INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUAL DIARIES

Sexual Diaries were developed as a method within Project SIGMA and now have a central place in our research work. We use them to provide unique and detailed information about gay and bisexual men's sexual activity and the contexts within which it occurs (though the method is equally usable for heterosexual behaviour). Validity and Reliability studies have shown that information is stable and in many ways is more valid than interview/questionnaire data [1999].

THE DIARY METHOD

The diary method is designed to produce data quite different from ordinary survey or interview methods:

- The information is much more specific, referring not only to the partner/s involved but also to the day, time and setting in which the sexual activity occurred.
- The data are much more detailed, giving information on the sequence in which things happened, on the roles (solo/active/passive/mutual) taken. If ejaculation occurred, its destination (in/on a partner, into a condom) is also noted. Any use of toys, "poppers" drugs etc. are recorded in the context in which they are used.
- Because Diaries are filled out on a daily basis, recall biases are lessened.

Because the diary method produces such detailed information it requires quite different methods of coding, representation and analysis and poses particular problems of reliability and validity. This part of the research, involving a primarily methodological focus and the writing of special computer software has been funded separately by the Department of Health.

The Sexual Diary and the Inventory of Sexual Behaviour (ISB) used in the WHO and SIGMA interview schedules have an identical structure (ref 1992 below), which makes direct comparison possible of data produced by the two methods and allows tests of consistency to be made.

RESEARCH.

Diary keepers are asked to keep a diary on a daily basis for the period of a month (though shorter periods are acceptable). Diarists are recruited both as part of the Project SIGMA ongoing samples, and occasionally by large-scale appeals in the gay press for volunteers to keep a month diary. To date there have been appeals in 1986, 1988, and 1992, and 1995. In addition, diaries have been used in research on Minority Ethnic Groups, Non Gay-identified MSM and Young Gay Men. Experimental work is in progress extending the method to use in PSE research, in non-literate cultures such as Bangladesh, and in monitoring reactions to new condoms ("Femidom" or "Reality").

CURRENT RESEARCH

Research using diary data is currently focused upon a number of substantive and methodological topics (references are at the end of this sheet)

- the effect of age and relationship combinations on the amount of sexual activity [1990a]
- the definition of reciprocal and power-based sexual sessions [1990b]
- the structure of sexual activity and its encoding in diaries [1988, 1992]
- the incidence of sexual role-types (only active/only passive/both active and passive/neither active nor passive) for different sexual behaviours, and the effect on risk behaviour [1993b]
- subjective and objective effects of alcohol consumption on risky sexual behaviour [1994a]
- inferring sexual networks from diary data [1995a]
- analysing high-risk behaviour from diary records [1994b, 1995b]

continued overleaf
investigating the relative validity of diary and questionnaire accounts of the same sexual behaviour [1999]

CURRENT DATA
Currently the micro-fiche and machine-readable database of sexual diary records consist of information on:

- 1661 individuals from
- 25 sites in the UK producing
- 1963 month-long sexual diaries

Under funding from the Department of Health, special-purpose software has been written (SDA: Sexual Diary Analysis) to store and analyse these data. These programs are available to bona fide researchers from Project SIGMA Essex.

Under funding from ESRC, the hard-copy diary forms have been anonymised, indexed, documented and reduced to micro-fiche form and are now archived and lodged in Wellcome Contemporary Medical Archives Centre, Euston Road, London. The diaries are thereby accessible to any bona fide researcher.

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