope he's evolving at this time...that he's doing some growing. I hope he's in a growth process at this time. I hope he's learning about a lot of things...I don't think it's something that anyone can just put aside. It's like living a fragment of life. It's a little schizoid to be someone to some people and another person with others. (18)

Telling at least select others is often seen as a necessary element of this process of self-acceptance.

You have to come to terms with being gay in the same sense as if you had big ears or buck teeth or not liking the sound of your voice. I'm just mentioning negative things, but it doesn't have to be. It's something that you have to come to terms with...Once you come to accept your buck teeth, they might even grow on you and you might even come to like them, or your crooked eyes or your big ears or whatever. It's something that you have to face up to. It doesn't need to be proclaimed. You don't need to put up banners and tell the world that you are gay, I don't think that's necessary, but I think that in the immediate entourage, you need to be at ease with yourself. (18)

According to one man, disclosure is not an indicator of self-acceptance, but a means for coming to accept one's sexual

identity. He states that he "works through" his inner issues by discussing them with others.

Disclosure is completely different than coming to terms with yourself except that by disclosing it to people, you think about it yourself and come to terms with it more. You work through the issues by telling people. By anticipating their responses, you grow personally...The point is really not telling people, it's the preparation for yourself, it's working through the inner issues. (28)

Respondents identify several problems which result when an individual does not accept himself and tell others about his homosexuality. The man who does not tell others risks depression, isolation, and poor self-esteem. One man believes that by remaining covert, the individual limits himself to brief and anonymous sexual contacts in public washrooms, like some of the men described by Humphreys (1970).

It's their problem if they don't want to come out. I see people in the washroom, old men trying to have sex with young men. It's really dehumanizing to have sex in the toilets, but if they don't want to come out, I'm not going to force them. It's really sad. (26)

Failure to assert one's homosexuality is sometimes seen as having a generalized negative effect on the individual:

There is no sense of mastery, nothing gets accomplished, there is no conquest of one's problems. One's *raison d'être* is somehow not celebrated. (10)

\* \* \* \*

Respondents adhering to psychological ideology argue that covertness is an indicator of personal problems and that

the gay man needs to be open with others in order to be happy and well-adjusted emotionally; covertness is viewed as both a cause and an indicator of psychological problems. Telling others is seen as an important element of the identity development process; the gay man is said not to fully accept his sexuality until he has reached the point of being able to tell others.

#### POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Ponse observes that the feminist and gay movements have contributed to increased resentment among gays about having to remain secretive, leading to an "ethos of openness" (1976:334). Adherents of this "ethos" argue that secrecy is the worst feature of gay life, that increased openness will draw more gays into an active and self-accepting lifestyle, and that disclosure will make heterosexuals more aware of homosexuality as a viable lifestyle. That disclosure entails some risk is recognized, but the new political position is that such risks are justified when considered in light of the personal and political costs of secrecy.

The political ideology is consistent with the psychological ideology insofar as disclosure is seen as necessary for gays to overcome their internalized negative self-images and self-oppression.

It's always the feeling of being a minority, it makes you feel bad, I think...they don't know why they feel bad. I think it's unconscious, because they have always been taught that gays are bad people. They are gay and they just believe what they have been taught...we should not think we are bad just because we are a minority. (5)

Le fait d'en parler, je pense qu'on comprend plus aussi. On s'accepte plus. J'ai peut-être plus à accepter de mon état, mon homosexualité. Si je l'avais dit aux gens qui n'ont pas compris, je serais peut-être encore fermé. J'aurais resté poigné avec ça. (19)

In a similar way, disclosure is seen as helping other gays come to terms with their sexuality:

This guy at work wrote me a little note. He thanked me for being so open about my gay feelings because it helped him identify his own sexuality. (4)

When you show that it is no problem for you, then the other person will realize that they can develop their confidence too..that's why it's so important to be open, to be a role model. (29)

Disclosure helps the individual and, because it helps other gays, it is sometimes seen as a responsibility: gays should tell others in order to help their "own":

Not coming out may also mean not accepting your responsibilities as a gay person. That's worse than the straights. I generally have guilt from not being gay enough. (28)

Respondents who profess a political ideology believe that telling others is important to remove the stigma and negative stereotypes associated with homosexuality.

I think it would be better for society...Maybe if people were to see homosexuality more often, they might be more inclined to see it as something no different from anything else. (12)

La société va finir par l'accepter finalement. Il faut s'afficher pour habituer la société. En se connaissant, ils vont voir qu'on n'est pas fou ou des maniaques. L'image va changer...C'est bon. Il faut s'affirmer. (13)

An important principle of the political ideology is that change will come through increased public visibility and by challenging the negative images of homosexuality held by others. Walking hand-in-hand or kissing in public, two forms of public disclosure, are ways by which gays can promote acceptance and assert their lifestyles.

[We should not stop ourselves from showing affection in public]...the straights do it, so why shouldn't we? Love is a fact of life that everyone should be able to accept...I would like a reaction from people, it would be a good opportunity to ask them why they don't like that and to try to make them realize that it's nothing bad. (5)

Il est peut-être nécessaire de montrer qu'on est gai. Il faut quand même changer des attitudes. On ne peut pas toujours se cacher. Il faut avoir des attitudes publiques pour démontrer qu'on existe, de ne pas être toujours caché. C'est aliénant. Si de plus en plus d'hommes se promènent main dans la main, ça va devenir un comportement plus ordinaire, une chose "normale." (34)

Once others come to identify the man as gay, they may begin to realize that many of their previously held images of gays are incorrect.

Usually people think "I like you but I don't like fags, therefore, you are not a fag." Once you begin to hang around someone you know is gay, that no longer enters into it. (29)

This ideological position maintains that gays should encourage other gays to be open in their lives, even if they are reluctant to do so. One man explains his political philosophy this way:

If people are really interested in you as a person, then it is up to them to come to grips with your politics, that's their liberation. That's their process. I really don't buy that there are political risks in being too open. I can't see what's to lose by being really open or pushing too hard. There might be specific instances where discretion is desirable, but generally, I don't see the problem. (28)

\* \* \* \*

The basic tenets of the political ideology are accepted by many respondents. Disclosure is seen as helping the gay individual accept his sexual orientation and overcome his inculcated negative image of homosexuality, and as supporting others in accepting their gay identity. The ideology also views disclosure as an important means to increase the visibility of gays, break down the stereotypic images of gays, and legitimize claims for equal rights for gays. The position tends to be assertive and unyielding to opposing views.

## DISSENTING VIEWS

While many men agree with the current psychological and political views, several men reject many of their fundamental tenets. For example, some men believe the current claims that it is necessary to be open in order to be self-accepting and to end self-oppression are incorrect, or at least, that they do not universally apply to all gays.

Sometimes it makes me angry that gays are not more open, but again, it depends. When I really think about it, then I start feeling that I'm not being very open to other people's lives and what they have gone through. If I look at my life, I think all gays should be open, but when I think of it, it would have to depend. (4)

Au niveau de l'acceptation, c'est "vivre et laisser vivre." Je le dis au monde qui me demande directement ou à des amis. Mais je ne le crie pas dans les rues. Ce n'est pas les affaires des autres ce que je fais dans ma vie privée. (15)

I don't think it is really necessary to be open with people in order to accept yourself. I accept myself and there are a number of people I am not open with. I don't agree with that [the openness view]. It might be so for some people, but that's not the case for me. (25)

These men believe that the decision concerning disclosure is personal and that no single position can be taken as correct and beneficial for all gays. These respondents stress the need to respect the individuality of gays and recognize that serious repercussions can result from revealing oneself in certain situations, making secrecy a



legitimate strategy. One respondent feels that accepting one's homosexuality and being open about it are two different processes, and states that the decision to disclose is situationally-based.

It's completely an individual case. Probably, in instinctive self-preservation, people come out only to the degree that they are happy. There will always be closet people...I think the degree to which you are happy and can live a contented life is the degree to which you understand yourself and your motives...If you understand the choice you make, being closeted or open or whatever, then you are more likely to be happy. (28)

For these men, disclosure is not always worth the risks it entails for the individual, and deciding to remain covert in a particular setting does not mean that the man will feel unhappy or distressed.

Several men also reject the political utility of public disclosure, seeing it as unnecessary provocation and potentially detrimental to the individual and the gay community:

I think [activists] have caused a whole lot of trouble by being extra strident to people who were just sort of indifferent. It's posing a threat. They weren't upset by homosexuals, they didn't bother with them. They left them alone...Slogans like "I'm proud to be homosexual" to my thinking is as stupid as saying "I'm proud to be Canadian" or whatever. There's nothing to be proud of and nothing to be ashamed about. (3)

I find the Body Politic [a Canadian gay liberation journal] is too adamant and militant. I like people who have opinions about things and who wish to share them. I'm not crazy about anyone being too militant about any subject: abortion, nuclear war...(18)

To go out and be hard-core about [gay liberation] is no good. It turns people off...Our own kind who shove this stuff are just as bad as the Jerry Falwells.  
(38)

These views are similar to those of gay civil libertarians during the Reformist stage of the movement (Conrad & Schneider, 1981; Humphreys, 1972), where provocation of nongays was viewed as ineffective and potentially detrimental to the efforts of the gay movement. Such provocation can also be seen as potentially dangerous for the gay individual:

I want to get along with people and also, you run the risk, walking down the street hand-in-hand at three in the morning, of a group of kids wanting to beat up faggots. There's an element of self-preservation in all of this. (2)

Some respondents also criticize some of the other strategies of the organized gay community, such as the assertion that gays should patronize gay commercial establishments:

Je deviens de plus en plus réticent aux questions d'un ghetto gai, dans le sens qu'on a des magasins gais, le cinéma gai, des restaurants gais...Pour moi, ça forme un ghetto. C'est comme les Noirs qui se tiennent toujours dans le ghetto noir. Ils parlent toujours avec des Noirs...ou les Chinois. Le monde ne se mélange pas. (15)

Even the calls for gays to take a personal role in helping nongays accept homosexuality is rejected by some:

J'ai pas de temps à perdre. Il en a trop de gens qui sont capable de m'aimer, alors je n'ai pas de temps à perdre pour convaincre quelqu'un de m'accepter. Ma vie est trop courte pour ces gens là.  
(8)

\* \* \* \*

While the tenets of the psychological and political ideologies are accepted by many respondents, some men reject several of the fundamental claims. They believe that disclosure is not necessary to accept one's homosexuality or to overcome the negative images of gays. Several respondents reject the calls to become more politically active and assertive, and feel that current activists are actually hurting the gay movement.

#### CONTRADICTIONS

While generally agreeing with the psychological or the political positions on disclosure, respondents' behaviour is often inconsistent with these ideologies. Despite the fact that all but a few of the respondents view disclosure as personally and politically desirable, all of the men are covert in at least certain instances. They profess a more or less consistent ideological position, but as we have seen in the previous chapter, the manner in which they manage personal

information in their social interactions is not consistent, and indeed, cannot be consistent. This means that for most of the respondents, there is a discrepancy in their beliefs about disclosure and their actual behaviour.

An important means of dealing with contradictions between their professed ideology and their behaviour is to stress the need to treat situations and persons on an individual basis. Many men state that there is no one rule which fits every situation.

It depends on the person. For me, I would not be happy if people didn't know. If I want to have a good friendship with people, I tell them...It all depends on the individual. Some people want to keep that to themselves. I respect that. (32)

The ideological positions of the respondent are flexible; the men generally state that gays should be open, but they allow for numerous exceptions to this rule. There are several reasons why self-accepting gays conceal their homosexuality (see Chapter Three) which do not from their point of view necessarily contradict the general principle that disclosure is beneficial and desirable.

The psychological and political perspectives imply that gays should ideally be open to everyone. The men recognize that it is not always possible or desirable to be open with everyone, so they may often feel that being open with most people or close friends, for example, is sufficient to consider oneself "open and self-accepting." The ideological definitions of overtness and covertness are vague, allowing

for considerable variation in how the men interpret the concepts.

This flexibility notwithstanding, respondents sometimes admit that they are not overt in a particular situation and that this leads them to feel guilty. Other times, they may choose to be covert in a situation, but only with great reluctance. One man, for example, is active in many gay political organizations, but he has not yet told his parents that he is gay:

Sometimes I feel like the most ashamed closet case in the world, especially when I have other friends who are really out to their parents and can bring lovers home and things like that. I think, "wow, that would be nice." (28)

This man explains the contradictions between his professed beliefs and his behaviour by saying that he cannot expect himself or others to be "ideologically pure." He stresses that everyone compromises their strongly held beliefs in certain situations:

It's always a tug...you can't be 100% politically correct all the time. You'd go crazy. I've seen some people who are 85% or 90% correct and they are dull as sticks...Everyone has their vices. I think that all gays have their part-time closets. They just try to make up for it in other ways. (28)

Many gays state that they have encouraged other gays to be more open, thereby promoting the political ideology. Some men report, however, that they do not encourage openness in others.

I have enough problems to keep track of in my head and in my life, so I don't need to sit around and play vigilante, saying that this is wrong or this is bad or that it isn't the right way to do things. We all find pleasure in our own ways. (2)

That's up to them. My morals only extend to me. I don't think I'm judgmental. (3)

Most men believe that disclosure is beneficial to the gay community, but some nonetheless feel that it is not legitimate to encourage other gays to be open, unless they are ready to do so.

#### CHANGES IN IDEOLOGY

Ideological positions often change over time. For example, one man reports that he decided to become more open and assertive following his arrest in a police raid on a gay bath house:

What the police did in fact was kick my bedroom door in. I thought "fine, kick it in, but you'll have to live with me afterwards"...It's given me more of a political concern, I would say...[My being gay] became a part of the larger scheme of things, whether I wanted it to or not...In a conservative environment, being forthright with the issue of being gay means going out and just firing it through the windows. Being very rough with other people, rough to opposing ideologies, those which are not pro-gay. (10)

Other men foresee the day when they will change their stance on disclosure and political activism. For instance, they state that if they were ever fired because of the sexual orientation or arrested because they were in a gay

establishment, they would likely become more politically oriented and more assertive in presenting their sexual preferences to others.

Ma vie aujourd'hui c'est correct pour le moment...peut-être demain, ça serait autre chose. Peut-être si je perds ma job, je serai content que les gens viennent m'appuyer...Je ne serai peut-être jamais dans une manifestation pour les gais que pour une très bonne raison.  
(19)

My close friends know, so it's settled in my mind. So it's okay, otherwise I would change things...Every time something happens, I readjust...if something happens later, I'll see then.  
(23)

It is also possible that an individual's experience leads him to become more careful and "conservative" in how he handles his potentially stigmatizing sexual identity. One respondent, for instance, reports that his first few disclosures were poorly received by others, and that this led him to become increasingly secretive:

I was really wondering if what I was doing was a good idea...I think that's when I first recognized the benefits of lying to someone. I really wasn't sure if telling people was a good idea. In fact, I confirmed this as the years went by. (37)

Recalling one particular disclosure, this man remembers his growing realization that revelations are dangerous and should be avoided:

[I remember feeling] some relief and then a sense of foreboding: "Oh my God, what have I done?" (37)

Beliefs about disclosure are changeable; some men become more open, as a result of their experiences in dealing with others. A few men became less open when they experienced negative reactions after having disclosed themselves.

#### SUMMARY

Most respondents accept the psychological and political ideological positions on disclosure and concealment of homosexuality. While they appear to profess consistent beliefs, their positions on disclosure are not rigid. Most of the men accept the claims that disclosure is good for the individual and for the gay community, while at the same time, they stress the need to treat people and situations on an individual basis. The men's own behaviour sometimes contradicts their stated beliefs, but they generally do not feel that their situationally-determined rationales for concealment oppose their fundamental beliefs about the desirability of disclosure. Very few of the men are dogmatic in their ideological views. They may sometimes encourage others to become more open, but the men are generally respectful of the predicament of others, and are not overly strident in their positions. Ideological positions are not fixed and often change over time.

This chapter has shown that the men's self-reported behaviour is often not consistent with their beliefs on disclosure. Ideological positions represent "ideals" not "reality," so the men develop means for maintaining their



beliefs while not necessarily following them in their day-to-day interactions. Resolution of these apparent contradictions are situationally-based: like the interactional dilemma, ideological dilemmas are resolved in an ad hoc manner.

## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

For many years, psychologists, gay political activists, and sociologists agreed that it was more desirable for gays to remain secretive about their sexual preferences than to disclose themselves to others. Covert homosexuality was seen to be psychologically advantageous to the gay individual and politically advantageous to the gay community. In the early 1970s, mental health professionals deleted homosexuality as a mental disorder and redefined it as a nonpathological variation of human sexuality (Bayer, 1981; Conrad & Schneider, 1980; Marmor, 1980; Socarides, 1975; Spector, 1977). The decision of the American Psychiatric Association (1974) to declassify homosexuality per se as a mental illness, and the explicit support of its decision by the American Psychological Association (1975) and the National Association of Social Workers (1977), "normalized" homosexual sexual preferences, at least according to the official positions of these mental health organizations (1).

The focus of sociological research on the demedicalization of homosexuality has distracted attention from an accompanying process which pathologized a new aspect of gay sexuality: the efforts of mental health professionals, sociologists, and gay activists to demedicalize homosexuality have paradoxically contributed to its partial

remedicalization. Homosexuality was normalized, but covert homosexuality came to be seen as psychologically and socially problematic. While once seen as the more desirable way of "being gay", secrecy was redefined as maladjusted and the legitimate focus of psychological concern and intervention.

The new definition of covert homosexuality as "deviant" is another topic for the body of sociological literature which deals with the creation of deviant categories and the redefinition of types of societal deviance as medical concerns (2). Previous studies of this nature have examined drug use (Becker, 1973; Dickson, 1968), alcohol consumption (Gusfield, 1967; Schneider, 1978), cigarette smoking (Nuehring & Markle, 1974; Markle & Troyer, 1979), coffee drinking (Troyer & Markle, 1984), wife battering (Loseke & Cahill, 1984), child abuse (Pfohl, 1977), hyperactivity in children (Conrad, 1975), and morbidity concerns among pediatricians (Pawluch, 1983). Homosexuality is one of the few documented examples of where a shift in the categorization of a deviant behavior has led to its normalization, and where the process of demedicalization contributed to a partial remedicalization.

It is in this context of altered authoritative beliefs about the normality and desirability of revelation of homosexuality, and the abnormality and undesirability of its concealment, that I have looked at the patterns of disclosure and secrecy among gay men. My major findings are:

(1) Most respondents view disclosure as beneficial for the individual and the gay community. The men believe that the individual comes to develop a positive gay identity through disclosing himself to others, and the community is seen to benefit by the increased visibility of gays. The men's views are largely consistent with the new views of disclosure, although few respondents were dogmatic or unequivocal in their beliefs.

(2) None of the respondents adopt a consistent stance with regard to disclosure. A range of openness was observed in my sample: no respondents were openly gay in all situations, and all of them had told select others about their homosexuality. Even the most open respondent, however, was secretive in select situations, and the most covert respondents had disclosed themselves to at least one other person.

(3) The literature has portrayed gays' decisions to disclose or conceal their sexual preferences as a consequence of a developmental stage or degree of self-acceptance. Implicit in this view is that gays' degree of openness is relatively consistent across different social situations. The respondents' patterns of disclosure and secrecy, however, suggest that revelations and concealment occur in particular situations and types of relationships. These situations and relationships provide the context within which gays' considerations about disclosure and secrecy are enacted.

(4) The respondents' patterns of disclosure and secrecy also suggest that they face an interactional dilemma, regardless of whether they are overt or covert. Some problems, like the risk of betrayal and negative reactions to disclosures, occur across different types of relationships, while other problems vary according to the type of relationship. Disclosure and concealment are both problematic means of adapting to one's homosexual preferences.

My study has implications that bear on the management of discreditable information and social identities and on the matter of psychiatric expansionism.

#### THE MANAGEMENT OF DISCREDITABLE INFORMATION

Goffman (1963) treats "discreditable information" in terms of its potential for "spoiling" the identity of the revealer. Respondents in my study were aware of the potential for stigmatization, and this awareness was an important consideration in their decision to disclose themselves or remain secretive in a given situation. The men recognize the risk that others might treat them differently if they found out about their homosexuality, so they carefully control personal information in order to minimize any possible negative effects. Like childless couples (Miall, 1986), stutterers (Petrunik & Shearing, 1983) and epileptics (Schneider & Conrad, 1980), the risk of stigmatization leads gays to carefully consider whether disclosing themselves in a particular social context is desirable. The strategic

management of personal information is an important means used by respondents to help reconcile differences between how they view themselves and how they may be seen by others. Selective disclosure and concealment also help the gay individual reduce the inner costs of possessing a discrediting identity, and protect his social identity in situations where disclosure may have negative consequences.

The discreditable nature of homosexuality often leads gays to carefully conceal their sexual preferences, but it leads some men to disclose themselves. The ideological stance professed by most respondents stresses the desirability of disclosure, presenting it as an important means of reducing the "spoiling effects" of homosexuality. Many respondents believe that by revealing themselves to others, they are contributing to the eventual social acceptance of homosexuality. Disclosure is sometimes viewed by respondents as a political act which aims at confronting anti-gay sentiment or hostility. Extending Lemert's (1951, 1967) concept of primary and secondary deviance, Kitsuse (1980) refers to this type of assertion as "tertiary deviance:"

the deviant's confrontation, assessment, and rejection of the negative identity embedded in secondary deviation, and the transformation of that identity into a positive and viable self-conception (1980:7).

In this sense, choosing to disclose oneself to another can be a conscious political action which asserts that a gay identity is valid and that gays are "deserving of the rights accorded

any member of society" (Kitsuse, 1980:6). Disclosure is a means by which some gays challenge the "discreditable" nature of homosexuality. The respondents' ideological beliefs relating to disclosure and secrecy provide them with a "code of conduct" (Goffman, 1963:111) for their social encounters with nongays, suggesting a desired pattern of revelation and concealment and providing a rationale for the manner in which they manage personal information.

Goffman's (1963) work on stigma focuses on the effects of discreditable attributes on identity and social interactions. The "discredibility" of homosexuality is an important factor in respondents' decisions to conceal themselves, but they cite several other situational considerations in choosing to conceal their homosexuality which have little to do with potential stigmatization: political beliefs, deference to the beliefs or needs of others, and the lack of a tangible benefit to the disclosure. The sexual nature of their stigmatizing attribute is an additional consideration cited by respondents. Discussion of sexual matters is often viewed as inappropriate in a given context, leading the respondents to conceal their homosexuality.

By focusing on the management of the discrediting aspects of personal information, sociologists have overlooked these situational and relational considerations that govern the management of various kinds of personal information (e.g., medical, sexual, religious) more generally. Epileptics, gays,

childless couples and other discreditable persons may, in other words, manage personal information in many of the same ways that "normals" do. Unlike epileptics and childless couples, however, gays have, in line with current psychological and political ideology, come to view disclosure as desirable.

Since this view of disclosure may come into conflict with the situational and relational expectations that regulate the delivery of personal, and especially sexual information, gays may define the conflicts they experience as a personal trouble rather than as a socially structured dilemma. This, in turn, may lead them to view disclosure and secrecy as legitimate concerns on the part of mental health professionals.

#### PSYCHIATRIC EXPANSIONISM

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical gay activists argued that (the mostly heterosexual) mental health professionals should not be permitted to impose their definitions of normality on gays (Altman, 1986); that gays should assert their own views and fight any efforts to be defined, studied, or otherwise controlled by "outsiders." Gays established many non-professional counselling centres which stressed the importance of helping the individual come to understand his sexuality within a broad sociopolitical context (Castel, Castel, & Lovell, 1979).

In the past fifteen years, however, the radicalism of



the gay movement has declined (Altman, 1981). The new psychological theories and models of intervention have incorporated many of the activists' political views, and many of the alternative psychiatric services which were suggested by radicals have also been integrated into "mainstream" professional psychology; peer counselling in non-professional centres has given way to professional counselling by the new gay therapists. At the same time, many contemporary activists view the new psychological experts on homosexuality as "allies," not enemies, in their struggle against political oppression because they also assert the normality of homosexuality and promote disclosure as an important means to promote mental health and social change. As a result, the movement which once challenged the "psychiatric establishment" once again relies on it for support and intellectual leadership, as it did in the 1950s and 1960s. The decline of nonprofessional alternative services for gays means that men who seek support and advice often have little choice but to turn to established professional services when they seek help.

The psychiatrists' decision to declassify homosexuality as psychopathological and create the diagnostic category "ego dystonic homosexuality" has contributed to the recent proliferation of models of gay sexual identity development, in which disclosure is viewed as an integral element of a positive gay identity. These models provide a theoretical foundation for new psychotherapeutic interventions: helping gays come out in a "healthy" manner. The new gay therapies do

not generally aim at restoring the "health" of gays diagnosed as mentally ill; rather, they represent interventions in the lives of "healthy" individuals. Intervention strategies for nonpatient populations such as these have been called "thérapies de la normalité" (Castel, Castel, & Lovell, 1981:321). These strategies are "expansionist" in that they extend mental health professionals' traditional role of treating the mentally disturbed to "treating" people who are not viewed as the mentally ill. (see Szasz, 1960, 1980). The new interventions aim at helping the individual come to terms with his gay identity and manage related information in line with professional conceptions of the coming out process.

The new view of homosexuality and its disclosure has been promoted by new psychological experts (3). These experts claim that homosexuality is nonpathological, but that remaining "in the closet" is psychologically problematic. In this way, they promote their belief that homosexuality is an acceptable form of sexual expression, while at the same time maintaining a gay clientele for their professional services. Loseke & Cahill's observations of new experts on battered women apply to the situation of covert gays:

In effect, experts discredit the ability of a category of person to manage their own affairs without interference. The actors in question are portrayed as incapable of either understanding or controlling the factors which govern their behaviour. In order for them to understand their experiences and gain

control over their behaviour, by implication, they require the assistance of specialized experts (Loseke & Cahill, 1984:305).

The attempts of a gay man to "justify" his covertness to his therapist by saying that he does not see why other people should know or that his sexual preferences are "none of anyone's business," can be dismissed as evidence of a poor self-esteem or an internalized negative image of homosexuality. For example, Parry & Lightbown, two of the "new gay therapists," state:

The person whose self-esteem is so fragile as to be threatened by the thought of others "knowing" (i.e., the covert gay) is likely to be acting from a basis of self-depreciation, not trusting her or his own experiences of her or himself (1981:162).

These authors advise other therapists to orient clinical interventions with such a gay client toward helping him recognize that he is "deep down lovable, basically OK" (Parry & Lightbown, 1981:162), thereby defining the man's claims regarding the concealment of his sexuality as symptomatic of a "deeper" psychological problem. These authors believe that until the client realizes that he is "OK," he will likely be unable to disclose his sexuality to others.

Gay activists, who had spent many years arguing against the mental health associations' views of homosexuality, now accept the new professional position on disclosure. The professional portrayal of the maladjusted covert homosexual is consistent with the "post-reformist" political ideology of gay

organizations, which argues that covertness is indicative of self-oppression and that disclosure is the most important means to overcome feelings of self-hatred and guilt. The shift in the categorization of gay-related deviance supports the political position of the activists, so they have little to gain by challenging the new models of gay identity development or the related assumptions about disclosure.

All of the major players in the declassification debate benefit from the new definitions of deviance: the traditional psychiatrists who continue to maintain that homosexuality is pathological retain some jurisdiction over concerns relating to gays, declassification notwithstanding (see Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Socarides, 1979; Van den Aardweg, 1986); the new experts assert their view of homosexuality as nonpathological and create a new clientele for their services; and the activists receive professional support and legitimization of their views that covert homosexuality is problematic and that gays should in fact "come out."

The earlier critics of the pathology model of homosexuality complained that gays were "potential patients" of psychiatrists and psychologists, regardless of whether they were distressed or "felt sick" (see Kameny's (1973) article entitled, "Stop It, You're Making Me Sick"). Recent critics have, however, failed to note that the creation of the category "ego dystonic homosexuality," the proposed models of identity development, and the a priori assumptions about disclosure have resulted in the recreation of the same

situation that existed before the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 declassification decision: many gays continue to be "potential patients" because they conceal their homosexuality in most situations. The psychological study of gays and intervention into their lives continue to be legitimized, declassification notwithstanding. Now, the professional jurisdiction of mental health workers has expanded to include the "normal" gay man.

#### FOOTNOTES

- (1) The declassification literature has failed to note that homosexuality has not been completely "depathologized": the existence of the category "ego dystonic homosexuality" means that homosexuality can still be legitimately viewed as a psychological disorder. Robert Spitzer, a noted psychiatrist and member of the psychiatric nomenclature committee notes:

if an individual patient asserts that his or her problem is absent or inadequate heterosexuality and a sustained homosexual arousal pattern, the legitimacy of the focus of the complaint--the absent heterosexual functioning--and not merely the associated distress is accepted. By including (ego dystonic homosexuality), DSM-III acknowledges that at least in some cases, an appropriate therapeutic activity is to help the individual develop a normative sexual arousal pattern (i.e., heterosexuality) and not merely to become more comfortable with his or her homosexuality (Spitzer, 1981:213).

The declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder is not absolute: gays can still be "officially" labelled as sick on the basis of their sexual orientation. Like many of the gay activists, who consider that they "won the classification battle" (Bayer, 1981; Conrad & Schneider, 1980), much of the literature on demedicalization fails to explicitly recognize this point. (but see Szasz (1977) and Conrad & Schneider (1980:209) for a critical discussion of the demedicalization decision.) Altman (1986) has suggested that one result of the AIDS epidemic has been a remedicalization of gay-related concerns.

- (2) see Spector & Kitsuse (1977) and Conrad & Schneider (1980) for a theoretical discussion of this approach.
- (3) my discussion here is based on Loseke & Cahill's (1984) analysis on the new experts on battered women and the creation of new deviance ("why do battered wives stay with their husbands?")

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