

Disclosing homosexuality, disclosing seropositivity. Interactions between coming-out and HIV-positive status disclosure.

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Objective

The purpose of the study was to analyze the different ways of revealing (or not) HIV-positive status and homosexuality by a sample of Swiss HIV-positive gay and bisexual men. Given that these two aspects of social identity are often linked to stigmatization and rejection, three main questions were investigated:

1. For both aspects, for whom is the disclosure meant and in what order are disclosures made?
2. On what kind of social structures (family, affective, professional, etc.) does the management of homosexuality and serology depend?
3. How does one manage these two aspects of social identity, according to his own social characteristics?

Data

- Collected from a more general study on associational dynamics and commitment in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Switzerland.
Self-administered questionnaires sent in summer 2005 to volunteers and ex-volunteers of eight local groups of the Swiss AIDS Federation and seven gay associations.
- Of the 846 questionnaires sent back (20.2%), **62 were completed by HIV-positive gay men.**
- Questions were asked about:
 - their socio-sexual orientation
 - their serological status
 - to whom both disclosures were made and when (month / year).
- Activism in associations may provide emotional involvement and affective support for coping with HIV+ status!
→ results may differ from more general studies on HIV-positive gay men.

1. Disclosing homosexuality

Basic frequencies

- Homosexuality more often disclosed to mother (54%), followed by friends (53%) and siblings (51%), less often to co-workers (47%) and even less to father (40%)
→ Greater normative expectation from fathers than mothers, as Schilt pointed out in the case of France².
A sizeable number of *No answer* (oblivion, refusal, uncertainty) and *Not concerned* (relative is dead or unknown) recoded into an intermediate value between *Yes* and *No*
→ generates an ordinal variable that will be used in the following multivariate analyses.

Tab. 1. Disclosure, concealment and uncertainty
"Do/did the following persons know that you are homosexual or bisexual?"
N = 62

	Yes	No	Don't know	Not concerned	No answer	Total
Mother	54	7	0	0	39	100
Heterosexual friends	53	3	3	0	40	100
Siblings	51	6	0	2	41	100
Co-workers	47	8	4	1	40	100
Father	40	13	1	7	39	100

Tab. 2. A homogeneous social space of disclosure
Correlation between recipients of disclosure of homosexuality
Pearson coefficients significant at 1% level. Highest values in bold.

	Mother	Friends	Siblings	Co-workers
Heterosexual friends	0.71			
Siblings	0.55	0.65		
Co-workers	0.59	0.68	0.70	
Father	0.73	0.60	0.58	0.58

Note: "Don't know", "not concerned" and "no answer" are assimilated as intermediate answers between "yes" and "no", so as to calculate Pearson coefficient on a 2 values ordinal variable. The results are similar when the original categorical variable is used to calculate Cramer's V: all coefficients are largely significant and the hierarchy of values are close; few differences occur, they mainly reflect the variable meaning of measures.

Correlation analysis

- Disclosure to mother highly correlated with disclosure to father and heterosexual friends.
- An other main grouping, for those with siblings: strong tie between disclosure to brother and/or sister and to co-workers.
- However, all these values are close and seem to indicate that, in our sample, gay and bisexual men who choose to come out choose **diverse targets** and that the first target chosen did not clearly predict the next ones.
- A rather homogeneous social network according to opportunities and probability of disclosure, no sole direction exceeds others.

2. Disclosing HIV-positive status

Tab. 3. Uneven targets of disclosure
"If you are HIV+, did you disclose it to..."
N = 62

	Yes	No	Not concerned	No answer	Total
Main partner	73	2	16	9	100
Family (excl. fath. and moth.)	71	14	3	11	100
Heterosexual friends	69	11	3	17	100
Heterosexual friends	62	9	8	21	100
Mother	58	21	7	14	100
Father	49	18	16	18	100
Co-workers	48	29	6	18	100
Other sexual partner(s)	38	21	13	28	100

Basic frequencies

Extent of disclosure of HIV+ status depends on the members of the social network:
- Large disclosure to main partner (73%).
- Small disclosure to casual sex partners (38%).
→ Result congruent with many former studies: anticipation of rejection from casual sex partners³.
- Larger disclosure to heterosexual friends than to homosexual ones, to siblings than to parents, to mother than father.
- Only 48% to co-workers.
→ Keeping the secret at work often linked with the will to be treated like anyone else or with anticipation of discriminatory reprisals and ostracism⁴.

Correlation analysis

Contrary to the disclosure of socio-sexual orientation, correlation analysis in table 4 shows that respondents disclosed their serostatus to their social network in a more heterogeneous way. Those who disclosed it to their mother were also more likely to tell their father and their siblings. Respondents who disclosed their serostatus to their homosexual friends more likely told their heterosexual friends as well.

Tab. 4. Two social spaces of disclosure: family versus friends
Correlation between recipients of disclosure of HIV+ status
N = 62. Highest values in bold.

	Partn	Fam	Het	Hom	Moth	Fath	Work
Family (excl. fath. and moth.)	0.19						
Heterosexual friends	0.46	0.36					
Homosexual friends	0.40	0.65					
Mother	0.19	0.53	0.19	0.19			
Father	0.19	0.45	0.19	0.19			0.78
Co-workers	0.34	0.29	0.37	0.41	0.19	0.22	
Sexual partner(s)	0.25	0.21	0.46	0.44	0.20	0.19	0.36

n = Pearson coefficient not significant at 2%

Diachronic perspective: a dominant order of disclosure

- First to mother,
- Almost at the same time to father,
- Then to siblings, to heterosexual friends,
- Finally to co-workers.

Thickness of the lines proportionate to co-disclosure index (Pearson coefficient), with thresholds at 0.60 and 0.70. For example, disclosures to mother and father are highly correlated: when an activist discloses homosexuality to his mother, he often discloses it to his father too (and reversely). No dash between two categories of relatives means that disclosure to the first does not significantly predict disclosure to the second (and reversely).
Time axis is based on dates of coming out indicated by respondents. Dates can be rated as fully reliable, but only 45% (disclosure to friends and colleagues) to 60% (mother and father) of them are indicated in the questionnaires. Moreover, some respondents declare no certainty over the fact that their relatives are acquainted with their homosexuality. Therefore, the chronological order of coming out may be considered as fully reliable mainly for respondents with a clear memory and certainty of their coming out.

Progress of disclosure of homosexuality

The rhythm of disclosure to different members of one's social network may clearly differ.
- Two extreme cases: socio-sexual orientation quickly and fully disclosed *versus* kept secret
- Three intermediate cases: difficulty for some gay and bisexual men to reveal their socio-sexual orientation. In particular, rejection after a first disclosure might prevent some of them from telling later (green line).

Fig. 1. Disclosure to family, then friends and co-workers
Prevalent process of disclosure of homosexuality to relatives with proportion of disclosures to each category

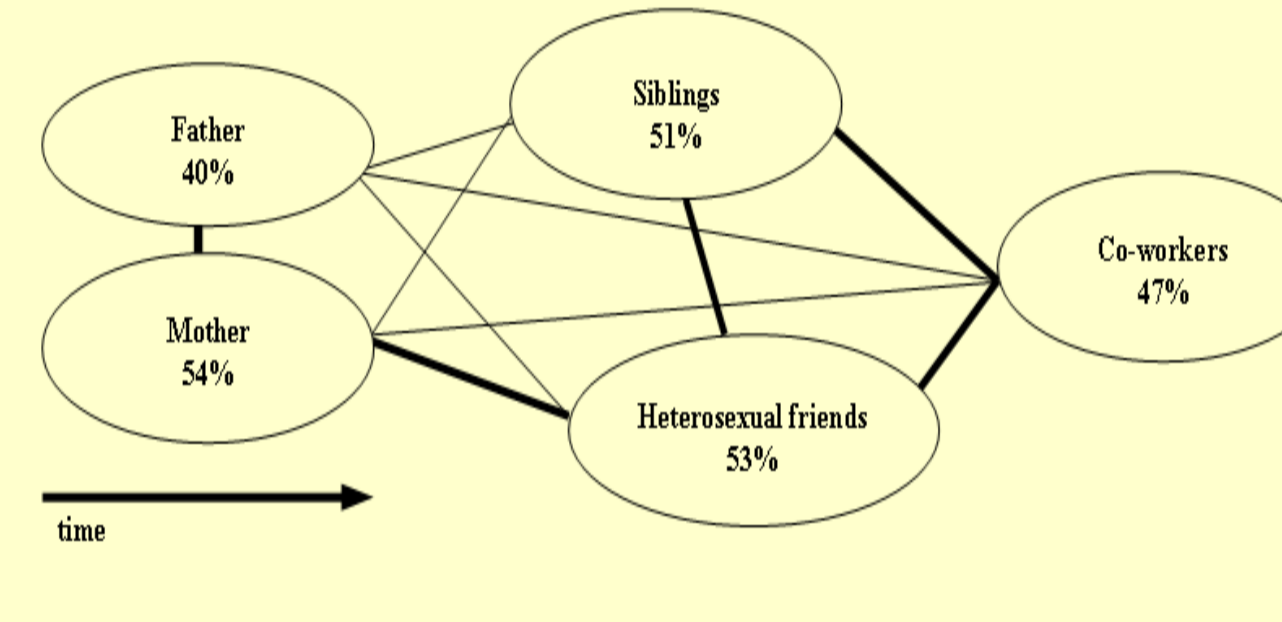


Fig. 2. Disclosing one's socio-sexual identity
Typology of evolution of number of groups of relatives to which homosexuality has been told

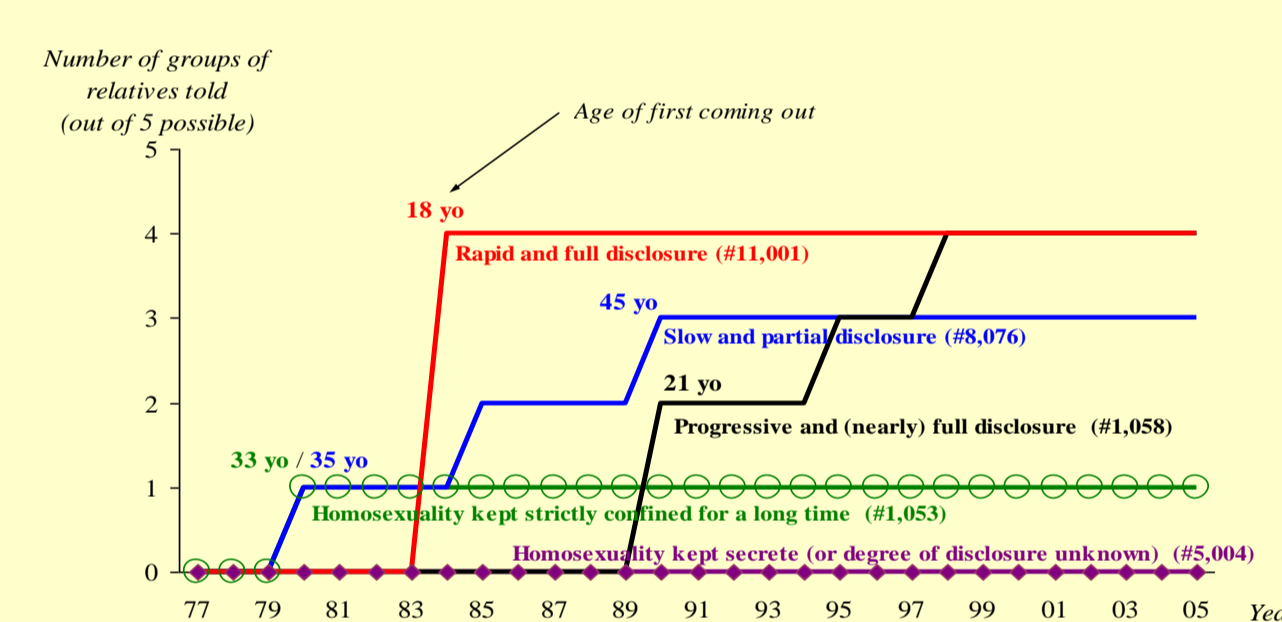
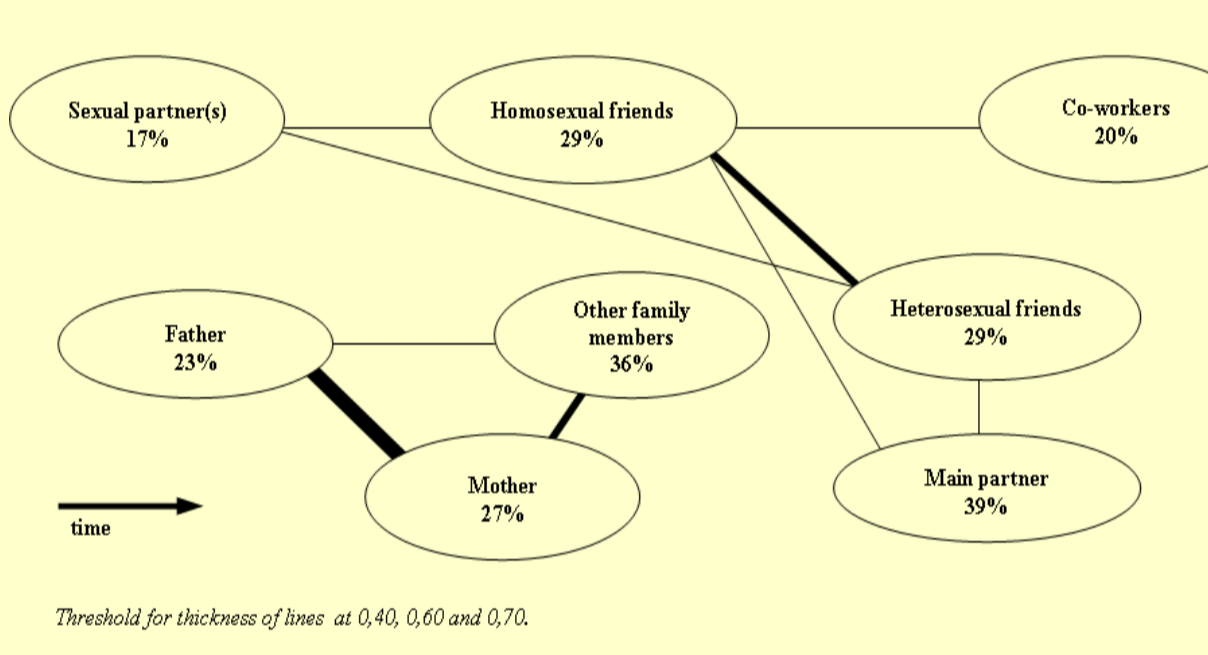
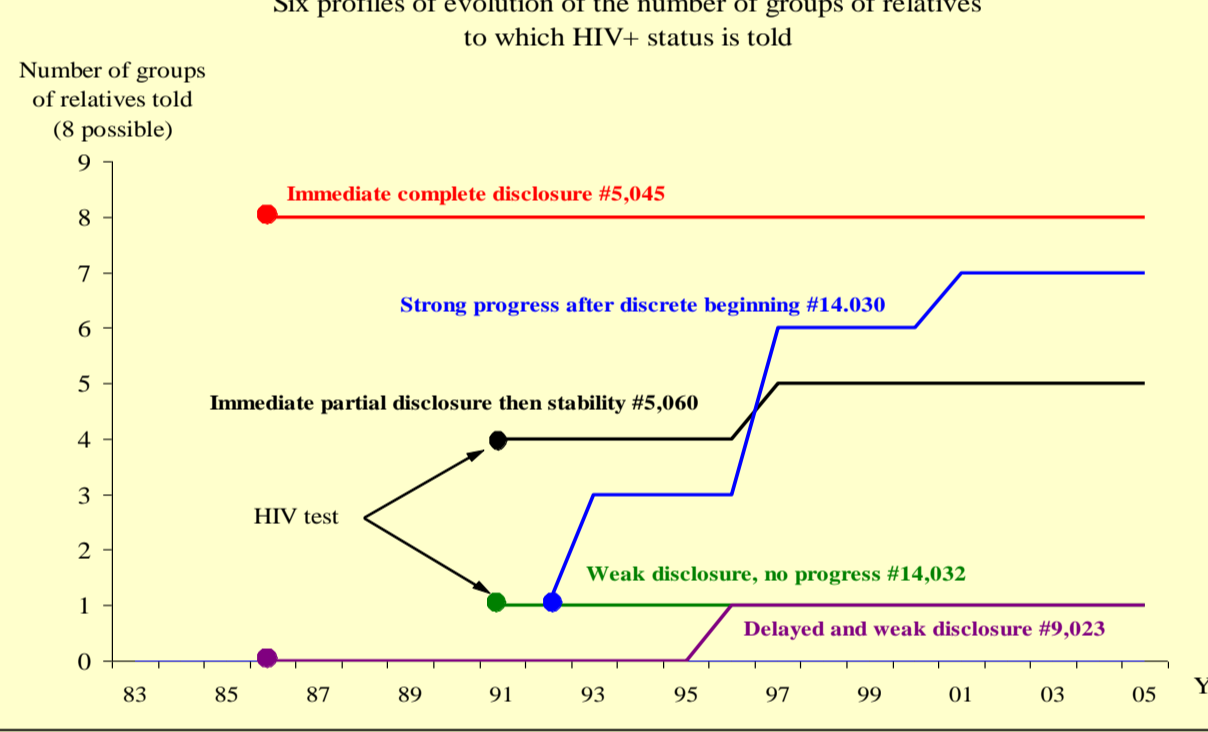


Fig. 3. Family first
Prevailing process of disclosure of HIV+ status to relatives with proportion of disclosures to each category



Threshold for thickness of lines at 0.40, 0.60 and 0.70.

Fig. 4. Disclosing stigma
Six profiles of evolution of the number of groups of relatives to which HIV+ status is told



Diachronic perspective: two opposite ways to disclose one's serostatus

- First group: disclosure to father strongly linked with disclosure to mother and, at lower level, to siblings.
- Second group: homosexual and heterosexual friends connected with main partner, sexual partners and co-workers.
- Respondents seem to divide the targets of disclosure into two groups with few links between them.

Progress of disclosure of HIV-positive status

Five types of disclosure processes:
- Two extreme cases: HIV+ status immediately and fully disclosed *versus* mainly kept secret.
- Three intermediate cases that stress:
a) The progressive way in which some respondents dealt with the anticipation of rejection by members of their social network.
b) The difficulty of coping with the identity that others associate with HIV infection⁵.

3. Interactions between coming out and HIV-positive status disclosure

Process of HIV+ status disclosure is highly tied to the way respondents were managing to reveal (or not) their homosexuality. Among our sample, **six types of interactions** between both processes.
- Fig. 5 (one case): HIV-positive status disclosed first (one case) → Very particular socio-demographic characteristics that restrained the possibility of disclosing homosexuality: *bisexual, married, two children, living in a small town.*
- Fig. 6 (one case): Both disclosures occurring during the same year (one case) → Infection caused a biographical reinforcement of his socio-sexual identity.
- Fig. 7 (most frequent process in our sample): Homosexuality largely disclosed at the time of HIV diagnosis, wide disclosure of HIV+ status as well → Way of managing both coming out quite congruent.
- Fig. 8: Homosexuality partly disclosed but HIV+ status kept secret → Could be linked to the anticipation of rejection and stigmatization by some members of one's social network, but also to the will to protect significant others from negative emotions.

Fig. 5. HIV+ status disclosed BEFORE homosexuality

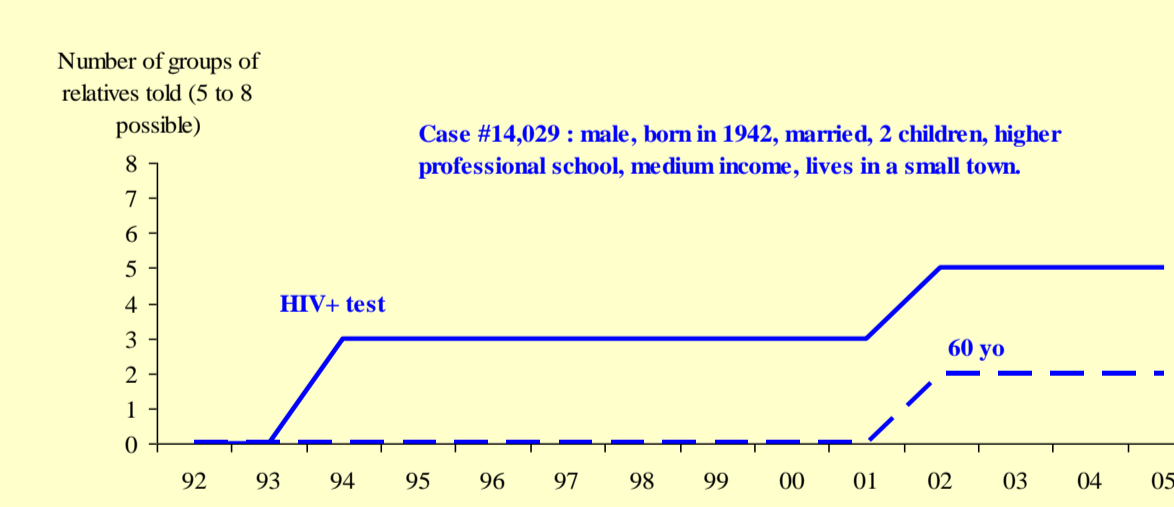


Fig. 6. HIV+ status disclosed SIMULTANEOUSLY with homosexuality

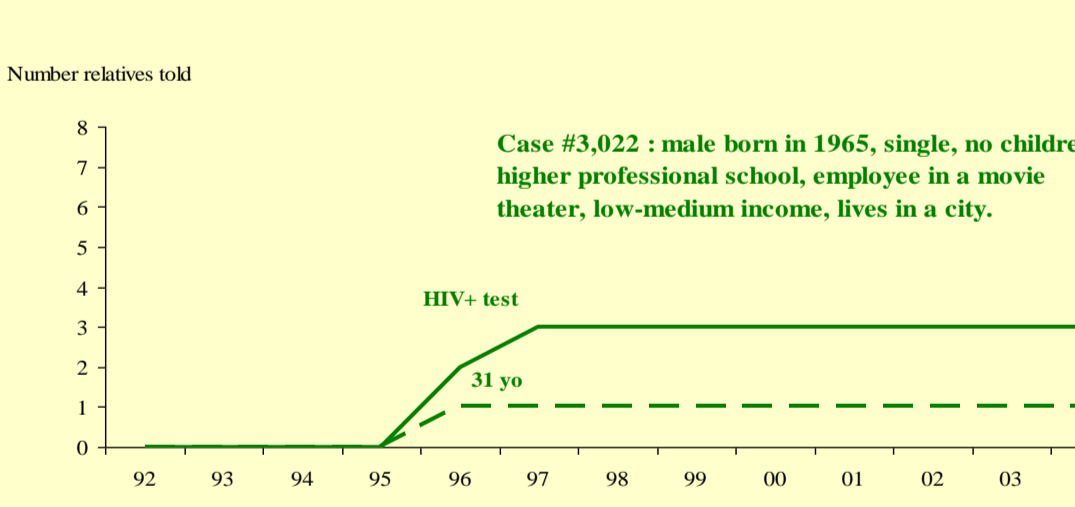


Fig. 7. Homosexuality largely disclosed and accepted that fosters disclosure of HIV+ status

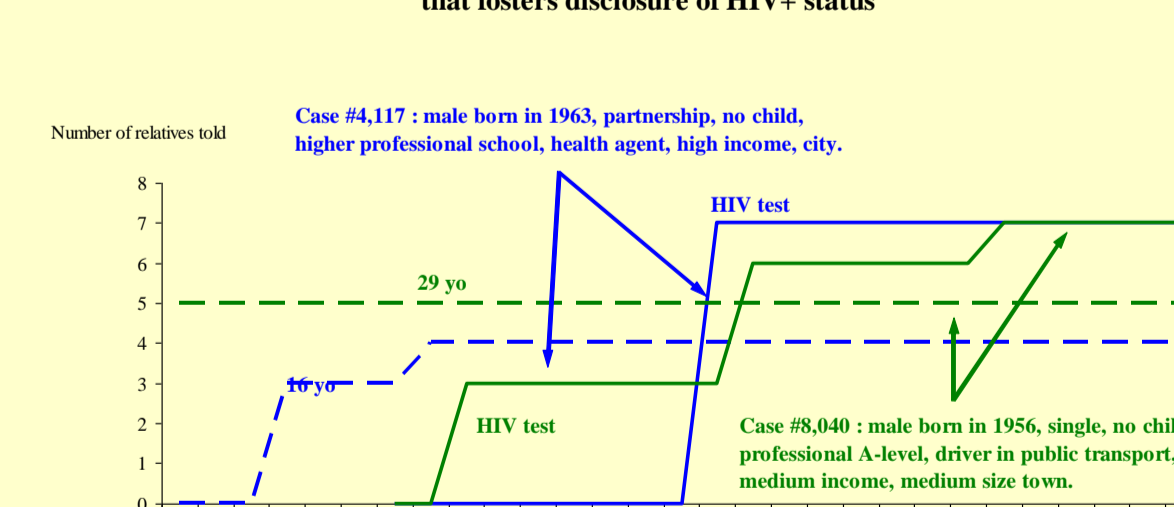


Fig. 8. Homosexuality partially disclosed but HIV+ status not disclosed or very lately

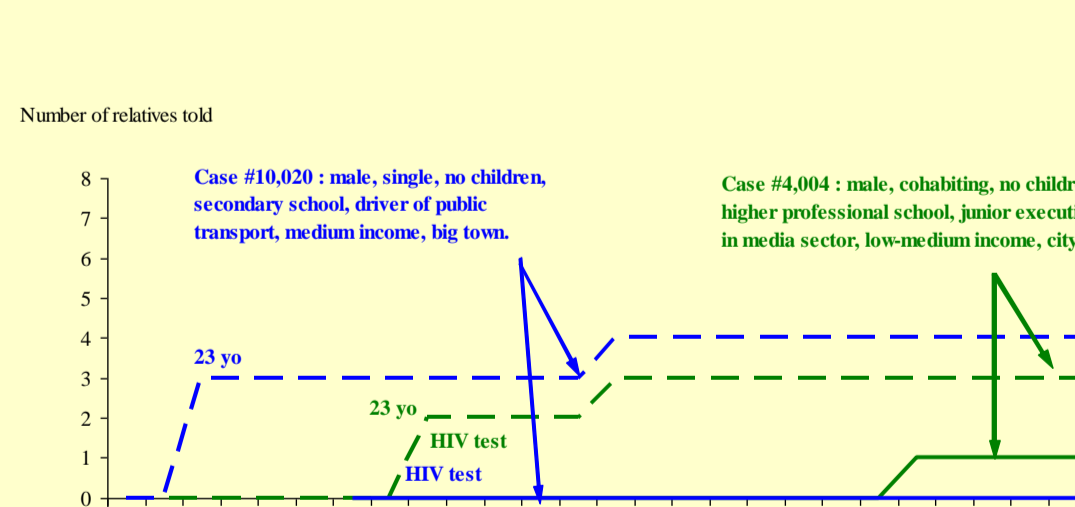


Table 5: combination of targets reached by respondents at the time of the study in 2005 (no diachrony)

A wide range of individual trajectories:
- 40% withheld socio-sexual orientation and serostatus from all targets (class 1)
- In 2 classes (4 and even more 2), wide disclosure of homosexuality but serostatus kept secret
- Reversely, classes 3, 5, and 6: no disclosure of socio-sexual orientation or, revealed to few relatives, but disclosure of HIV+ status to varying range of relatives.
→ Even if 2/5 of our respondents disclosed to their whole social network, the act of disclosing a socio-sexual orientation and HIV+ status remains very difficult for some respondents, especially for those with few social resources and precarious trajectories (mainly in class 5, but in other classes as well, except class 1).

Tab. 5. Combined profiles of disclosure of homosexuality and seropositivity

Ascending hierarchical cluster analysis of homosexual (5 targets) and HIV+ (8 targets) disclosure.
Missing values represented as indicated in figures 1 and 5.
Residuals (2 respondents, 4% of sample) not classified.

Class / Proportion of sample	Distribution of disclosures	Typical profile								Specific individual properties	
		ID	Hom. Serop.	Friends Gay friends	Het. friends	Sibl.	Moth	Fath	Work		Main partn.
1 40%	Homosexuality disclosed to all. HIV status known by all except sometimes co-workers and/or sexual partners.	1027	H	F	S	M	Fa	W			
		S	HeF	GaF	Sib	M	Fa	W	P	Sx	
2 24%	Homosexuality known except sometimes from co-workers. HIV status unknown from parents and generally from siblings, from sexual partners and from colleagues.	3022	H	F	S	M	Fa	W			
		S	HeF	GaF	Sib			W	P	Sx	
3 11%	Homosexuality only told to father, uncertain or secret to all other targets. HIV status mainly disclosed, especially outside the family.	5069	H	F	S	M	Fa	W			
		S	HeF	GaF	Sib	M	Fa	W	P	Sx	
4 11%	Homosexuality widely known, except from father. HIV status known from heterosexual friends, secret or uncertain for other targets.	8019	H	F	S	M		W			
		S		GaF	Sib	M			P	Sx	
5 6%	Homosexuality and HIV status largely uncertain. HIV status sometimes revealed to family or main partner.	1032	H	F	S	M	Fa	W			
		S	HeF	GaF	Sib	M	Fa	W	P	Sx	
6 3%	Homosexuality generally disclosed except to father. HIV status known from friends and co-workers.	4047	H		S	M		W			
		S	HeF	GaF	Sib		Fa	W	P		

Note:
- if cell is colored, disclosure is done for target
- if cell is white with letter, disclosure is uncertain, ignored or no answer
- if cell is white, disclosure is not done.

Conclusions

Difficulties in revealing one's HIV-positive status remain very important, especially when this status combines with a socio-sexual orientation still stigmatized in Swiss society. Quantitative analysis reveals some general tendencies of both disclosure processes. Fear of homophobia, fear of being rejected or stigmatized propelled an important proportion of our respondents to hide their socio-sexual orientation and their serostatus, except for some to significant others. This situation has kept them confined to a double closet of secrecy with which it is difficult to cope. In order to better understand individual reasons for disclosing or keeping the secret, a second step in this study will use a more qualitative approach based on interviews.

NOTES

1. D. CARRICABURU, J. PIERRET (1995), "From biographical disruption to biographical reinforcement: The case of HIV-positive men", *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 17(5), 55-88.
2. M.-A. SCHILTZ (1998), "Young homosexual itineraries in the context of HIV: Establishing lifestyles", *Population: An English Selection*, 10(2), 417-445.
3. See for instance K. SIEGEL and B. J. KRAUSS (1991), "Adapting tasks of seropositive gay men", *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 32(1), 17-32; R. L. KLITZMAN (1999), "Self-disclosure of HIV status to sexual partners: A qualitative study of Issues faced by gay men", *Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association*, 3(2), 39-49; R. L. KLITZMAN et al. (2007), "It's not just what you say: Relationships of HIV disclosure and risk reduction among MSM in the post-HAART era", *AIDS Care*, 19(6), 749-756.
4. See for instance J. M. SIMONI, H. R. C. MASON and G. MARKS (1997), "Disclosing HIV status and sexual orientation to employers", *AIDS Care*, 9(5), 589-599.
5. M. POLLAK (1988), *Les homosexuels et la sida. Sociologie d'une épidémie*, Paris: Métailié.