

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

An insight on initiation of same sex behavior among men who have sex with men in Agra district of India: A Qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: Men who have sex with men (MSM) refer to all males (of any age) who engage in sexual relations with other males. The gross stigmatization and discrimination of homosexuals have affected the life and health of MSM. **Aims & objective:** To get an insight on circumstances of initiation and continuation of same sex behavior among MSM. **Material & Methods:** This qualitative study was conducted in MSM population in Agra district in India. Audio recorded in-depth interviews were transcribed into verbatim. Potential themes were extracted as a part of analysis as per relevant experiences of the participants. Data saturation achieved after 13 In-depth interviews. **Results:** The initiation of same sex behavior among MSM was at a young age and was mostly without their consent. Almost all participants were below the legal age of giving consent for sex and their first homosexual partner was a familiar, elderly in position of authority. They played a passive role in their initial sexual encounter and none of them was able to discuss it freely with their family members or friends. They mostly felt depressed after their first homosexual encounter. They had continued this sexual behavior as they have accepted their attraction towards same sex. **Conclusion:** There is a need to include concepts of sexuality in education curriculum and sensitize parents also and counseling of those exposed to homosexuality at a tender age is imperative.

Keywords

Men Who Have Sex with Men; MSM; Child Sexual Abuse; Sexual Health; Sexuality; Sexual Violence

Introduction

Men who have sex with men (MSM) refer to all males (of any age) who involve in sexual relations with other males.(1,2) and 'same-sex' behavior refers to sexual conduct between people of the same sex, irrespective of their sexual orientation.(1)

The gross stigmatization of homosexuality have always affected life and health of MSM (especially young MSM), particularly when reinforced by criminalization and violence.(3,4) Young MSM are often aware of lack of understanding and hostility around issues of same-sex behavior. This forces

them to keep their sexual behavior/orientation hidden from others which significantly reduces their access to HIV, sexual and mental health services and increases their vulnerability to engage in risky behaviors.(2,3,5)

There is evidence that young MSM become sexually active at an earlier age than previous generations of MSM.(6,7,8) Numerous studies also document a high prevalence of history of sexual abuse in their childhood. (9,10,11) This abuse further compromises their sexual and mental health and increases their vulnerability for various sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS later in their lives.(12,13,14). There is a paucity of studies exploring the circumstances of initiation and continuation of homosexual activities in MSM but such studies may reveal their increased vulnerabilities in later life.

Aims & Objectives

1. To get an insight on experience and circumstances of initiation of same sex behavior among MSM in Agra city
2. To get an insight on reasons for continuation of same sex behavior among MSM in Agra city

Material & Methods

Study Type: This was a qualitative study. Audio recorded in-depth interviews were transcribed into verbatim. Potential themes were extracted as a part of analysis as per relevant experiences, behaviors and attitudes of the participants.

Study Population: This study was conducted among MSM population in Agra district of Uttar Pradesh state in India

Study Area: Agra district of Uttar Pradesh state in India

Study Duration: Study was conducted between December 2017 and November 2018.

Sample Size Calculation: Data saturation was achieved after 13 In-depth interviews. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The first participant was recruited through a non-profit peer group. Further participants were subsequently referred by the participants from their peer circles.

Inclusion criteria: for the participants of the study are: 1) Self-reported same sex behavior in last 1 year; 2) 18 years or older at the time of interview.

Exclusion criteria: 1) Self-reported HIV positive status; 2) critically ill or suffering from end stage

disease; 3) lack of willingness to participate or provide written consent.

Strategy for collection: The participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The first participant was recruited through a non-profit peer group. Further participants were subsequently referred by the participants from their peer circles. The questionnaire was semi-structured and was constructed using guidelines of In-depth interviews (IDIs).(15) In-depth interviews were conducted with the eligible participants at the place of their choice, in the language as per their fluency (Hindi and/or English) and were audio recorded. Each interview lasted for 30-45 minutes. The audio was converted in to transcript. The transcripts in Hindi language were converted in to English and were analyzed after each interview. The interim data analysis was done using deductive thematic analysis. Potential issues and concepts were identified from relevant words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs of the text and were marked (labeled) and coded. Potential themes were extracted as a part of analysis as per relevant experiences, behaviors, attitudes and acts of the participants. Data saturation was achieved after 13 IDIs.

The audio recordings were simultaneously deleted after each analysis. No identifier was mentioned in the transcripts.

Working Definitions: Same-sex behavior: refers to sexual conduct between people of the same sex, irrespective of their sexual orientation

Men who have sex with men (MSM): Males, 18 years or older who had anal or oral sex with another male in the last one year.

Ethical Approval: The ethical clearance for the study was taken from Institutional Ethical Clearance Committee, SN Medical College and Hospital, Agra. The study was not funded and has no-conflict of interests.

Consent: The participants were informed about the study and a written consent was taken for their participation and for audio-recording their interviews. The audio recordings were simultaneously deleted after each analysis. No identifier was mentioned in the transcripts.

Data analysis: The interim data analysis was done using deductive thematic analysis. Potential issues and concepts were identified from relevant words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs of the text and were labeled and coded. Potential themes were extracted as a part of analysis as per relevant

experiences, behaviors, attitudes and acts of the participants.

Results

A total of 13 individuals who identified themselves as active MSM and were living in Agra city participated in this study. They were aged between 22 to 45 years, 2 of them were married and 9 were full-time students.

At the start of the interview, the respondents reacted with a sense of skepticism and disbelief that someone is really interested to talk to them on this issue. They were shy to talk about their first homosexual act initially but were comfortable after re-assurance of confidentiality of their identity.

[Table 1]

Age at first homosexual act: Most of the participants informed that they were below the legal age of giving consent (i.e. 18 years) at the time of their first homosexual act: "I was around 7-8 years old; my neighbor cajoled me into things....." (IDI-7, 45 years, service man, married)

Partner during first homosexual act: The participants revealed that people who were closely related and previously known to them were their partners during first homosexual act. One of the respondents painfully narrated his ordeal: "Actually it was like proper harassment, he was my maternal uncle....." (IDI-4, 23 years, student, unmarried)

Most common perpetrators were their relatives, neighbors or tutor and were older to them. In some cases the partner during their first homosexual act was even twice or thrice their age. ".....he was 26 and I was just 12 (his face turned pale and uttered in a sad tone)." (IDI-4, 23 years, student, unmarried)

It was also found that their first homosexual partner was known to them for a longer period of time. One of the respondents told: "Usko bachpan se dekha tha use, mere pados me rehta tha....." meaning "I had seen him since childhood. He used to live in my neighbourhood...." (IDI-10, 38 years, shopkeeper, married)

Therefore, it can be documented that an elderly, closely related or familiar person whom they have known for many years is the perpetrator of sexual abuse among participants of this study which led to the initiation of same sex behavior.

Place of sex: The most cited place of first homosexual act was their home or their partner's house. Some of them also reported public places (school, hostel and public park) as the places of their

first homosexual act. "Merapehele sex encounter tha.... jab main 10 saal ka tha, vo mere tutor the or mere hi gharmaipadhaneate the." meaning "My first sexual encounter happened when I was 10 years old, he was my tutor and he used to visit my home to teach me." (IDI-5, 26 years, graduate, unmarried)

Nature of act and role in first homosexual act: In most of the cases, first homosexual act of study participants was forceful and non-consensual. One of the respondents narrated: "Completely forcefully tha. As I remember that date was 26th of June, everybody was gone in party outside....." meaning "It was completely forceful. As I remember that date was 26th of June and everybody was out for a party." (IDI-3, 23 years, student, unmarried)

This study also found that participants mostly played a passive, receptive role during their first homosexual encounter. Most of them were in fact too young to act as an active, penetrating partner at the time of their first homo-sexual act.

However, a 25 years old fashion designing student, whose first homosexual act was planned, had different views: "My first sexual experience (with a deep breath), I guess I was 17 at that time, and I met the person through the social media. It was well planned and we both were aware that we are going to sex date." (IDI-6, 25-year-old, student, unmarried)

Physical injury: Several participants with a history of sex abuse during their first homosexual encounter, reported sustained injuries. One of the respondents who faced sexual violence during his first homosexual act informed: "Bruises on my chest, neck and.... (long pause)." (IDI-6, 23 years, student, unmarried)

Repetition with same partner: The study participants reported repeated sexual acts with the same person who was their partner in their first homosexual act. In most of the cases, some form of physical and/or verbal abuse, suppression, use of authoritative power or blackmail by the same partner, was reported as the reason of repetition of sexual encounters. "Yes after two days he again forced me to sleep with him & the thing was irritating more...he was drunk." (IDI-3, 23 years, student, unmarried)

Disclosure of first homosexual act: Most of the participants were not able to fully disclose their first homosexual act freely to anyone including their parents, siblings or relatives after the encounter. Most of them even did not wanted to disclose it to anyone, not even with their close friends. One of the

respondents told: "Maine yeh baatkisi ko nahibatayi but main bahut dar gaya tha us time to, ki kisi ne nahi dekha ho mujhe, ya kisi ko pta na chal jaye ye baat." meaning "I didn't disclose this incident to anyone but I was too scared at that time, what if someone had seen me or someone came to know about this thing" (IDI-10, 38 years, shopkeeper, married)

They were even blackmailed by others in the pretext of not disclosing it to their parents or siblings: "Tomaine bola mere ghar par mat kehna. Mujhe ye darlagakahi ye mere ghar par nakehdai.... Usneutna hi darayamujhe..... bhai se kahungashikayatterri..... tuaise-aise garden gyatha. Maine kaha please mat kehna mere bhai se..... to usne kaha theekhai mere sathchal, usnemujhe blackmail kiya." "So I said don't tell at my home. I feared that he might tell at my home.... he made me scared a lot..... will complain to your brother.... You went to the garden.... I requested him not to tell my brother..... so he asked me to come along with him, he blackmailed me." (IDI-10, 38 years, shopkeeper married)

Even those, who tried to disclose it to someone, did not receive any positive response or support. As one of the respondent narrated: "I tried, but I belong to, You know conservative family, toh at that time toh, meri bua ko mainebatanekikoshishkaritoh (paused)..... she slapped on my cheek and told kichupraho hum log aisibaatenahikartehai, then never discussed these things again." "I tried, but I belong to, you know conservative family, so at that time I tried to tell it to my paternal aunt (paused)..... she slapped on my cheek and told me to keep quiet and told me that we don't indulge in such type of talks and then I never discussed the same with anyone again." (IDI-5, 22-year-old, graduate student, unmarried).

Feeling after first homosexual act: Most of the participants experienced a feeling of guilt and depression after their first homosexual encounter. One of the participants narrated his helplessness after his first act: "I was so embarrassed (paused), he played the entire night as if I were a doll. I neither was able to cry nor was able to do anything. It was a very bad experience of my life." (IDI-2, 23-year-old, student, unmarried)

On the contrary, some participants admitted that they enjoyed their first homosexual encounter and sounded happy about their first experience: "Hmm.. Interested toh me bhitha to first time to bahut achha feel hua, aurdheeredheereaurachchalagnelaga." (IDI-5, 26

years, student, unmarried) "Hmm.. I was also very interested so felt very good at first time and gradually I started feeling much better." (IDI-5, 26 years, graduate, unmarried)

One of the participants was indifferent towards his feelings: "I didn't hate it. I didn't ever like it. It was just exploration". (IDI-12, 25 years, graduate, unmarried)

Reasons to continue homosexual behaviour: When the participants were asked about reasons for continuation of same sex behaviour, they mentioned that 'they are made like this'. One of the respondents told: "I guess, I do not really need reason for that (with a surprise on his face) because this is what I am (paused)..... this is how I am made, this is how I have been created, so I do not need reason for that (pause)....." (IDI-2, 25 years, graduate, unmarried)

Another participant who had his first homosexual act at the age of 19 years told: "Because I think (paused) it is not wrong. We all have choices and that is why I continued." (IDI-11, 25 years, graduate, unmarried)

Discussion

This qualitative study was conducted to assess the circumstances and experiences of MSM during their initial same sex encounters. It has been reported in some studies that boys as young as 7 years were sexually abused by older men.(1,5) Tomori C et al (2016) reported sexual abuse of children as young as 3 years old across 12 studied sites in India. (11) Sexual abuse especially at a young age has long lasting psychosocial impacts on the lives of the victims. In most of the cases, the first same sex encounter occurs at a young age and is usually forceful, receptive and non-consensual. The perpetrators are mostly older, familiar and known people (usually family, close relatives and friends) who have easy access to children. This establishes the vulnerability of children towards sexual abuse by individuals of same sex in the environment which are considered to be safe. Tomori et al (2016) also found that all of these early sexual experiences among MSM entailed clear power and/or age differences, and participants rarely initiated these sexual encounters themselves.(1,11) Moreover, majority of these initial sexual experiences in MSM are unwanted and occur before the age of attainment of sexual and/or required mental development, when the victims have inadequate knowledge of consent and safe sex and perpetrators are physically, psychosocially strong and have intention to

dominate, abuse and blackmail the victims for their sexual gratification.

It can be deduced from this study that most of the MSM plays a passive, receptive role during their first penetrative same sex encounter. It is also a common observation that MSM are usually forced or seduced to indulge in their first same sex act. However, it has been reported when the initial encounter is consensual, planned and happens comparatively at later stages of their adolescence, individuals find it pleasurable and interesting. Tomori et al (2016) also described these first homosexual experiences in different terms, ranging from clearly unwanted to partly or entirely desired and potentially enjoyable. (11)

Forceful, unwarranted encounters also accompany physical violence and significant injuries mostly in private parts. It has been well documented in grey literature and has been observed in this study that MSM have sequential, repeated sexual encounters with their first partner willingly or unwillingly. An element of blackmail, use of force, mental torture and threat of disclosure of their same sex act by their partners are cited as the probable reasons. This trauma leads to development of a feeling of guilt in young MSM which further promotes depression in most of the cases. This unpleasant experience compromises mental health of MSM and have long lasting negative psychological impacts. (1,5,16)

This study also provided the insight regarding the trouble and lack of comfort that MSM experience to discuss their first homosexual act freely with anyone including their parents, siblings and relatives. Even those who disclose it rarely receive any positive or supportive response and are further discouraged to discuss this issue. Perceived moral values, socio-cultural environment and ignorant attitude towards same sex practices are the possible reasons for such attitude and low acceptance. However, these barriers put them at significant risk of unsafe sex and abuse throughout their lives. (1,4,17)

The reasons cited for continuation of same sex behavior despite of bad/ mixed initial experiences varies within the study group. Pleasure and satisfaction is recognized as the main reason for this continued behavior. Moreover, younger MSM have greater acceptance for their sexual preferences and sexuality and considers it as 'natural' and their personal choice to indulge in to homosexual relationships.

Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth insight of circumstances and experiences of initiation of same sex behavior in MSM in Agra city. Childhood sexual abuse was quite prevalent among MSM and its disclosure among their family is very poor. The early, predominantly forceful and non-consensual initial encounters with an elder person and lack of support system calls for a multipronged strategy to prevent child sexual abuse. There is a strong need for inclusion of concepts of 'safe' and 'unsafe' touch in education curriculum in primary education. The parents should be educated on creating a safe environment for children at home and familiar spaces. They should be prompted to talk to their children about anything that compromises their mental health and should be sensitized about same sex attractions and sexual identity

Recommendation

Since most of MSM are involved in homosexual acts at tender age, a responsive mechanism should be developed to report, resolve and support them in case of need at the earliest. The educational institutions should be sensitized on sex, gender and sexuality issues and parents should be educated on creating a safe environment for children at home and familiar spaces. They should be prompted to talk to their children about anything that compromises their mental health. Effective counseling services should be ensured to safeguard the mental and sexual health of young and adolescent MSM population. As most of MSM had continued same sex behavior after their first encounter as they accepted themselves as such so there is significant need to make them aware about safer sex practices and HIV and Sexual transmitted diseases prevention through behavior change communication and bring them in direct standard care.

Relevance of the study

There is dearth of the studies exploring the initiation of homosexual behavior among MSM population in India. This qualitative study provides useful insight about the initiation of same sex behavior among MSM and highlighted prevalent childhood sexual abuse and had also given insight on reasons for continuation of this behavior later in their lives.

Authors Contribution

All authors were involved in preparing, editing and reviewing the manuscript. KIA, SSC and SKM

designed the study. KIA and SSC analysed and interpreted the data. KIA, SSC, GS, TPS, and AR extensively reviewed literature and collected data.

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Tables

TABLE 1 THEMES AND CODES EXTRACTED FROM INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Themes	Codes
Age at first homosexual act	Legal age of giving consent Young Age Child sexual abuse
Partners during first homosexual act	Relatives Neighbor Tutor Elderly Previously known/ familiar people Significant Age difference
Place of sex	Home Partner's house Public places
Nature of act and role in first homosexual act	Forceful Non-consensual Passive Receptive Planned
Physical violence	Physical Abuse Bruise Sustained Injuries
Repetition with same partner	Repetitive encounters Suppression Abuse Authoritative power Blackmail
Disclosure of homosexual act	Non-disclosure Lack of free will to discuss Blackmail Lack of support from family
Feeling after first homosexual act	Guilt Depression Interesting Indifferent
Reason to continue homosexual	Self-acceptance Self-choice