

Sexuality non-disclosure and concealment as functional: A qualitative study of multi-gender attracted men and non-binary people

Authors:

Smith A K J^{1,2,3}, Newman C E¹, MacGibbon J¹, Chan C⁴, Bavinton B R⁴, Reid-Moore T², Broady T R¹, Storer D^{1,5,6}, Anderson J⁷, Holt M¹

¹ Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney, ² School of Population Health, Curtin University, ³ Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health, Curtin University, ⁴ The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, ⁵ School of Population Health, UNSW Sydney, ⁶ School of Law, Society and Criminology, UNSW Sydney, ⁷ Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University

Background:

Non-disclosure and concealment of sexual orientation have often been linked to internalised stigma, mental health distress, and lower rates of health-seeking behaviour. The aim of this study was to understand how bi+ and straight men who have sex with men (MSM) negotiate disclosure and concealment of sexual identity and behaviour, and implications for sexual health services.

Methods:

Respondents of a national MSM survey in Australia (2024) were invited to be interviewed if they had consented to be contacted and identified as either straight or bi+. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via videoconferencing or telephone between Oct 2024 to Feb 2025 and analysed thematically.

Results:

The sample ($N=33$) were diverse in gender ($n=26$ cis men; $n=7$ trans, including trans men and non-binary), with many describing multiple sexual orientation labels ($n=26$ bisexual; $n=8$ pansexual; $n=3$ straight). Ages ranged 19-71 (*median*=36), most lived in major cities of Australia ($n=24$), and were born in Australia ($n=24$).

We developed four categories to describe the significance of discretion in participants' lives (high, moderate, less, not discreet). Under half ($n=15/33$) valued a moderate or high level of discretion regarding sex with men and were typically older (*median*=49). Key themes included: managing a 'straight-passing' life; not correcting others' assumptions about sexuality; and varied disclosure dynamics across different social domains (home, family, friends, workplace). A few reported stigma and the burden of concealment as issues. However, most described concealment as functional, enabling them to maintain privacy, preserve relationships, and protect social roles in public life.

Conclusion:

Assumptions of compulsory heterosexuality remain a challenge for some multi-gender attracted men and non-binary people, but concealment practices can also be normalised. Sensitivity to the complexity of disclosure, concealment, and desire for discretion is vital for effectively engaging this population, particularly as the social and political context shaping attitudes to diverse sexualities continues to change.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Centre for Social Research in Health and the Kirby Institute receive funding from the Australian Government Department of Health. This study was funded by the National Health & Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Partnership Project scheme (GNT2002625). No pharmaceuticals grants were received for this study.