Abstract

Title	Risky Business? A sociosexual study of men who have sex with men
Author	Ronny Tikkanen
Key Words	Homosexuality, HIV, sexual risk, gay couples, the Internet
Distribution	Göteborg University, Department of Social Work. Box 720, SE 405 30 Göteborg
ISSN	1401-5781
ISBN	91-86796-42-9

This dissertation is a sociosexual study of men who have sex with men (MSM). The first aim with the study is to describe, explain and understand sexual relationships and sexual actions among MSM. The second aim is to explore the Internet as a sexual arena. The questions addressed in the study are: To what extent is unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) practiced among MSM? What are the differences between steady and casual partners in the practice of UAI? Which men use chat rooms on the Internet, and what are their experiences of this arena? What meanings are related to UAI within a steady relationship? How do men in steady relationships deal with the risks related to UAI? What are the agreements regarding extra-relational sexual contacts and how are these agreements related to risks of HIV transmissions?

The methods used in the study are: (1) a questionnaire distributed through gay organizations, the Internet and through key-persons; (2) explorative interviews with six men who have experience of meeting sex partners through chat rooms on the Internet; (3) qualitative interviews with 32 men in steady relationships.

The results show that twenty percent of the men in the study have had UAI with a casual partner during the past twelve months. About half of the respondents have had UAI with a steady partner during the same period. There is a difference in the incidence of UAI between steady and casual partners. Two out of ten intercourses with casual partners are unprotected. With a steady partner the situation is the opposite: seven out of ten intercourses are unprotected. This finding points in the direction that most cases of UAI are intended and have symbolic meanings for the men who practice it. The qualitative study shows that UAI has a symbolic meaning of intimacy for men in steady relationships. The unprotected intercourse both *defines* and *delimits* the intimate relationship. The decision to stop using condoms in a relationship might indicate that the relationship moves into a phase where the relationship is intimate and "for real".

The sexual contacts that the men have outside their relationships are defined as qualitatively different from sex within the relationship. Safer sex plays an important role in this differentiation process. Sex outside the relationship – where a condom is used – is not "real sex". Real sex is unprotected and conducted within a loving relationship.

It is difficult to identify a clear negotiation process between men in steady relationships. The men did not see their partner as a risk when they stopped using condoms. However, there was a limited risk assessment of the partner in the beginning of the relationship. This assessment was indirect in its nature and focused on sexual history and sexual morals.

The findings from the study suggest that risk is not absolute, but socially constructed. Several factors have an impact on the construction of risk, such as the perceived susceptibility and severity of HIV/AIDS. The retroviral combination therapies and the feeling of being geographically and socially distant from HIV might result in the fact that the UAI is perceived as less risky. To perceive the love partner as a risk is not a part of the interpersonal sexual scripts – at least not when there is an aspiration for intimacy between the men.

Finally, there are reasons to assume that the Internet plays an important role in the socio-sexual life of a large number of MSM. Firstly, men who do not identify themselves as homo- or bisexuals, but feel the need to meet other gay men, socially or sexually, might find the gay communities on the Internet more secure to visit than traditional gay venues. Secondly, men who are geographically isolated from physical gay communities can easily visit and take part of the virtual gay communities on the Internet. Finally, men who are in the process of "coming out" as gay or bisexual might benefit from the virtual gay communities. To sum up, Internet offers opportunities to approximate other sexualities in general and homosexuality in specific. The findings also show that the Internet is a possible arena for research and HIV-prevention, as it makes it possible to reach men who are difficult to recruit through other modes.