

# Not So Gay In The Bush: *'Coming Out' In Regional And Rural Victoria*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This research indicates that for both lesbians and gay men the journey to self acceptance was often a difficult and stressful one, caused by the prevailing atmosphere of non-acceptance and often vilification of homosexual people. Such a context was found by many respondents to be more prevalent in regional and rural areas. In each of the domains of inquiry examined in this study, that is family, community, school, contact with health professionals and the workplace, lesbians and gay men had experiences of ‘homophobia’. In the culture of regional and rural Victoria homosexuality is still considered a minority experience. This has serious consequence for how lesbians and gay men can live out their lives.

### **RESEARCH AIMS**

The study set out to identify the regional and rural aspects of being a lesbian or gay man with particular attention to the process of coming out and the significance of place.

### **BACKGROUND**

Previous studies, while largely focusing on the urban male experience draw to our attention the potential for there being significant differences between male and female experiences. These occur in a contemporary socio-historical context of ‘mixed messages’.

Urban areas have openly gay subcultures but harassment and negative attitudes continue and there is some evidence that this is more problematic in rural areas where religiosity and ideas on masculinity may be important.

Research indicates that gender non-conformity among men is less tolerated than among women and that supportive social networks are important for the mental health of lesbians and gay men.

Cass’ model of stages of homosexual identity formation is useful and alerts us to the

personal and social dimensions involved, the likely mental health consequences and the complexity of service provision that these would entail.

## **METHOD**

Researchers used both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Twenty in depth interviews were carried out with ten lesbians and ten gay men. A variety of snowballing techniques were utilised in the Grampians Region and on websites to distribute a questionnaire which resulted in 106 completed questionnaires (95 valid).

The rich data from the interviews usually *complemented* the findings from the questionnaire but sometimes *contradicted* it, possibly a result of the many missing values in questionnaire responses.

The report is very long so substantial summaries are located at the end of each section.

## **SAMPLE DESCRIPTION**

The age range of respondents was 17 to 59 with little gender difference in the spread. Lesbians were more likely to have a degree or diploma but slightly less likely to have a post graduate qualification than gay men. Most had a professional or management/administrative occupation.

## **GENDER, AGE AND MARITAL STATUS DIFFERENCES**

The men and women differed significantly in terms of the age they became aware of same sex attraction, (82% of those becoming aware *after* they were 19, were female) and in terms of marital status (79% of those currently or had been married, were female).

Nine percent of the women identified as lesbian after they were 35 but three quarters of the 25 formerly married lesbians, were aware of same sex attraction *before* they married.

Eighty-two percent of the men had never married. More lesbian respondents (62%) were currently in a relationship than gay men (41%).

The differing age and marital status of lesbians and gay men created complexities for homosexual identity formation, especially when they were married and/or had children.

### **PLACE OF COMING OUT**

Interview data revealed that the place of coming out was a complex issue as the process could be long and respondents moved to regional, urban or other rural areas during this time. Given this understanding, there was still a notable gender difference in quantitative responses to this question. Women were more likely state that they came out in a regional city (46%) or major city (38%), while men's place of coming out was more diverse: major city (15%); regional city (44%); farm (18%), small town (21%).

### **STEREOTYPES AND IDEAS ABOUT SEXUALITY**

Although both males and females were more likely to see their sexuality as 'not a choice, but something they were born with', women (n=8) were more likely than men (n=0) to view their sexuality as a conscious choice. The sample population preferred the self-identifying terms of lesbian and gay.

Most of the respondents believed their initial beliefs about stereotypes had influenced their feelings of self-worth during the homosexual identify formation process. The stereotypes that respondents were most aware of were the idea of gender inversion, the idea of homosexuality as a sickness, the idea of homosexuality as sinful, and the idea that homosexuals are lonely, unhappy and unfulfilled.

There was some gender difference in terms of the influence of the stereotypes overall and significant difference in some of the individual stereotypes. Men overall seem to believe in more negative stereotypes but these were often combined with conflicting feelings, both positive and negative, when realising their same sex attraction.

Just over half currently had good feelings about their sexuality. The majority were at least accepting and many were content and proud.

Both younger people forming a homosexual identity and those who develop a homosexual identity in adulthood experience stress and anxiety, though each group has different complicating issues.

## **COMING OUT IN FAMILIES, AT SCHOOL AND IN COMMUNITIES**

### **Families**

Disclosure to parents during a questioning period regarding same sex attraction was avoided by women and men, but especially by men. At the time of becoming a lesbian or gay man, women were more likely to confide in parents than men were. Both women and men were more likely to confide in mothers rather than fathers.

While reactions were mixed, parents placed considerable value on the idea: ‘as long as you are happy’. A typical reaction, however, was a limited form of acceptance coupled with restrictions placed on public display of a homosexual relationship in family and local community contexts.

Lesbians and gay men choosing to leave marriages experienced greater family pressure because of concerns for the children of the marriage. Most children were accepting of their parent’s sexuality.

### **Schools**

The school context was particularly difficult for young men. The issues of gender non-conformity and homosexuality were confused and some boys were victim of merciless bullying (32.5% said they had been abused and 37.5% said they had been physically assaulted).

### **Community**

The majority of lesbians and gay men were aware of negative community attitudes

and experienced a restriction of social activity as a result of this. Women were more likely to disclose to friends and both women and men more likely to disclose to other women.

Pervading negativity towards homosexuality caused 54.3% of gay men and 38% of lesbians to leave their community. In their current community women (62.5%) were much more likely to interact with other homosexuals than men (15.4%). Many of the home communities for the participants did not have an active homosexual community and many were socially isolated.

Health professionals mostly reacted with acceptance and support to the respondents but counsellors were more sought and appreciated than doctors. The qualitative interview responses revealed vestiges of unacceptable attitudes among the medical profession. Most respondents who sought help and reported negative reactions felt they were depressed or were diagnosed with depression.

Reactions by religious families were likely to be, but not always, negative, linked as they were to the condemnation of homosexuality as a sin. Unexpectedly, the homosexual children of very religious parents were significantly *less* likely to be ‘driven from their communities’ than children where the parents were not religious at all. Most respondents currently had rare or no contact with religious institutions.

The majority of respondents disclosed completely or selectively in their workplace and about half believed their career had not been affected but a minority suffered negative reactions.

### **CURRENT FEELINGS ABOUT SEXUALITY**

The great majority of lesbians, in particular, and gay men, a little less so, expressed positive feelings about being homosexual. At the very least they were accepting and many were content and proud. A closer view reveals some gender difference in the current feelings. Men overwhelmingly saw their sexuality in terms of sexual preference rather than male solidarity or choice.

Although the majority are accepting of their sexuality and happy to be lesbian or gay, they nevertheless live curtailed lives with a blanket around a central dimension of their lives. Their minority status, and as a marginalised group, means that in every aspect of their lives they have to be mindful of inadvertently revealing their sexuality.

## **NEEDS**

The services provided for sexual minorities would have to take into consideration the diversity of the gay and lesbian population in terms of:

- age at awareness
- age of coming out
- current age
- gender
- level of religiosity
- marital status
- children in the same-sex relationship

The lesbian and gay community largely depend on each other to organise services and support. This informal system (in that it is removed from the State) enjoys some success in Melbourne where there is a sizeable lesbian and gay population, but does not work so well in regional and rural Victoria where the lesbian and gay population is smaller and more dispersed.

Women and men in this study expressed different needs and showed interest in different services however they can be broadly categorised as health, general information, professional services, community education including school and social and support services.

Many of the excellent suggestions made by the participants could be facilitated through the development of a website, or links to current websites, that enable the sharing of information and the retention of anonymity. The address of this website should also be effectively disseminated throughout the region.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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### **1.1 The Objectives Of The Present Study**

Over the twentieth century attitudes about homosexuality and behaviour towards homosexuals have been mixed. On the one hand there have been periods of tolerance and to some extent acceptance and on the other hand there have been periods where lesbians and gay men have been systematically discriminated against and persecuted.

Examination of the literature about homosexuality provides some understanding of such attitudes. The literature indicates that the dominant belief about the aetiology of lesbian or gay sexuality throughout the twentieth century attributed homosexuality to genetic or hormonal biological abnormalities (Kallman, 1951; Doerner, 1975) or to dysfunctional nurturing causing psychological defects such as arrested psycho-sexual development or constitutional inferiority (Bergler, 1954; Kaye, Berl and Clare, 1967; Wolff, 1973; Browning, 1984; Blumenfeld and Raymond, 1988; Magee and Miller, 1992). Within both theories, homosexuality was commonly believed to be an illness or an abnormality and a sign of deviancy. The church condemned homosexuality as sinful, and homosexuality was listed as an illness on the American Psychiatric Association's list of mental disorders in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) until 1973. The delisting of homosexuality had some positive effect, however in the next edition of the DSM a new category, Gender Identity Disorder (GID), appeared. As homosexuality is identified with gender inversion, that is that gay men are somehow feminised and lesbians somehow masculinised, this category has enabled the continued targeting of homosexuals on 'medical grounds'. Given such an environment, negative attitudes towards homosexuality are not surprising. Nevertheless the latter part of the twentieth century saw some increase in tolerance towards homosexual people.

Despite many social and political gains in the 1970s and 1980s, in the 1990s and into 2000s homosexuality is still not accepted as a natural alternative lifestyle. Some research and anecdotal evidence exists that homosexuality is less accepted in regional

and rural areas than in urban areas.

This research project seeks to identify uniquely regional and rural aspects of being ‘different’ in this case being a lesbian or gay man, and how being different is worked out within the values held by the majority of people in regional and rural Victoria. As Carole Vance, (1989:18) has suggested homosexual identity is “mediated by historical and cultural factors,” a proposition that forms the basis of this study.

In this study the relationship between social/cultural values, attitudes and beliefs and women’s and men’s experiences of becoming homosexual was examined. The research addressed the issue of whether, and how, dominant beliefs, values, and practices related to being different in sexual orientation differentially influenced processes of homosexual identity formation of persons in rural/regional as opposed to urban/metropolitan settings. The focus was on the experiences of lesbians and gay men during the identity formation process in terms of how they feel about themselves and how they were treated when they ‘came out’ to others. In this study the term ‘coming out’ is used to describe each individual act of disclosure to another person. In this study coming out also refers to acknowledging one’s own sexuality, as in ‘coming out to self’. The domains to be explored in constructing developmental histories included:

- personal and private reflections;
- interactions with same-sex and opposite-sex peers;
- school experiences;
- experiences within the family;
- experiences within the community;
- participation in social activities;
- gender role socialisation and gender non-conformity;
- contact with religious institutions; and
- contact with medical/psychiatric institutions and/or counselling services.

## **1.2     Overview of past research emphasis and the changing ideological context in which sexual identity formation occurs**

Prior to the 1970s, research into the area of homosexuality centred on aetiology and

homosexual identity formation. A further area of research following on from homosexual identity formation, involves homosexuals' experience of disclosure of sexuality in various contexts and reactions to disclosure, as experienced by homosexuals. For example the literature explores adolescent coming out (Zera, 1992), coming out to parents (Borhek, 1983; Savin-Williams, 1989), and coming out at work (Schneider, 1989).

Most historical and contemporary research about homosexuality concentrates on homosexual men (notable exceptions are Ettore, 1980; Kitzinger, 1987; and Whisman, 1996) with an often unstated (and stated) assumption that the experiences of lesbians are similar. The research that has included lesbians as well as gay men, has often found differences between experiences and lifestyle of lesbians and that of gay men. As a result of different socialisation experiences for females and males the experience of becoming a lesbian or gay man and the acquisition of a lesbian/gay identity also differs. It is important therefore for researchers to take into consideration the different social and political influences that gay men and lesbians are likely to experience (Jeffreys, 1993). This has been done in this study.

It is possible to differentiate three recent eras according to their values, attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality. In the first period before 1970 prevailing attitudes of perversion resulted in a climate of oppression and discrimination. Homosexuality was treated by the courts and/or by the medical/psychiatric profession as either a deviance to be punished, and/or a condition to be cured.

In the late 1960s, after a period of political struggle, significant turning points were reached in England, Canada and Australia concerning decriminalisation of homosexuality (Burgmann, 1993:152). Between the early 1970s and the 1990s the homosexual sub-culture in urban areas developed, incorporating gay media, gay businesses, and gay professionals (Plummer, 1995). Counsellors and discussion groups helped individuals learn about homosexuality and helped many to establish comfortable self-concepts.

During the 1970s and 1980s, research focussed on becoming a homosexual and a number of theories of homosexual identity formation were developed (see Coleman, 1982; Cass, 1979 & 1984; Troiden, 1979). Although theorists claim to encompass the developmental experiences of lesbians and gay men within a single framework, most theories reflect the urban, male homosexual experience. Notable exceptions are the theoretical analyses of identity formation generated by Cass (1979 & 1984), Schaefer (1976), Sophie (1985/86), and Kahn (1991). Each of them made some effort to differentiate the experiences of women from those of men and included women in their samples. Some studies allude to differential acceptance of homosexual identity in rural and urban communities, none of them however addressed directly the impact of location, and the values and practices associated with location, on the development of sexual identity. Any understanding of homosexual and lesbian identity formation must take cognisance of changing historical contexts of dominant societal beliefs about homosexuality and the influence of different social contexts, including geographical.

The current era presents somewhat mixed messages about homosexuality. McDonald (1999) has argued that youth now have to struggle more than in the past to create robust subjective identities, given that secure kinship, work status, and sexual roles no longer apply. Although there is an openly lesbian and gay subculture in urban areas, lesbians and gay men are still subject to harassment and violence. Issues such as the AIDS phenomenon introduced negative images into public discourse. A resistance to the acceptance of homosexuality has surfaced particularly from some churches and in relation to the Gay Mardi Gras and AIDS (Mason and Tomsen 1997). There have also been occasional media reports, for example there was a report in the media (Lesbiana, 2001) of a gay man in Swan Hill being ostracised, and a television documentary on SBS describing homosexual hate crimes in a Queensland regional area. Another publicised example was the attack on High Court Judge Michael Kirby (Devine, 2000). It is possible that negative attitudes are exacerbated in rural areas where openly homosexual subcultures do not exist.

### **1.3 The need for regional and rural research**

Several small United States studies have indicated that being different in sexual

orientation is more likely to have negative consequences in rural than urban settings. For example, Boulden (2000) found that disclosure of sexual orientation and personal safety were daily concerns for rural-based homosexual men, while Greene (1997) documented a case of physical and psychological harassment of lesbians by the mainstream rural community. Pratte (1993), in surveying attitudes towards homosexuality, found that rural respondents expressed more negative attitudes than urban people. McCarthy (2000) noted that being a lesbian is made easier in urban areas by the availability of information and support. She found that in rural areas such opportunities are mostly unavailable and the lack of public meeting space hindered the development of a social group identity. Most importantly, Friedman (1997) found that lesbians living in rural communities presented unique issues to mental health practitioners which were exacerbated by a combination of their minority status and geographical isolation.

Overall little of scholarly interest has been published which links the relationship between dominant social/cultural factors, such as those listed in the domains of inquiry, geographical location and the experience of coming out. It is this gap in knowledge that has prompted this project.

#### **1.4     Outline Of The Study**

Chapter 2 examines the literature on homosexual identity formation. This information is relevant to the process of becoming a homosexual, the main area of research in this study. The chapter commences with a brief description of Vivienne Cass' six-stage model of homosexual identity formation and highlights the aspects of identity formation that impacts on mental health and well being as identified in the models and confirmed by recent research in Victoria. The chapter concludes with a discussion of existing understanding of homosexual identity formation in regional and rural areas.

Chapter 3 details the methodology and methods of data collection used in this study and the reasons the methodology was deemed to be the most appropriate. This chapter also describes the method of data analysis and concludes with a clarification of key terms and concepts.

Chapter 4 contains the analysis and discussion. Statistical data and qualitative commentary are integrated. The findings are further discussed relative to existing literature, in particular that relating to regional and rural contexts. Each main section within this chapter concludes with a summary of the findings discussed in that section.

The final chapter concludes with the summary of findings and the implications of the research.

## **2 HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN URBAN, REGIONAL AND RURAL CONTEXTS**

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The models of homosexual identity formation, developed in the 1970s and 1980s, should not be taken literally and it should not be expected that they depict the experiences of all lesbians and gay men. Further, some research and anecdotal evidence suggests that the experience of rural and urban homosexuals differs (for USA see D'Augelli, 1987; Rounds, 1988; Boulden, 2000; for Germany see Sautter, 2002; for Australia see Hopwood and Connors, 2002; for anecdotal commentary in the media see Dahir, 2000 [USA]; Bell, 1995 [Australia]).

A summary of models of homosexual identity formation is presented in appendix B. Each column represents the stages through which the theorists believe homosexuals progress. In the next section Cass' (1979 & 1984) six stage model is summarised (see figure 1). Her model seems to be the most commonly accepted internationally and is frequently cited by researchers of homosexual identity. Furthermore, Cass' model was developed in Australia with an Australian sample. This model, because of its inclusion of psychological well-being, aspects of sexual identity formation and its inclusion of lesbians is useful as a framework for this study.

### **2.1 Cass' Stage Model of Homosexual Identity Formation**

The work of Cass incorporates emotional, cognitive and behavioural aspects of identity development, as well as taking into consideration the social context within which identity formation occurs. This is important to this research which seeks to examine and understand the social context in regional and rural areas.

While the models developed by Cass and others (see appendix B) are useful frameworks and describe many of the attitudes and behaviours experienced by homosexuals during the identity formation, the models should not be seen as all encompassing and not all homosexuals have such feelings or progress through such stages (Phillips, 1995). Further it must be remembered that much of the research used to develop the models

focuses on the experiences of men and often is not representative of women's experiences (Gottschalk, 2000). While Cass included lesbians in her sample, she does not consider the implications of gender in her final model. Nevertheless the models are useful in highlighting the various emotional and behavioural aspects of becoming a homosexual. Further, events and milestones depicted in the models were often spoken about by the participants in this study.

Cass' (1979) model suggests that homosexuals pass through six stages as detailed in figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1: Cass' model of homosexual identity formation**

Stages		Personal	Social	Outcomes
Stage 1	Identity confusion	first awareness, sense of difference, inner turmoil, personal identity crisis	non-disclosure	accept homosexual feelings but reject homosexuality thus self loathing/homophobic <b>OR</b> acknowledgment and progression to next stage
Stage 2	Identity comparison	acknowledge possible homosexual identity	feelings of alienation and difference, incongruity of self perception and perception of others	foreclosure <b>OR</b> acknowledgment though not acceptance of possible homosexual self
Stage 3	Identity tolerance	anger and resentment about being homosexual, tolerate rather than accept homosexual identity	seek other homosexuals, needs positive contact with other homosexuals	foreclosure <b>OR</b> acknowledgment of homosexual self
Stage 4	Identity acceptance	validate and normalise homosexuality as a way of life, non-stressful	start disclosure, increased contact with other homosexuals and contact with homosexual sub-culture	acknowledgment and some acceptance
Stage 5	Identity Pride	devaluation of heterosexuals and heterosexual values feeling of belonging to homosexual sub-culture	involvement with and commitment to homosexual community, community very important	acknowledgment and acceptance
Stage 6	Identity synthesis	total acceptance of self	acceptance of heterosexuals less feelings of difference disclosure a non-issue	homosexual identity just one aspect of the self

During *identity confusion* (stage 1) the individual becomes aware of a sense of being different in some way to others, and comes to the realisation that their own behaviour and feelings may be labelled as homosexual. This challenges their perception of

themselves as heterosexual. They may resolve the incongruence by accepting the fact of their homosexual feelings, but consider them undesirable, and reject homosexuality. They may become self-hating or they may even adopt an anti-homosexual stance. On the other hand a more positive outcome of this stage is acknowledgment that they may be homosexual and thus progression to the next stage occurs. During stage 2, *identity comparison*, the individual has acknowledged the possibility of being homosexual. This awareness triggers feelings of difference and alienation with which they have to deal. They are now aware of incongruency between their perception of themselves and other's perception of them. If foreclosure does not occur, this stage ends with an acknowledgment that "I probably am homosexual" although not acceptance of a homosexual self (Cass, 1990, p.248).

In the *identity tolerance* stage (3), the individual may feel anger and resentment about being homosexual but privately acknowledge their sexuality. However they may tolerate rather than accept a homosexual identity. At this stage it is believed that the individual starts to seek out other homosexuals. Cass considers it important at this stage that contact with homosexuals is positive. Negative contact could result in renewed inner turmoil and may result in foreclosure. This stage, if foreclosure does not occur, ends with an acknowledgment of a homosexual identity (Cass, 1990, p.249). During *identity acceptance* (stage 4) there is increased contact with other homosexuals. The impact of increased contact is to validate and "normalise" homosexuality as an acceptable way of life (Cass, 1979, p.231). The individual may start to disclose their sexuality to significant and trusted heterosexuals.

During the *identity pride* stage (5), the individual becomes self accepting and involved in the community. Commitment to and identification with the homosexual sub-culture increases, and results in a feeling of belonging, to the point of feeling pride and preference for a homosexual identity. During the final stage (6), *identity synthesis*, there is total acceptance of self and others. Homosexual identity, instead of being their whole identity is now accepted as being just one aspect of themselves.

As can be seen, the earlier stages in particular can have implications for mental and

physical well-being.

## **2.2 Well Being and Mental Health of Lesbians and Gay Men**

Many of the stage models of homosexual identity formation (see Cass figure 1 and others appendix B) describe the early stages as being characterised by inner turmoil, personal identity crisis and anger and resentment about being homosexual (Cass, 1979) marginality, gender inadequacy, inner struggle and confusion (Troiden, 1979 and 1989), behavioural problems, repression, experimenting with alcohol and drugs and suicide (Coleman, 1982), anxiety, confusion, guilt and isolation (Minton and McDonald, 1984).

The models of homosexual identity formation were developed from research conducted in the 1970s and early to mid 1980s in the USA and Australia in the case of Cass. More recent research conducted by researchers at the University of Ballarat on sense of belonging and mental health, and attitudes of heterosexuals to homosexuality has resulted in some interesting findings, and findings that support many of the health implications noted in the earlier research. Nicholas and Howard (1998) found that suicide attempts in a sample of ‘gay youth’ were about four times greater than in a heterosexual sample (cited in Sidoti, 1999). Two separate studies were conducted on sense of well-being and mental health in lesbians (McLaren, 2002) and in gay men (Jude, McLaren and McLachlan, 2002). Both studies found that sense of belonging was related to mental health in terms of depression, anxiety, stress and suicide ideation. Interestingly for gay men, in terms of better mental health, there was a stronger relationship between a sense of belonging to the general community than to the gay community. For lesbians, a sense of belonging to both the lesbian community and the general community was important. In the case of gay men, living in city areas was a greater predictor of increased thoughts of suicide, than living in regional or rural areas (Jude, McLaren and McLachlan, 2002). Jude et. al. however only noted the place of residence of her respondents at the time she administered her survey. Our research has revealed that commonly rural and regional lesbians and gay men migrate to urban centres during the process of coming out.

A further study examining the attitudes of heterosexual and homosexual people toward homosexual adolescent suicide resulted in highly disturbing findings (Molloy, McLaren and McLachlan, 2002). Both heterosexual and homosexual respondents in their studies thought that the suicide of a homosexual adolescent was more “acceptable” and psychologically healthy than the suicide of a heterosexual adolescent. At the same time both heterosexual and homosexual respondents felt greater empathy toward the homosexual suicide victim. The researchers in this case did not examine gender differences of the ‘victim’ or of the respondents. Further respondents’ understanding of the word ‘acceptable’ was not analysed. Nevertheless the findings are disturbing.

The findings of these and the earlier studies, despite the decades between them, clearly show a connection between homosexual identity formation and mental health and that his connection is to a great extent dependent upon acceptance of family and friends and a sense of belonging to the wider community.

Clearly interventions are needed, firstly to increase understanding and acceptance in the general community of homosexuals, and secondly to facilitate the development of a lesbian and gay community which incorporates both social and support services. Studies conducted in Australia and other countries suggest that these issues are particularly relevant in regional and rural areas.

### **2.3 Coming Out In Regional And Rural Areas**

A rural population is normally one with a population of between 200 and 5000, though often, larger town and regional centres are included in a rural framework. For the purposes of this study the broader definition of rural is used and includes regional centres. Research overseas and in Australia points out that rural populations are likely to experience socio-economic disadvantages over their city counterparts including poorer mental health. For example an ABS profile of the mental health and well being of adult Victorians shows that non metropolitan males are a little worse than metropolitan males and females considerably worse off (ABS, 1997).

There is not a lot of research that examines the experiences of lesbians and gay men in regional and rural areas in Australia. That which has been done has concentrated mainly on the experiences of gay men. Though normally such research should not be extrapolated to include women it is fair to say that both lesbians and gay men in rural areas experience isolation, and homophobia (hatred of homosexuals - see definition of terms in section 3.6). Anecdotal evidence, and some studies (eg.D'Augelli, 1987 [USA]; Rounds, 1988;) note that people from rural communities hold to traditional values, are more conservative, and are less tolerant of diversity especially homosexuality.

In the USA, D'Augelli reports that there are greater reports of homophobia and heterosexism in rural communities (D'Augelli, 1987). In an article, journalist Dahir (2000) discusses the advantages and disadvantages of rural life for gay men and lesbians. He cites a man who moved to a rural town feeling safer in the town than he had in the city, where he had been the victim of homophobic violence. On the other hand though, he reported the experiences of two men who moved together to a small rural village in Arizona and who experienced such intense hatred of homosexuals that they felt physically threatened and unsafe. They eventually sold their property and left the area. Rounds (1988) makes the link between rural communities' adherence to religious values and their lesser acceptance of diversity such as gender non-conformity, which is associated with homosexuality.

Boulden (2000) in a USA study of rural gay men found that his respondents spoke of the difficulty of coming out to others and issues of safety. They described their rural environment as one of 'don't ask, don't tell' and of being 'on guard'. Nevertheless the men described themselves as happy to be living in a rural area.

In a German study of the experiences of gay and lesbian farmers, Sautter (2002) also described German rural communities as 'closed' and conservative. The main areas of concern expressed by the gay farmers was being known by most people in the community. One of her respondents commented, "... in the country where everybody knows each other ... you need to develop a really thick skin" (2002, p.48).

In a study of heterosexual student's attitudes to homosexuals in a rural Australian university Hopwood and Connors, (2002) found that the variables influencing attitudes to homosexuality related to fear of HIV/AIDS, gender (non-conformity), level of religiosity of the heterosexual respondent and the nature of the academic majors studies by students. Business students for example were more homophobic than Humanities students. The issue of gender and religiosity is examined in section 4.0.

Some reports suggest that rurality may even be an advantage. Bell, (1995) a freelance writer for the Independent Monthly, interviewed lesbian parents and their children in an Australian country town. The women spoke of support they received from the mainstream community. Bell evidently also interviewed a Sydney couple and a Melbourne couple who reported that they could not participate in their urban communities, thus suggesting that support was not available in urban areas.

When it comes to concepts of masculinity, a traditionally more conservative rural context may exaggerate attitudes that remain strong generally. For gay men non-adherence to notions of masculinity are problematic. Masculinity represents those who are not women, children, or gay men. Any characteristic or behaviour that is normally ascribed as non-masculine can only be seen as feminine (Connell, 1987 and 1995). Feminine behaviours in males of all ages are negatively sanctioned, but especially in young boys. Such behaviour is labelled homosexual because of the assumption of gender inversion; that homosexual men are in some way feminised (and lesbians in some way masculinised). This assumption seems to be more pronounced in rural areas:

Concepts of masculinity are often narrower and more rigid in country areas where there is less acceptance of diversity and less tolerance of someone who is different. This can have an impact on all young men, straight or gay, who may be restricted, often unconsciously, into narrow roles of what it means to be a man. Homophobia is as much about how heterosexuality is defined as it is about homosexuality (Thorpe, 1999, p.186).

Behaviours in men that are deemed to be feminine are unlikely to be tolerated.

Discrimination, harassment, verbal and physical abuse are thus directed at young men who do not conform to notions of masculinity and particularly so if the young men are known to be gay (Mason and Tomsen, 1997). Rural communities have more conservative notions about masculinity, about how men should behave. Thus rural men may be more prone to homophobic attack than urban men.

For women it is less clear whether the abuse is directed at their femaleness or at their lesbianism (Mason and Tomsen, 1997). As will be discussed in section 4.2.1 and 4.4 of this report gender non-conformity in girls and women is more tolerated than it is in men or boys. Further gender non-conformity is not as severely sanctioned in women as it is in men (Thorne, 1990; Gottschalk, 2003a).

In most rural towns there are no identifiable gay communities or networks, though some exist in regional cities. A sense of belonging and community is a basic human need and integral to mental well-being (Maslow, 1954; McLaren and McLachlan, 2002). The development of a homosexual identity is normally a secretive and stressful period in a person's life (Cass, 1979 and 1989; Troiden, 1989). Developing and maintaining relationships with like minded people, other lesbians and gay men is, for many, integral to the development of a positive identity and sense of self. Where acceptance in the general community is haphazard, existence of an identifiable homosexual sub-culture and social support groups can often help the coming out process.

Boulden (2000) noted that the absence of a formal gay community in the rural areas studied and the 'hard to find' informal community were a major disadvantage for their gay male participants. Sautter's (2002) participants also spoke of the lack of a homosexual community and consequent difficulty of meeting others like themselves and thus potential partners. The consequence of high levels of negativity toward homosexuals in rural areas and lack of support for women and men forming a homosexual identity can be a migration away from rural areas.

Research thus far, then, has intimated, in spite of some contrary findings, that there

may be significant differences between urban and rural levels of acceptance of homosexuality and attitudes toward acceptable expressions of masculinity. Furthermore research has revealed the importance of supportive social networks to the mental health and well-being of lesbians and gay men.

### **3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

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In this chapter we describe the main features of the methodology used in this study. We detail how the area of inquiry was investigated and the nature of, and rationale for, the choice of methodology, as well as the methods of data collection and analysis.

This study adopts a phenomenological research strategy but uses quantitative as well as qualitative methods of data collection. The study is exploratory in nature and aims to better understand the nature of the problem within a regional and rural context.

The phenomenological approach assumes that reality is subjective and multiple and socially constructed, “as seen by participants in a study” (Hussey and Hussey, 1997, p.48). The phenomenological paradigm has three main elements. Firstly, because the approach sees reality as socially constructed, it is important to understand human behaviour from the respondents’ own frame of reference. Secondly qualitative researchers acknowledge that the act of investigating reality has an effect on that reality. Finally the qualitative approach focuses on meaning, rather than measurement, of social phenomena (Hussey and Hussey, 1997, p.53). This research values:

- the importance of establishing rapport between the researcher and the subject;
- the need for their relationship to be, as much as possible, egalitarian;
- the need for the researcher to value and respect the subject’s view of their own reality; and
- for the subject’s own words to be used in the subsequent written report.

#### **3.1 Multiple Research Methods**

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this study. While quantitative data provides useful statistics on a number variables, it provides limited real understanding about how people live and experience their lives.

Through the use of multiple research methods, understanding of the respondents’ perception of reality is likely to be increased, thus the validity of the findings is

increased. "Multiple methods work to enhance understanding, both by adding layers of information and by using one type of data to validate and refine another" (Reinharz, 1992:201). Multiple research methods are often seen as a commitment to thoroughness and validity. No attempts were made in this study to have the respondents' stories independently verified, however the use of multiple research methods and cross checking within the questionnaire and between questionnaire and interviews is likely to result in less distortion of data because of faulty recall and/or retrospective bias.

### **3.2 Methods of Investigation**

This research was conducted using a combination of questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were initially used as an exploratory tool to determine the aspects of society's dominant belief systems about homosexuality, such as contact with medical professionals, and other factors that influenced women's and men's experience of forming a homosexual identity. Further they provided descriptive statistics and simple correlational data enabling exploration of links between central variables. The questionnaire sought to identify the experiences of lesbians and gay men on a number of variables. As such it provides a broad overview across these variables rather than in-depth information on a few.

#### ***3.2.1 Questionnaires***

Initially the questionnaire was administered to a pilot group of lesbians and gay men. They were asked to provide feedback about how well the questionnaire allowed them to express their experiences and to make suggestions and comments to improve the questionnaire. See appendix A for a copy of the final questionnaire. The main categories in the questionnaire were:

- demographic data
- personal information and reflection
- experiences within the family
- interaction with same-sex and opposite-sex peers
- participation in social activities
- experiences within the wider community
- contact with medical/psychiatric personnel and institutions and counselling

- contact with religious institutions
- experiences in the workforce
- personal feelings about being a lesbian or gay man

Open-ended responses were sought in a number of areas. Those open-ended responses that are incorporated in the data analysis and findings, along with the interview data, included personal feelings and attitudes during the period of first awareness and identifying as a homosexual, religion, medical intervention and current lifestyles.

### ***3.2.2 In-depth Interviews***

In-depth interviews are used as a research method when the researcher is attempting to gain an understanding of the respondents' own perspective of their lived experiences and how they give meaning to those experiences (Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1992; Neuman, 1997). Interviewing offers access to people's thoughts, feelings and memories and allows the use of their own words rather than the researcher's (Reinharz, 1992:20).

The interviews of the women who participated in this study was conducted by one of the principal researchers and the men were interviewed by a male research assistant. The interviews were used to clarify, validate and extend the information in the questionnaires. In that way they also helped to eliminate misunderstanding. Verbatim excerpts of interviews are included throughout the data analysis for the same purpose.

From the questionnaire responses, themes to be explored in the interviews were identified and highlighted. The main themes that emerged from the questionnaire were

- reactions from others
  - family
  - religious institutions
  - health professionals
  - workplace
- services available
- services needed
- the significance of community/sub-culture

- self-concept and current lifestyle

From January 2003 to May 2003 a series of formal interviews with ten lesbians and ten gay men were conducted. The respondents were self chosen. The questionnaire, included a 'tear away' section for the respondents to include their name and contact details if they agreed to be personally interviewed.

The interviews were conducted at venues chosen by each respondent, usually in their private home, though three were conducted in cafes.

### **3.3     Origin of respondents**

The respondents in this study were recruited from a number of sources; private networks, lesbian and gay social groups, and through community radio and print media publicity. Distribution methods included personal contact, and mail contact enclosing the questionnaire and covering letters and email contact.

One of the researchers was interviewed about the research on country Victoria ABC and Melbourne community radio. Finally, as interviews commenced and progressed, each interviewee was asked whether they were able to pass on questionnaires to others.

It is not possible to determine the total numbers of questionnaires distributed. For example one respondent admitted that she made photocopies of the questionnaire, introductory letter and consent forms and passed them on to her contacts. Whether other respondents did the same is unknown. Another respondent rang me and asked to be sent copies of questionaries for friends and contacts. Whether they were then distributed is not known. Furthermore there was no way to check how many questionnaires were actually passed on in the snowballing process. Approximately 1000 fliers were distributed at the Daylesford gay and lesbian 'Chill Out' festival, mostly attended by people from Melbourne but also by gay men and lesbians from regional and rural areas. Of the many questionnaires distributed, a total of 106 questionnaires were returned completed (95 of these ultimately included as valid).

No valid assessment is able to be made of the extent to which the women and men who

completed and returned questionnaires is representative of homosexuals in general or in regional and rural Victoria. A demographic profile of homosexuals in the state of Victoria does not exist, and indeed would be difficult to establish. For example many people, especially women living in close loving relationships with a same-sex partner do not necessarily identify as a homosexual. Many women and men who live in heterosexual marriages identify as homosexuals but do not live as homosexuals, or alternatively identify as heterosexual even though they are in sexual relationships with a person of the same sex. Claire, age 53, although in the fifth year of a close loving relationship with her female partner, described herself as bisexual, explaining that "I'm in transition from a heterosexual relationship into a lesbian relationship." Others living in a homosexual relationship choose to live outside the homosexual community and do not disclose their sexuality. Finally disclosure of homosexual status could be restricted by some for reasons of security.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were given to respondents in this study. In this study where respondents' quotes are included pseudonyms are used. Some minor changes have been made to some quotes to avoid the possibility of identification, such as reference to country towns in which participants lived or 'came out'. One concern was that respondents might become upset in the process of recalling distressing experiences involved with forming a homosexual identity. In the eventuality that this happened the interviewers had with them, details of counsellors. This precaution proved unnecessary.

### **3.5 Analysis of data**

In the analysis of the questionnaires the focus was initially on descriptive statistics. Exploratory data analysis is useful for describing data and presenting it in tables or other diagrammatic form (Hussy and Hussy, 1997:189). This enables patterns and relationships not obvious in the raw data to be determined. Cross tabulations were also made. A Pearson Chi Square Test of Independence was performed on a number of variables to determine significant relationships and to test whether gender differences occurred by chance. The opportunity for this was limited due to the small

number of responses for many of the variables.

In a number of items in the questionnaire respondents had the option of ticking more than one variable. For many of these the response rate was fairly low. On the one hand this would be because those categories did not apply, however, there may also have been respondents who did not want to complete those items for other reasons. For those multi-variate questions we counted the number of people who responded to each variable item instead of the number of ticks. For this reason those tables do not sum to 100%.

### ***3.5.1 The interviews***

1. The interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed.
2. The data was organised and checked with the respondent for clarification where necessary.
3. All transcripts were read and themes were identified.
4. Documents were created around the themes and relevant quotes were selected from the transcripts and were ‘cut’ and placed in the appropriate sections of the report.
5. The relevant literature was referred to, and understandings from the literature were integrated into the appropriate documents.
6. The final part of phase of the data analysis involved a discussion of the literature and research findings. The respondents’ accounts of their experiences were placed within the broader social, cultural and political contexts.

The above process, from point 5 to 8, involved a number of readings of the transcripts to ensure that the respondents’ words and meanings had been accurately represented and not misinterpreted by the researcher’s own beliefs and biases.

### **3.6 Clarification of key terms and concepts**

The following terms may be unfamiliar to some readers or may have more different meanings in different contexts. This section defines the terms and explains how they are used in this report.

### ***Bisexual***

The term bisexual refers to people who relate to sexually both women and men. Some people who sent completed questionnaires for this study self-identified as bisexual in that they would always be open to both same-sex and/or heterosexual relationships. Others self identified as bisexual because they had heterosexual relationships in the past but felt that they would not have heterosexual relationships in the future. This latter group has been included in this project. However those who identified as bisexual in its literal sense have been excluded. The rationale for this decision is discussed in section 4.1.1.

### ***Coming out***

There are many and varying definitions of coming out. In the literature the definitions of the term ‘coming out’ and ‘homosexual identity formation’ are often inconsistent. Troiden (1979, p.376) defines ‘coming out’ as “defining oneself homosexual”. Other theorists may use the term to mean homosexual identity formation, or reserve the term ‘coming out’ as declaring ones homosexual identity to others; for example to family, friends and co-workers, to other homosexuals and finally to a certain extent to "the public at large" (Troiden, 1989, p.48). In this report the terms ‘coming out to self’ or just ‘coming out’ is used to refer to ones increased awareness of same-sex attraction and eventual formation of a homosexual identity. The term ‘coming out to others’ is used in its literal sense. In this report also, the term ‘coming out’ is also used generically when referring to both coming out to self and coming out to others.

### ***Gay***

The word gay is commonly used to refer to both male homosexuals and lesbians. It is a term of preference for most gay men and some lesbians. It is also a term that is rejected by many lesbians. The women in this study showed a clear preference for the word lesbian and therefore we have mostly used lesbian to refer to women except where respondents use other terms to refer to themselves. We do however also use the word homosexual especially when discussing other research.

### ***Gender***

The word gender is often used inappropriately to refer to biological sex. The term sex differences refers to physiological characteristics and the word gender refers to socially constructed behavioural characteristics arbitrarily assigned to either women or men. This is the meaning for which the word gender is used in this report.

### ***Gender Inversion***

The idea that homosexuals are more like the opposite sex. That is, that gay men are in some way feminised and lesbians are in some way masculinised.

### ***Lesbian***

The word lesbian refers to women who are emotionally and sexually attracted to other women. Respondents in this study show a clear preference for the word lesbian to describe themselves. For this reason, wherever possible in this report, the term lesbian is used in preference to homosexual.

### ***Heterosexism***

A belief that heterosexuality is or should be the only acceptable sexual orientation (therefore homosexuals and homosexuality are unacceptable). This results in prejudice, discrimination and harassment of lesbians and gay men (Blumenfeld, 1992, p.15). Heterosexism (or heterosexist) also refers to ideologies, policies and practices which assume that all people are heterosexual.

### ***Homosexual***

The word homosexual refers to a person who is sexually attracted to others of the same sex. The term homosexual refers to both women and men, but in much research tends to reflect the experiences of men. In this report lesbians and gay men are differentiated as much as possible though at times the word is used in its generic sense. This is when other researchers or respondents use the work and occasionally for convenience.

### ***Homophobia/Homophobic***

Although the word phobia refers to "fear of" homosexuals and/or lesbians, the emotion experienced by those with homophobia is hatred rather than fear. In this report the word

homophobia is used occasionally to reflect this common meaning, especially where other researchers cited, or respondents, have used the term. However the term ‘internalised oppression’ is used instead of the term ‘internalised homophobia’ to refer to the homosexual person’s internalising of society’s negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuals.

### ***Outing or being outed***

This word refers to when a lesbian’s or gay man’s sexuality is disclosed to others by a third person.

### ***Sexuality***

Sexuality encompasses a broad spectrum of the expression of physical and psychological sexual relations. This term is used in its broader sense in this study, that is, when we are discussing all or any aspect of sexuality, both homosexual and heterosexual, without distinction of various categories of sexuality.

## 4 NOT SO GAY IN THE BUSH

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### 4.1 About the Participants in this Study

A representative demographic profile of the lesbian and gay population does not exist so it is not possible to conclusively determine the number of homosexuals in the Grampians district, where they live, or other demographic information about them. Nor is it possible to determine how they compare with the heterosexual population. Similarly it is not possible to determine whether the demographic profile of respondents in this study is representative of homosexuals in the general community.

The following tables present a summary of the demographic information of participants in this study, as provided in the questionnaire.

The total number of respondents was 95 (40 men and 55 women). Table 4.1 gives the total number of participants and how they self identified.

#### 4.1.1 Self Identification

**Table 4.1: Self identification of participants**

Identification	Women		Men	
	n	%	n	%
Lesbian	40	75.5	0	0
Gay	7	13.2	30	76.9
Queer	2	3.8	5	12.8
Homosexual	0	0	4	10.3
Bisexual	4	7.5	0	0
Missing values	2		1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>		<b>40</b>	

The label lesbian was a term of preference for 75.5% of women and the word gay was preferred by 76.9% of men. The word homosexual was rejected by the women and the word queer, commonly used in the literature in the 1990s and 2000s was chosen by a minority of women and only marginally more of the men.

The ‘label’ which same-sex attracted people use to describe themselves is for many of them, a political and contentious issue. For example Justin and Tara describe their self identity as follows,

Justin: I'm white, middle aged, middle class, with a good job, a three bedroom brick veneer in the suburbs with a Commodore in the driveway, with a share portfolio and a superannuation plan - the only thing that makes me different from my neighbour is that I have sex with other men.

Tara: I am comfortable with my sexuality and with the term lesbian. I am delighted to be a woman and do not want to be invisible. I feel that the word gay is usually associated with men and as a feminist I think it is important for women to also be noticed, visible and counted.

Many more women than men agreed to be interviewed and there were more responses from women overall. It was felt that women and men should be equally represented in the interviews therefore, as put forward in the proposal for this research, ten women and ten men were interviewed. Most of the women interviewed were either living in the Grampians region or had lived there at some stage of their coming out. Two of them lived in an adjoining area. As so few men agreed to be interviewed, we also accepted men who were living out of the Grampians region but still in nearby rural Victoria.

The women who identified as bisexual in table 4.1 were accepted in this study because they made it clear during the interviews or in their qualitative commentary that they were using the label only because they had previously been in heterosexual relationships, including marriage, in the past. Thus they believed that the word bisexual was the most appropriate way to describe themselves. They did not however envisage alternating between homosexual and heterosexual relationships in the future. They are included in this study because they felt that they would not return to relationships with men in the future. For example Mary said, “Although I have had a 30 year marriage to a man, I have progressively lost interest in males over the past 5 years. I have no sexual interest in males at all.”

On the other hand seven male respondents and one female respondent who ticked bisexual were excluded from this study on the basis that they still desired heterosexual

relationships or that they “enjoyed the freedom” of variety. There was one questionnaire returned by a man who described himself as transgender. The decision to exclude those who identified as bisexuals and transgenders was not made on ‘moral’ grounds nor on political grounds, rather an acknowledgment that their experiences differ from the experiences of those who identify exclusively as same-sex attracted. It is acknowledged that bisexuals and transgenders are also minority groups with special needs. However to include bisexuals and transgenders in this analysis would have meant their experiences were subsumed by the majority identity group. It was beyond the scope of this study to analyse them separately.

Historically this has also been the case with women and men in that women’s experiences have often been subsumed under the male generic. For that reason separate statistics for women and men are presented in this report where appropriate so that the experiences of each can be distinguished and reported accurately. Historically, sociological and psychological research has seen the experiences of men treated as though they are the experiences of the human race. As in much social research, most researchers of homosexuality have been men, most of their subjects have been male homosexuals and most of the resulting theories have explored the male homosexual experience. Often though, the use of the generic homosexual has left the impression that women were included in the study. It is in these ways that women’s experiences have often been effectively made invisible (Spender, 1982). The experiences of lesbians and gay men are presented separately in this report where their experiences differ. This is because women and men come from different historical, social and political contexts. To present the findings of this research as aggregated statistics would have resulted in a distorted view of both men’s and women’s lives and experiences.

The place of ‘coming out’ proved difficult to establish. In the survey we asked respondents for postcodes in order to identify the area in which they were living when they were forming a homosexual identity. A surprising number were missing values. Only 32.8% of men gave a postcode and 67.2% of women gave a postcode. It is not possible to determine the reasons respondents were reluctant to give postcodes. It is

possible that some respondents were ‘out of area’ but still wanted to be heard. It is also possible that respondents were nervous about giving postcodes if they lived, or had lived in smaller areas, for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity. The gender difference may hold a clue. As will be discussed in sections 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 men, more than women, experienced physical harassment, especially in childhood. The reluctance of men to disclose their place of coming out may be due to a greater fear of negative reactions.

Survey respondents were also asked to describe the nature of the place in which they came out in terms of population, see table 4.2.

#### ***4.1.2 Place of coming Out***

**Table 4.2 Place of Coming Out**

Location	Women %	Men %
Major city	38.0	14.7
Regional city	46.0	44.1
Farm/rural property	2.0	17.6
town < 4000	2.0	20.6
Town 4000-8000	6.0	2.9
Town > 8000	6.0	0

Initially those respondents who indicated that they came out in a major city were separated with the intention of excluding them. However it quickly became apparent from qualitative commentary in the questionnaires and later during interviews that for many participants there had been moves during the coming out process. Furthermore the process of homosexual identity formation can be a lengthy process for many and so some participants lived in more than one area while they were in the process of forming a homosexual identity. The figures in table 4.2 must be viewed with the understanding that some people became aware of issues of sexuality in a rural area and moved to either a regional, urban or other rural area during the coming process.

While similar numbers of gay men and lesbians came out in regional cities, many more men than women came out in smaller towns or farms. It is not known whether this is

due to issues of sexuality or for some other reason. The fact that a substantial number of men rather than women came out on farms could also be due to patrilineal inheritance. Men more than women are likely to inherit the family farm and stay on the farm (see Cullinan, 2002 for a discussion on gender and farm inheritance). An example of the complexity of ‘place of coming out’ is one participant who came out in a regional city at the age of 16, moved to a larger city and eventually married, separated some years later and in the last 18 months moved back to the regional city where she started to reconsider her sexual identity. There are many similar examples including one young man who started the identity formation in a Wimmera town, moved to Melbourne for higher education, and thus had part of the coming out process in Melbourne.

Coming out has another aspect, and that is coming out to ‘others’. This is also an on-going process but continues throughout a lesbian’s or gay man’s life. A minority of participants started the self identification in a major city and then moved to rural or regional areas, or alternatively came out to self in the city but also had ‘coming out to others’ experiences after moving into a regional or rural area. One couple moved from a major city to a rural town in the Grampians region because of one partner’s work promotion. The other partner was still coming to terms with her sexuality choices at the time and thus ended the identity formation process in the rural town. Others moved from one rural location to another where they were not known. For example one woman moved from an eastern Victorian small town to a Grampians small town. She was not prepared to come out in her home town where she was known. All of these experiences are included in this report.

There were also two responses from people who lived interstate and had never lived in Victoria. These were excluded from this study.

#### ***4.1.3 Education Level***

As can be seen from table 4.3 men were more likely than women to have completed high school. However of those who completed high school, women were more likely to have completed post secondary education. They were also more likely to have an undergraduate degree or diploma. Men were marginally more than women to have post

graduate qualifications.

**Table 4.3 Highest Level of education**

Education	Women %	Men %
Did not finish high school	5.5	2.6
Completed high school	20.0	34.2
Completed basic or skilled vocational	5.5	2.6
Completed degree or diploma	43.6	36.8
Completed post graduate	16.4	18.4
Other	9.1	5.3

#### **4.1.4 Occupation of Respondents**

Table 4.4 details the current occupation of participants.

**Table 4.4: Occupation**

Current Occupation	Women %	Men %
Management/Administration	12.7	18.4
Tradesperson/related worker	0	5.3
Production and transport	0	0
labourer and related worker	0	2.6
Professional	50.9	39.5
Clerical sales and service	5.5	10.5
Home duties	9.1	0
Other	21.8	23.7

The majority of respondents' occupational status tended to professional and administrative/management positions. Such skewing to the higher end of occupational ranges was also found in a study of lesbian identity development (Gottschalk, 2000) and of homosexual men (Phillips, 1995). Career choices and career movement of lesbians and gay men is an area in need of further study.

#### **4.1.5 The Age of Respondents at the time of the research and the age of first awareness**

The range in age, of respondents in this study was from age 19 to 59, see table 4.5.

**Table 4.5 Age of Respondents at time of study**

Age	Women		Men	
	n = 55	%	n = 40	%
Less than 20	2	3.6	5	12.9
20 to 24	7	12.6	7	17.9
25 to 34	14	25.4	9	23.1
35 to 44	22	40.2	16	41.0
45 to 54	8	14.6	0	0
55 or older	2	3.6	2	5.1
Missing value			1	

As can be seen from table 4.5 the ages of women is skewed to the upper range. The criteria for respondents was that they had formed a homosexual identity in the last ten years. This criteria too became problematic. There were participants who had been aware of same-sex attractions in adolescence, or younger, but, for a variety of reasons discussed later, did not act on them for many years. For example Oliver recalled,

Where to begin, okay in terms of coming out, when did I come out? I was thirty eight when I came out. When did I first identify myself? I first identified that I was attracted to males when I was seven or eight years of age. I remember various occasions generally involving summer holidays, beaches, swimming pools, playing under the hose where the experience of being with other boys excited me. And yeah, I never experienced the same thing with girls.

Oliver acknowledged that he was gay while at university but he did not come out, or live as a gay man until he was 38 years old.

Forming a homosexual identity and becoming aware of a same-sex attraction are not the same thing. Respondents who are asked questions such as ‘when did you first realise you were homosexual?’ rely on retrospective recollection and interpretation of retrospective memories. Both recollections and interpretations are informed by their current understandings. If, for example, their current understanding and belief about homosexuality is of some form of gender inversion they may reflect on childhood clues such as gender non-conforming play and interpret those as evidence of first realisation of a homosexual self. If the individual did not experience same-sex sexual attraction until adulthood they will nevertheless reflect on similar experiences and will see these as evidence of latent homosexuality (Gottschalk, 2003b).

Additionally, when their current identity evolves around same-sex attraction, they are

likely to recollect close same-sex relationships. Thus they may also reflect on close same-sex friendships and/or sex play during childhood and recognise this as an early sign of their adult same-sex attraction. People who identify as heterosexual may recollect similar experiences but give a different meaning to them in adulthood. Thus a person with say, very close same-sex friendships in childhood may or may not form a homosexual identity in adolescence or adulthood (Phillips and Over, 1995)

The ages at which participants first became aware of a same-sex attraction are presented in table 4.6.

**Table 4.6 The age of first realisation of same-sex attraction**

Age	Women %	Men %
Less than 10	16.4	23.1
10 to 14	29.1	35.9
15 to 19	29.1	33.3
20 to 24	3.6	0
25 to 34	12.7	5.1
35 to 44	5.5	2.6
45 to 54	3.6	0
55 or older	0	0

Of the male respondents 92.3% first became aware of same-sex attraction by the age of 19 and only 7.7% after, whereas 74.6 % of women became aware of same-sex attraction before the age of 19 and 25.4% after that.

A Pearson Chi Square Test of Independence was performed on the data presented in Table 4.6 to determine whether the gender differences in the age at which women and men first became aware of same-sex attraction could have occurred by chance. The test was done twice, firstly setting the age of adulthood at age 25 and secondly setting the age of adulthood at age 20.

There is no significant difference between gender and age respondents first became aware of same-sex attraction when respondents were assigned to two age groups, aged 24 or less and aged older than 24 ( $\chi^2 3.395$ , df = 1, p = .065).

There is a significant difference between gender and age respondents first became aware of same-sex attraction when respondents were assigned to two age groups, aged 19 or less and aged older than 19 ( $\chi^2$  4.860, df = 1, p = .027). Of those who had become aware of same-sex attraction after the age of 19, 82.4% were females (n = 14) compared to only 17.6% of the males (n = 3).

A common assumption is that coming out happens during adolescence and for a few in early adulthood. Most models of homosexual identity formation support this idea, however, as noted previously, much of the research has concentrated on the experiences of men and subsumed the experiences of women. When gender was considered it was found to be more common for women than for men to come out in adulthood, though even in this small sample there were a few men who had their first experience of same-sex sexual attraction in adulthood.

The gender difference in the age at which participants self identified as lesbians or gay men is in line with much previous research findings on homosexuality since the 1970s. The models of homosexual identity formation, discussed earlier in this report ignored gender differences in discussions of experiences and did not consider adult homosexual identity formation. They mostly see homosexual identity formation starting in childhood or adolescence, and their respondents have usually progressed to a lesbian or gay identity by adolescence or early adulthood. In Barry Dank's (1971) research only two of his 182 male respondents experienced their first sexual desire toward the same sex after the age of twenty-five. Similarly Troiden (1979) found that lesbians tend to define themselves as lesbian at around age twenty-two and gay men at age nineteen. Cass (1984) whose respondents included both women and men acknowledges that adult identity development is possible. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) who researched the feelings and experiences of adult women who became lesbian after a long period of heterosexuality, found that many women do not become lesbians until well into adulthood, even well into middle age.

In this study 5 (9.1%) of the women identified as lesbians after the age of 35. For example one of the women interviewed, age 47, has only identified as a lesbian in the

last 18 months. She claims to have had no inkling previously that she may be attracted to women. She explained that 18 months ago she met a woman, and as the weeks passed, started to realise that she had fallen in love with her. This interviewee was married at the time, albeit on the verge of separation. Nevertheless she found the realisation and following months quite stressful.

The stresses around homosexual identity formation in adolescence and coming out in adulthood are clearly different, thus adult homosexual identity formation is also an important point to consider in research such as this. Both women and men who are older at the time of homosexual identity formation, also have difficulties that are exacerbated in regional and rural areas. One participant, Mary, explained,

My particular difficulties in trying to come out involved a 30 year marriage. People have stereotyped me. This may be a bonus because they don't see me as 'different'. Also two girlfriends while purporting to support me have inadvertently put many obstacles in my way eg "don't wear rings like that when we're out because people might think I'm your partner" or "don't tell my husband you're gay or he won't let me go travelling with you". I have ageing, frail conservative parents and my younger sister is a psychiatrist and I know what she was trained to think. My current partner is phobic of being outed so I am having the experience of the closet.

Adult homosexual identity formation is especially difficult if people have been married and/or have children, as many lesbians do. Many lesbians have children through donor insemination, however many have children in heterosexual relationships prior to choosing to live as a lesbian. McNair, Dempsey, Wise, and Perlesz (2002, p.43) in research conducted in Victoria, found that 52% of the children of their lesbian respondents resulted from sexual intercourse. Furthermore 87% of those had done so in the context of a heterosexual relationship. For the children born and having lived in heterosexual families there are issues they have to deal with, such as, separation, divorce, dealing with their parent's sexuality, and being raised in a same-sex relationship: usually lesbian. Adult homosexual identity formation is a difficult time for the individuals involved, for their partners, children and family. Furthermore reactions from community members who have only seen them as heterosexual exacerbates the situation. The accusation of being a threat to the family or breaking up families is often

directed at lesbians and gay men. For married people with children choosing to leave the marriage and live as a homosexual, this accusation is particularly painful.

Further, lesbians and gay men are seen by many as a threat to children. Research by Marchesani, McLaren and McLachlan (2002) focussed on the attitudes of Australian heterosexuals toward heterosexual gay and lesbian parents. Their results showed that heterosexual Australians had negative attitudes toward lesbian parents and felt that children of lesbian parents would have problems. Such attitudes were more pronounced when the respondent was homophobic. There has been much research that has argued that such attitudes are unfounded (Patterson, 1995; Hamilton, 1994; Flaks, Fischer, Masterpasqua and Gregory, 1995) however lesbian and gay parents continue to experience the articulation and expression of such attitudes, as was noted by some respondents in this research.

Georgia, one of the women interviewed, was separated from her husband but had custody of their children when she first became aware of a same-sex attraction. When her husband found out he threatened to take the children from her. Gossip in the town about her breaking up the family became difficult to deal with. She explained, “A girlfriend I know in the next town said ‘Georgia, I heard in the hairdresser your name mentioned and it wasn’t said in a nice way.’ I was ready to go to (larger regional city) to a bigger group and start all over again.”

Tony, a male interviewee, married while at university and early in his marriage worked a farm in the Wimmera. From there he moved with his wife to another rural area where they had two daughters and a son. While the first awareness of a same-sex attraction was experienced in the Wimmera, it was really in the other area where he started to recognise his sexuality and noticed others around him whom he recognised as being gay.

My thoughts about my own sexuality just increased and increased and increased to the point where I was to a minor extent doing the beats. I had discovered within my work colleagues one or two people to whom I could relate to on issues of sexuality. But it got to the point where I was getting depressed. Here I was married. I had children and my life just wasn’t being fulfilled. On quite a separate issue I believe the

marriage was coming apart I suppose partly because of my attitude to everything. But there were other issues too and I would always say, whether or not I was gay, that marriage was going to come apart. Anyway I got brave one night and came out to my wife who initially said she would be supportive. And then about forty eight hours later went totally the other way, and has stayed the other way and forbade me to mention anything to the kids. Because the one thing I wanted to do more than anything was to talk to my children about it. That went on for two years and the pressure just got so intense that in the end I just had to leave and I did.

Since then he has virtually no contact with his wife, some email contact with one daughter but a good relationship with the other daughter who "... acted strangely when this all occurred and asked if I could source a book or two for her on the subject of gay parents. I did that, she read the books, put them down and hasn't had a problem since." Tony also has had no contact with his son.

#### **4.1.6 Marital Status**

Of note is the ratio of never married to previously married respondents (see table 4.7).

**Table 4.7: Marital Status**

<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Women</b>		<b>Men</b>	
	<b>n</b> =	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b> =	<b>%</b>
Never married	28	50.9	32	82.1
Currently married	4	7.3	4	10.2
previously married	23	41.8	3	7.7
Missing value			1	

In this study 41.8% of lesbians had been previously married. This is in stark contrast to the marital status of the gay men who participated in this research (7.7% of men had been previously married), and in line with previous research. For example in Gabriel Phillip's (1995) study to establish a taxonomy of male sexualities, 89% of his respondents were single and had never married, 11% had at some time been married. In Gottschalk's (2000) study 40.5% of lesbians had been previously married.

It was not possible to conduct a Chi Square test using the three categories, 'never, currently and previously married' to discover if there is a significant difference

between marital status and gender as 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5.

However, when we combined the currently married and previous married groups there is a highly significant difference between gender and marriage ( $\chi^2 9.586$ , df = 1, p = .002). Of those respondents who are either currently married or who have been married only 20.6% were male (n = 7).

The data suggest that women, though they may be aware of being sexually attracted to other women, still marry. Men, on the other hand, do not. The reasons for this would lie in the historical, social and political context in which males and females grow up and live. Both women and men receive strong social conditioning to marry and have a family, however a choice to remain unmarried has different social and political consequences for women and men. Men have career options that even in 2003 women do not have. Women's social identity is tied to family rather than career, as is men's. Indeed it is not uncommon for women to still be criticised for choosing both career and family.

There are three important issues to consider around marital status and the implication for coming out in rural areas, some alluded to in the discussion of adult homosexual identity formation. The first is that some women and men married at a time when they were already attracted to their own sex and their reasons for doing so. There are also those women and men who are currently married but at the same time having same-sex relationships and finally there are those who had not had same-sex attractions before.

Of the twenty-five lesbians who had been married, 76% were aware of same-sex attractions at the time they married; and yet they married. While the statistics show that 60% of the men were aware of same-sex attractions at the time they married, it must be remembered that only 7 men were either married or had been previously married, and only five of those responded to this question. On the one hand, the reasons that people marry despite being aware of same-sex attractions could be due to social pressures to marry and have families, often called the heterosexual imperative. As Kellie explained,

“... it was expected of me to marry”. Kath too felt that, “...it was the usual thing to do. I didn’t really think about it and we had been together for 9 years so it seemed like the next step in the relationship.” There is also a desire for normality, for stability and to ‘fit in’. When asked why she had married Claire explained, “It seemed to be the appropriate thing at the time - my need for stability and security.” Such social pressures may be greater in rural areas.

Another reason for marrying could be due to isolation from a homosexual sub-culture and lack of perceived alternatives. When Wendy was asked why she married she commented, “Because it was safe; because I didn’t understand my sexuality; because my parents both died in my teenage years; because I grew up in (small town) which was very straight; because I was scared of not being accepted.” Rowena’s comment relates as much to psychological isolation as to social isolation, “I didn’t know how to validate that I could be homosexual. I did not know how to initiate a same-sex relationship. Too many prejudices to be faced.”

Another reason for marrying was a desire for accepted ‘normality’ and a desire for family and children. In Sautter’s (2002) German study of gay and lesbian farmers one young man commented on the likelihood of childlessness and consequently the loss of an estate, in his case the farm, that had been in the family for generations. He poignantly commented , “somehow you can’t help thinking like a heterosexual in that respect”. Indeed this is part of the explanation given by some participants in this study. For example Mary was very young (20 years) but “ I loved the man I married. I wanted children.” Further due to the restrictive nature of her social environment Mary had little opportunity to consider an alternative to marriage. She continues, “ There was no chance of experimenting with sexuality before marriage. I was highly chaperoned.” Tony described the subtle indoctrination that led to his marriage,

I was brought up on a farm in the Wimmera, where in the local environment everything was extremely conservative. The church played a big part in almost everybody’s life in the district and like almost everybody else, I was influenced by that. It was very much, indoctrination. It is a very subtle ... yes I think subtle is the right word ... it is a subtle indoctrination within the church, within the general society within which I was brought up. There was the very clearly held

concept that when you leave school and get a job, you will then get a girlfriend, you'll then get married and you will then have children. That was very much unsaid and also sometimes said 'Oh have you got a girlfriend yet?', 'No', 'When are you going to have kids?' The rellies, neighbours, it didn't matter who.

Another issue to consider is that of those respondents who are currently married and either having same-sex relationships at the same time, or who are currently married and not in relationships, but who do not feel able to leave their marriages because of social reasons, exacerbated by rurality.

For Vera it was more complex. She had been in a relationship with a woman and when she was about 19 this relationship broke up. She was living with a man "as friends" at the time, and then married him. As she explained, "He 'moved in' and took advantage of my vulnerability. I was looking at security, looking for my parent's approval to show them I'm straight." The man Vera married was 35 years older. She has now separated and started a relationship with a woman. Vera is now in her late 20s.

While there are serious implications for adults forming a homosexual identity, and possibly for their children, there are other implications for younger people coming out during adolescence. These include implications for school and social interactions and coming out to parents. Most importantly adolescence is a time when young people are dealing with puberty and are still developing a sense of self and their place in the world. Having to deal with a sexuality that is considered deviant, adds to this already potentially stressful time. The experiences of younger lesbians and gay men are discussed extensively in this report.

**Table 4.8: Current relationship status**

	Women		Men	
	n	%	n = 39	%
Not in a relationship at present	20	36.4	23	59.0
In a relationship with a woman	34	61.8	0	0
In a relationship with a man	1	1.8	16	41.0

More lesbian respondents (61.8%) were in a relationship than gay men (41%). The one

woman in a relationship with a man was a respondent who was also currently married, but planning to leave her husband.

#### ***4.1.7 Summary of demographic information about participants in this study***

The majority of women in this study self-identified as lesbians and the men as gay. The word queer, even though commonly used in contemporary writing about sexual difference, and debated extensively in the academy (see Jeffreys, 2003) is by and large rejected by participants in this study.

The place of coming out proved difficult to determine. Noteworthy numbers of respondents reported moving from rural locations to urban locations or from rural areas to regional cities. More women than men moved to a city while more men than women came out in towns or rural areas.

The majority of respondents had at least completed high school and many had tertiary qualifications. Commensurate with such levels of education many were in professional or semi-professional occupations.

The age range of respondents was 17 to 59 with little gender difference in the spread. However the age of first awareness of same-sex attraction showed significant gender differences. Many more men than women identified as homosexual at a very young age while more women than men formed a homosexual identity in adulthood. Consequently significantly more women than men had been previously married.

Both younger people forming a homosexual identity and those who develop a homosexual identity in adulthood experience stress and anxiety though each group has different complicating issues. The personal and private reflections of the coming out period is examined in the next section.

### **4.2 Personal and Private Reflections**

Growing up and living in a culture that is at best ambivalent toward homosexuality and at its worst violent to homosexuals means that all people, whether they are conscious of it or not, are exposed to many negative attitudes and messages about homosexuality. This of course includes not only lesbians and gay men but also children, and women and men before they start the homosexual identity formation process. The consequences of societal ‘homophobia’ included fear, depression, feelings of alienation and internalised oppression. Internalised oppression then, is the result of internalising or incorporating such images onto one’s concept of self. The term is usually used to describe a lesbian’s or gay man’s negative feelings about themselves because of their homosexuality. Internalised feelings of low self worth negatively impact on the development of a healthy lesbian or gay identity (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). The feelings caused by homophobia and internalised oppression has both physical and mental health consequences in that gay men and lesbians can be more prone to stress related conditions including suicide ideation. As commented upon by Brian,

Well this is the way I am, so there was no point in getting all bitter and twisted about it. But since then I’ve seen friends, and people I’ve met who I know, have had huge issues with it, and have gone on to become alcoholic, and all sorts of things like that.

This section identifies which of the negative messages about homosexuality respondents were aware of and the extent to which they contributed to feelings of low self-worth. The respondents in this study were asked to reflect back to the time they were becoming lesbian or gay and to consider their understanding of various stereotypes about homosexuals? We sought to determine which of the various attitudes and beliefs held by some people in society, respondents were aware of, to what extent they believed in those stereotypes, and whether such beliefs affected their coming out experiences (see table 4.9).

**Table 4.9: Stereotypes about homosexuals**

Stereotype	Believed True n = responses		Thought false n = responses		had never heard it n = responses		Were unsure of feelings n = responses		Can't remember n = responses	
	Wom	Men	Wom	Men	Wom	Men	Wom	Men	Wom	Men
are child molesters (paedophiles)	3	9	38	14	6	8	7	7	1	1
seduce heterosexuals	7	9	33	8	8	12	3	8	4	2
are lonely, unhappy and unfulfilled	13	20	21	9	13	4	7	5	1	1
are sick	11	19	36	13	4	0	2	6	0	1
are deviant	15	17	31	13	1	3	6	5	1	1
are sinful	16	21	28	11	3	2	7	4	0	0
try to turn young girls into lesbians or boys into gays	11	11	33	13	6	7	3	5	1	2
are a threat/danger to the "family"	14	17	27	10	8	2	3	8	2	0
destroy society's sense of morality and virtue	12	18	28	11	8	5	3	5	3	0
(lesbians) are masculine (butch dykes)	33	27	13	3	3	3	6	4	0	2
(gay men) are feminine (faggots)	32	29	18	4	0	0	4	5	1	1
(lesbians) are man-haters	23	20	18	8	7	5	7	4	0	1
should try to become heterosexual	17	20	27	7	3	4	7	7	0	1
reflect a natural expression of human sexuality	25	10	8	10	12	15	9	0	0	3

The figures in table 4.9 represent the number of responses in each category. There are 40 male respondents overall and 55 female respondents. As can be seen there are many missing values in some of the categories and full responses in others.

The stereotype that was believed by most respondents at the time they were forming a homosexual identity was that of gender inversion. Table 4.10 shows that 60% of lesbians believed that lesbians are masculinised and 72.5% of gay men believed that

gay men are feminised. The next set of variables that most believed in were the negative ones around the ideas of homosexuals being sick and/or sinful. Interesting men were substantially more likely to believe in those negative stereotypes than women.

**Table 4.10: Main stereotypes believed by respondents**

Stereotype (Lesbians/gay men)	% Women believed	% Men believed
are lonely, unhappy and unfulfilled	23.6	50.0
are sick	20.0	47.5
are deviant	27.3	42.5
are sinful	29	52.5
destroy society's sense of morality and virtue	21.8	45
reflect a natural expression of human sexuality	45.5	25.0
(lesbians) are masculine	60	-
(gay men) are feminine	-	72.5

In section 4.10 we discuss the finding that the sexual identity of many lesbians has a political dimension, for example identification with other women. Table 4.10 also shows that women more than men perceive their sexuality to reflect a natural expression of human sexuality. Indeed women were more likely to believe in the naturalness of their sexuality than in any of the negative stereotypes.

We attempted to group the stereotypes into positive and negative in order to conduct a Chi Square analysis however seven respondents recorded both negative and positive stereotype beliefs. When these cases were removed from the analysis there was no significant difference between gender and negative or positive stereotype beliefs ( $\chi^2 3.605$ , df = 1, p = .058).

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they felt that the stereotypes influenced the coming out period of their lives. Table 4.11 shows the extent to which respondents believed there was some influence.

**Table 4.11: Influence of stereotypes**

Influence	Men %	Women %
No	27.0	32.1
Yes	73.0	67.9

In this instance there is little gender difference. The majority of men (73%) and women (67.9%) believed that the existence of the stereotypes and their own beliefs about them, influenced their feelings of self-worth during coming out.

Some women and men noted how the internalising of negative images was almost an unconscious process and how it impacted on the stressfulness of coming to terms with their sexuality.

Vernon: So becoming aware that I was different to other boys, that is probably the way to formulate it. Fairly early in the piece it made life very interesting in the sense that, you know, no-one had ever actually said to me directly that being gay was wrong, but it is an attitude that you absorb very quickly over the process of time.

Jennie explained, “I assumed unhappiness was natural for me. I personalised the reactions to me rather than seeing them as societal attitudes.” Barbara felt much the same, “The stereotypes make it harder in general to come out. When close friends and family mention such stereotypes, even in passing, without condemning them, it makes it harder to stand up.” Peter reacted differently, “ I tried to repress my sexuality. I came out at 27 years of age, having told no one prior.” Deirdre was deeply affected and turned to her religion, “I tried to ignore my feelings for women and used to pray to God to be normal.”

Ken mentioned loneliness, men being feminine and the desirability of heterosexuality as “... all considerations, and I had to work through all these to get to a point where I was comfortable with myself.”.

The stereotypes that respondents were most aware of and the ones that caused the greatest difficulty for women and men, were the idea of gender inversion, the idea of homosexuality as sick and/or sinful, and therefore a threat to the family and the

belief that homosexuals are lonely, unhappy and unfulfilled.

#### ***4.2.1 The idea of gender inversion***

The dominant ways of thinking about homosexuality have evolved from the work of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sexologists (see Ellis and Symonds, 1897, p.87). They used the term congenital invert to define a homosexual, as a person who possesses characteristics of the opposite sex. As mentioned previously the male homosexual is seen to be in some way feminised and the lesbian is seen to be in some way masculinised. Public opinion was influenced by the work of the sexologists and also provided the basis for later empirical research. For example the idea of gender inversion is evident in early and more recent biological theories for homosexuality. Furthermore biological theories for homosexuality use as evidence, ideas of gender dysphoria and gender non-conformity in childhood (see the models of Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1979 & 1989), hormonal imbalances such as an overdose or under-dose of male hormones (Meyer-Bahlburg (1984) cited in (Byne and Parsons, 1993), and feminised or masculinised brains (LeVay, 1993).

The sexologists' idea of congenital gender inversion has become a constant part of the dominant ideology about sexuality. In a survey which included the question "How would you know if a co-worker was a lesbian?" responses included, aura of masculinity, masculine, jeans, heavy boots, flannel shirts, manly, athletic, short hair (Eliason, Donelan and Randall, 1992, p.137). In the report no respondent was said to have mentioned feminine characteristics. As found by Gottschalk (2000) the dominant ideology about sexuality is internalised and influences how homosexuals interpret and act out their sexuality. It also has some influence on current ways of dressing and behaving. Most importantly the idea of gender inversion influences the emphasis given to retrospective childhood recollections, (see Phillips and Over, 1992 and 1995; Gottschalk, 2003a).

In this study many respondents, both women and men, believed that homosexuals were inverted, and described gender non-conformity as retrospective evidence of their sexuality. For example John explained how he, "Tried to avoid 'gay' music, tried to

act more masculine to fit in with school peers. I never stood up for more feminine males when they were being bullied by others” and similarly Mary explained how she, “...was a tomboy and enjoyed climbing rocks and doing stuff like that but I also enjoyed playing with dolls and I loved ... I loved drawing and still do. I don’t like...I don’t like abuse in any form (referring to being less aggressive).”

Jacob: I think I was very aware of not being seen as a stereotypical gay man but it made me stereotype. I was good at dancing and art ... but I also found I couldn’t take a compliment either because I was constantly set up to make fun of. If someone was to say, “Wow, that is a great drawing” I didn’t know whether they meant it or if I was being set up (for teasing about not being masculine) so I would actually tear the drawing up in front of them rather than have to deal with what would come next. Probably still to this day I find it hard to take a compliment and just accept it.

Playing, or not playing, sports is an activity often cited as evidence of a homosexual orientation by women and men seeking signs in their recalled childhood and adolescence years that they had a pre-existing homosexual orientation. For example Vera reflected on gender non-conformity in childhood. “I played sports I was much more into sports and I didn’t like dolls. I had crushes on women but never on men”.

While playing sports is clearly not an exclusive male activity and enjoying music is not an exclusive female activity, these are in reality interpreted as such by many lesbians and gay men. This may be due to the stereotyping of certain activities as symptoms of gender inversion. Such ideas of congenital gender inversion have become a constant part of the dominant ideology about sexuality and have been reinforced by the inclusion in the American Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) of the category *Gender Identity Disorder* (GID) (discussed in Rottnek, 1999; see also Meyenburg, 1999; Haldeman, 2000).

Gender Identity Disorder pathologises gender non-conforming behaviour in children. According to the DSM-IV children with GID have a “marked preoccupation with traditionally feminine (masculine) activities” (see Minter, 1999, p.10) including cross-dressing and avoidance of “rough and tumble play” for boys and engaging in “rough and tumble play” for girls. Sports is often correlated with rough and tumble play. The

permeation of such ideas into the general understanding of homosexuality is exemplified by David. David could be described as having a preoccupation with ‘feminine’ activities and an aversion for the ‘rough and tumble;’ play of active sports.

David: I wasn’t into sport or anything like that. I was into creating things, making things, craft work, sewing, that sort of thing. My parents knew I was always different because I was always much more interested in that sort of thing than what was going on at the farm. I was encouraged (to be creative). My mother did a lot of craft work and was good at sewing and that sort of thing. My brother was very good at sport. He was good at football as a teenager. I was good at what I was doing and I certainly wasn’t discouraged. I wasn’t forced to get involved in sport or anything. I was encouraged with what I did.

While some recalled such gender ‘non-conformity’ and accepted it as a sign of homosexuality for others the awareness of the gender inversion stereotype actually hindered or delayed homosexual identity formation. These individuals did not see themselves as being gender inverted and so thought they could not be homosexual. Alternatively they felt a lack of attraction to masculine women (or feminine men). Maggie and Tara are such examples. Maggie, as can be seen from her concerns, was also acutely aware of the ‘homosexuals are paedophiles’ stereotypes,

Maggie: I thought that I couldn’t be gay because I didn’t fit the (lesbians are masculine) stereotype, so I would go out with guys because I felt it was expected of me. I also worried a lot that if I was gay and people found out they would put me into the category of a paedophile or accuse me of destroying the family. I also worried that I would have to become butch (masculine) to be accepted as a ‘real’ lesbian if I ever did come out.

Tara: I thought that I couldn’t really be a lesbian since I was feminine, didn’t want to be a man and in fact loved being female. I didn’t have tattoos and had long hair – those image stereotypes are still strong today, and still cause problems for women in regional and rural areas

Helena too was “ ... resistant to becoming part of a butch community,” whereas Mary initially tried to conform to the stereotype when she came out, “I knew how I felt about other women and tried to make myself look more butch. I am told this didn’t actually work.” Mary soon realised she could be a lesbian without appearing or acting in a masculine way. Mary also rejected the idea that lesbians are masculine.

Mary: A lot of the things they do I don’t feel comfortable doing, like

going out mud wrestling (laughs) or drinking. It doesn't make me any less than what I know I am. Lesbians come in all shapes and sizes and a lot of women feel that being masculine epitomises them and they don't realise that you can still be a woman and be feminine and still be a lesbian ..... put on the uniform (masculine clothes and short hair) and behave that way. I sometimes get the feeling that they want to be men ... tomboy business. A lot of gay men think being gay means being feminine. Nothing can be further from the truth.

While there were many men who believed in the 'gay men are feminine' stereotype there were also gay men who did not identify with the idea that gay men are feminised.

Vernon: The interesting thing I found out about that was that the majority of people I met on the scene did not appeal to me. That is interesting because then it becomes a question of 'to what extent have I perhaps internalised a certain degree of homophobia growing up in the country?' I just found the sort of, what would you call it, campness (exaggerated female gestures), of the whole thing really put me off. I didn't like it, I didn't enjoy it and I still don't particularly. So ironically, even though I am gay, what I find is I really don't relate that well to the majority of the gay men that I meet because I find the sort of campness that comes with being gay puts me right off. I can't deal with it and I don't find it particularly attractive. I suppose I am that kind of straight acting gay male.

While a belief in gender inversion affects how a person expresses and presents themselves and thus is by and large not overly threatening to heterosexuals, other stereotypes, such as 'homosexuals are sick and/or sinful', have greater potential to harm lesbians and gay men.

#### ***4.2.2 The idea of homosexuality as sick and/or sinful***

The second most common stereotype of which respondents in this study were aware was that homosexuals are sick and sinful. Many lesbians and more so gay men in this study had internalised society's attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality as a sickness and/or a sin. The word 'sickness' however is often aligned with depravity rather than a medical illness.

Table 4.10 shows that 47.5% of gay men and 20% of lesbians actually believed that homosexuals are sick, 29% of lesbians and 52.5% of gay men believed homosexuals

were sinful and 27.3% of lesbians and 42.5% of gay men believed homosexuals were deviant. Clearly men more than women believed in negative stereotypes about homosexuality at the time they were becoming lesbian or gay.

Included in this category is the belief that homosexuals seduce heterosexuals and more disturbing that homosexuals are paedophiles, are dangerous and destroy society. Such internalised beliefs caused feelings of low self worth and often self destructive behaviour. For example Tom explained,

I had a strict religious background, and never actually meeting another gay person, I was under the impression that what I had become (or what I had realised about myself) was sick, depraved and sinful. It forced me to internalise the feelings so that it was a further three years before I was able to come out to my parents.

Robyn hinted at the influence of conservative beliefs held by many religious groups about homosexuality, “I was brought up to think it wasn’t normal to be a lesbian. I have very Catholic parents. It made the time of coming out a very emotional and difficult transition.” The influence of religion is discussed in more depth later in section 4.8.

The effects of believing oneself to be abnormal and sinful are serious indeed. A number of those interviewed said that they had, at some time, felt suicidal. As pointed out in section 2.2, Molloy, McLaren and McLachlan (2002) found that suicide was seen as a viable option by heterosexuals and also many homosexuals and extensive research findings reveal that suicide ideation and actual suicide is not uncommon risk among young homosexuals, men in particular (Herschberger and Pilkington, 1997) On the surveys a number of respondents noted that they had been suicidal. Sixteen lesbians (14.5%) and twelve gay men (17.5%) had thoughts of suicide. For example Lorna said “I thought that what I was feeling (attraction to the same sex) was wrong and I consequently denied those feelings. I later became suicidal.”

The total number of respondents who indicated that they had considered suicide was 28 or 29.4% of respondents. No Chi Square test could be performed to establish

whether there was a significant difference between gender, age of realising a same-sex attraction and considering suicide. This is because all possible age groupings had expected cell counts of less than 5.

Self abuse was also mentioned. Vera is one participant who suffered low self esteem and low self worth, "I couldn't handle rejection mostly due to my childhood but also due to being a lesbian." Vera was sexually, physically and psychologically abused in childhood by her father and later also by her brother. "I genuinely thought there was something wrong with me. I was suicidal and slashing up." At this point she showed me scars on her arms. "I just couldn't cope. I overdosed and was diagnosed border line personality disorder and a manic depressive." Another woman, Susie, who comes from a very religious family said,

I hated myself because I knew that I liked other girls and these feelings were bad. I engaged in self harming behaviour, risk taking and cutting myself. At the time I don't think I knew why I harmed myself so much, but now I recognise it was because I hated myself and also because I repressed so much, cutting at least made me feel something ... physical pain rather than emotional pain.

Tara: the deviant/sinful bit meant that I dismissed my feelings as being part of a hedonistic, rebellious phase that I should just get out of my system, so that I could get on with the rest of my life. I thought that the deep dissatisfaction I was feeling would go once I was over it.

The feelings of low self worth and behaviours described are indicative of Cass' (1979; 1989) 'identity confusion' stage, where she explains that some individuals become self-hating and Coleman's earlier stages where he comments upon increased risks of self harm and suicide (1982). Internalised oppression, which influences whether or not an individual has a healthy self-esteem, can result in inner conflict, depression and potentially self harm, as is well described in the models of homosexual identity formation (see Troiden, 1989 Cass, 1989; 1990).

Clearly the context in which an individual forms a homosexual identity has a noteworthy impact on whether or not that period is a stressful one. Individuals in the community in which gay men or lesbians live believe in the stereotypes and thus create a climate of non-acceptance. Also lesbians and gay men who have internalised

the same negative beliefs about homosexuality then struggle both with their own identity and sense of self worth. Anne explained, “The stereotypes I was exposed to made me feel dreadful because I knew that I identified with all that was ‘wrong’. I was attracted to girls and was therefore all the bad things that gay people were” and Jeremy “If people described gays as sick, I felt sick. If they described them as feminine, I felt feminine ...”

Evidence discussed previously points to residents of rural areas holding more conservative values than urban areas. Traditionally conservative communities, more common to rural areas, may exacerbate such feelings. Frock (2002) studied internalised ‘homophobia’ of lesbians in a large city, a regional city and a small rural town in the USA. She found that lesbians from the smallest towns experienced the greatest level of internalised oppression. She also found a strong correlation between internalised oppression and psychological distress. Additionally the greater conservatism of rural areas may mean that the population is more likely to internalise negative attitudes about homosexuality and thus become less tolerant of what they see as deviance in their communities.

During the interviews for this study the major issue focussed on was the impact of living in, and coming out in, a regional and rural context. Sian’s experiences exemplifies a climate of non-acceptance in rural areas very well.

Sian: I did not tell many or any people about my sexuality. I was concerned about what people may think about me. I was living in an area where I only knew of one other lesbian who was in a relationship with a much older woman. I knew that she had copped heaps of shit from people in the area. I remember going to a ‘same-sex attracted dance’ and being very frightened about my future. I only started feeling better about myself and my future when I visited a major capital city and mixed in areas where I felt as though I was accepted for who I was.

Gerard spoke of two types of isolation of which he was acutely aware,

... from my own experience you are isolated because of any number of reasons. You may be isolated geographically, which to an extent I was simply because I was on a property 3 hours out of town. So there’s that sort of isolation. Or you may be isolated because you are locked into an

extremely small narrow social group that literally knows everything going on. So you can't afford to fall foul of that. One of the real issues (of being homosexual) is the level of stress that, that generates for you.

Tony became a homosexual in adulthood and believes that the isolation contributed to his late awakening. He felt that the indoctrination to marry and have children and lack of awareness of other options may have prevented exploration of his sexuality. The lack of awareness of options he attributes to,

... what also wasn't there because of the age group I am, was television. We didn't have television in our home until the late sixties although it became available in Australia ten years earlier than that. We lived out in the country. There were not influences from newspapers. The radio station the family listened to was the ABC so that was pretty conservative even then. So yeah, the opportunities to even start to think about such things were not there. There were no seeds being dribbled out of a bag to start thought processes. I didn't encounter the words gay or lesbian until I was in my late twenties.

Vernon is currently also experiencing the types of pressures that Tony had to get married and have a family.

Vernon: Now I get questions as to why I am not married and sorts of things which is all a bit difficult because all the country boys are normally married by the time they are 22. They're awkward questions particularly when all the cousins my age are all married, without exception.

However he also described the loneliness of gay men who choose to stay on farms.

Vernon: While they are running properties and all of those sorts of things, they are incredibly lonely because you are not going to get someone [another gay man] in the city to move up to the country. That is just not going to happen (because) it is not a great lifestyle choice if you have a nice job and everything in the city. They are really very lonely and I think the loneliness breeds a real vulnerability. One of the things I do notice is, over time, and meeting different country people, the number of them that have come to be HIV positive. Because they are stuck in the country and get to the city maybe once a month, once a quarter, depending on how far away they are and what time of the year it is and all of those sorts of things, and they just sort of go berserk ... as you do.

Vernon also commented on the lack of gay role models in rural areas.

That doesn't mean there aren't any but I certainly don't know any. I

hadn't actually met anyone who was gay that could make me think, 'Oh my god I am going to turn out like that' or 'He's a pretty cool guy'. I had no sort of model whatsoever to react with, or against.

One of the women interviewed spoke of the lack of anonymity in rural areas. Georgia "I have had 2 partners. They talk to each other, they talk to other people and it's all just a bit close. Sometimes [I wish I could] move away for a while. There's a difference between town and city. Here you can't get lost in the crowd."

Finally 15 women in this study indicated that they saw their lesbianism as a conscious choice (see table 4.38). Gottschalk (2000) found that women who had made a conscious choice to be lesbians generally embraced their chosen lifestyle without the periods of doubt and anxiety experienced by others.

#### ***4.2.3 Perceptions of Other Homosexuals***

The stereotypes depicted in table 4.10 also had an influence on how participants in this study viewed other homosexuals

It is interesting to note that even those who became lesbian and gay themselves were influenced relative to the way they perceived other homosexuals before, during and after they themselves had formed a homosexual identity. Before becoming a lesbian herself, Tara thought "... that gay men were interesting 'quaint' and fun to be with, the lesbians I found more threatening and was not sure how to relate to them," and Linda "I treated them like they had to be turned into heterosexuals and be saved."

Reports of violence against homosexuals as well as personal experiences of violence create a climate of fear. Fear of becoming a victim of homophobic attacks may well be a barrier to disclosure.

Lorna and Viki are two people who had internalised negative feelings about homosexuality prior to their own homosexual identity formation. Lorna recalled, " I thought the lesbian teacher was perverted and joined other students in picking on her." Viki said

It changed on and off over the years - from being totally okay and comfortable with them, to being turned off by the full on emphasis on sex with gay men to really believing that gay people could - with really good Christian counseling become straight ... when I decided to live with my partner, I spent quite a bit of time looking for the reasons people are gay.

People like Viki and Lorna then had to come to terms with their own developing sexuality from a base in which they were becoming something they had previously seen as undesirable.

On the other hand Robert described his attitude toward other homosexuals as, “Benign. My upbringing taught me not to judge others for their actions. My own homosexuality, despite my self denial, obviously allowed me to understand the problems that they were facing.” Claire saw Homosexuals as, … “ kind and caring people who appeared more happy than many heterosexual couples.”

The stereotypes and internalisation of associated attitudes affected many respondents. However there were also people for whom coming out was a happier event. Sam is one of the people in this study for whom homosexual identity formation was a relatively non-stressful one and points out how acceptance in the immediate environment can make homosexual identity formation a much less painful period, “My parents had many gay friends so I felt comfortable from a young age”. People like Sam and his parents clearly respected homosexual people as part of their community and Sam’s sentiments show how a context of acceptance and respect can result in less grief and pain.

#### ***4.2.4 Personal Feelings About Same-sex Attraction***

Participants had the opportunity to comment on the questionnaire about their feelings when they became aware of same-sex attractions. Personal feelings about same-sex attractions were also discussed during interviews. Clearly, as can be seen from table 4.12 not all participants in this study had negative feelings about their same-sex attraction and did not have feelings of low self worth. For example Justin’s reaction was "So that's what it is! 'Groovy!' or something like that. I mean, I'd never been

attracted to women, and now I knew why.” Kath, who says she became a lesbian as a result of a political commitment to feminism said that, “It was a healthy curiosity. I was married at the time and was somewhat puzzled by these feelings”

However as can be seen from table 4.12 there were many who felt less comfortable.

**Table 4.12: Personal feelings about same-sex attraction**

Feelings	Women		Men	
	n	% n55	n	% n40
Comfortable	13	23.6	5	12.5
Excited	29	52.7	11	27.5
Curious	23	41.8	17	42.5
Concerned	27	49.0	19	47.5
Confused	27	49.0	23	57.5
Scared	33	60.0	23	57.5
Thought there was something wrong with me	17	31.0	22	55.0
Disgusted with self	15	27.0	15	37.5
Thought life was not worth living	8	14.5	7	17.5
Considered suicide	16	29.0	12	30.0

Percentages refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

Many more women than men felt comfortable (23.6% and 12.5%) and excited (52.7% and 27.5%) about their same-sex attraction. Similar percentages of men and women had negative feelings. Both women and men felt confusion and fear and the feeling that there was something wrong with them.

There is a significant difference between gender and having positive feelings (comfortable or excited) ( $\chi^2 4.808$ , df = 1, p = .028). Of those who had positive feelings when they realised they had a same-sex attraction 65.6% were females (n = 42) while only 34.4% were males (n=22).

There is a significant difference between gender and feeling that there was something wrong with them ( $\chi^2 5.554$ , df = 1, p = .018). Of those who did not feel that there was something wrong with them when they realised they had a same-sex attraction 67.9% were females (n = 38) while 32.1% were males (n=18).

Care must be taken in interpreting the above data because when the multiple response question about personal feelings at the time of realising a same-sex attraction were assigned to ‘good’ ‘medium’ and ‘negative’ groups 78.5% of respondents were found to belong to more than one group.

Interestingly of the 77 valid cases (18 missing values) 62.3% had negative stereotype beliefs. Of those with negative beliefs 85.4% ( $n = 41$ ) had negative stereotype beliefs *and* conflicting feelings (having both positive and negative feelings) when realising a same-sex attraction. Of these 41 responses 46.3% were females ( $n = 19$ ) and 53.7% were males ( $n = 22$ ).

The most negative emotions and thoughts experienced by respondents were those related to suicide ideation. As noted previously, 17.5% men and 14.5% women thought that life was not worth living, including Lorna and Vera mentioned previously and Julian who twice attempted suicide. Twenty nine percent of women and 30% of men had considered suicide at some time. Some hoped that the feelings of same-sex attraction might go away or that they could resist them. For example Jodi said, “... after my teenage years I blocked it out for almost 30 years.”

Robert: I doubted myself to the point where I refused to even consider accepting my sexuality until a few months ago when I met someone to whom I was attracted and who actually spoke to me. Once I confronted the prejudices my upbringing had instilled in me, they were soon (within weeks) refuted, at which time I came out.

Some acted out their problems while, as was stated previously, a few just repressed them. Deirdre was very so unsure pretended to go out with boys. “I was scared of my friends’ reactions. I was depressed about myself and did some self mutilation at the time.”

Maggie: ... I thought that everyone in my life would reject me if I came out and as a consequence I thought that I would never be brave enough to come out. ... I really wanted to be straight and thought that if I forced myself to be with guys and not think about girls eventually I would become straight.

Barbara: I wished it would go away and at a younger age, the feeling wasn’t so strong - I thought I could go through life without being

with a woman - and I probably could have.

Susie: I clung to the advice in ‘Dolly’ magazine that it was ‘just a phase’. My negative feelings got worse when it didn’t pass.

Robert: Although I was conscious that I was attracted to my own sex from puberty if not before, because I was constantly told that homosexuality was a choice and a sinful one, I believed that I could ignore it and therefore I was not devastated by this knowledge.

Christina is an example of someone who struggled for a long time,

Christina: I had a very hard time coming to grips with my sexuality. It took me nearly 7 years to come out and that was only because of the help of a very close straight friend who was quite a bit older than me, say 7 years older.

For those who were married at the time they were coming out to self the confusion and anguish were exacerbated. This was more common for women as they were more likely to have been married, and more likely to take responsibility for children.

Tara: I was not sure what to do with my feelings, particularly once I realised that they were not going away, and were in fact getting stronger/more urgent. As time went on I was also confused because I had the ‘perfect’ life – a nice husband and two children, and yet I was getting more and more unhappy.

Sometimes the more negative feelings were to an extent relieved when the individual acknowledged their homosexuality. As Wendy said, “When I made the decision to live my life true to myself I felt a real freedom as well as fear. I dismantled my marriage, had a break down, took the children and left.”

An issue that was of concern to some men was the feeling of loss associated with the realisation that they would not have family and children. Clearly this was less of an issue for women, many of whom already had children or who had role models of lesbian mothers. For example John commented, “I wasn’t ready to come out. I thought I was bi (sexual) didn’t want to abandon wishes of being with a girl and having a family,” and Paul also, “When I discovered I was attracted to men, I was still under a false apprehension that I was bi-sexual. This was due to family values – ie I wanted kids.”

#### ***4.2.5 Summary Personal and Private Reflections***

The ideological context in which homosexual identity formation occurs influences the way a person perceives and experiences the world. The values, attitudes and beliefs held by society about homosexuality are usually also internalised by people forming a homosexual identity. The main beliefs or stereotypes held by lesbians and gay men are that they are sick or sinful, that they are immoral and thus a threat to society and that they should become heterosexual. Many respondents in this study had internalised those beliefs. Finally a stereotype that was widely believed by both lesbians and gay men was that homosexuals are gender inverted, that is masculinised or feminised. Many more gay men than lesbians believed in the negative stereotypes. Twice as many gay men (50%) than lesbians (23.6%) expected that homosexuals would lead lonely, unhappy and unfulfilled lives and 45.55% of lesbians, as opposed to 25% of gay men thought that same-sex sexuality reflected a natural expression of human sexuality.

The influences of those stereotypes were strong with 73% of men and 67% of women believing that their initial beliefs about the stereotypes had influenced their feelings of self worth during the homosexual identity formation process.

The idea of homosexuality as gender inversion has some insidious consequences especially for gay men. The idea of gay men as being feminised is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly the existence of the category gender identity disorder (GID) means that children not conforming to acceptable gender norms could come under the attention of psychiatrists who believe that a later homosexual orientation can be prevented. This was not explored in this study but the connection has been made in other research (see Rottneck, 1999). Secondly the marking of gender non-conformity in childhood gives a child a feeling of difference or not belonging which might have led to alienation. The converse of this is people experiencing same-sex attraction who did not have feelings of masculinity/feminisation who delayed acting on their same-sex attraction as they thought they couldn't be 'real' homosexuals. The most insidious effect for young males who do not conform to notions of masculinity (therefore by default were seen as feminine) was merciless teasing and bullying at school.

The roots of such attitudes and behaviour lie in the subordinate status of women relative to men and by behaving in a non-masculine (therefore feminine) manner a male is taking on a subordinate status. Robert Connell (1987 and 1995) discusses in depth the relationship between the subordination of women, the negative attitudes toward gay men (and their subordinate status) and notions of masculinity. The spurious connection of homosexuality and gender non-conformity is also discussed in Gottschalk (2003a). When it is considered that gender identity inversion is seen as a treatable psychiatric condition it is understandable that sickness was also a widely believed stereotype.

Sickness and sin are often merged in peoples' thinking about homosexuality and many twentieth century psychological researchers put forward theories that blur the margins. At the same time religious dogma blurs the margins by seeing the homosexual as a sick (and perhaps also immoral) person who commits sin if they have same-sex sexual relations. Beliefs such as 'seduction of heterosexuals and children' and 'threats to family and society' flow from the sinful stereotype.

Once again it was substantially more gay men than lesbians who believed these stereotypes. The ways in which such internalised beliefs affected lesbians and gay men during coming out have strong implications for mental health and well being. Substantial numbers of lesbians and more so gay men held negative feelings as they became aware of, and adapted to the fact that they were sexually attracted to their own sex. Thirty one percent of lesbians and 55% of gay men thought that there was something wrong with them. Twenty seven percent of lesbians and 37.5% of gay men felt disgusted with themselves and 29% of lesbians and 30% of gay men had at some stage considered suicide. The interviews, where peoples' experiences were explored in more depth revealed more negative feelings of anxiety and stress and self destructive behaviour such as 'slashing up'.

Whilst there are many negative stories of stress and trauma it is noteworthy that, although almost 50% of gay men and 30% of lesbians had some negative views and feelings there were many for whom the experience was less, or not, stressful and who indeed had positive emotions and described themselves as comfortable and excited. As

will be seen later in this report in section 4.10, the great majority of respondents are now accepting of their sexuality and content.

### **4.3 Experiences in the Family**

Ashley's description of his family portrays a common rural and regional picture.

Ashley: It probably was that, just the general overall thing. Because it wasn't the norm, coming from a family that is very straight, very average, the big family where everyone got married and had children and a lot of my cousins stayed on the farm. When I was growing up, my dad's family of 9 children. Most of them still lived around where we lived and their children still lived around where we lived. No-one ever went away and did anything different. A few have gone now.

Borhek (1983) and Savin-Williams (1989) discussed in depth the range of responses of parents to their children's homosexuality. While many lesbians and gay men in their studies spoke of supportive parents, all too many young people experienced rejection, abuse and even physical violence. In these studies fathers were found to react more negatively, and sons were more likely than daughters to experience negative reactions. Similarly in this study gay men experienced less acceptance and support from family than lesbians.

Participants in this study had both positive and negative experiences with their families. Parents too have internalised society's attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and perhaps helped to perpetuate them with reactions such as that described by Christina,

A lot of this was never discussed or came up in my environment. I do remember when I was 13 and a gay sex scene between 2 males came on TV and both my sister and mum said 'oh gross turn it off'. It made me feel really funny and very angry so I tried to argue with them that it wasn't gross and made them turn the channel back to where it was under the pretense that I wanted to watch it, which was half true. I just wanted them to watch it and change their mind.

How parents react to their children's or other family member's disclosure of homosexuality depends a number of factors, including their own beliefs about sexuality and the extent to which they had internalised the negative stereotypes discussed in the previous section.

We attempted to determine the influence, if any, of socio-economic (see table 4.13) on family reaction to children's homosexuality. While socio-economic status does not seem to be a factor in family reaction, there were too few responses to the question about reactions from parents to disclosure of homosexuality to apply meaningful statistical analysis.

**Table 4.13: Family of origin socio-economic status**

Socio-economic status	Women %	Men %
Low	36.7	32.4
Middle	61.2	50.0
High	2.0	17.6

It is interesting that many more men than women said they came from a high socio-economic background.

Some of the respondents had not disclosed to their parents or had disclosed selectively.

**Table 4.14: Disclosure of same-sex attraction to family**

		Mother %		Father %		Siblings %		Other relatives %	
<b>during questioning</b>	<b>Men</b>	2.6	97.4	0	100	0	100	8.1	91.9
	<b>Women</b>	12.2	87.8	6.4	93.6	18.4	81.6	19.6	80.4
<b>during identity formation</b>	<b>Men</b>	33.3	66.7	<b>18.4</b>	81.6	30.8	69.2	35.1	63.9
	<b>Women</b>	<b>43.2</b>	55.8	36.2	63.8	51.0	49.0	40.9	59.1

Percentages in this table refers to valid responses for each row category and bears no relationship to other row categories.

We sought to determine whether there were statistically significant gender differences in disclosure to mothers or fathers.

Only 8% of valid cases ( $n = 88$ ) confided to their mother at the time they were questioning their sexuality. Of these respondents 85.7% were female ( $n = 6$ ) and 14.3% were male ( $n = 1$ ). The numbers are too small for statistical analysis.

Only 3.6% of valid cases ( $n=84$ ) confided to their father at the time they were questioning their sexuality. Of these respondents 100% were female ( $n = 3$ ). The numbers are too small for statistical analysis.

There is no significant difference between gender and confiding in their mother when they were forming a homosexual identity ( $\chi^2 1.107$ , df = 1, p = .293). Of those who had confided in their mother 63.9% were females ( $n = 23$ ) compared with 36.1% of males ( $n = 13$ ).

There is no significant difference between gender and confiding in their father when they were forming a homosexual identity ( $\chi^2 3.267$ , df = 1, p = .071). Of those who had confided in their father 70.8% were females ( $n = 17$ ) compared with 29.2% of males ( $n = 7$ ).

During the time respondents were questioning their sexuality women more than men disclosed to parents, siblings and other family members though the majority in both cases did not disclose at all. As respondents were coming to accept their same-sex attraction and form a homosexual identity both women and men started to disclose more, though women still more so than men. Table 4.14 shows that men were more likely to disclose to mothers than to fathers during questioning of their sexuality (though only 2.6%), while choosing not to disclose to fathers at all. Women disclosed at this stage marginally more so. During homosexual identity formation both women and men disclosed though men less so especially to fathers. Disclosure to siblings revealed a similar reluctance by men who did not disclose at all during

questioning.

Most participants have only disclosed selectively.

Mary: The only people who know are a male friend, my ex husband, my lover and 2 girlfriends. Another girlfriend suspects and my mother suspects. My parents are 75 years old and quite conservative so I haven't told them.

Cheryll: Most of my family do not know I am gay. I live two lives, straight to the family and then the gay scene. My mother said it was just a stage when I told her and that if I didn't get through it (the stage) she knew a psychiatrist I could go to. My older sister never accepted. She said, 'I love you, but I don't want to hear about your perverted sexuality'. My sister is very religious. I grew up Catholic but I did not make the connection between the scripture and gayness because to me it (lesbianism) was about love not sex.

As noted previously a high level of religiosity of the person to whom lesbians or gay men disclose is consistently found to be correlated with a rejection of homosexuality and negative reactions to homosexuality. Vernon noted, "It wasn't until I was 30 that I actually told my father that I was gay. It was only because I was secure in a job and had made a life for myself in (city) and didn't care whether he liked it or not because he had to go back to (country town in which he grew up)." Vernon described his father's reaction,

That was interesting. He was extremely good at the five minutes silence. We had a lot of those. To give him credit, he was really trying and the first thing he did say after getting over the shock was, 'Well the most important thing is you are happy' and I thought that was good on the scale of what he could have come out with. Then he made it very clear that he doesn't really understand and he's not even going to pretend he understands. Certainly in terms of wanting to know about that part of my life, he doesn't want to know anything about it at all. That was made very clear. But it is very much 'I don't want to know about who you are seeing, I don't want to know about what you are doing. We'll talk about all the other aspects of your life but we are not going to discuss that one'. That was probably the best outcome that I could hope for.

Vernon's father was also very concerned about others in the community and the extended family finding out that his son was gay.

No-one else in the family knows (about my homosexuality). That was actually one of the other things that he (father) sort of said. I think that

was a combination of worrying about his reputation, but also I think, as he said, ‘The reality is if you ever want to come back here, even to visit, forget live, if you just want to come back here, and want people to accept you, you can’t have them knowing’. That’s the way the place (rural community) works.

Vernon reflected on a conversation with his mother when he was still a young adolescent. His hesitation about coming out is understandable given his recollection.

Vernon: I can’t even remember the context of the conversation but I had this conversation with my mother where I might have actually asked her what homosexuals were, plucked up the courage, had a bit of a fishing expedition, and her comment was, ‘You don’t need to know about those sorts of things’. I sort of persisted and she told me and it was basically, ‘They are men who like other men, they tend to spend a lot of time in toilet blocks’ which had me mystified and then I said, ‘What do they do?’ and with much distaste my mother finally told me. That kind of gave me a jolt hearing that, in the sense that it doesn’t sound all that bad to me, but you know it was very clear that my mother didn’t feel comfortable talking about it, didn’t want to. I never discussed it with my father then, so I never really had any sense of what they (homosexuals) were, apart from what was implied in my mother’s conversation with me, that it ain’t normal. If you are a homosexual you are not normal.

While Vernon’s father was accepting but distressed, other participants in this study described a variety of reactions. See table 4.15 for a summary.

**Table 4.15: Reaction to disclosure (parents)**

Reaction to disclosure	Mother				Father			
	Lesbians		Gay men		Lesbians		Gay men	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Accepting	14	25.4	5	12.5	11	20.0	3	7.5
Supportive	12	21.8	4	10.0	10	18.2	3	7.5
Distressed	9	16.4	6	15.0	6	10.9	1	2.5
Angry	6	10.9	2	5.0	4	7.3	4	10.0
Physically violent	0	0	0	0	1	1.8	0	0
Abusive	3	5.4	0	0	1	1.8	1	2.5
Other	4	7.3	3	7.5	4	7.3	0	0

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

No Chi Square test could be performed to establish whether there is a significant difference between the reactions of mothers and fathers to gay sons and lesbian

daughters. This is because of the low response rates. There are many missing values in this section however it can be seen that both mothers and fathers were less likely to be supportive of gay sons and slightly more supportive of lesbian daughters. Table 4.16 shows that men did not readily disclose to fathers, presumably anticipating negative reactions.

**Table 4.16: Reactions to disclosure (siblings and other relatives)**

Reaction to disclosure	Siblings				Other relatives			
	Lesbians		Gay men		Lesbians		Gay men	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Accepting	23	41.8	7	17.5	12	21.8	6	15.0
Supportive	19	34.5	7	17.5	10	18.2	8	20.0
Distressed	4	7.3	1	2.5	5	9.0	1	2.5
Angry	3	5.4	1	2.5	3	5.4	0	0
Physically violent	0	0	2	5.0	1	1.8	0	0
Abusive	3	5.4	0	0	1	1.8	0	0
Other	1	1.8	2	5.0	0	0	1	2.5

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

Georgia's brother had difficulty accepting her lesbianism. At a family function he referred to her relationship as "dirty laundry". She explained,

My brother is really coy with women and I made a joke about it, and everyone laughed and he said 'Air your dirty laundry. Let's hear your dirty laundry' and I said, 'If that's the way you want to look at it, fine'. Mum stuck up for me and we (brother) haven't spoken to each other since, not properly.

For Jacob coming out to his sisters was positive. "Yes I started to tell my sisters. I can't remember how I told them. I told them all one at a time. They all reacted well so that was fine." He told his parents when he was twenty eight in a letter which "... was very really carefully and beautifully written." He had been home many times to try and tell them but it just never seemed to be the right time. His decision to tell them in a letter, "... was easiest for me because I felt words would be exchanged and I would become emotional." The letter proved to work well because he was able to tell them how he really felt and why he was telling them and whom he had already told. The only regret Jacob had was that he had put all that pressure on his mother

who had to give the letter to his father. The initial response to it was,

... that I wasn't to talk about it when I came home, never to bring anyone home with me, never to tell my Grandmother. And I was OK with that and I was prepared for that because I had realised it had taken me this long to accept my own sexuality and that part of me will take them a while to get used to it.

Jacob recognised the potential difficulties for his family if it were known in their rural community that he was gay.

I live in the city and they live in the country. In (country town) I am still not really out. I don't really see the need to because I don't live there any more. I would like to think of myself as this role model for others to come out but with as small minded as people in a country town can be. And they are very homophobic. I often think how that would reflect on my parents ... They've got their friends there and how they would deal with that ... I really haven't done that.

The reactions from other family members and the community was also an issue for the mother of Oliver who initially would not allow him to visit with his partner,

I said (to mother) the next point that I want to raise (with you) is that one of the most difficult things from my relationship to do with you was the fact that you wouldn't allow us to come here. So we had a long discussion all around that and why she took that stand and all these sorts of issues; all of which was totally illogical and connected with all sorts of prejudices that she had. All sorts of expectations about what her family, her side of the family would think.

Deirdre also wrote a letter to her parents,

I confided in my family when I was about 20 and not living at home. I told my sister first and wrote a letter to my parents. My sister and brother were both very accepting and supportive. My mother and father were shocked and upset and blamed themselves, but over time became very supportive. My mother asked my sister, 'what do lesbians do in bed?"

Georgia: My family? Whenever they ring up I don't talk about my personal life at all. They don't ask if I've met anyone, where I go, what I do, because they know it's mostly gay orientated. So it's just trivial stuff that we talk about over the phone now. I ask how they are, and phone calls are getting fewer and fewer. Mum doesn't ring as often as she did. The sister that I'm not allowed to see her children, the last time I spoke to her was Christmas and we used to ring each other once a week! There wouldn't be any other reason. I mean the whole Christmas thing, to not have my partner, that was the real truth

that came out then. If I had not had intentions of taking (partner) with me I would not have ever known really how much they felt against her.

Maggie: (parents) are accepting in the sense that I know they know and they haven't kicked me out of the house. But they refuse to talk to me about anything that relates to my sexuality. ... I never spoke to them about my relationship with (partner). But I think they knew that we were together because my mother said to me several times that she, 'didn't want *that* girl in our house' and that she didn't think I should spend time with her because she was bad influence on me.

Maggie did have strong support from another family member, though also aggression from a brother.

Maggie: My uncle approached me and asked if I was gay and when I said yes, he was really happy and told me that he was gay too.... My brother worked out that I was gay and when I was younger used to hit me, but now he is just verbally abusive or doesn't talk to me at all. At the time I was discovering I was gay, he used to threaten that he would 'out me' (tell others about her sexuality) and say it would ruin my life.

Margaret: My mother said she thought so. Dad was so distressed that I thought he would disown me but both were not happy. Mum said as long as you are happy, what does it matter. Other relatives just smiled and were polite. Siblings all said they were disappointed they would not see my children.

Oliver had mixed reactions from his siblings. While one brother said,

'Good on you, that's great, I do what I like, you do what you like' my sister appeared very supportive at first and then proceeded to wreak havoc by ringing all my friends and ringing anybody she could think of and screaming and yelling. And ringing me and abusing me over the phone and creating all sort of havoc. I would say five years later that she is only just coming to a point where she actually accepts me and my partner, and the fact that I am a human being, and still allowed to live inside the family.

The issues around married women and men coming out are complicated. On the one hand the family of the person coming out feel empathy to their children's spouses. At the same time there is also concern for the children who find themselves with a homosexual parent and a broken home.

Tony: The day I left my marriage I rang my brother and my two sisters to tell them what had happened. They and their children have virtually

all been supportive. Whereas at that point my younger sister has subsequently sided more with, if sided is the right word, more with my ex-wife. But still there's contact there and I have very good contact with her children so ...

The common stereotypes that homosexuals are paedophiles or a bad influence on children was an issue that arose in some families, especially if the lesbians or gay men had children and/or if their siblings had children. The experiences of Georgia and Kath best reflect this, "My sister and I used to swap children during the holidays, now she won't let them come here. They haven't been for a couple of years. I only catch up with them at Christmas time. It's very disappointing."

Kath: To this day I do not know how my brother and sister in law and nieces feel about it. It is never mentioned but the children *never* come and visit. I suspect their mother believes we are 'sick' and does not want her girls to spend time with us - the girls are 10 and 8 years old.

Georgia described coming out to her family as "probably the worst" thing she had to go through. Georgia, like many lesbians and gay men with children had to come out to her children as well as parents and siblings. "The children were good. The eldest daughter wasn't for about three months. But she was more upset that I had lied to her. Now she's good. I think that most of her friends know." When Georgia's daughter confided about her mother's lesbianism to a friend the response was unexpected. As Georgia explained the daughter's friend's response,

'There is something I haven't told you. My mother is gay and has been living with someone for 5 years and they have had an IVF baby'. She (daughter) said to me, 'Mum, you wouldn't believe this' I said 'See, it was meant to happen. You were meant to talk to (friend)'. I'm glad she has someone to talk to about it. The boys (Georgia's sons) say, 'Good on you Mum, do what you want to do.'

While many family members, especially parents were initially upset or shocked, many eventually became supportive, especially so when they saw that their children were still 'normal' people and were happy.

Gary: My mother and step-father have always supported who I am since a very early age. My real father does not and will not accept me. My only other sibling is my older sister who is also gay and she did not accept me when I told her. She still has her own demons to deal with when it comes to (our) sexuality.

#### **4.3.1 Summary experiences in the family**

Disclosure to parents during questioning of same-sex attraction was avoided by both lesbians and gay men, but especially by men. No men confided in fathers or siblings during this stage. Both lesbians and gay men were more likely to come out to parents during the time they were forming a homosexual identity though still less so to fathers than to mothers. Women were more likely to confide in both mothers and fathers than men.

Disclosure to family members elicited mixed reactions. Most parents were very supportive according to the questionnaire responses, but more were accepting and supportive of lesbians than gay sons. Many more lesbians disclosed to siblings and received positive reactions. Men disclosed to siblings or to other relatives marginally more so than to parents. Interview responses provided more depth.

Commonly parents placed a big value on ‘as long as you are happy’ though at the same time may struggle with accepting their children’s sexuality, block it out, or have a fear that their children are sick, committing sin or may end up lonely and unhappy. A common reaction was limited acceptance in that respondents were welcome in the family home but had restrictions placed on them such as they should not bring partners home and so forth. Not infrequently parents were rejecting.

Siblings were more likely to be accepting and supportive and parents (at least the parents of those who answered this question) were also relatively accepting and supportive. It is worth noting though that acceptance and support was much more likely for lesbians than for gay men.

Married lesbians and gay men forming a homosexual identity and choosing to leave their marriage experienced greater family pressure because of concerns for the children of the marriage. Interestingly most children of lesbian or gay parents were accepting of their parents’ sexuality.

#### **4.4 School Experiences**

The majority of participants in this study, especially men, were aware of same-sex

attractions during their school years. For them, becoming aware of same-sex attractions during their adolescent years, there was firstly the issue of coming to terms with homosexuality at an age when they were still developing their sense of self. Secondly there was the problem of dealing with their reactions of others, such as, students, teachers, family and the wider community. This section explores the school experience of those respondents who started the coming out process during adolescence.

Table 4.17 shows the extent of disclosure at school and the extent to which teachers and fellow students might have known. The figures here suggest that either male homosexuals were more easily recognisable, or that they were more likely to come out. Table 4.14 however suggests that they were reluctant to come out, at least to family and the wider community. It is also possible that male gender non-conformity was more the reason that they were singled out.

Cass (1979) notes that the first stage of homosexual identity formation which is the ‘Who am I? What am I?’ questioning stage, starts with an ‘event’ which has brought to the attention of the individual that they are in some way different. According to Cass it is this that starts the questioning process. So it is also possible that being singled out for gender non-conformity triggered feelings of difference which in turn led to a questioning of sexuality. This current study however does not attempt to explore such a connection and reports only on experiences of disclosure.

**Table 4.17: Disclosure at school and the extent to which teachers and fellow students were aware**

	Females		Men	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
Teachers know	9.8	31.4	20.5	33.3
Students know	14.0	32.0	43.6	25.6

Table does not total 100% because the ‘not sure’ category is excluded.

Vernon, who is now in his 30s, lived in a rural area and like many other boys from the country he went to a boarding school. While the boarding school experience has its own

unique characteristics (Hufer, 1998) Vernon's story poignantly reveals the isolation and anguish experienced by young homosexuals. "There used to be little talks about having particular friends and all of these sorts of things, all of which were really aimed at the fact that as young boys there were things that you were not supposed to do together." Vernon said that he knew he was gay at age 13,

... there was no question about it. I had had enough experience to realise that that's what I enjoyed and I sort of began to realise that while I enjoyed the company of girls, I wasn't even vaguely interested in any sexual way. So this whole sort of thing of groups of boys talking about 'Hasn't she got great tits' and all of that kind of stuff, you play along with it for survival but you realise that it just doesn't mean anything to you at all. But I suppose in terms of coming out, there wasn't much activity at all, probably until I was 21. I was very careful not to do anything overt and certainly with all of the experiences I had through school, I was never the person who made the first move.

While he personally did not disclose his sexuality except to a chosen few he described the experiences of those who were suspected of being, or were known to be, gay.

Vernon: Then probably Year 9 or Year 10, perhaps the end of Year 9, I had a friend of mine that subsequently, after school, confirmed to us that, yes he was gay, and was being picked on really unmercifully ... and bastardisation at boarding school takes on a life of its own. That was an interesting period because my conscience was telling me you just don't throw your friend to the lions but the sort of survival instinct was saying, 'Shut up, keep your head down, pretend you don't know anything about what's going on and you'll sail through'. So anyway, in the end conscience got the better of me and I ended up sticking up for him. So that made things extremely difficult. The interesting thing, one of the things that used to get at me precisely, was that I stuck up for my friend. I was a poofter lover. I wasn't necessarily a poofter myself, I was a poofter lover. I suppose in the scheme of things that was close enough to the real thing not to have any meaningful difference. There would be things like if you had to queue, you would get shoved out of the queue, you would get pushed out of the queue, and you wouldn't be able to get you place back again, so you would have to join the back of the queue.

The consequences of supporting his friend was immediate and harsh.

Vernon: That was predictably the worst thing I could have done because as soon as I did that, I immediately had to be a poofter as well and all of that kind of stuff. So suddenly having gone from being

moderately popular and, I suppose, comfortable in the whole social structure, I suddenly found that I was totally isolated. And you know, the irony was, that at the time no-one actually knew that I was gay. So we spent probably a good 12 months together at school because there was no-one else to speak to. Which meant things like you'd be eating in the dining room and there would be the two of you at the table and no-one else would sit with you and when you are in a dining room of maybe 800 or 900 boys, that's a humiliating experience to go through, so anyway...

Supporting someone who was gay or thought to be gay meant self-incrimination to other boys. A person did not actually have to be gay to be labelled as gay.

The existence of gender non-conforming behaviour was a major factor. The implications of the stereotype that gay men are feminised and lesbians masculinised are profound for adolescents but the negative consequences for school age boys are significantly greater than for girls.

Haldeman (2000, p194) contends that “society endorses masculine behaviour more readily than feminine behaviours” and cites D’Augelli who pointed out that tomboys are mimicking the more desired masculine behaviours. As both girls and boys learn, through the construction of masculinity (Connell, 1987 and 1995; Messner, 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1994), that male characteristics and behaviour are desirable, it is indeed unlikely that tomboys (who are like boys) are harassed by gender conforming girls, in the same way that male sissies are harassed by gender conforming boys. Peplau, Garnets, Spalding, Conley, and Venegas (1998, p.392) claim that they are not harassed. They cited studies that found tomboys to be “popular, cooperative, helpful, supportive of others … and were regarded as leaders”. Indeed that they were just as popular as gender conforming girls.

According to John Money, (1986) gender conformity is more important for boys, and boys are watched more closely than girls for gender non-conforming behaviour. They are also more likely to be heavily sanctioned. This is confirmed by Thorne (1990, p.110) who cautions on the need to consider social processes. Thorne explains that in late primary school, sissies are more often teased and harassed by both girls and boys, while tomboys are less stigmatised and do not experience the same level of derision (1990).

On the contrary Peplau et al. acknowledge that while, “In the eyes of many children (both sexes) and adults, a sissy’ is about the worst thing that a boy can be” (1998, p.392) they cite another study that found “children rated the girls who played a masculine game with boys as most popular and the boy who played a feminine game with girls as least popular” (1998, p.392). It was the boys in this study, rather than girls who suffered for gender non-conforming behaviour.

Jacob: I think initially I was never interested in playing with boys. I think I did all the stereotype things (rough and tumble play, sports etc) which didn’t help. I preferred the company of girls. I got along better with the girls and I think that was because I was picked on by the boys. Initially that was because I was identified as different because of the way I spoke. I think it really went from name calling which would be poofter, faggot, hand jabber and all sorts of horrible things.

Brian: Certainly there would have been harassment, there’s no question of that. If I’d said to kids at school ‘I’m gay’ I knew I would be bashed up, I knew I’d be teased. … so I obviously wasn’t very sporting and that was probably, in a country town, the biggest thing that set you apart, particularly in light that my father was very into sport. Probably, in a way, that protected me a bit because the other kids sort of respected him because of his involvement … but I knew I would have copped it if I’d said anything. It would have been very hard … you know, there’d be the ‘poofter’ remarks, and ‘sissy’. You did not want to be labelled that way and I can remember certainly trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. And I know that’s affected later in my relationship that I’d keep very quiet … so you learn to be very low profile.

Further there seemed to be an historical difference relative to negativity experienced at school. In the 1990s and 2000s the words lezzo, dyke, poofter and faggot seemed to be more commonly used terms of abuse than in earlier decades. These terms and the word gay are also used to refer to people or things that are viewed negatively in some way. For example the word ‘gay’ has been generalised to mean stupid or silly, in much the same way that the word ‘spastic’ or ‘spas’ was used in earlier decades.

Susie: Faggot, poof and gay were constantly yelled throughout the playground and the teachers didn’t stop it. Those teachers that did try to stop it then came under suspicion for being gay themselves. This just reinforced that being gay was a terrible thing.

Jacob: It was always a dirty word, being called a poof is the lowest thing you can call someone. The lowest of lowest. I was made to feel dirty. I felt dirty and I had been teased for my life right from primary

school which had had nothing to do with my sexuality. I had coke bottle glasses; I still had a speech impediment; I had a hearing aid that was visible. So when I moved into secondary school and having to cope with all of that sort of stuff ... I never felt good about myself.

Vernon: Most of the talk at school just didn't gel with the way I sort of understood the world and what aroused me and those sorts of things. And I suppose growing up in the country you sort of realise that calling someone a poofster has a number of uses to it. It is a way of telling someone that their taste is bad, it's a way of socially controlling a particular form of behaviour or an attitude. So I suppose through all those sorts of things you realise very quickly that that's what you are, that it's not a good thing to be, you keep to yourself.

It is hard to measure the effect on a young person who is experiencing same-sex attractions to hear words that are used to label homosexuals commonly used in an abusive way. The influence of the way in which terms of abuse for homosexuals are used in the school yard is perhaps reflected in table 4.18.

**Table 4.18: Other students reaction to disclosure**

Students' General Reaction	Women n	Men n
Accepting	2	2
Supportive	2	2
Distressed	0	0
Angry	0	7
Physically violent	0	13 = 32.5%
Abusive	2	15 = 37.5%
Other	4	1

Percentages refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

Few respondents answered the question related to other students reaction in the questionnaire, though some elaborated in the interviews. Nevertheless the data show that a noteworthy number of gay men were abused by fellow students and experienced physical violence, whereas women by and large were spared such reactions.

Justin: I recall that I was accused of being queer at primary school and at the time it was just ordinary abuse, no matter how prescient; at uni I was asked why I was reading the gay classifieds (because they were there - literally, on the coffee table).

Jacob: I did have a nickname in secondary school which was 'Poofter' which I still find very difficult to say, but I guess my experience was not just not mental, it was physical .... I would say all but one male in my class was involved in verbal and physical abuse. Physical abuse was I guess being felt up, probably the easiest way to put it. I tended to stay in safe places as much as possible. Places like the library, school yard but never venturing anywhere where I could be singled out. I guess I didn't feel safe anywhere. I would be groped in a classroom right in front of a teacher under a desk. The teacher wouldn't even know what was going on but all the other students knowing about it. It started to slow down in form three I guess. It was really humiliating.

Such experiences were not only humiliating for Jacob. His extreme anxiety, stress and consequent feelings of low self worth caused him to consider suicide.

Jacob: I do have very vivid memories of suicide ideation I suppose and I do know that I didn't actually want to kill myself but I didn't know how else to express to these people how much they are hurting me. I had a fantasy where I would walk past a group of students and they would tease me and I would have a coke bottle in my hand in my fantasy I would drop it and it would smash and I would pick up the glass and slash my wrist. I never actually did that but it was just visually showing them how much they were hurting me. I didn't know how else to show them how much pain I am in about what they're doing. And that was quite a regular fantasy.

There was marginally more support for lesbians, minimal abuse and no experience of physical violence. Cheryll describes how she,

... told some mates, both genders, at high school. They were good friends. One male friend pretended to be my boyfriend to keep others off my back. I also spoke to a young female teacher. She was great; she had just come from uni. She spoke positively of gays.

Maryanne: Most of the students didn't care, though once a student yelled out on a bus 'Are you a lesbian?' It made me stop and really think about my sexuality and calling myself a lesbian. Although I didn't like it being yelled at like that, especially when I was trying to come out to my friends and sus out their opinions on gays.

There were few responses to this question in the questionnaires but of those responses the reactions of teachers was also mixed.

**Table 4.19: Teachers Reaction to disclosure**

Teacher's General Reaction	Women	Men
Accepting	2	1
Supportive	4	2
Distressed	1	2
Angry	0	1
Physically violent	0	3
Abusive	0	4
Other	1	3

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

Some teachers were supportive.

Lynette: The teachers who I came out to were very supportive. Other teachers did not know I was a lesbian, but homophobic comments were occasionally made in the school environment by teachers, and this slowed my coming out process

However teachers were not always supportive. It seems that teachers, like students, were less accepting and more aggressive toward young males who they thought were homosexual. One gay man reported that a teacher had been physically violent. The reaction of one of Jacob's teachers when Jacob went to him for help is etched in his memory.

Jacob: I do remember in Year 9 it being quite important that I really couldn't take it any more being called these names in class and actually going up to a teacher that I really trusted, and telling this teacher that they were calling me these names, which was Poofter. At that time I didn't even know what it meant, but I just knew it was meant to be dirty. Having got up, and god knows where I got the strength to do it, but to get up in front of that class of boys and tell the teacher they are calling me this name and being told by this teacher to go back to my seat and sit down. The humiliation of telling an adult that I thought I could tell and not getting the response that I needed, was just even more shaming. So never really telling another adult again really, in fact trying to hide it, almost that I had told someone and I wanted to take it back.

Cheryll, the only woman who reported a negative reaction from teachers, explained how, "I told a girl from my netball team that I cared for her, she told her parents and I was kicked off the netball team despite being the 'all star' goal defence." Deirdre's teachers were more concerned about close friendships, presumably concern about temptation, "I was in a girls' catholic school and the nuns told me I needed to get over my crushes with other girls. I seemed to fall in love with several older students."

Nevertheless the knowledge that having a crush on an older students was considered to be unacceptable, had other consequences for people such as happened to Jodi.

Jodi: As a teenager I had a crush on a same-sex teacher, as do many students. But being in a religious family I knew it was unacceptable, so I totally blocked it out, even though I rebelled against my parents and the church. It wasn't until the year 2000 I seriously thought about my sexuality. After 2 marriages and a child. In 2002 I finally told someone - what a weight off my shoulders!

#### ***4.4.1 Summary School experiences***

In the school context, the issue of gender non-conformity and homosexuality were often confused. More men than women reported that fellow students and teachers probably knew about their sexuality. The reason for this is not clear. It may have been that the negative reactions experienced by them, were because of known homosexuality, or presumed homosexuality, because the boys were gender non-conforming. Boys, in particular, were labelled homosexual because of not conforming to notions of masculinity and not engaging in activities such as rough and tumble play in which it is thought normal boys should engage.

Being labelled homosexual at school resulted in pervading fear and flight from something that has become part of a popular culture; the use of labels for homosexuality as a general term of bullying or abuse. In the school context in the 2000s, being labelled a poofter, lezzo or even gay does not necessarily mean homosexual. It may also mean things like 'you are (or that is) stupid'. There can be little doubt in the minds of school age adolescents that homosexuality is bad. Table 4.18 clearly shows that coming out to other students can result in negative reactions. Thirty two point five percent of males said they had been abused and 37.5% said they had been physically assaulted (note that the same respondents may have ticked both responses).

Fewer respondents indicated that they came out to teachers. Of those who did, lesbians were treated with acceptance and support whereas men were treated with abuse.

Girls had an easier time of it at school though a few spoke of difficulties. This trend was repeated in the wider community.

#### 4.5 Wider Community

As discussed previously a sense of well being to the general community, as well as the homosexual community, is perhaps important to a sense of well being and mental health. In this section the attitudes of people in the communities in which respondents lived when they were coming out is explored. Rather than focussing on adolescents alone, the experiences of forming a homosexual identity in adolescence and in adulthood is integrated in the discussion.

The attitudes of friends and neighbours is the main focus here. The attitudes of work colleagues, ministers of religion and health workers is included in table 4.20 but will be discussed in depth in sections 4.7, 4.8 and 4.9.

Initially respondents were asked about the extent to which they were aware of attitudes towards homosexuality, even though they may not have been physically or verbally assaulted themselves.

**Table 4.20: Awareness of attitudes toward other homosexuals**

	Women		Men	
	n	%	n	%
negative comments	49	89.0	28	70.0
homosexuals abused/bashed	43	78.2	24	60.0
prejudice/discrimination	45	81.8	27	67.5

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

Eighty-nine percent of lesbians and 70% of gay men in this study indicated that they had heard negative comments made about homosexuals. Seventy-eight percent of lesbians and 60% of gay men were aware of homosexuals being abused or bashed and 81.8% of lesbians and 67.5% of gay men were aware that homosexuals were actively discriminated against. Table 4.20 gives the numbers who answered in each category.

Maggie: I was too frightened to come out in Ballarat because I often heard a lot of negative comments made about lesbians and I'd seen the

way a lesbian couple lost all of their friends when people found out they were gay.

Conversely Ashley, although he was aware of discrimination and oppression of homosexuals was also aware of some acceptance.

Ashley: Near where (other person's) farm was, there actually was an old gay couple and they were quite well accepted by the community. They were probably in the 50s or 60s when I was growing up and they were known as Mr and Mrs (xxx). They weren't alienated in any way but there were joked about. But people have accepted them.

#### ***4.5.1 Disclosure to friends and their reaction***

Homosexuals who are facing the decision about whether or not to disclose their sexuality to family, friends and others would take into consideration their understanding of how others had been treated when their sexuality became known. It is not surprising then that less than half of the male respondents (46.2) disclosed to friends. On the other hand women were more likely to disclose to friends (72.2%). This may be explained in terms of the greater abuse and discrimination experienced by gay men for reasons of sexuality.

Robert was one respondent determined not to be put off by possible negative reactions.

Robert: I decided that having accepted that I was gay, if any of my family or friends was unable to accept me because of it (having explained the reasons for my decision to accept who I am) I would rather not pretend to have a relationship with people who could not overcome their prejudices. If someone does not like or love me now now that I've told them I am gay, then their attachment to me was always obviously superficial. I have always been gay, they just never knew. In fact all the people I have told, with the exception of one close friend, have told me that they never for a moment thought I might be gay.

Others were not as open as Robert. Vernon talked about the double life lived by most homosexuals, having to hide their sexuality from many for fear of discrimination and/or abuse but disclosing selectively to those they felt they could trust.

Vernon: I was sort of living a schizophrenic existence where I was completely straight with my straight friends who knew nothing about this other side of what my life was. And even moving to (city) didn't

quite solve the problem. It gave me an outlet, but it gave me an added complication in the sense that I now had a very active part of my life that I had to keep disguised from everyone else I knew. Finally I took the plunge and told a friend that had been about three years ahead of me at school and we met up again at university and became really good friends. I had told (friend) about, what was going on, thinking 'It's got to come out one day', and much to my surprise (friend) was actually OK with the whole thing. Lots of the 'I'm not gay myself of course but I know lots of people that are'.

Table 4.21 shows how friends and peers reacted to disclosure of sexuality. It can be seen from the number of responses that women more than men confided in friends.

**Table 4.21: Reaction of same-sex and opposite-sex peers**

	Same-sex peers reaction n		Opposite-sex peers reaction n	
	To lesbians	To gays	To lesbians	To gays
Accepting	29	13	16	14
Supportive	28	6	14	10
Distressed	3	1	4	0
Angry	3	1	2	0
Physically violent	4	0	0	0
Abusive	0	3	0	0
Other	7	2	9	1

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

The interviews also revealed that same-sex friends and opposite sex friends react differently to lesbians and to gay men. Same-sex friends were much more accepting and supportive to lesbians than opposite friends and women were more likely to confide in same-sex friends than men. Whereas for gay men the reaction was somewhat similar from both same-sex and opposite sex friends.

Men were less likely than women to confide in friends, but when they did so they were more likely to confide in women friends than in same-sex friends whereas women clearly preferred to confide in same-sex friends.

Ashley: Right through school my closest friends were female. I didn't have many male friends. That is still the case to an extent. I have got a couple of close gay male friends but some of my closest friends are straight females.

Tony: I was working with the (xxx) company at the time and there were colleagues, both male and female that I was able to talk to about this and they were good. I'd have to say probably more so the females than the males. There were a couple who come to mind right now who

were most supportive when I came out.

For women the majority of same-sex friends were accepting and supportive, though there were also examples of rejection. According to Tara, “Some friends reacted with great support, and some left – never speaking to me again.” And Mary, while holidaying with a heterosexual friend, observed,

... a couple of women on the bus tour who were obviously very close and I became a companion to them. The friend I went with said ‘I hope people don’t think we’re a couple.’ On one hand she supported me (but) there were comments that were really hurtful. My friend was extremely good support but there have been times where her own stuff has got in the way.

In extreme cases friends became serious enemies. There were also cases of serious abuse. Cheryll told how she was raped by a male ‘friend’ for being a lesbian. “I was 23 years old.” At times there was brutal, sadistic punishment. Wilma tells a chilling story,

My friend rejected me but later ... she called me and asked to meet her in the lane. I went in the hope that she had changed her mind. I remember it was very dark. I saw her in the distance and started walking towards her. I couldn’t work out why she wasn’t coming forward. The next moment I felt myself being thrown to the ground, something cold against my neck. Fear set in, I couldn’t scream in shock. I felt male pricks going in. Everywhere laughter in the background. And when it was finished a few kicks in the ribs and the parting words ‘dicks are better than cunts’ and (friend [sic]) was in the background laughing.

According to Susan Brownmiller gang rape is used as a social control mechanism to keep women in line, in this case to give her heterosexual experience, or to make her heterosexual, as well as to humiliate and degrade (1976). It is punishing a woman for daring to be a lesbian and to reject men.

#### ***4.5.2 Reaction of the wider community to disclosure***

Table 4.22 explores the reactions of people with whom lesbians and gay men normally come into regular contact.

**Table 4.22: Reaction from wider community**

Wider community	Neighbours	Work colleagues	Ministers of religion	Medical workers	Other
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	<b>L</b>	<b>G</b>								
Accepting	13	2	22	6	3	0	11	4	5	1
Supportive	3	3	13	5	2	0	4	2	4	0
Distressed	1	0	3	1	5	0	3	0	2	0
angry	2	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	3	2
Physically violent	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Abusive	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2	0

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

L: lesbians      G: Gay men

Few gay men and less than 50% of the lesbians answered this question. From the figures available, once again neighbours, work colleagues and medical workers were more accepting of lesbians than of gay men. Ministers of religion on the other hand were more likely to be distressed, though occasionally supportive of females (see also section 4.8 for a discussion about the implications of religion). Kate told a Minister of religion, “... he told me he'd had success at curing those types,” and Susie, “My extended family told my sister to pray for me and that eventually I would see the light. This put a wedge between me and my sister that I doubt we will ever overcome.” Lena said, “My neighbours would not talk to me, totally ignored me, even in front of my parents. They had been neighbours for 18 years.”

Tara: I had a lesbian couple as neighbours for a while, we were a great comfort for each other at different times. Work colleagues either thought it was irrelevant or were fine with it and I chose not to tell those I thought couldn't handle the information or who displayed homophobic attitudes. I chose to challenge their attitudes rather than ‘come out’ to them, and because I had long hair they did not assume I was a lesbian. I felt this was more productive than coming out, as I was quite vocal in my challenging and I also wasn't sure that I would be able to cope with rejection or outright homophobia thrown at me.

Male respondents in this study seemed reluctant to answer this question so few figures are available. Those men who were interviewed spoke more freely.

Brian: So this particular friend had a party. It was mutual friends of theirs who were having the party and I didn't get an invitation. I didn't think anything of it really because I had only known this person for probably five, six or seven years even though I was around the house a lot. I suppose three or four weeks later, she apologised to me and said that this particular person, the husband of the friend who put on the party, would not have me in the house because I was gay. So I thought ‘Oh, oh’. I was really quite surprised. I didn't think that would still exist, but it did, and it wasn't that long ago.

Tony: It would have been different influences on me but the country influence was strong, unconsciously and unwittingly suppressive and sadly I think still is. However I'd have to balance that by saying now living back in the country up here (partner) and I hide nothing about the fact that we're an item and we're accepted very, very well in this community. We can walk into the town down there and talk to anybody we want to and not feel a sense of homophobia or anything like that. We've been invited to a few homes in the district. The next door neighbours come over with their kids and we just talk like you and I are talking right now. It's not a problem.

Tony felt that there had been a change in the attitude of people in rural areas, "I go back to the Wimmera now and again. People I was brought up with accept me very, very well. There's the odd one who doesn't, and you know what, they're the ones who are still tightly tied to the church."

For married respondents with children, the same concern held for children by family was expressed by the wider community. Viki commented that, "People were mostly concerned about my children - not me." By this she meant that the concern of others was that her children would have problems being raised in a lesbian relationship.

The commonly held stereotypes about homosexuality were also terms of abuse aimed at participants by family and various members of the community. See table 4.23.

**Table 4.23: Stereotypes used as terms of abuse**

Stereotypes Homosexuals are:	Mother	Father	Neighbour	Minister religion	Medical doctor	Psychologist psychiatrist
Child molesters (paedophiles)	3	3	1	3	0	0
Seduce heterosexuals	1	3	2	2	0	0
Will be lonely, unhappy, unfulfilled	13	7	1	5	1	0
Are sick	7	8	6	4	0	1
Are deviant	8	7	5	7	0	0
Are sinful	9	5	5	8	0	0
Try to turn young people into gays	0	9	4	3	0	0
Are a threat/danger to the family	7	4	2	7	0	1
Lesbians are masculine (butch)	3	4	5	3	1	2
Gay men are feminine	4	5	2	3	1	1

(faggots)					
Lesbians are man haters	3	1	4	1	1

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

As discussed previously the most common stereotypes that were used as perjorative terms were sick, sinful, and deviant. However overall few respondents answered this question. Table 4.23 shows that mothers were concerned that their child would end up lonely, unhappy and unfulfilled. Those that did, commented, Viki, “My mother also stated that she *knew* that all lesbians were into drugs and sold ecstasy!!” and Judi, “My neighbour was hostile as he'd expected me to want him. I think it was a personal rejection for him. I think my dad would be shocked if I did tell him. He thinks gay people are sick. I don't know if knowing that I'm a lesbian would change his mind.”

#### 4.5.3 *Driven away from rural community*

Respondents were asked whether the negative reactions from family, friends, neighbours and the general community, or the fear of negative reactions, had caused them to leave their home areas. Thirty eight percent of lesbians ( $n = 19$ ) and 54.3% of gay men ( $n = 19$ ) said they had been driven from their home communities.

We sought to determine whether there was a significant relationship between ‘driven from community’ and parents reaction to disclosure and parents level of religiosity. Once again the difficulty of low response rates arose, especially in the parents’ reaction category. With the few figures available for parents level of religiosity we found the following.

There is no significant difference between parents who are not religious and being driven from the community ( $\chi^2 1.555$ , df = 1, p = .212). in this case respondents may or may not be driven from the community.

There is a significant difference when both parents are very religious and being driven from the community ( $\chi^2 6.294$ , df = 1, p = .012). Of those responding that both parents were very religious only 17.6% were driven from the community ( $n =$

3).

When examined by gender 28.6% of males were driven from the community when both parents very religious (n = 2) compared to 10% of women (n = 1).

Responses to the question of whether respondents felt they were driven from the community were very mixed. Some participants found great support while others felt they had to leave. One of the survey respondents wrote that she moved so that she could come out. One of the interviewees, Cecelia, said that she personally knew of parents of several gay youths who left home around age 18 and moved to Melbourne. She added, "The parents are still bitter about their boys being gay." Many however, opted to stay in their communities, sometimes openly.

Tara: ...with the support of others around me I chose to stay and get involved with setting up a lesbian and gay group here. We hoped to support others who may have been alone or without support, and to set up some social activities for others and ourselves."

Mary: "I haven't left (regional city) but I think things would be a hell of a lot easier if I lived in Daylesford, Castlemaine, Port Fairy or Melbourne. My home is in (regional city) and so I am still here." Helena: "I enjoy support from gay and straight friends I enjoy my geographic location and a few bigoted people will not drive me out." Pam: "Certain people are biased and bigoted in general and I don't care what they think Those few aren't the whole community."

In some instances the atmosphere of negativity toward homosexuals was so severe that it became almost impossible to stay. Commenting about attitudes to homosexuals in her town Kate, as stated previously, said, "The rural community I was living in held a town meeting where it was decided to 'get rid of the undesirables'" and Deirdre, "The community at the time did not know I was homosexual. When at 20 I did come out to all, I was excluded, victimised and bashed twice by others in the community I was living."

More commonly, things were simply uncomfortable and participants in this study

recognised that while they may not be physically abused, they would get little support. Melanie was still living in her home town at the time of this study, but was sure she would eventually leave "...not at this stage, although I am still living separately from my partner. We will not live together in this rural area. We will move to the city before living together." Wendy left, "... for many reasons but one was because I felt that I would not have the support in my rural community I would need once I had made the decision to come out." Lyndell: "I have found that colleagues who never finished high school and never left (the town they grew up in) for study or work are more likely to be abusive. Small town people - small town attitude."

Whereas others left as soon as they could, and with feelings of rejection, anger and resentment.

Christina: I don't want to be part of a community that makes me feel uncomfortable and it feels very strange to have part of my family that are still part of that community. I have a lot of strong feeling towards people who are not accepting of the gay lifestyle and find it hard to not say something if I hear a negative thing. It also makes me feel like shit, like I am a confused 14 year old girl again who is so scared of what people think and what will happen to her. I hate feeling like that and people who make me feel like that are not worth my time or effort.

For Kellie leaving her home community was not a rejection of rural life but rather wanting to live in a town where people had not known her since childhood and where those same people were friends and neighbours of her family. "I was born in (Western Victoria) but I could not go back there to live as a lesbian because I am known by the whole community - however I prefer the rural life so we have moved here to the other end of the state."

Lyndell: I moved from my hometown to Melbourne for university, and now live in another rural community (western Victoria). Starting fresh with new people, being open about being a lesbian, is easier for me to deal with than going back to where I grew up and coming out to people who I grew up with and knew me as a straight teen. At least in a new community I'm not going to lose friends, just not make the ones who are homophobic!

Some participants left home and their home town at a very young age. For example Tom, "I found that I didn't fit into any of the clubs or groups of kids in the area so I

left home at age 16 to go to the city" and John said, "I don't feel comfortable enough to be true to myself and others around here. It's like I only present the side of me that I feel others will not be offended or intimidated by." He moved to the city in his late teens.

Jacob: I left town when I was eighteen and I guess I had unconsciously come down to the city to come out really. I did attempt to come out when I moved down to the city at eighteen and even went as far to go to a nightclub. HIV came out at the same time so I saw that as a sign and didn't actually come out until I was twenty four. I don't think I was an alcoholic but I did rely on alcohol to drown my feelings but I suppose it never really worked but it made me more depressed.

Lorna: I try to live in larger communities and only socialise in gay friendly areas if possible. I went to Ballarat recently on a university pub crawl and my girlfriend was hit. I will not be going there again. I now only go to rural areas if I have to, to visit family, and then I only stay for as short a time as possible.

Justin was an exception in that he finds his rural community more accepting than people in the city.

Justin: I grew up in the city and hated it - I moved to the country as soon as I could. Most of the rural people don't know or care about queer issues - and as long as you behave decorously - you don't offend middle class manners - they will leave you alone. The country is where I want to be - and at the moment, this town is a fine compromise.

Of interest is a comparison of towns in the study area and the one town in the area, Daylesford, that is known to have a large gay population. Most lesbians and gay men living in the town have moved there either from the city or from other rural areas precisely because of its openly gay population and its perceived tolerance of homosexuality and other alternative lifestyles. The area is generally seen as a diverse and tolerant community and accepting of homosexual population. The rainbow flag is displayed openly in many businesses and the area has a regular gay festival. During the interviews a surprising number of participants living in the western part of Victoria spoke of Daylesford, particularly in relation to the questioning of leaving their own rural area to live elsewhere. Daylesford seems to be viewed as a gay mecca. A number (indeterminate) of the participants lived in Daylesford.

Paul: I live in Daylesford which as you are aware has to be one of the most accepting communities in Australia if not the world, and it is really nice not feeling like a minority group here, as the hippies that live here are more looked at in that way (sorry to say).

Nevertheless even in Daylesford there are isolated incidences of negativity toward homosexuals. Jennie is a lesbian mother and interacts frequently with the heterosexual community through school and children's activities.

Jennie: (lives in Daylesford) there have been complaints about books referring to homosexuality at the child care centre. I also know people who have had less than equal treatment from the police, for example in an issue of lesbian domestic violence where the woman was not taken seriously when it was realised that her partner was a woman. The parents of one of my son's friends became very distant after my son's birthday party when this parent realised there were lesbians present.

It is fair to say though that comparatively, Daylesford is a safe place for lesbians and gay men to live. A heterosexual teacher at Daylesford Secondary college (not formally interviewed for this research) told one of the researchers that homosexuality was generally considered to be a "non-event" by the students at the school, many of whom would have some contact with the lesbian and gay population.

To explore the level of intolerance toward homosexuals in the town and determine the extent to which proximity to homosexuals reduces such intolerance, would be a useful area of research.

#### ***4.5.4 Summary wider community***

The models of homosexual identity formation and recent research by Jude, McLaren and McLachlan (2002) highlight the importance of acceptance of the general community to the well-being and mental health of gay men and lesbians. This research has shown that while there is a degree acceptance and support by family, friends and neighbours, there is, at the same time, rejection, abuse and persistence of physical assault in certain contexts.

The majority of lesbians and gay men were aware of negative attitudes towards homosexuals held by many in the wider community while they were forming a

homosexual identity. Thus they would have almost instinctively known that coming out was risky. As was the case with family, women were more likely to disclose to friends than men. Both usually received acceptance and support. A surprising, if small, number of lesbians were victims of physical assault. Men were more likely than lesbians to disclose to opposite sex friends.

The pattern of acceptance and rejection was repeated when neighbours became aware of respondents' sexuality, though there were only five responses from males and some of these may be from the same man. Some men who were interviewed had negative experiences but also general acceptance from neighbours.

Although there were few responses about reaction of neighbours and others in the community, the general pervading atmosphere of homo-oppression caused a significant number of respondents (54.3% of men and 38% of lesbians) to leave their communities.

It is important to note the significance of a place like Daylesford. Here there has been a steady migration of lesbians and gay men into the town and high levels of acceptance have been reported. This suggests that proximity results in understanding of the humanity of homosexuals and may result in a reduction of acts of aggression or discrimination against lesbians and gay men.

The level of acceptance of people in the wider community has many implications, such as contact with medical professionals (discussed in section 4.7) and opportunity to participate in religious activities (discussed in section 4.8). The following section explores the extent to which respondents can participate in social activities including the gay community, where it exists.

#### **4.6 Participation in Social Activities**

There are two aspects of participation in social activities to be discussed. Firstly social activities with heterosexuals. This was particularly relevant for adolescents still at school. Secondly social contact with other homosexuals, important for self

affirmation and to meet like minded people including potential partners.

**Table 4.24: Effect of disclosure on participation in social activities**

Effect on social activities	Lesbians %	Gay men %
No effect	52.9	25.0
Some restrictions	32.4	30.0
Felt excluded	2.9	30.0
Actively excluded	11.8	15.0

Percentages refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

Young people were severely restricted because they were afraid of others but for some also because they felt bad about themselves. Tom's experienced exclusion from social activities while still at school, "I decided not to participate in a number of activities because I couldn't relate to the other boys that I was trying to participate with. Peter chose to avoid social contact, "I hid myself away from social activities out of fear," and Jennie censored herself, "I think I restricted myself because of a belief that mainstream activities were not for me because I was deviant." Andrew experienced imposed exclusion, "I was expelled once from a tennis club because the coach suspected I was gay."

Tara's response to this question demonstrated the double jeopardy of lesbians. As discussed previously, it is often difficult for lesbians to distinguish whether abuse they experience is about lesbianism or about being a woman.

Tara: I mixed with a group of women, some lesbian some not. They were an inclusive and accepting group so this was not an issue for me. My work was with women's groups and so the broader community assumed we were all lesbians anyway! And of course this was not the case. They treated us differently because we were very public feminists. I think this was considered more of a threat in this community because the work we did was more visible, than anyone's sexuality and feminists were, of course, breaking up families.

Although the statistical data in report suggests that lesbians experience less active discrimination and abuse than gay men this study has not sought to identify sexist discrimination and abuse against women, which of course lesbians also experience.

An important source of acceptance and support for both lesbians and gay men was

from other homosexuals.

#### ***4.6.1 Homosexual community***

The models of homosexual identity formation unanimously point to the importance of contact with others “like themselves”. Cass’ (1979) stages 3 to 6 comment on the need to interact with other homosexuals and that many actively seek out the homosexual community.

Cass in her model of homosexual identity development (see figure 1) and earlier discussions notes that commitment to, and identification with, the homosexual subculture increases self acceptance, and results in a feeling of belonging, to the point of feeling pride and preference for a homosexual identity. Interaction with the homosexual sub-culture is seen by many as critical to a healthy and integrated homosexual identity in most models of homosexual identity formation (Troiden, 1979 & 1989; Cass, 1979 & 1984; Minton and McDonald, 1983 & 1984; Zera, 1992).

However in the region studied for this project social interaction with other lesbians and gays was more difficult. Mostly participants knew only a few others like themselves and socialised in each others homes. As Cheryll explains, “At the time there was no organised gay culture in Ballarat. It was loose and we were just friends who met at each others’ houses. I went to venues in Melbourne.” As it happens there was a gay group in Ballarat however Cheryll did not know about it. This points to the difficulty of finding a group of people who by their nature cannot, or would find it difficult, to advertise. Furthermore in some areas the difficulty was finding a venue that would accept them and would allow the space for exclusive use of the gay community. Mostly people found out by word of mouth, and for this they had to know other homosexuals.

There was an interesting gender difference in the extent to which participants were able to interact with a homosexual community. Fifteen point four percent of the men, and 62.5% of women, were able to interact with the homosexual community in the

area in which they lived. Women much more than men interacted with other homosexuals and found that contact useful (see table 4.25).

**Table 4.25: Helpfulness of the homosexual community**

Helpfulness of community	Lesbians n	Gay men n
Contact with others like me	29	5
Social activities	17	0
Cafes, clubs etc	0	0
Counselling contacts	10	0
Other	7	2

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

There is an interesting gender difference here in that men hardly considered the homosexual community. There may have been some male respondents who did not see this question as important for them to answer. The gender difference may be due to the nature of community and gender differences in perceptions of community. It is not clear whether respondents interpret ‘community’ as bars and clubs or a network of friends, some of whom may give support, or both of those. The figures in table 4.25 suggest a gender difference in perception here. In a study of sense of belonging to community and mental health (Jude, McLaren and McLachlan, 2002) found that for gay men, there was a stronger relationship between a sense of belonging to the general community than to the gay community, whereas for lesbians, a sense of belonging to both the lesbian community and the general community was important.

Many gay venues exist in Melbourne. Going to Melbourne of course was not an option for young people and those people living further west because of distance involved. Cecilia regularly went to Geelong to socialise, a distance of over 200 kilometres. She was considering moving closer to Ballarat so that she could socialise more with other lesbians and gay men. In the western part of Victoria, in both larger and smaller towns, there was a noticeable lack of a visible gay and lesbian community. Ballarat was an exception with the existence of the lesbian and gay group, BGLAD. Though few participants from this study were members of BGLAD, there were some who had mixed feelings about the group, especially one lesbian who thought the group was “gay male focussed”.

While there was a gay community in the town in which Vernon grew up, he was afraid to become part of it because he and his family were well known in the town.

Vernon: So for people in my sort of situation who grew up in the town and sort of pretty well locked into it, it really wasn't an option at all, even though the service was there. In terms of utilising it socially it just wasn't an option. Because again, here I am one removed from the (name of school) situation where I am going through a school that is filled with cousins, and going to university where it is absolutely filled with cousins, (to a town) filled with cousins and other family.

Two interviewees in one of the larger regional centres in western Victoria identified two cafes owned by gay men, where gay men and lesbians were known to frequent (this was not noted in their questionnaire response). In another larger town two of the female participants interviewed were just starting a social and support group for lesbians and gay men at the time they were interviewed. Activities of the group were determined through a survey of members to identify the needs of such a group. Regular contact has been maintained with these participants and at time of writing this report the group has 40 members and meets monthly. The age group of members ranges from 18 to mid 50s and members come from as far the South Australian border and the south coast. Interestingly, when considering the figures in table 4.25, membership is approximately 80% gay men and 20% lesbians. The group offers social activities, guest speakers and outings. They also distribute a newsletter and have set up a web page. Several members of the group have been interviewed for this study since the group started. They spoke enthusiastically about the group and how helpful it was for them.

As was suggested in the models of homosexual identity formation contact with other homosexuals was usually a positive experience. Deirdre commented that, "It was supportive, reaffirming that you were okay; you were normal; you had a place in society; you belonged. The support of others is so crucial to your own self esteem and identity and gives you the courage to be who you are."

Justin: I lived in (small town) and worked in (regional city). The (regional city) queer community was helpful if somewhat aloof. It was helpful to me that there was a queer sub-culture and there were others like me out there, and down the road, not just on the net. I was on the

net from the early days.

Sometimes it was difficult just to find the courage to attend a function or social evening held by the homosexual community.

Georgia: It started off as a support group but now social. I remember that first meeting I went to. I'll always remember my first time and the other two girls (also their first time) that we're quite good friends now and they were terrified, and I was terrified. I hardly said 'boo'. They've got to know me over the time.

In this group people new to the group had the option of bringing a support person. This proved problematic and the practice was abandoned. Georgia explained,

A girl turned up that I knew and she wasn't gay, but she was a support person for someone else. And within 4 days it had gotten back to me that she has broken the confidentiality of the group. So now no-one brings a support person, they come on their own.

Unfortunately there were some for whom contact with other homosexuals was not helpful. For example Rowena, who formed a lesbian identity in adulthood, found "...this group not helpful as they judged me for not finding my sexuality until I did. They didn't trust me because I had been married and had children," and Maggie,

I knew a bit about the gay male scene in Ballarat, but felt that it was too small and that being part of it would automatically 'out' me, which I wasn't prepared to do at the time. The gay scene in Ballarat was of no help to me.

In the Grampians region of Victoria there were only two organised formal gay groups found, one in Ballarat and the other new group in a medium sized town. In other places there were informal groups of people who socialised at each others' homes. However there were also those whose incredible isolation must surely have been a serious strain. Mary, for example, knew few other homosexuals.

It's good to have some idea of who else is the same in that respect. I have become aware of another couple through my partner and I am aware of other gay women through intuition, common sense and knowledge.

This meant that most of their social interaction was with heterosexual people. Though some of those were supportive it nevertheless meant the women could be less than totally open. The need for venues or activities where lesbians and gay men

can meet others like themselves, is important to self understanding, affirmation that they are normal, a healthy self concept and general health and well being. Such a community also provides opportunity for gay men and lesbians to meet potential partners.

#### ***4.6.2 Summary participation in social activities***

For both lesbians and gay men disclosure of homosexuality resulted in some restrictions on their ability to participate in social activities. For a sizeable number there was active exclusion. While acceptance in the general community is critical, indeed more important to gay men than the homosexual community (McLaren, 2002) the existence of, and acceptance within a homosexual community is also important. All but two regional cities and towns where participants in this study came from did not have an active homosexual community. This meant that gay men and lesbians had only a narrow social group in which they could be themselves, without fear of accidentally outing themselves or being outed by others. Many were socially isolated. Such a situation has clear implications for mental health and well being.

### **4.7 Homosexuality and the Health Profession**

Historically lesbians and gay men have had an ambivalent relationship with the health profession. Psychologists, psychiatrists and medical practitioners, through pathologising homosexuality, have contributed to the creation of stereotypes about homosexuality that suggest homosexuals are sick.

The theories proposed by the health professional, in particular psychiatrists and psychologists were based on the idea of gender inversion. An imbalance of male or female hormones was a common theory which has not entirely been abandoned. Although the hormones androgen, testosterone and oestrogen occur in both women and men, and are similar to the point of being able to transform into each other, they are commonly labelled female or male hormones (Blumenfeld and Raymond, 1988:128). Based on the sexologists' theories of congenital gender inversion it was assumed that homosexual men would have a lower rate of male hormones (testosterone and androgen) than heterosexual men, and that lesbians would have a higher level of male

hormones than heterosexual women. This imbalance was believed to cause women to develop masculine, and men to develop feminine, characteristics and preferences. The findings have been inconclusive (Browning, 1984:14).

Research into the type of environmental factors that might cause homosexuality have resulted in findings that are many and varied. Most environmental theories focus on boys and it is interesting to note that the suggested causes of male homosexuality are external, that is "things done to them" rather than an internal condition. Research which has focussed mainly on male homosexuality but sometimes lesbians, include the family environment, believed to be dysfunctional, and other childhood experiences (Siegel, 1988; Blumenfeld and Raymond, 1988; see also Deutsch; McDougall cited in Magee and Miller, 1992:71). Many of the theories attributing internal causes to lesbianism, have in common a list of "fears" including fear of the responsibilities of womanhood, fear of rejection, fear of the opposite sex, fear of pregnancy, and fear of the penis (see Ponse, 1978:44).

A revival of earlier research emphasis is the attempt to prove that hormones play a part in sexual orientation. This time the thesis was that hormone levels "wire the brain" for sexual orientation during the pre-natal period (see Byne, 1994:27). This differs from earlier hormonal research which attempted to demonstrate that hormone levels influenced sexual orientation. Once again the assumption of gender inversion suggests that high pre-natal androgen levels cause heterosexuality in men and homosexuality in women, and low pre-natal androgen levels leads to heterosexuality in women and homosexuality in men. Recent studies rely on rat mounting behaviour in male rats, and lordosis (a mating posture) in female rats. When applied to human behaviour the studies suggest that of the two people engaging in sexual relations there is only one homosexual, and that "the homosexual can be identified from the gender atypical "position" they assume in lovemaking" (Byne and Parsons, 1993:231). Such interpretations, as well as having a basis of gender inversion, have a narrow androcentric view of sexual relations as dominant/passive and penetrative. William Byne notes with a touch of sarcasm that, "the notions that gay men are feminised and lesbians are masculinised may tell us more about our culture, than about the biology of erotic

responsiveness" (1994:26).

The view of homosexuality as 'unnatural practices' and a condition from which people suffered meant that there was a potential for cure. At the same time homosexuality was, and indeed still is, widely believed to be a sin.

So, as a sickness, a sin or a crime, the management of homosexuality up until the 1970s was largely in the hands of the justice/legal system and the medical profession. In Australia treatment was discussed by the subscribers to the *Medical Journal of Australia* (1948:175). The medical profession, it was noted in the journal, believed it was important to recognise congenital homosexuality which they thought could have an endocrine basis, in order to determine the 'appropriate' treatment to apply to the individual. Homosexuality that was not congenital and was believed to involve some degree of choice, was therefore considered a sin, as well as a condition that had to be treated. So in the case noted in the journal above that "with treatment, punishment *must unfortunately* be mentioned" (my italics) (*Medical Journal of Australia*, 1948:175) and indeed according to Murphy (1992:501) 'therapies' have ranged from threats of beating to brain surgery.

Many of the treatments devised to 'cure' homosexuals were aimed at reversing gender non-conforming behaviour. Some homosexuals were given hormone treatment to cure their homosexuality. However, male homosexuals 'treated' through increasing their male hormone levels, reacted by increasing their sexual activity but not changing their sexual orientation (Murphy, 1992, p.511). Faderman (1991, p.100-101) describes an intensification of attempts in the 1930's, at treatment including so-called cures such as "... removing one of their (lesbians) adrenal glands ... such treatment ... could correct over-functioning (of masculine tendencies) that caused some women to have an 'aversion' to marriage" (1991, p.100). In Schafer's (1976, p.67) study, one woman was told by her family physician after a hormone level check, that she had more male hormones than female hormones.

On the surface, it looked as though the removal from the DSM-II in 1973 of

'homosexuality', and the inclusion in the DSM-III in 1980 of GID, served to separate the connection of gender and sexuality. In reality however, the move not only reinforced ideas of essential or biological gender differences separating women and men, but it also indirectly reintroduced the connection of gender and sexuality. For example some theorists and members of the medical profession view GID as a pre-homosexual condition, believing that if GID in childhood is treated promptly a later homosexual condition may be prevented (Minter, 1999, p.12). Mass (1990) suggests that through the inclusion of GID, American Psychiatry had subtly reintroduced homosexuality as a mental illness. Burke (1996) too suggests that the inclusion of GID in the DSM was a deliberate ploy by those who objected to the removal of homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973. Indeed, according to Haldeman (2000) the GID literature often discusses GID and sexual orientation as though they are interconnected. The gendered behaviours described in the DSM are stereotypes which persist not only in the popular media but also in sectors of the scientific and medical professions, especially in discussions of GID. As was seen in table 4.9, 60% of lesbians and 72% of gay men had heard and believed that gay men are feminised and lesbians masculinised.

#### **4.7.1 Contact with the health profession**

Respondents in this study were asked whether they had sought medical help in relation to sexuality issues. Men were significantly more reluctant than women to seek such help. Only 10 of the 38 men sought help whereas 24 of the 52 women who answered this question sought help.

**Table 4.26: Help sought from health professionals**

<b>Sought help</b>	<b>Women</b>		<b>Men</b>	
	<b>n = 52</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n = 38</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Yes</b>	24	46.2	10	26.3
<b>No</b>	28	53.8	28	73.7

Their reasons for seeking help are detailed in table 4.27

**Table 4.27: Reasons for consulting health professionals**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Lesbians n</b>	<b>Gay men n</b>
Thought I was sick	5	2
Thought there was something wrong with me	6	1

Wanted to be changed to heterosexual	1	1
Wanted help to adjust to my sexuality	16	7
Other	1	1

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

For some it was for reasons of discomfort with their sexuality, that is, they thought they were sick or that something was wrong with them. Julian sought professional help for all of the above reasons. He was convinced that he was sick and he also hoped he could overcome his homosexual feelings “particularly after the first suicide attempt”.

The majority (30% of lesbians and 17.5% of gay men) however wanted help adjusting to their sexuality and hoped to learn more about themselves. For people like John seeking counselling was not about wanting to be changed nor to help adjust to his sexuality but simply dealing with the psychological effects of internalised oppression and loneliness. As John explained, it was “... Depression about my attraction to guys while being closeted and not being able to find like-minded guys.”

It was similar for Maggie (age 23).

... I was feeling very depressed at the time because of the confusion that I was having with my sexuality, but because I was never asked whether my problem was connected to my sexuality I felt like I couldn't bring up the subject. I was very scared and I found it difficult to talk about. The doctor I was seeing at the time put me on anti-depressants.

Peter sought help because of depression, anxiety, family violence and sexual abuse issues. However his efforts made things worse. “The psychiatrist was homophobic and suggested I wasn't really gay.”

Gerard went to see a general practitioner when he, “...was feeling really ‘ugh’” The GP ended up referring him to a psychologist who diagnosed him as being depressed. She said that he had been depressed for quite a long time without even realising it.

Gerard: It surprised me as it was the first time I had had any real sort of personal brush with depression whatsoever. I had heard about it but I didn't actually know what the symptoms were so to suddenly find I had them. ... that it doesn't happen to you when you're young. It was a real shock to the system and certainly there were a couple of occasions when I didn't do anything but I actually thought it would be

easier to suicide and get it over and done with. I think the only reason why I didn't was either because I wasn't that severely depressed. I could always sort of convince myself there was some point at which things would get better which at different stages took more or less convincing.

Anne explained, "I was so depressed about my sexuality that I started drinking alcohol to excess." She sought help because, " I needed help to deal with poor choices I was making simply because I saw my life as same-sex attracted woman was not worth anything."

Jessica, an interviewee who came from a very religious background had been a victim of sexual abuse by her older brother. She sought help after a mental breakdown and was sexually assaulted by a psychiatrist. However after that she sought medical help again and found the general practitioner and psychologist to be supportive and helpful. Jessica maintains that, "... the biggest myth of all is that it (homosexuality) is a psychiatric illness." She had even studied the DSM to try help her understand herself.

#### **4.7.2 *Reactions to Disclosure***

Not surprisingly contact with family doctors and/or counsellors and psychologists brought mixed reactions ranging from heterosexism to abuse.

Table 4.28 summarises reactions from various health professionals. By far the majority were accepting and supportive. This is probably due to a combination of changing attitudes and careful selection by respondents of professionals who they thought would be helpful.

**Table 4.28. Reaction of health professionals to disclosure**

	Medical		Psychiatrist		Psychologist		Counsellor	
	n		n		n		n	
General Reaction	L	G	L	G	L	G	L	G
Accepting	11	3	3	5	6	6	14	3
Supportive	9	3	3	5	5	4	12	3
Helpful	7	2	3	5	5	2	13	3
Angry	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Physical/sexual abuse	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Verbal Abuse	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Given medical/psych drugs	0	1	2	4	0	0	0	0

Counselled about AIDS	1	1	0	3	0	0	0	1
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Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

The questionnaire results and interviews showed that counsellors, rather than medical professionals or psychological practitioners were most used and the ones who were most accepting, supportive and helpful.

Judi: I found that when I first talked to psychologists about possibly being gay they said things like, but how do you know? How can you be attracted to all women, all women are different? It was frustrating but when I had counselling after or during my first relationship they'd accepted that I was gay and would work on the relationship issue that I wanted to.

Viki: "My counsellor was fantastic ... I had previously seen a psychologist who was sooo avoidant on the issue. She changed the topic every time I raised it."

Lorna had mixed experiences when she sought help,

The doctor I saw was very helpful and explained that there was nothing wrong with me. The counsellor said it was a reaction to sexual abuse and that I should not judge all men by the actions of one and referred me to a psychiatrist for treatment. The psychiatrist gave me medication which is also used for obsessive compulsive disorder. The medication severely screwed with my head and had bad side effects.

As can be seen interviewees spoke of good and bad reactions from health professionals. For example Tara noted that,

I went to a couple of counsellors to varying degrees of success. One was just ignorant. One immediately assumed the partner I was talking about was a man, so I did not feel okay to go any further. One was fantastic ... it was at a session with her that I first felt okay to call myself a lesbian and felt greatly relieved.

Susie: "My doctor has been good in terms of listening to me and just accepting what I say without judging me or making me feel bad or guilty." However Linda: "The doctor told me to 'get laid' and get over it."

The fear of being outed (the health professionals breaking confidentiality about their clients' sexuality) was ever present, such as for Tom who explained, "I would still not feel comfortable coming out to minister or doctor in my home town."

Gerard, whose psychologist diagnosed depression, had not disclosed his sexuality so the possible causes of depression were not dealt with.

Even when I went to the psychologist, I didn't say anything about being gay. I dare say, looking back on it, if I had said it, it probably would have got a much broader and comprehensive explanation of what my life over the past 11 or 12 years had been. I probably also would have been able to be pointed in the direction of some of the services that I was sort of looking for. The irony of it was that I was so locked into the sort of syndrome of being terrified of telling people because of where that information would travel. I wasn't even having an argument with myself about 'Do I or don't I?' I simply did what I always did and made the decision that homosexuality has nothing to do with what is going on here so there is no need to discuss it, so I never did.

There are of course many lesbian and gay counsellors and other health professionals. The survey did not seek to establish the sexual orientation of those to whom respondents went for help.

Jacob: I ended up contacting the Victorian AIDS Council and I guess I decided I need see someone, a counsellor. I had a couple of guys. The first time I was contacted by the nurse as they didn't have enough counsellors and she put me in contact with a group and I went along to the group but I found it too confronting. But then they put me in contact with a guy who was also from a small country town and I think from there he was really supportive. He became a close friend, took me out.

#### ***4.7.3 Summary contact with the Health Profession***

Contact with the health profession resulted in a variety of responses. This is understandable in so far as historically this profession has both had an exposure to extreme attitudes toward homosexuality, but has at the same time contributed a great deal to such attitudes. Up until the 1970s the prevailing view was that homosexuality was both a sickness and a sin. As homosexuality was strongly related to gender inversion the research and treatment emphasis was largely associated with male and female hormones.

While in the 1990s and into 2000s the general feeling is that homosexuality is not a sickness, there is nevertheless lingering antipathy toward homosexuals among the profession and some are still treating homosexual clients as though they are sick.

The positive reactions of counsellors was welcome but there are vestiges of unacceptable attitudes in the rest of the medical professional. Respondents in this study were reluctant to seek medical help and only few did so. The main reason was help to adjust to their sexuality rather than for treatment of their sexuality. Reactions from the profession ranged from acceptance and support (the majority) to negative reactions. Most respondents who sought help and reported negative reactions felt they were depressed or were diagnosed with depression. Such psychological conditions would most likely have been related to the difficulty individuals experienced in coming to terms with their sexuality and forming a healthy homosexual identity.

#### **4.8 Homosexuality and the Church**

While some respondents sought help from the health professions others turned to their religious faith. Organised religion, as well as the health profession, has played a large role in the creation and perpetuation of negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and homosexuals. In this case it is the ‘homosexuality is a sin’ stereotype. Still, in 2003, the church, in particular the Catholic church and the more fundamentalist Protestant churches, strongly denounces homosexuality as a way of life.

While only a small number of questionnaire respondents completed the section on religion, interviewees spoke at length. When Vernon considered the role of religion in his coming out experiences he explained,

I suppose it played a role in a sense that it was through religion or maybe the religious values that my family and extended family had, that I got the message very clearly that the only acceptable option in terms of sexuality is to be straight. To be homosexual is to be unnatural and all of those sorts of things. It wasn't as strongly an articulated religious argument, it was just wrong.

Some research has been done about the attitudes of religious institutions and the experiences of homosexuals with them. Weinberg sees, “Christianity as a great culprit and a creator of homophobia ...”. Bell and Weinberg (1978:150). Bell and Weinberg

(1978:150) found that homosexual adults (female and male) who believed in their religion (Christian) experienced greater inner conflict when coming to terms with their sexuality than non-religious homosexuals. This is not surprising and the findings by Cecily Morton in a discussion with a number (number not stated) of homosexuals (cited in Dicker, 1985:64-65) supports this view. She lists the following as attitudes towards homosexuals quoted from the discussion,

- total rejection of me and of a homosexual life style;
- fear and disengagement;
- knee-jerk reaction of condemnation at the mention of homosexuality;
- disgust;
- not prepared to acknowledge me or my needs;
- made me feel they (minister) was going through a routine, did not recognise me as a person; and
- disappointed in me because I had not stopped being a homosexual.

She raises an interesting observation. Until disclosure of their homosexuality, those she spoke to were loved and respected members of their church. They went to Sunday School, were active in church activities and were often office bearers. As soon as they revealed their homosexuality they faced hostility and rejection. However the only thing that had changed was the attitude of the church members.

There is little contemporary Australian research that has explored the issue of sexuality and religion though there has been some discussion in the USA. An article in a non academic journal *Church and State* (unauthored) described how a young gay male high school student who was presumed to be gay was forced by the assistant principal to read those passages from the Bible that are commonly interpreted as condemning homosexuality. The student was also outed to his parents and was told in a consequent handwritten letter from the assistant principal that he was condemned to hell. An official statement from the school denied that the “student’s constitutional rights” had been violated (2003, p.16).

A common approach that the church takes is to attempt to separate the sinner and the

sin, as in ‘love the sinner but hate the sin’. This means that gay men and lesbians who attempt to live under such restrictions are not able to form close loving relationships and to consummate those relationships.

Several studies have explored the extent to which devout Christians were able to accept the homosexual person while rejecting the homosexual behaviour. Research by Batson, Floyd, Meyer, and Winner (1999) found that many Christians were not able to make the distinction and accept the homosexual person. Research by Bassett, Baldwin, Tammaro, Mackmer, Mundig, Wareing and Tschorke (2001) found otherwise. However in their research acceptance was dependent on the devoutness of the Christian and their motivation for the level of devoutness. The more intrinsically devout the less helpful subjects were to homosexual people.

The patterns described in the research above were repeated in this study. Jessica and her family belonged to a well known Christian sect where homosexuality was grounds for formal excommunication. When her family discovered her sexuality she was formally excommunicated from the church. Another woman in the church with whom she had formed a relationship initially had a group of church members formed to put pressure on her to reject her lesbianism. In the religion, excommunication meant that as far as the church was concerned her parents no longer had a daughter. Jessica’s parents have totally rejected her and she no longer has contact with them. “I have lost my parents, I have lost my older sisters and my younger sisters. I have only one sister out of all of my siblings and nieces and nephews.”

#### ***4.8.1 Personal level of religiosity***

Bell and Weinberg (1978:153) found that the majority of homosexuals attended church less often than heterosexuals and "a fairly large minority" maintained that their affiliation to religion had been weakened because of their homosexual status. This is also similar to the findings here. Tony had deeply religious beliefs to the point that, "... I offered myself as a candidate for the ministry and was accepted." However after about two and a half years he realised that, "... no this really isn't me." However for some years he was a lay preacher. When he married it was to a religious woman.

Ultimately when he started forming a homosexual identity,

The coming out bit which meant I stepped right back from the church and I would venture to say never to go anywhere near it again. I see it (the church) now as having repressed and suppressed my life so much that I'm close to angry about it and there is no way known I can think positively about the church at all at the moment and I probably won't.

When Tony was asked to comment on the influence of the church on his coming out his reply was, "In the not coming out process in reality, it was such a huge part of my life, that matters of sexuality weren't even considered or they were taken so much for granted that you didn't consider them."

Mary had a very religious upbringing. Her main concern with the church was its non-acceptance of women as equal members.

Mary: My father was an elder and superintendent of Sunday school and my mother was a Sunday school teacher. I was an elder and a parish counsellor myself for 10 years. I was a candidate for ministry at the age of 28 but accidentally got pregnant instead. I am a very liberal thinker, very sensitive to others people's pain injustice etc. I haven't attended church for 15 years due to perceived ingrained misogyny.

#### **4.8.2 Parents' religiosity**

Religious values and beliefs seemed to contribute to the ways in which family, in particular parents, reacted to disclosure of homosexuality. Table 4.29 shows the level of religious feelings of the parents of lesbians and gay men.

**Table 4.29: Parents religiosity**

	Not at all religious		Average religiosity		Very religious	
	Lesbians	Gay men	Lesbians	Gay men	Lesbians	Gay men
<b>Mother</b>	12	11	24	15	19	13
<b>Father</b>	20	15	15	10	17	13

In table 4.29 the categories 'a little religious' and 'average' have been collapsed and the categories 'somewhat religious' and 'very religious' have been collapsed.

The following comments demonstrate how the idea of homosexuality as a sin, promulgated by the church, has influenced parent's reaction to their children's disclosure of homosexuality.

Tara “My mother found it all a bit difficult at first saying ‘you know what the bible says about all that’ but she is warm and loving.”

Susie: “My parents’ reaction was with what the church taught them. But my dad uses it as an opportunity to grow away from the church and question what they are saying about me. My mum swallowed it hook line and sinker.” Linda: “My parents believed I was a sinner but because they thought I was mentally ill, I’d ‘get over it’. They were caught between wanting to support me and upholding god’s law on homosexuality.” Paul: “My father doesn’t know and my mother was a bit disappointed as she was a firm church goer … and I think still thought it was a sin although it was never mentioned to me by her.” Tom: “My parents were shocked and quick to ‘fix’ the problem with prayer.”

Robert: My father said that although he does not, and never will understand how I can be homosexual, God knows and understands me better than anyone since he made me. Both my parents obviously believe I should continue going to church. Not realising perhaps how profoundly I have been affected by the church’s hypocritical, judgmental teachings when it habitually condemns and scorns homosexuals. ... I was raised in a very strict Catholic family, yet because it was a loving environment I was unable to reconcile the love my parents gave to all their children with their views on homosexuality - resulting in years of self doubt.

Viki had been married with children and, as discussed previously, the presence of children makes the whole situation more difficult. In Viki’s case her parents were prepared to use the children to influence Viki. “They (parents) were beyond outraged .. they told my children *very clearly* that they would *not* be permitted in heaven if they chose to live with my partner and I.”

Kath’s parents supported their daughter fully. “Amazing! I feared telling them because of their Catholicism but they surprised me. My mother told me she would wear a rainbow sash if I wanted to go to mass at St Patrick’s Cathedral with George Pell.”

#### **4.8.3 Contact with Ministers and parishioners**

Few of the women (7) and men (9) who participated in this research commented on

contact with religious institutions during the time they were coming out in the questionnaires though some discussed this in depth in the interviews. Few disclosed their sexuality.

There were some priests and ministers who were accepting. Their reactions and that of parishioners, to disclosure are presented in table 4.30.

**Table 4.30: Reaction from Ministers and parishioners**

General Reaction	to lesbians		to gay men	
	Priest	Parishioners	Priest	Parishioners
Accepting	0	1	0	1
Supportive	0	0	0	1
Angry	0	1	1	
Called me a sinner	2	4	1	1
Verbally abusive	0	1	0	
Other	1	1	1	1

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

During the interviews Lorna and Oliver expressed support from the church though they did not indicate this in their questionnaires as can be seen from table 4.30. Lorna: “The priest was great, not only did he make me feel like I was normal but also convinced my mum that I was still a good person and wasn't going to hell. My mum would probably still hate me if it wasn't for him.” Oliver was deeply religious and for a time had been a minister. When he came out he found his fellow ministers supportive and believes, “I never experience any, have never experienced any discrimination at all.”

Laura: Nothing at all negative, relationships are still very much the same as before. One religious young man with whom I work even had the guts to discuss his previous thoughts on homosexuality with me in private and that how after he knew me, those ideas changed. He accepts now that homosexuality is not that big a deal at all.

However from the few responses to this question in the questionnaires and the interviews the descriptions of contact with religious institutions was predominantly negative, as the following quotes demonstrate. Helena “The minister took the position ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’. I had mixed reactions from parishioners.” Vera “The pastor told me I would go to hell, that I was dirty and the devil was trying

to take me over. Other parishioners were rejecting. I lost friends.” Susie: “I was told I could be healed, that the devil had control of me and that with prayer and support I could be cleansed. It was all very ‘Oranges are not the only fruit.’” Linda: “I was constantly told that homosexuality was wrong by the church and by my family.”

Some continued contact with the church but remained closetted. If the church, minister and other parishioners, were non accepting the individuals usually left the church. The majority of respondents no longer had contact with religious institutions or did so only rarely (see table 4.31).

**Table 4.31: Current contact with religious institutions**

	<b>Women % n = 53</b>	<b>Men % n = 38</b>
Regularly	7.5	0
Occasionally	15.1	21.1
Rarely	26.4	26.3
Never	50.9	52.6

The following respondents describe their response to negative reactions from the church community.

Mary: I dropped out of church leadership in my mid 30’s as I was having an affair with a man and I was not wanting to be hypocritical, I had no intention of stopping (the affair). I also felt that misogynous attitudes reigned supreme and didn’t want my daughter or sons educated that way. After I came out (as a lesbian) I became a non-attender.

Tom: I have no faith in organised religion because of the persecution of homosexuals. I believe in a God, but do not want to participate or show support for a church that criticises and promotes negativity in the rural community about homosexuality.

Vernon I suppose I was just very aware that this religion was the same thing that pointed at people like me and said, ‘You are not one of us and you never will be one of us’ so I suppose in that sense that religion excluded me, or was one of the mechanisms that excluded me.

Jacob: I was approached in the toilets at a gay night club; so that kind of made it difficult as well with the demons, and I got a message from God, so I was really constantly in conflict with my religion so I ultimately

abandoned that. I still suffer Catholic at times I am pretty much an atheist now. The coming out was a long process, six years I think from knowing that I was gay to actually coming out.

Deirdre: “I am a Catholic but I don’t believe. I would like to meet and discuss beliefs with George Pell.”

#### ***4.8.4 Summary contact with religious institutions***

Organised religions have been, and to a great extent still are, at the forefront of condemning homosexuality and have thus contributed to perpetuating the ‘homosexuality is a sin’ stereotype, as well as the idea that homosexuality is a moral sickness.

While the medical profession has officially pulled back from treating homosexuality as an illness, religious institutions have continued to condemn. This is problematic for homosexuals and their families on a number of levels for those people who come from religious families and/or who themselves are religious.

Firstly non-acceptance or rejection by the church and the accusation of being a sinner will exacerbate anxiety and inner conflict. Keeping in mind that acceptance by the general community in which one lives is critical to mental health and well being, this rejection can have serious consequences for a homosexual.

Previous research has found, and the qualitative data (though not the quantitative data) from this study confirms, that the reaction of the individual’s family is more likely to be negative and non-supportive when parents and other family members hold strong religious views. This further impacts on the well being and self-esteem of a lesbian or gay man, when they are rejected not only by the general community but also by their families. As discussed in section 4.3 family reaction that could be described as negative, focussed strongly on the idea that homosexuality is a sin.

Finally it was found in this study that the great majority of respondents had contact with religious institutions only rarely or never.

## 4.9 Workplace

On the whole participants chose to disclose their sexuality at work only selectively. This was also the findings of Afrank (2000) in a study of lesbian identity management in the workplace. The women in her study chose to come out selectively to friends or not at all because of fear of negative consequences. As can be seen from table 4.32 most lesbians came out at work only selectively, while a greater number of gay men came out completely.

**Table 4.32: The extent of disclosure at work**

Disclosure at work	lesbians % n = 52	Gay men % n = 39
Not at all	13.5	20.5
Selectively	51.9	35.9
Completely	34.6	43.6

A significantly greater number of women (51.9%) than men disclosed selectively whereas only 35.9% of men disclosed selectively. More men than women chose not to disclose at all, yet more men than women were completely open about their sexuality. Barbara: “I always find it difficult in work situations to come out. I am a private person and fear coming out in work situations. It influences how people view and respect you at times.”

Generally the workplaces of participants in this study seemed to be tolerant though there were clearly some exceptions. However in the study by Alfrank (2000) Only three out of the 20 women interviewed perceived their workplace as being tolerant to lesbians and gay men.

In this study there was mixed reaction to disclosure though generally there was acceptance (see table 4.33).

**Table 4.33: The reaction of bosses and colleagues to disclosure**

General Reaction	lesbians	Gay men
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	Boss n	Work colleagues n	Boss n	Work colleagues n
Accepting	32	37	21	25
Supportive	17	22	15	20
Distressed	0	3	1	0
Angry	0	2	1	0
Physically violent	0	0	0	0
Abusive	1	1	3	0
Other	2	5	4	3

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

A few were more open.

Ashley: We've got a [very small] staff. It's never ever been an issue with any of the other people I've worked with. Also at a higher level in (the organisation) I guess there are a few people that are on the ball that would probably suspect it or be well aware of it and I've been here for 14 years. I think people respect me for what I do in my job and anything else should not be an issue. Well I hope it's that way.

Tony: "The two things that were wonderful for me were I came out one hundred percent to my work colleagues and got almost one hundred percent positive, supportive response."

Melanie on the other hand, was more cautious about disclosing her sexuality. "I believe I would have been discriminated against and possibly dismissed."

The general work environment in most situations can be difficult for lesbians and gay men because of the assumption that everyone is heterosexual, ie heterosexism. Heterosexism can be difficult for gays and lesbians to cope with

Mary: Over the past two years I became intolerant of jokes, comments about men, male bodies. I was sick of people assuming that every woman likes looking at men. I felt as thought some thought I was quite frigid. I am quite the opposite. So I guess at one level I've been teased and tormented by default. It is a very lonely place to be.

Christina: If I was rejected by some I never really took much notice. I also figured who might have been the most likely to do so and actively sought to remove them from my environment, even if it meant not engaging with them in conversation or befriending them. Mostly if anything happened it was stupid gay comments, gay jokes, and 99% of

these came from male co-workers.

Hanna: I did have one amusing experience with a woman I regularly car pool with. I was told by a friend that his woman, not knowing about me, was heard to say ‘I think I’d throw up if I was sitting next to a lesbian.’

Generally bosses were accepting and occasionally angry or abusive. Often reactions were positive or supportive. For example Robyn said, “My manager was totally accepting and told me to let her know if I had any hassles,” and Kath said, “My boss at the time, a woman, said, ‘well that explains your social conscience’ Others have known me as happily married thus were confused and couldn’t accept or understand.”

Hanna: I came out at work in Melbourne. The boss was a nice man. I needed time off work when my partner was ill. When I mentioned that my partner was a woman the colour drained from his face. He did give me time off. My partner was sick here in (rural town). My workmates were very supportive and would ask, ‘how is your partner?’

Pam suggested that disclosure, “... didn’t seem to make a difference; one boss did ask me to find a woman for him and his wife. This one boss I ignored but should have reported him for inappropriate comments”

Work colleagues were generally accepting and supportive for lesbians and gay men. Margaret: “Generally accepting because they involve me and my relationship in work conversations and my partner is invited as other partners are invited to work functions.”

Some respondents found that some colleagues were distressed and one received abuse. Gary: “My skills and personality have always overridden job placement/promotion discrimination, but there has been plenty of verbal abuse from work colleagues over the years.” Margaret “I think initially some work colleagues were shocked and withdrew from their usual level of friendship and conversation.” Peter: “Homophobic sneers jokes and sneers, which made me feel uncomfortable.” Kate: “I used to work at (company) in (large rural town). Very interesting indeed! One of my coworkers whittled a dildo out of silicone for me.” Justin: “At work my

sexuality is an ‘open secret’. Most people don’t care, some are supportive, and the antis are restrained by the EEO regulations. I’d stomp on them if they made it an issue.” Gary” “Apart from myself as gay, there is one other (lesbian) in our office plus a heap of fundamental Christians. A potential explosive situation.”

Those who were in professions where they were working with children felt more vulnerable. Jessica worked as a primary school teacher in a central Victorian location. She is extremely careful not to inadvertently admit to being a lesbian. “I am very scared to come out at work.” Some of this fear centres around the interrelations with children and their reactions. Jessica explained that, “Homophobia in children is becoming more and more younger.”

Gerard: ... (in) teaching you are in a profession where you prefer that people don’t know you are gay because it suddenly makes you susceptible to all sorts of unsavoury accusations because people draw that connection between homosexuality and paedophilia. Also the fact that if the kids get to know it, it makes it much harder to actually do your job, because teenagers are notoriously anxious about their own sexuality. Working in private schools in particular you’ve got to be very careful because you are not covered by the anti-discrimination legislation in terms of sexual preference and all those sorts of things. And if you’ve got a school that is not particularly understanding you can be out on your backside sort of like that (click of fingers). I suppose in some ways I am still very cautious about that whole thing

Vernon: I distinctively remember the boarding master having a conversation with me about it because I was in the same boarding house and he was more or less ferreting for information of what I knew and saying to me about a colleague, ‘If I find out he is homosexual, he will be out of here so fast his feet won’t even touch the ground’. With that message you realise how you have to play it.

Deirdre: “Fifteen years ago some parents tried to get me dismissed saying I was a bad influence on their children. The teachers union has always been extremely helpful and supportive.”

Women working in a female dominated profession were accepted at work but interestingly not by the community in the same way. There are also professions that tend to attract lesbians and/or gay men. For example, Linda noted, “A lot of gay

people work in my field (social/human services).”

Tara: In women’s health other staff and management committee members are lesbians, quite a lot of them are out and it is clearly not an issue. We also are the agency that is there to support other women who are questioning their sexuality. In the bigger bureaucracy I work in at the moment I am not so sure about people’s reactions and so I am selectively out - but as I say that, I am publicly out as I certainly do not hide myself, but I do not introduce myself as ‘Tara the lesbian’ just as they don’t introduce themselves as John the heterosexual. And if the topic ever came up I would let people know as several here already do.

Helena: “I work in a woman only organisation and my sexual preference has never been an issue. Management was aware of my preference at the time I was employed.”

In the cases where there were problems of negative treatment of lesbians and gay men in the work place some respondents took formal action.

**Table 4.34: Action taken when discriminated against and effect of action**

Personal action	Took this action		Success of action					
			Improvement		Worse		No effect	
	Men	Women	M	W	M	W	M	W
Ignored it	6	11	2	5	1	1	3	4
Confronted the aggressor	2	5	1	3	1	2	0	0
Reported to supervisor/manager	3	6	0	2	0	1	4	1
Left the company	4	7	2	2	0	0	1	3

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

There were many missing values in this question. Most participants ignored the aggression, some confronted the aggressor personally. For some there was some improvement though more likely there was no effect.

Although generally it seemed that taking action did not result in improvement,

Lyndell is one respondent who saw some improvement in her situation. “My workmates are fine, and very supportive. But the administrative and reception staff are horrible about me - gossiping and vilifying me being a dyke to other professionals coming in for meetings, and in front of clients.” Lyndell reported this harassment to her manager. Lyndell told how her “... manager and other colleagues have been very supportive, and a process of disciplining these staff is underway - and I didn't even initiate it, other staff made complaints!”

Cheryll: “Later I wrote a letter to the Board calling them homophobic, Years later I have been apologised to by many people involved.” Jeremy: “I confronted my manager (the aggressor) and she stopped the harassment to me directly, but continued behind my back.”

Finally, in this section, respondents were asked to reflect on their work life and career and the consequence of disclosure. On the whole there was no known negative affect of disclosure on career overall although as can be seen from table 4.35 a minority of people felt they had to change employer.

**Table 4.35: The effect of disclosure on work life and career**

Effect of disclosure on work life and career	Lesbians		Gay men	
	n	%	n	%
No effect	27	49.0	22	55.0
Rejected by some	12	21.8	8	20.0
Discrimination	3	5.4	0	0
Dismissal	1	1.9	0	0

Negative reactions to workplace disclosure resulted in reprisal for some participants including in some cases dismissal. For some women and men there was rejection and three women spoke of discrimination and one of dismissal.

Cheryll: I was fired from my first job when I was 15 for being an ‘out’ lesbian. When I came out I was ostracised, the other girls stopped the ‘boyfriend talk’. My supervisor said that the others were uncomfortable working with me, and she was worried about me in the community. I think she was trying to be decent but she was also homophobic. She told me I should get help, that I was not

normal and the community doesn't accept this sort of thing.

Tom: Two days after my employer at the firm I had worked for three years discovered I was gay (through a printed email from my boyfriend) he had me fired under very suspicious circumstances. In subsequent workplace I have been very open and it has generally been received well. I even took my partner to the Christmas dinner.

Jennie: Some work colleagues, especially in male dominated workplace have been abusive, otherwise not many hostile reactions, although my social life has probably always been fairly centred around supportive circles. When I worked on the trams there was one driver in particular who was very abusive. I went to the union who supported me and from then I did not have to work with this driver.

#### ***4.9.1 Summary workplace***

The majority of gay men and lesbians disclosed their sexuality in the workplace either selectively or completely. In terms of gender differences the figures are intriguing in that so many more men than women disclosed completely yet fewer disclosed selectively.

The reactions to disclosure of bosses and work colleagues was predominantly accepting and supportive of both lesbians and gay men. The questionnaire results showed that only a minority of lesbians and gay men suffered negative reactions. During the interviews respondents elaborated on both positive and negative experiences.

Respondents who worked with children felt more vulnerable, the issue here being the 'homosexuals are paedophiles' stereotype. A stereotype that persists despite the fact that the overwhelming evidence points to heterosexual men as the main perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

A small number of women who worked in women only type professions commented upon the support they received and the relative security they felt.

Few respondents completed the section on whether or not they took formal action in

cases of homophobic attack. From those responses it showed that the preferred action (or non-action) for both lesbians and gay men was to ignore the attack. Of those who reported the attack to a supervisor or a manager there was mostly no improvement in the situation. Four men and seven women dealt with the issue by leaving the company. One woman spoke about support from her manager/supervisor.

When asked about the effect of disclosure on work life and career most respondents 49 % of women and 55% of men felt that their career had not been affected by their disclosure of sexuality.

#### **4.10 Current Feeling About Being a Lesbian or Gay Man**

There has been much debate in the literature in the last 30 years about what it means to be homosexual. Recent debate has centred around the issue of choice (see for example Whisman, 1996); which to many means homosexuality is a sin, and biology (Levay 1993 and 1996); (which suggest that homosexuality is natural or at least that the individual ‘can’t help it’).

Gottschalk (2000) has argued that there are significant gender differences in the way in which lesbians and gay men see themselves. A question to test this hypothesis was included in the questionnaire.

**Table 4.36: Personal perceptions about homosexuality**

	Women		Men	
	n	% of n = <b>55</b>	n	% of n = <b>40</b>
A way of life	34	61.8	16	40.0
Sexual preference	23	41.8	18	45.0
Identification with women/men	21	38.2	3	7.5
Born that way/no choice	25	45.4	28	70.0
Conscious choice	15	27.3	0	0
Other	3	5.4	4	10.0

Percentages and figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

It can be seen from table 4.36 that the earlier findings have been largely confirmed in this study. Women seem to have a political perspective on their sexuality that gay

men do not have. That homosexuality is a way of life was felt by 61.8% of lesbians but only 40% of gay men. Of great interest is the relationship between identification with their own sex and sexuality, 38.2% of women and only 7.5% if gay men. The majority of gay men (70%) saw homosexuality as something that happened to them and over which they have no choice. On the other hand, keeping in mind that 38.2% of lesbians saw lesbianism as an identification with women, 27.3% claimed to have consciously chosen to be lesbians.

No Chi Square test could be performed to establish significance between the categories ‘choice’, ‘born that way’ and ‘an identification with the same sex’. This is because the groupings had expected cell counts of less than 5.

Finally participants were asked how they currently felt about being lesbian or gay. Overwhelmingly participants in this study were happy to be lesbian or gay, at peace with themselves and proud (see table 4.37).

**Table 4.37: Current feelings about being homosexual**

	Women		Men	
	n	%	n	%
Accepting	44	80.0	28	70.0
Content	41	74.5	24	60.0
Proud	34	61.8	20	50.0
At peace with self	39	71.0	25	62.5
Happy to be homosexual	29	52.7	26	65.0
Thankful to be homosexual	14	25.4	16	40.0
Unhappy	0	0	4	10.0
Wish I were heterosexual	2	3.6	3	7.5
Angry and resentful	1	1.8	1	2.5
Self loathing	0	0	0	0
Other	1	1.8	3	7.5

Percentages and figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

As Tony said,

There were two points along the road, so to speak, one was my own recognition within myself that I had sexual feelings, sexual attractions to other men. That was step one: step two was accepting it. That was probably a bigger step but from the moment I accepted it I felt a whole lot happier within myself. I remember reading some graffiti in a toilet once that simply said ‘Do yourself a favour, come out’, and I couldn’t have agreed more.

There were some, however, who were less than happy about being homosexual, marginally more so for gay men than for lesbians. In some of the categories in table 4.37, namely acceptance, content and proud, more women than men were accepting, content and proud to be homosexual. Only a minority of respondents wished they were heterosexual. None of the women said they were unhappy about being homosexual, but 10% of men did.

It was thought that relationship status might have some influence on sense of well being as measured by acceptance of homosexuality and happy to be homosexual. We re-coded the relationship status into two groups, in a relationship and not in a relationship, as initially there were too many cells with a count of less than 5. From the responses we have there would seem to be a significant difference between positive feelings about being homosexual and relationship status ( $\chi^2$  10.214, df = 3, p = .017). However there were still cells with counts of less than five therefore no broad conclusions can be drawn from these results.

We also found no significance difference between relationship status and access to social outlets ( $\chi^2$  3.782, df = 1, p = .052). Of those who were in a relationship 53.1% responded that they had social contacts (n = 26) while of those who were not in a relationship 32.5% responded that they had social contacts (n = 13).

Gerard: To be really honest with you it has only been in the last 3 years that I would now tell someone I am gay, if they ask me. I still won't volunteer the information purely because I think at the end of the day it is none of their business but if someone says "Are you gay?" I will finally say "Yes" whereas before I would have denied it flatly. I suppose in terms of just being comfortable enough with my sexual identity to go 'Yeah that's how it is', it has taken me years to get to that point. I suppose that gets tied up with worrying about what people are going to think of you, how they might change in dealing with you. In a couple of cases that has happened and you have to learn roll with the punches.

When issues of gender hierarchy are considered these results are not surprising.

While homosexuals are widely believed to be congenitally gender inverted, a choice to be gay therefore cannot be an empowering choice for men. Men, by becoming gay, were becoming more like women in the eyes of those who believed that a gay man is feminised. Most gay men tend to vehemently deny any element of choice in their sexual orientation (Whisman, 1996). Indeed it is unlikely that men would consciously choose to join what they recognise as an oppressed group.

For women, being a lesbian has implications quite different than for men being gay. Unlike gay men, the choice of a lesbian lifestyle means leaving an oppressed group (heterosexual women) at least in the private sphere, and to some extent in the public sphere. "Lesbians might be oppressed in the public domain but heterosexual women .... enter unequal partnerships in which sexist norms and power relations prevail" (Nira Yuval-Davis, cited in Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1993:14).

When reflecting back to the comments lesbians made about how they perceived their lesbianism, such sentiments fall into place. For lesbians it was a way of life, and an identification with women as well as for nature.

Men on the other hand seemed to see their sexuality in terms of a sexual preference over which they had no control. Throughout this report each category has shown that male homosexuality is less tolerated than lesbianism (see sections 4.3, 4.4, and 4.17). When this is translated into the level of harassment and abuse gay male youth and gay men experience from childhood, it is not surprising that they are less at peace with their sexuality than lesbians. Such findings however need to be considered in the broader political context.

The fact that men seem to suffer more than lesbians from the oppression of homosexuals is not to say that lesbians have an easy time of it. Lesbians are the victims of both homophobic and sexist attacks. In Australia lesbians and gay men are increasingly victims of high levels of harassment and violence. Research by Mason and Tomsen has shown that gay men are four times more likely than other men to be victims of assault, and lesbians six times more likely than other women (1997:iii). According to

Mason and Tomsen, (1997) many hate crimes against lesbians and gay men in Australia are unreported; reflecting a lack of trust in the police and the justice system. Indeed the stigma attached to male homosexuality and lesbianism differs, generally because of the relationship between the idea of gender inversion and society's perception of acceptable masculinity.

Lesbians bear the double oppression of gender and sexuality (Tomsin and Mason, 1997). Although lesbians as such did not suffer the same legal persecution that homosexual men did, they shared the injustices and violence suffered by all women, often compounded by their lesbianism, for example losing custody of children, greater discrimination in employment, obtaining finance, housing and so on. Indeed it is often difficult for a lesbian to determine whether she has been abused or discriminated against on the grounds of sex or sexuality. Further the word lesbian or derogative terms for lesbians are also used as terms of abuse for heterosexual women.

The following comments from respondents reflect those who were accepting, content and proud to be lesbian or gay. Wendy "I believe I have probably always been gay but it took me 37 years to accept it. I was never comfortable with me and now I am in a relationship with a woman. It just feels right." Justin: "As I mentioned before, I'm white, middle aged and male. I've never been sexually attracted to women, and the few times I have had sex with females I decided housework was more fun. Sex with other blokes is just like the advertising - its fun!" Kath: "I feel proud. Every day I am aware of how fortunate I am to be a lesbian. I would not want to be anything other than a lesbian."

Deirdre: I have a great partner, a great community. I have marched in Mardi Gras and participated in the gay games. I am very happy and comfortable with who I am. I work as a volunteer on a lesbian and gay counselling phone line once a fortnight. I am out at work and I refuse to live a lie. I challenge homophobic comments and reactions but this has all taken time and I can still get a daily 'kick in the guts' from people if I am not careful.

The following comments are from those women and men who had mixed feelings. Margaret: "My feelings fluctuate at times but generally I am happy and accepting. Sometimes angry, unhappy and resentful if I feel I have missed out on something due

to my sexual preference.”

Gary’s sister is a lesbian, and his concern is continuing non-acceptance from his father. “My father still believes homosexuality is a choice. However it is interesting that he accepts having a lesbian daughter but not a gay son. If my time could be experienced again, I’d still wish that I was gay.”

Christina: Sometimes it makes me sad, knowing what I have had to go through to get where I am today. I can’t help but think that it would have been a lot easier and I would have been happier as a child and young adult if I had been heterosexual. It makes me angry that I feel this way, it shouldn’t have been such a big issue as it was. If I had had some kind of influence or role model to look to then I would have felt less alone and helpless. I am happy that I am gay now, it makes me see the world through different eyes and I like that.

Mary is happy to be a lesbian but has a partner who is very anxious about her sexuality and being found out. “I have a partner of 8 months who I love very much. I long to be out. She is very afraid of being outed because of her work with children. I would love to be living more openly, that is, each of us acknowledged in each others’ families.”

Those who felt unhappy about their sexuality did so for a number of reasons. Lincoln for example explained, “I wish I was heterosexual. I am still not completely over not being ‘normal’. My future doesn’t have the same sort of definition that I see heterosexual life having, that is marriage and kids. I am unsure about how I feel about that.” And Ken: “I am generally happy to be a poof, but I would like to be hetero sometimes because there are more partner options. I am happy with myself, but generally I don’t identify with other gay men because they are generally not ‘regular’ people.”

For Rowena the feelings were more stressful. “I feel scared. I know it is right for me but I wish I could change it,” and tragically, Jodi said, “Sometimes I still feel disgusted with myself.”

A notable contrast is Anne, “Just completing this survey I have realised how far I

have come. It's an achievement that will only ever be acknowledged by me, and yet is probably the most difficult thing I'll ever do. No one congratulates you on a good 'coming out'."

#### ***4.10.1 Summary current feelings about being a lesbian or gay man***

The findings show that lesbians and gay men have differing perceptions about their sexuality. For lesbians there was more of a political dimension in that significant numbers (27.3%) saw their lesbianism as a conscious choice and 38.2% as an identification with women. There are no gay men who considered choice and only 7.5% who perceived their gayness as an identification with men. Men overwhelmingly saw their sexuality in terms of biology and a sexual preference.

Both lesbians and gay men expressed positive feelings about being homosexual. There was little interest in being heterosexual (3.6% of lesbians and 7.5% of gay men). A small number of men (10%) and no women said they were unhappy.

When taking into consideration the historical, social and political context in which women and men live the above results are not surprising. Lesbianism provides options for women than many heterosexual women are denied. Women in some ways gain politically by being lesbians whereas men, because of the assumption of gender inversion, may lose status by being gay.

### **4.11 Services and Needs**

During interviews, and in the questionnaire, participants were asked to reflect in particular on being lesbians or gay men in regional or rural Victoria, and to identify services and assistance available in their communities which would have helped them at the time they were forming a homosexual identity. Those who were still living in regional or rural Victoria (Grampians region) were also asked to identify existing and desired services and support.

During the interviews the response to the question of existing services was invariably

a cynical laugh and a resounding “nothing”. It was noted by one interviewee that there are some books in the Grampians Community Health Centre library which is open to the public. The existence of a social group BGlad in Ballarat was mentioned, as were two caf  s in Horsham that were known to be gay friendly. A social and support group was being set up at the time of the interviews, by a small group of lesbians and gay men in Stawell.

That there was a need for social and support services in the area was highlighted by one of the interviewees. Oliver, who had been a priest before coming out as a gay man, supported the view that there were few social opportunities for lesbians and gay men in rural Victoria, and even less in terms of support. From his experience,

The other thing that may interest you (addressing interviewer) which is not in my experience as a gay man, but as my experience as a minister in rural Victoria. It's people that I encountered, male and female, young people who thought they were gay, knew they were gay, and needed someone to talk to and it's very hard for them, very hard.

This need for services was also confirmed by comments such as those of Maryanne and Justin. Maryanne: “I think the process would have been easier if I knew that it was ok to be homosexual. That other people go through the exact same thing as I. The worst thing was I did it alone, no one to talk to and being very confused.”

Justin: Gays are a minority. In small country towns, there are just not enough people to make any minority visible (though I eventually found four other queers in (small town). For me, coming out was not difficult, just long and drawn out. Coming from a privileged middle class background, I knew that I could do and be anything I wanted - or as in this case, I could be what I am.

While the need for services was supported by participants in this study, the overwhelming concern expressed about services in public space was that of anonymity and confidentiality. This is also an ongoing concern noted by rural social workers as well (Green and Mason, 2002). Some participants were quite adamant that even if, for example, there were books about homosexuality in the library, they would not risk being outed by openly borrowing them. As Maylene said, “It would be threatening to go to the public library to get a book out - everyone would know.”

Christina concurred, “Any information that was available in a way so that nobody knew I was getting it. I was so scared that people would 'find out my secret'. I would have needed information that made me feel safe to access.”

Table 4.38 shows the services nominated by respondents in the questionnaire that they felt would be useful.

**Table 4.38: Desired services identified by participants**

<b>Services desired</b>	<b>Lesbians</b>		<b>Gay men</b>	
	<b>N =</b> <b>55</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N =</b> <b>40</b>	<b>%</b>
Designated gay friendly counsellor	28	51.0	9	22.5
Designated gay friendly medical doctor	19	34.5	5	12.5
Information about services	23	41.8	4	10.0
Books in school library	9	16.4	2	5.0
Inclusive sex education at school	32	58.2	9	22.5
Community education about sexual diversity	24	43.6	12	30.0
Books in public library	14	25.4	4	10.0
Legal action against homophobic crimes	17	31.0	4	10.0
Opportunities for social activities	23	41.8	8	20.0
Other	8	14.5	1	2.5

Figures refer to the valid responses for each row category and bear no relation to other rows

There was a significant gender difference in the type of responses to this question. Few gay men nominated a service that they could personally access, example libraries, gay friendly doctors etc., even though, when taking into consideration their experiences, it might seem they were more in need of such help. While women supported such initiatives, men were more supportive of initiatives that educated others to be more respectful of homosexuality and homosexuals, though women too supported such initiatives. It is interesting too, to note how few men completed this part of the questionnaire. The main interest of those men who responded was community education generally (30%) and at school (22.5%) with 22.5% also wanting gay friendly counsellors. Only 20% were interested in social activities. While lesbians also considered this to be important they also showed interest in other services such as gay friendly health professionals (51% and 34.5%), school and community education (58.2% and 43.6%) and 41.8% wanted both an information point about services and opportunities for social activities.

The services indicated in table 4.38 and those discussed during the interviews can be broadly categorised as health, general information, professional services, education, and social and support services.

#### ***4.11.1 Health professionals***

The category of health professionals includes that provided by all areas of the health profession including allied health and social services such as social workers, as well as identifying dedicated gay friendly health practitioners and counsellors. Respondents pointed out needs in the following areas:

- Mental health relative to self-esteem and confidence;
- Relationship counselling;
- Support and counselling around sexuality issues;
- Sexual health;
- Suicide prevention; and
- Gayline including counsellors if attacked or abused.

A telephone counselling service already exists. The Gay and Lesbian Switchboard is based in Melbourne but has a 1800 number for country callers. It is staffed by trained volunteers. For lesbians and gay men to be able to identify gay or gay friendly health professionals would be extremely helpful.

#### ***4.11.2 General Community Information***

This section deals with accessing information about services, support and social activities provided by the homosexual community, but which could also be provided in other more formal ways. There are a number of gay and lesbian newspapers and magazines in Melbourne, to which people can subscribe. However there are few places in country areas where they can be bought over the counter. A media drop off point was mentioned as a need however there is still the same problem of confidentiality and anonymity.

A web based service, such as a ‘what’s on’ and a ‘what’s available’ was suggested as the safest and potentially most informative option, that is, an on-line data base of available resources and publications. This service would have links to other web based services, for example the ALSO foundation and the Law Institute which has a publication about lesbian and gay legal rights.

Existing services include Loddon Mallee Women's Health, which has a lesbian worker and Rainbow Radio.

#### ***4.11.3 Professional services***

Another suggested need was how to identify designated gay friendly professional services such as financial and legal. Various information booklets exist such as 'Over the Rainbow: a guide to the law for lesbians and Gay men in Victoria.' 2002, available from the Law Institute. The web based information service was suggested as a means of professionals making it known that they are gay friendly. Another suggestion was for a paid position in a DHS community centre whose duty statement includes gay issues (gay/lesbian networker and advocate).

#### ***4.11.4 Education***

Discussions around education included two aspects. Firstly participants discussed a need for access to information about homosexuality as well as services available. Secondly they pointed out the need to educate others about homosexuality. While discussing this issue Tony pointed out the need for the general community to be exposed to homosexuality as a normal lifestyle, "Gay literature attracts me a little bit, the gay slanted TV shows such as 'Will and Grace' or 'Queer as Folk' yeah I'll sit and watch them. I hope a hell of a lot of the population who are not gay also watch them."

Education about homosexuality was widely supported. The general feeling was that if heterosexuals understood homosexuality there would be greater respect. Lena suggested that, "People need to be taught from a young age that homosexuality is not a disease but simply a way of life."

Community education for police, doctors, counsellors, social workers and teachers was particularly noted. Indeed it would be of interest to research the current understanding of homosexuality of such professionals as well as their attitudes toward homosexuality and further, how they would deal with homosexuals who came to them in a professional capacity. Such information would be useful before

preparing any educative material/services. A sample information kit for teachers and students was prepared by a University of Ballarat student and is available upon request from the researchers.

#### ***4.11.5 Social/support***

One of the greatest difficulties faced by regional and rural lesbians and gay men was meeting others like themselves. For example Mary noted, “One of my girlfriend’s said ‘You don’t look gay’. You don’t look the butch type.’ That’s half the problem, that we can’t recognise each other. We’re so ordinary.” The need for a meeting place was mentioned by many respondents. Over the years many social and support groups, organised by energetic and enthusiastic lesbians and/or gay men have come and gone. Social support groups such as those in Bendigo and Geelong, each of which has a sizeable, active membership, are currently enjoying strong membership. BGlad exists in Ballarat though it was felt by some lesbians in this study to be gay centred. For some years there was a group called Central Victorian Lesbian Network (CVLN) which had a membership ranging from Trentham to Ballarat. This group provided a strong support network and organised many social activities. According to one of the interviewees who had been a member, the group disbanded when they attempted to become incorporated and could not fulfil the legal requirements.

The group that recently started in Stawell, with a membership of 40 promises to be a successful group.

Social support groups are predominantly organised and run by a group of interested lesbians and/or gay men. Frequently they are active for a few months or years until eventually they disband. The reasons for their non-continuance includes a reduction in members, in-fighting, the organisers running out of energy and a reluctance by others to take leadership. Such was the case with the group Daylesford Springs Connection. Reduced interest, infighting and a reluctance for new people to take on the leadership caused the group to disband. It was a core group of Springs Connection members who started the Daylesford Chill Out festival and ran it for the first few years. While Springs Connection has disbanded, Chill Out has been taken

over by a new committee.

One way, suggested by an interviewee, in which to take the pressure of individual members, might be to formally set up groups. Maggie: “A support group that was very confidential and didn’t meet in a public space where other non-gay people could have been.” John: “I think a queer youth group, and better education in (catholic) schools.” Samantha: No one ever attends community education about sexual diversity. We need public awareness, a gay get together venue, a newsletter for the area.”

Many existing self help, social and support groups are run in Melbourne. The lesbian magazine, *Lesbiana*, and the gay press, eg. *B.News*, lists some of those including, information and support groups, health information services, lesbian parenting groups, social groups as well as specific activity groups such as bush walking. The listings also include political, activist groups.

In Central Victoria the Cobaw Community Health Service (DHS) is involved with a project called ‘Way Out Victorian Youth and Sexual Diversity Project’. This project focuses on homosexual youth up to the age of 22. Their aim is to fight ‘homophobia’ in the Macedon shire and to support youth during the identity formation process. The activities of the group are initiated by members, with facilitation by the project worker. Activities include regular meetings, media campaigns, training programs, and promotion activities such as stickers and brochures.

#### ***4.11.6 Summary services and needs***

The services provided for sexual minorities would have to take into consideration the diversity of the gay and lesbian population in terms of:

- age at first awareness of same-sex attraction
- age of coming out
- current age
- gender
- level of religiosity

- marital status
- children in the same-sex relationship

The lesbian and gay community largely depend on each other to organise services and support. This informal system (in that it is removed from the State) enjoys some success in Melbourne where there is a sizeable lesbian and gay population, but does not work so well in regional and rural Victoria where the lesbian and gay population is smaller and more dispersed.

Women and men in this study expressed different needs and showed interest in different services however they can be broadly categorised as health, general information, professional services, community education including school and social and support services.

## **5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

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### **5.1 Introduction**

At the time of this study the great majority of lesbians and gay men who participated expressed positive feelings about being homosexual. At the very least they were accepting and many were content and proud.

As was discussed in the models of homosexual identity formation, for example Cass (1979) the progression to acceptance of a homosexual self is often a difficult one. Whilst their stage theory cannot be confirmed the experiences and milestones depicted in the models were found to be true. For both lesbians and gay men in this study the journey to self acceptance was often a difficult and stressful one, caused by the prevailing atmosphere of non-acceptance and often vilification of homosexual people. Such a context was found by many respondents to be more prevalent in regional and rural areas. In each of the domains of inquiry examined in this study, that is family, community, school, contact with health professionals and the workplace, lesbians and gay men had experiences of ‘homophobia’. In the culture of regional and rural Victoria homosexuality is still considered a marginalised experience. This has serious consequence for how lesbians and gay men can live out their lives.

Although the majority are accepting of their sexuality and happy to be lesbian or gay, they nevertheless live curtailed lives with a blanket around a central dimension of their lives. Their minority status, and as a marginalised group, means that in every aspect of their lives they have to be mindful of their sexuality.

For example in the family it is not uncommon for parental and family acceptance to be combined with restrictions such as ‘don’t bring your partner home’ and ‘don’t talk about it’. In the community lesbians and gay men, even if they are accepted cannot do things in public that heterosexuals take for granted. Often they are completely secretive for fear of homophobic attack. When consulting medical and other professionals lesbians and

gay men often do not disclose their sexuality to avoid discrimination. Non acceptance by the church means that those who wish to, cannot participate or completely participate honestly. Homophobia in the church has caused many respondents to reject organised religion.

A major finding in this research is that there are distinct groups within the homosexual population. The data confirm that lesbians and gay men are not a mirror image of each other. They are two distinct groups of people with very different social and political backgrounds and experiences and needs.

The second distinct grouping can be made around age of coming out. On the one hand there are adolescents dealing with homosexual identity formation during school years and on the other hand there are those who form a homosexual identity in early adulthood, up to and even beyond middle age. Some of this latter group may have started homosexual identity formation at a much younger age and foreclosed due to inability to deal with the issues at the time and/or a lack of support. Others have experienced same-sex attraction for the first time in adulthood. The main area of concern for the older age group is those who are married and have children.

The needs of each of these groups differs but also overlaps. A primary need for both groups is general information about homosexuality and the opportunity for social contact with others like themselves. A particular need for young people is support and counselling. This is especially crucial if parents and family are non-accepting. Such a situation leaves the young person totally isolated and vulnerable to thoughts of self harm.

## **5.2      Gender differences**

More men than women believed in negative stereotypes about homosexuality at the time they became aware of same-sex attraction. The main negative, influencing stereotypes were gender inversion, sickness and sinfulness, and the prospect of living lonely, unhappy and unfulfilled.

Disclosure to parents was a major barrier for young lesbians and gay men though for some older ones as well. It is not surprising for young people to be hesitant about disclosure. Young people are likely to have difficulty discussing with parents that they are becoming sexual beings, let alone homosexual beings. Nevertheless mostly parents were accepting and supportive of children. Rejection was more likely for gay sons than lesbian daughters and rejection was more common by the father than the mother. Young people anticipated such reactions and were less likely to disclose to fathers than to mothers.

Major differences were found in the school experience. Boys in particular were victims of merciless bullying if they did not conform to acceptable notions of masculinity and were suspected of being homosexual.

The trend to be harder on male homosexuals was repeated in the wider community. The general pervading atmosphere of non-acceptance of homosexuals caused a significant number of women and men to leave their communities.

Finally there are important gender differences in the way lesbians and gay men see themselves and feel about their sexuality. Lesbian sexuality had a political dimension that male homosexuality does not seem to have. Gay men see themselves as having few choices around sexuality and do not see their sexuality as being in any way associated with an identification with other men. Thus few male respondents spoke of or showed interest in a homosexuality community, though this is countered by the sizeable male membership of the newly formed Stawell group.

Although in the end gay men are accepting of their sexuality, there were more gay men than lesbians who gave negative responses such as ‘unhappy’. Also there were only 50% who said they were proud. These sentiments may be connected to the more extrinsic perception of sexuality held by gay men, that is, that it is something that happened to them.

Lesbians perception about their sexuality was quite different with many more nominating ‘a way of life’, a choice (as well as sexual preference) and an identification with women. Lesbians held a greater intrinsic view of their sexuality in that they believed they had some agency in their sexuality. In the end they were more accepting, content, proud and at peace with themselves than gay men.

### **5.3 Provision of services**

Whilst the needs of lesbians and gay men are many, resources are somewhat scarcer. Clearly many resources and services such as community education and public spaces for lesbians and gay men are desirable, if not necessarily practical to provide.

A major concern expressed by the respondents in this study was that of anonymity and confidentiality. They tended not to use public spaces such as libraries to access information about homosexuality for fear of being seen. Formal social activities tended to be in each others’ homes or in public places such as cafes.

When considering provision of services or developing policy to address the needs of lesbians and gay men, gender differences and age differences need to be taken into consideration.

The researchers recommend the setting up of a web site (which could be part of the current DHS web site). This site could be simple in so much as it provides basic information and some links to existing services. Alternatively it could be a more complex site including educative materials, a what’s on section, information about gay friendly professionals and chat rooms. Gay or gay friendly health professionals could be identified on this site. Recommended links would be to:

- professional organisations such as the Law Institutions and the EEO commission as these have information relevant to lesbians and gay men;
- the ALSO Foundation;
- publications such as this report and other educative material;
- existing formal and informal services such as the Loddon Mallee group, Rainbow

- Radio, social and support groups such as those mentioned earlier; and
- other gay and lesbian websites.

A major challenge is to make the existence of such a web site known to the target group. This would involve fliers in public places frequented by all age groups, such as libraries, community health centres, GP's surgeries, Health Services, pre-school centres and so on. Ideally this could also be linked to the Department of Education to make such information available in schools, although it is understood that this is a politically sensitive issue.



## APPENDIX B

### The stage models of homosexual identity formation

Theorists	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5	Stage 6
Dank 1971 deviancy; women subsumed; but talks of closet queens, T room trade etc	<b>Identification</b>	<b>Self acceptance</b>				
Plummer 1975 (symbolic interactionist) (sex of respondents not known)	<b>Sensitization</b> awareness of self as potentially gay	<b>Signification</b> heightened awareness of relevance of h/s	<b>Coming Out</b> “reborn into gay comm; self labelling as h/s	<b>Stabilisation</b> of identity unable and unwilling to change		
Schafer 1976 women 151, 18 to 40 year olds; West Germany	<b>First suspicion</b> mid teens, attracted but not physical desire	<b>First Intercourse</b> late teens, more hetero activity, suppressing of homo desire	<b>Awareness of being lesbian</b> within a year of first sexual experience; often increased hetero-sex; troubled and fear of future			
Lee 1977 deviancy subsumes women but refers to he/she	<b>Signification</b> (awareness) slowly accepting a deviant identity; aware of orientation but do not act; first sex at beats	<b>Coming Out</b> (behavioural acceptance) Self identification and disclosure to others; seeks h/s community and venues	<b>Going Public</b> example in the media - says few do this			
Cass 1979/84 women and men. In 1979 says all people went through stages	<b>Identity confusion</b> first awareness, turmoil, personal identity crisis	<b>Identity Comparison</b> Acknowledge possible h/s id Alienation feel different	<b>Identity Tolerance</b> Resentment, start disclosure seek other h/s tolerate, does not accept h/s id, Needs positive contact with other h/s to move to stage 4	<b>Identity Acceptance</b> increase contact with h/s validates id, non-stressful, Much contact with h/s sub-culture	<b>Identity Pride</b> Involvement with and commitment to h/s community, community very important here	<b>Identity synthesis</b> total acceptance, re-identifies with heterosexuals. Disclosure a non-issue
Troiden 1979 150 men; perspective of deviancy	<b>Sensitisation</b> pre-puberty, feeling of difference, marginality; gender inadequacy; excitement in company of men; reinterpretation of childhood experiences;	<b>Dissociation &amp; signification</b> adolescence; inner turmoil; do not acknowledge h/s id; this stage early teens for males, later for females	<b>Coming Out</b> Late adolescent/early adult; seeks h/s community; Labels self as feeling h/s; Has been sexual with men; inner struggle for many	<b>Commitment</b> Identity seen as natural/normal; Express contentment; commitment to h/s; take a lover; prefer to be h/s		

<b>Coleman 1982</b> (essentialist) Unclear if women interviewed although mentioned	<b>Pre-Coming Out</b> Feeling different in childhood; (if h/s not confronted as they grow up, denial, repression) then psychosomatic illness, behavioural problems and suicide)	<b>Coming Out</b> Acknowledge h/s feelings; disclosure	<b>Exploration</b> Sexual experimenting; alcohol and drugs ease pain	<b>First Relationship</b> tires of sexual experimenting; needs intimacy; first relationship has intensity, lack of trust & possessiveness	<b>Identity Integration</b> More likely to have good relationships; incorporates public and private identities	
<b>Minton &amp; McDonald 1984</b> (essentialist) Deal "chiefly" with men; See h/s id as a lifespan development process; symbolic interactionists; use Habermas' stages of ego development	<b>Symbiotic Lack of Identity</b> In first year of life, child has no sense of self	<b>Egocentric child</b> differentiates between self & environment; Possibility of a "primitive awakening of homo-erotic sentiment"; self perception inadequately" feminine or masculine?; feelings of difference	<b>Sociocentric</b> aware possibly h/s; aware society's attitudes; some anxiety, confusion, guilt, isolation; do not consciously identify as h/s; assume feelings will pass	<b>Universalistic</b> realises societal norms can be critically evaluated; acceptance and commitment to a positive h/s identity		
<b>Sophie 1985/86</b> women only; sexuality fluid; tested against 6 existing models, including Cass 1979, Plummer 1975, Coleman 1982	<b>First Awareness</b> Alienation for some; Other models have first awareness before contact with h/s' - some of Sophie's contact first then consider h/s for self; most did not come out to others	<b>Testing Exploration</b> Most models suggest no relationship at this stage but Sophie's some did have relationship; Most, but not all seek out gay community	<b>Identity Acceptance</b> Increased preference for gay social interaction	<b>Identity Integration</b> Accept lesbian identity; however may not be an end state - change can occur		
<b>Troiden 1989</b> revision of 1979 model; discusses women as well as men; seems to see h/s as biologically based eg gays and lesbians who were gender typical experience more confusion about their sexual identity	<b>Sensitisation</b> Pre puberty; childhood experiences which sensitise them to later h/s id; marginality, difference; gender inappropriate behaviour; given h/s meaning during adolescence	<b>Identity Confusion</b> personalise h/s as they realise their behaviour could be regarded as h/s; confusion, inner turmoil	<b>Identity Assumption</b> h/s identity is both a self and presented id; women self id at first r'ship; men at regular sex eg beats; h/s id is tolerated not accepted; need positive contact with other h/s'; must manage stigma	<b>Commitment</b> Adopt h/s as way of life; prefer to be h/s		

<b>Zera 1992</b> Overview of gay adolescent experience rather than a model; focuses on the negative	Internal Experience associate term h/s with sickness or sin; fear of alienation from family/friends; describes only negative feelings and experiences	Peer Relationships alienation, fear of discovery, loneliness, frustration	Parental Responses fear of disclosure, anger, shock, denial; describes only negative responses from parents	Coping Strategies learning to hide; denial; engaging in gender deviance; redefinition “only a phase”; higher risk of suicide; increase in pregnancy	Consolidation of Identity cites Cass and Trolden	
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