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Homophobia and the production of shame: young people and same sex attraction

LYNNE HILLIER and LYN HARRISON

Research among same-sex attracted young people in Western cultures has described a minority group of adolescents whose sexuality is negated by the significant institutions and people in their lives. Very often, there is a silence in the family and at school about same-sex sexuality and when a young person's homosexuality is suspected or disclosed s/he suffers from denial, discrimination and abuse. Not surprisingly, living in hostile environments leaves such young people at high-risk of drug abuse, depression and suicide. This paper describes some of the ways young people resist being positioned in these negative ways. Using autobiographical stories from 200 same-sex attracted young Australians, we document the discursive field of sexuality in which these young people struggle to construct positive identities. Young people were well aware of dominant discourses which characterized homosexuality as 'evil, diseased and unnatural'. Yet they use different strategies to fault, deflect and discount these negative understandings and to highlight other discourse which positions them positively.

Introduction

A little sense of solidarity

How in the name of heaven can I escape
That defiling and disfigured shape
The mirror of malicious eyes
Casts upon my eyes until at last
I think that shape must be my shape?

William Yeats

During the 1999 Australian Tennis Open championships, 19-year-old unseeded French tennis player Amelie Mauresmo found herself in the media spotlight when she defeated number one player Lindsey Davenport in the women's semi-finals (Pierce 1999). Media interest was not primarily about her unexpected win, but about comments made by Davenport afterwards that playing Amelie was like playing a man. Martina Hingis, world number two player at the time was also reported as saying: 'She has a girlfriend, she must be half a man'.

During the next 24 hours, the media focused on Mauresmo's powerful

Lynne Hillier is research fellow at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society. Lyn Harrison is a senior lecturer at Deakin University, Melbourne. All correspondence should be addressed to: Lynne Hillier, Australian Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Level 1, 215 Franklin St Melbourne 3000, Australia; e-mail: l.hillier@latrobe.edu.au

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shoulers, her strong jaw line, her top spin, her hard-hitting serve, her girlfriend and her tennis attire—for Mauresmo always wore shorts. The controversy and the interruptions were so intense that she had to move her training sessions to a more private venue. Mauresmo made two public statements about the comments that positioned her as unfeminine in one way or another. When asked about Davenport’s jibe, Mauresmo reframed her comments in the following way: ‘I think she is saying that I have a strong all round game and I take it as a compliment that she says I play like a man’. She also called Hingis’ comments stupid. Both Davenport and Hingis later recanted, saying that their comments were either misheard or taken out of context. Mauresmo lost in the finals to Hingis and the controversy abated (Pierce 1999). However, the comments also encapsulated community beliefs about what was and what was not an acceptable female subject. Mauresmo’s positioning of herself as a woman who was fit, well-muscled, shorts clad, ‘out’ lesbian was clearly overstepping these boundaries.

For Hingis and Davenport, Mauresmo performed gender and sexuality in a way that was outside their notions of the feminine. They refused her a feminine position by calling her ‘masculine’ and ‘half a man’. Mauresmo resisted this masculinization by placing herself within a competing discourse, that of the tennis athlete, in which there was a positive place for her (and a lesbian tradition) as a well-muscled sportswoman.

This incident serves as an example of the way same-sex attracted women are able to creatively engage with and resist attempts to deny a positive female identity. What of the one in ten same-sex attracted young Australians who very often face family and community hostility around issues of gender and sexuality (Hillier et al. 1999) without the support and resources available to Mauresmo?

Research has revealed that growing up gay, lesbian or bisexual can be a lonely and stressful time in comparison with the experiences of other minority youth (Martin and Hetrick 1988, Savin-Williams 1990, Telljohann and Price 1993). Young people who are members of racial or religious minority groups most often share their status with their families and there is always that opportunity for affirming their minority identity. However, this is almost never the case for same-sex attracted youth whose parents are overwhelmingly likely to be heterosexual. As a result of the lack of support for their sexual difference within the family, these young people are over-represented in homeless populations (Hillier et al. 1997, Irwin et al. 1995). It is also not surprising to find that such young people not infrequently turn to alcohol and other drugs to escape from their hostile environments (Hillier et al. 1998, Rosario et al. 1997, Sanford 1989, Smith et al. 1999).

Research has suggested a link between same-sex attraction and suicide in the USA (Bagley and Tremblay 1997, Gibson 1989, Harbeck 1995, Remafedi et al. 1997) and in Australia (Howard and Nicholas 1999). Of the 5000 suicides of young men and women between the ages of 15 and 24 in the USA each year, over 30% of them have been attributed to the emotional turmoil over sexual preference issues and societal prejudices surrounding same-sex relationships (Harbeck 1992). In Australia, the
position of this group is likely to be the same. It is possible that same-sex attracted young people who are able to find fault lines in oppressive discourse around gender and sexuality may develop the resilience to prevent them from falling into despair, drug abuse and suicide.

There are many theories concerning sexual identity formation in young people (see examples in D’Augelli and Patterson 2001). The analysis offered here works from the assumption that young people are active players in the production and reproduction of their identity through discourse (Fairclough 1992, Foucault 1981). We believe that same-sex attracted young people have choices (albeit limited and difficult) in the ways they constitute themselves within discourse. Harris described this position well:

People are active constructors of their lives and make choices under terrible constraints—constraints including the limited subject positions made available to them through hegemonic discourse, but they are lived out uniquely in the particular forms they take in individual people's lives. (1996: 5)

The total number of discourses about sexuality constitute the 'discursive field' of sexuality and strands of explanation within them as discourses. According to Burr, each discourse within the discursive field is: 'a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together make up a particular version of event' (1995: 48).

Discourses provide a framework through which people live their lives. However, some are better known and more widely used than others, in part because they have institutional support. A dominant or globalizing discourse (cf. Foucault 1980) is a set of statements which have some institutional force, are widely circulated and regarded as truth by most of the population (Mills 1997).

Globalizing discourses around gender and sexuality, which are supported by the church and the state, sanction heterosexuality and certain types of masculinity and femininity, while constituting non-heterosexuality and other ways of performing gender as unacceptable. This does not mean, however, that other discourses do not exist, nor that young people are powerless victims. As Mills points out, they have the opportunity to engage in discussion and play an active role in constituting themselves:

...the categories and narratives which discourse constructs for subjects are not simply imposed, but are subject to negotiation by those subjects. It is the process of engaging with discursive structures that constitutes us as particular types of subjects. (1997: 96)

In this paper, we document the discursive field of sexuality and sexual difference evident in the data collected in a large national research project with same-sex attracted young people. We then chart the effects of the negative positions in discourse on young people and the many ways these young people resisted being positioned negatively through strategies of reframing and finding fault lines in dominant discourses.
Study design and methodology

Data for this paper were drawn from research conducted with 748 same-sex attracted young people throughout Australia in 1998 (Hillier et al. 1998). The project was advertised widely in national magazines, street press and the radio. Data were collected through a short questionnaire that asked about discrimination and abuse, well-being, sources of information about safe sex, relationships, sexual behaviours, support and safety issues. It also included a number of open-ended items and a request at the end for autobiographical stories. Of particular interest to this paper was the item 'How do you feel about being attracted to the same sex?' with potential response ratings as follows: 'great', 'pretty good', 'OK', 'pretty bad' and 'really bad'. Participants were also asked to explain their answers to this question in more detail and to send stories about their lives. Questionnaires were filled out on the Internet or on a hard copy which participants requested from the researchers. The discourses described in this paper emerged from participants' autobiographical stories and open ended responses to questionnaire items.

Quantitative data were entered into SPSS Mac V.6. Qualitative data were analysed in depth by the authors on a case by case basis, and across cases. Texts were analysed and coded with a focus on young people's engagement and struggle with discourses about sexuality.

Profile of the participants

Valid questionnaires were received from 748 (369 males, 379 females) same-sex attracted young Australians aged 14–21 years, and 200 of them wrote stories about their lives. The mean age was 18 years with the young women on average 6 months younger than the young men. Almost three-quarters (73%) of the group were students attending school or university/further education courses and 65% lived at home with their families. The States and Territories were proportionally represented as were metropolitan (78%) and rural (22%) municipalities. Eighty-seven per cent of the participants were born in Australia and 2% were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Half accessed the survey through the Internet and half through the post. This is a self-selecting sample in which low socio-economic groups are under represented, including homeless young people, as are young people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

All of the young people expressed that their sexual feelings were regarded as perverse in their culture and the authors have written elsewhere about the discrimination and abuse that they suffered because of this (Hillier et al. 1999). Over half had been verbally and/or physically abused because of their sexuality and, unlike information about heterosexual safe sex, less than one in ten had been able to access information about gay and lesbian safe sex from schools or the family. One in five had disclosed their sexuality to no one. However, this did not ensure a trouble free life. Some were physically and verbally abused
because they did not conform to gender norms and many others were anxious about someone finding out about their sexuality. These young people were, on the whole very isolated, with few having made inroads into a ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian community’.

Given the pervasiveness of dominant negative beliefs about homosexuality and the evidence of verbal and physical abuse inflicted on same-sex attracted young people in the study, we expected the young people to feel badly about their sexuality. We were surprised therefore to find that 60% felt either ‘great’ (32%) or ‘pretty good’ (28%) about their sexual feelings and only 10% felt ‘pretty bad’ (7%) or ‘really bad’ (3%). The remaining 30% who felt ‘OK’ were often ambivalent about their sexual feelings.

Further analysis showed that young people who felt good about their sexuality had almost always found ways to disrupt those dominant ways of thinking in order to find ways to position themselves as normal. Young people who felt ‘pretty bad’ or ‘really bad’ about their sexuality appeared to position themselves negatively within dominant discourses.

**Dominant discourses and young people’s reactions to them**

Young people were aware of many discourses of sexual difference. Four dominant themes were present within their stories, each one set within the epistemology of a powerful institution. In each case sexuality was dichotomized into ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘other than heterosexuality’, the former having positive value, the latter negative. We have used these quotes primarily to illustrate the discourses but in many cases they are also examples of young people’s resistance to them.

*Psychology, health and ill-health*

Many young people described parental beliefs that positioned homosexuality as an illness that needed to be treated and cured. This often left them unable to confide in their parents.

My family makes a big deal out of anyone who is homosexual, they talk about it like it is a disease or something. This will make it very difficult to ‘come out’. (Bridget, 20 years)

Telling my parents is out of the question. They think homosexuality is a perversion and liken it to paedophilia and things like that which angers me. (Mary, 15 years)

This discourse had the most damaging effect when young people, such as Sue, positioned themselves within the illness discourse and Sue reported that she felt ‘really bad’ about her sexual feelings:

My parents used to think that they were sick or something. Their feelings sort of rubbed off on me, because that’s what I grew up with. (Sue, 21 years)

Historically, homosexuality was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical list of Mental Disorders (Chervinsky 1998), however, in the early 1970s,
the scientific evidence that pathologized homosexuality was repudiated. The legacy is that 30 years later many people still believe that same-sex attraction is an illness.

Christianity, good and evil

Christianity was also used to frame young people’s understanding of sexual difference. In this discourse, heterosexuality is God-given and therefore good while anything not heterosexual must by default be equated with evil, the devil and hell. Christianity was referred to particularly in the context of the school and the family. In the school context, Christianity was more likely to take a traditional form, for example that found in the single sex Catholic school. In these schools there was an institutionally sanctioned homophobia (as opposed to a silence in secular schools) where sexual difference was proclaimed in the classroom as wrong. Young people were particularly alienated because many potential support people in the school were followers of the faith and regarded as unsympathetic. As Kieran found:

Our school counsellor was also the school chaplain so I don’t think I could have talked to him—our religious education classes made it quite clear what they thought about homosexuality.
(Kieran, 19 years)

In these schools, religious teaching formed the framework of the philosophy of school life and these young people were constantly reminded that they sat outside all that was right and good. Boyd questioned the logic of this for someone like him:

I attended a private Catholic primary school, where it was drilled into us through the stereotypical notions that God is everything and I, being a boy, would have to find a decent Christian girl, whom I’d marry, have lots of children and grow old in my faith and certainty that I’d be reserved a seat in heaven for doing all this. But hey, there’s just a little bit missing from that school’s perspective on life and the reason we’re here, like what happens if I find the thought of sex with girls repulsive. (Boyd, 17 years)

Other young people wrote about having parents who were Christians and, in these cases, the brand of Christianity tended to be more radical (e.g., Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism). Here, same-sex attraction meant not just a loss of goodness and heaven, but banishment to hellfire and damnation for those who were sexually different. Jane, aged 16, was threatened with hell, excommunication and eviction when she told her parents that she was a lesbian:

My parents totally freaked out, especially my Mum who yelled and screamed that I was going to hell, told my Dad who said that I wasn’t his daughter anymore ... and I said I wasn’t anyway and Mum threw me out of the house saying that I couldn’t go back to her house till I changed my evil ways and gave my heart to Jesus—well fuck them. (Jane, 16 years)

At the time of the survey, Jane had left home, dropped out of school and work and was living with friends. She rejected her mother’s beliefs but was having a difficult time without family support. Another young man was in many ways worse off. He simply wrote that he felt very bad about
being same-sex attracted because he was 'supposed to be a born again Christian'. It was not possible for this young man to position himself as 'good' or 'normal' within this particular Christian discourse, and it left him with few positive options with which to create a positive identity. The belief that homosexuality is wrong in the eyes of God still holds sway in many Christian churches in the new millennium, despite the many moves by lobby groups to bring about change.

*Heterosexuality is natural—anything else is unnatural*

A third discourse used nature and common-sense as a framework for understanding sexuality. In this discourse, heterosexuality is normal and natural and therefore right. By default, anything which is not heterosexual is unnatural and abnormal. Many young people spoke about their parents' beliefs that homosexuality was unnatural and undesirable. As Simone observed:

> My parents aren't very accepting of homosexuals, not discriminatory, but they don't think it is 'normal' whatever normal is ... so I haven't talked to them. (Simone, 16 years)

Others expressed their desire to be regarded as 'normal'. Though some forms of heterosexuality might be regarded as more acceptable than others, heterosexual young people rarely have to question the normality of their opposite sex attraction. Knowing that they were likely to be regarded as deviant, Tim and Andy craved normality:

> Throughout this [same-sex exploration] I was able to separate what I was doing as just fun and not me really be gay ... in fact for a long time I couldn't even put the two ideas together ... I wanted to believe I was like everyone else, normal. (Tim, 20 years)

> At 18 I had a nervous breakdown because I tried to convince myself I was 'normal' and straight ... If Australian society wasn't so immature and emotionally cold, perhaps I would have received a healthy masculine love, and turned out normal [straight]. (Andy, 21 years)

As we have seen with the other dominant discourses, the worst outcomes occurred when young people did not resist being positioned negatively. Neither Lina nor Libby was able to counter the feeling that they were abnormal:

> It makes me feel uncomfortable. I have felt this way for as long as I can remember, but it still doesn't feel normal. Only my family knows. They reacted so badly, I haven't told anyone else. (Lina, 19 years)

> The first time I realized was a few years ago on a weekend me and my friends were playing truth and dare. I was asked who I liked and I couldn't think of anyone except my friend. Of course, she is a girl so I thought this was not normal. I read up on it and ever since then I have not been happy with my life. I don't do as well in exams any more. I just wish I could be normal. (Libby, 17 years)

The belief that they would be labelled unnatural and excluded from the 'mantel of normal' in their everyday lives left many young people silent, unhappy and isolated.
A phase versus the real thing

A final dominant discourse of sexuality reproduced by the young people was the 'passing through' or 'phase' explanation. This taps into psychological developmental and psychoanalytic theories that posit same-sex attraction as an immature and incomplete way of expressing sexuality that will be overtaken in due course by heterosexuality. Here, all will turn out right, that is, heterosexual in the end, if we let it take its course. A hierarchy is set up here with heterosexuality, the pinnacle to be reached at the end of the process. Both Martin and Jody described their parents’ hopes and beliefs in the phase theory:

I came out to my parents at age 17, and they are OK, supportive, but I think still secretly hoping for the ‘phase’ theory to swing in at any moment now. (Martin, 19 years)

My mother is inclined to believe it is ‘just a stage’ that I am going through now. I do not. (Jody, 18 years)

Belief in the phase theory prevented these young people's parents from taking their children's same-sex desire seriously, because they believed they would grow out of it. Some young people accepted this discourse as potentially accurate and positioned themselves within it. Lucy decided not to tell her parents just in case it was a phase she was going through and she had to come out again later as a heterosexual.

Implications of these discourses

All of the discourses described above, placed same-sex attracted young people in difficult positions within their families and communities. Most of them were at school and still dependent on their parents and this left them feeling very vulnerable. Many of them became very anxious and fearful about what might happen in the future.

Shame and disappointment to parents

Some young people were concerned that disclosing their sexual preferences would bring shame upon their families and that this in turn would bring shame upon them. Many spent hours agonizing over possible scenarios if they disclosed to their families. Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, such as Lee and from religious families such as Rebecca, were particularly concerned about family fallout:

The main reason that I still haven’t come out to anyone even though I'm 19 is because I come from such a conservative ethnic family. My parents are Chinese and I don’t think Australian counsellors would really understand how difficult it is to be gay and come from an Asian background ... I feel that coming out would not only hurt my parents, but because of the nature of our community, they would feel a great deal of shame as well. (Lee, 19 years)

I don’t know if my family will be that supportive as my friends have been, but it’s in a matter of time. It's not going to look nice when I do tell them, for they have been raised as little Catholic people who are very judgmental, and will be probably thinking to themselves, ‘where did I go wrong?’ (Rebecca, 16 years)
Neither Lee nor Rebecca had disclosed to their families for fear of hurting them, but it left them feeling isolated and unsupported at home.

*Parental rejection and loss of support*

The belief that they might be thrown out of home and disowned by their families if they disclosed their sexual attraction is, according to previous research with homeless youth, a not totally unrealistic one, because same-sex attracted young people are over-represented in homeless populations (Hillier et al. 1997, Irwin et al. 1995). As Aden said:

> My mother just fell apart when I came out. I expected Dad to, but he was fine. I have a feeling I was this close to being kicked out. (Aden, 17 years)

In reality, two-thirds of the 30% who had disclosed to their parents received immediate or eventual support. Some parents joined Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and others sought support in other ways. Others, such as Mark, were not so lucky:

> A month before I was 16, I came out to my father and as a result I have moved out of home. I have been supporting myself since and am currently continuing my education. (Mark, 17 years)

Emma, Tony and Lea chose not to tell their parents, believing that they might remove all physical support:

> I hope that they can accept me for who I am, not what I am, their daughter, flesh and blood, their baby, but if worse comes to worse, and they don’t, well, the only solution is to move out; that’s if they haven’t kicked me out of the house already. (Emma, 18 years)

> I can tell you that I am not out, and I wish that I was, although I think that I would lose friends and my Dad wouldn’t speak to me. Mum would be pretty bad so I just won’t ever mention it. (Tony, 18 years)

> If and when I tell my parents, I will have to arrange another place to sleep until things cool it at home. (Lea, 17 years)

Though most parents do support their children when they disclose their sexuality, there are some parents who do not. The over-representation of same-sex attracted young people in homeless populations are evidence of this (Irwin et al. 1995).

*A life without a family and children*

Many of the young people in the study assumed that because of their sexuality they would not have children and they were concerned at the grief this would create for their parents. This was particularly so for only children like Frank:

> The thing that is scaring me the most is telling my parents. What do you say to your parents when you are an only child and know that they aren’t going to have any grandchildren as such? I tell you what, I’m shitting myself over that one. I think I’ll wait a while—like after I’ve moved out of home! (Frank, 20 years)

The difficulty of envisioning ‘lesbian’ and ‘mother’ residing in the one person resulted in an assumption of childlessness for these young people.
We could find only one participant, a young woman, Jen, who could see herself as a lesbian mother.

When I told my mum, we both cried. She was disappointed, she was worried about me not being able to get married and have a family. I told her I still wanted to have a child. (Jen, 21 years)

Many lesbians and gay men have children and live in family relationships with children. Some have them as a result of previous heterosexual relationships, others are choosing to have children and raise them in alternate families with parents of the same sex. That these families seem to have been unnoticed by the young people in the project is a testament to the power of dominant discourses to mark this activity as taboo.

Abuse, rejection and alienation at school

Homophobic environments at school affected young people in two different ways. First, those who had disclosed their sexuality or were thought to behave in gender atypical ways were positioned by the other students as 'sick, twisted and perverted'. This was most manifest in verbal abuse and rejection. However, in a small number of cases it became physical (Hillier et al. 1999). Second, those who led a secret life because of the fear of being negatively positioned were left with an inner discomfort because they were not being true to themselves and those around them.

In summary, for some young people, negative subject positions left them silent and invisible at home and school or, if they disclosed, punished with abuse and exclusion. Despite these hostile environments, many young people resisted dominant discourses and creatively constructed positive affirming identities for themselves.

Strategies of resistance—discovering the fault lines

Not one of the young people in this research enjoyed being positioned as 'sick, evil and unnatural' and when they positioned themselves within these homophobic discourses it was with terrible regret. Most young people struggled against these negative subject positions, keen to be regarded, and to regard themselves, as 'normal' and 'healthy'. Despite the isolation, alienation, discrimination and abuse evident in the lives of many of the young people interviewed, the finding that 60% felt 'great' or 'pretty good' about their sexuality and 30% 'OK', was a reflection of successful resistance to their negative positioning within the dominant discourses described above. A careful reading of their stories highlighted the many creative strategies they used to construct a strong, positive sense of themselves. The first major strategy was to find a fault in the dominant discourse, or more specifically those who ascribed to it.

Scott, for example, explained that the dominant discourses, and those who constructed them, were wrong because they lacked important information:
I think one of the problems parents (and society for that matter) have is that they don't know enough about homosexuality and are only going on the negative things they have been told or brought up to believe. (Scott, 20 years)

Scott believed that he had a more informed view, which came from his first hand experiences. He argued that if people were more knowledgeable, they would understand that sexual difference is all right and that their negative beliefs are merely the result of a lack of information. In this way, he was able to broaden the parameters of what was normal and position himself within it.

In a similar way, some young people were able to separate their sexuality from the ways it was constituted in other people's discourse, seeing the discourse as only one way of understanding rather than it being 'the truth'. They believed that in another world with different 'truths' in which they were accepted as normal, they would feel fine. By accepting that it was not their sexuality but other people's constructions of it that made them feel bad, Warwick and Rhill could begin to imagine a positive sexual identity for themselves.

Society makes it not great so I don't feel great. If society accepted it, I would feel great. (Warwick, 15 years)

It's hard because I can accept who I am, and I like liking women, it is just those who don't understand, and don't want to, that make it hard for me to openly be who I am. (Rhill, 17 years)

Other young people, such as Boyd, mentioned earlier appealed to the expert higher authority within themselves. Boyd argued that his sexual feelings were normal because they felt normal to him. This simple claim gave power back to Boyd to name subjective truth, and effectively refuted the belief that only heterosexuality can be normal.

Some young people picked up on the relatively recent discourse of homophobia in Australian culture to focus a critical eye on the mainstream and away from themselves. In this case, they named the negativity and abuse 'homophobia'. Because this term conjures up notions of mental disturbance (phobias), it has been criticized by many in the gay community as being an inaccurate reflection of society's hatred of sexual difference (e.g., White 1999). Notwithstanding its problems, the term homophobia is pervasive in mainstream culture. Young people in the study who had rarely, if ever, spoken about their sexual feelings, understood the term and used it to reframe hostility as a problem within society, rather than within themselves. In this way they resisted the mantels of illness, evil and abnormality offered to them in the discursive field of sexuality. Instead of seeing themselves as perverse, Carlie and Peta saw their family and friends as having the problem:

I've come to realise that all of my friends and family are homophobic. (Carlie, 21 years)

The biggest issue for me is my parents. I have not told them and probably will never tell them. They are both homophobic and hate gay people. It upsets me when they insult gay people because they are really insulting me! I wish they knew! (Peta, 21 years)
Even 15-year-old Luke, who had spoken to no one about his sexual feelings, was able to label anti-gay and lesbian behaviours and beliefs as homophobia.

I haven’t told anybody at all. Rejection and homophobia is still rampant in the playground and in ordinary families. I don’t know if anyone has guessed but I know I would lose most of my friends if I were to disclose it. (Luke, 15 years)

Another strategy of resistance was to creatively co-opt ways of thinking about the normalized, visible practice, (e.g., heterosexuality), and apply them to the ‘other’ practice that had been vilified. This had the effect of making the dominant discourse look fatuous by revealing double standards. Sandy achieved this when she questioned the way that parents encourage their same-sex attracted children to try heterosexual sex:

How many parents say to their straight children I think you should have sex with someone of the same sex before you decide you are straight? I’d say none but swap it around to being queer and all of a sudden you don’t know your own mind and have to justify yourself constantly. (Sandy, 20 years)

Similarly, taking social justice issues that society has embraced, for example, racism and sexism, and applying them to heterosexism, served the purpose of highlighting double standards. Fairclough describes this strategy as follows:

Under different social circumstances, the same boundaries might become a focus of contestation and struggle, and the subject positions and discursive practices associated with them might be experienced as contradictory ... The contradictions between what is allowed in one place but not in another may become a basis for struggle to shift boundaries. (Fairclough 1992: 69)

Here, Fairclough is referring to different rules in different sections of the curriculum, but his argument could equally be applied to the anomaly of differing avenues of redress to abuse in different situations—for example, teacher responses to the violence of racism and sexism compared with the violence of heterosexism. Many young people alluded to the double standards in the treatment of different groups in which, for example, racist violence was dealt with seriously by teachers while homophobic violence was ignored. Similarly, they complained that where they learned about racism and sexism, there was nothing about heterosexism at school. In these cases, young people were, in Fairclough’s terms, ‘redrawing the boundaries between old elements’ (1993: 70). Because discourse is inherently unstable, once they found the fault lines in existing dominant discourses they could use them to highlight inconsistencies and contradictions.

These strategies could also be evidence of ‘emergent institutional support bases’ both within some schools (usually configured within a social justice agenda) and outside of schools, where in Victoria, Australia, for example, the new relationships bill (2001) gives gay and lesbian couples the rights of de facto heterosexual couples.

Young people’s strategies of resistance were very much concerned with extending the mantel of normality over their own sexual feelings. They
wanted to find positions for themselves within discourse where their same-sex desires were regarded in a positive, acceptable light.

I hope my future is happy and ‘normal’ just as if I were heterosexual. No disadvantages just because I’m gay. I just want to settle down with someone and love them and be loved. (Alex, 20 years)

I would like to find a girlfriend that I can love. I just want to live a ‘normal’ life just like everyone else. I don’t feel like I’m different from anyone. I read somewhere, 'Heterosexuality isn’t normal, just common'. So I’ll leave it at that. (Ria, 19 years)

Both of these young people believed that they had the same needs and desires as their opposite sex attracted peers and they refused to think of themselves as different. Ria, in particular questioned the assumption that heterosexuality is normal because it is common. Both young people felt that they were normal and wanted the rest of society to feel that way too.

Conclusions

This research highlights the need for same-sex attracted young people to have access to spaces in which they are free to explore their sexuality and people with whom they feel safe to be themselves. It also highlights the importance of interventions in schools and the community that raise awareness to the damage of homophobic environments to these young people.

The dominant or globalizing discourses of sexuality reproduced and resisted by the young people in this research are a reflection of the normalization of certain sexual behaviours and the exclusion of others from the realm of the normal. There were no dominant discourses in their stories of sexuality that described same-sex attractions as good, healthy and/or natural, and it was young people’s mobilization of resisting discourses (or working the fault lines) that created positive and very often ‘normal’ subject positions. Nor were there any dominant understandings of same-sex attraction that promised happy fulfilled relationships, family cohesion and social success. According to the collective wisdom that informed young people’s lives, being same-sex attracted could only mean alienation, dislocation, and a thoroughly miserable life.

Given the dominant understandings that position these young people as deviant, and the findings of verbal and physical abuse directed towards them in most arenas of their lives, how do we explain the 60% of the sample who, in spite of this, felt ‘pretty good’ or ‘great’ about their sexual feelings? We have come to believe from their explanations that young people were able to feel good because they were resisting the negative beliefs about their sexuality by faulting and reframing the dominant discourses in order to reposition themselves in positive ways. Most of the participants were experiencing great change in their lives and although few of them had contact with the gay community as such, many of them were reaching out for information and support wherever they could find it. This may in part explain how they were able to engage with, and resist homophobic discourse.
Labelling those who reproduced anti-gay discourse as homophobic or ignorant, using institutionalized equal opportunity discourses and discourses of difference to justify a change in thinking about homosexuality, and emphasizing the positives about their own sexual choices were some of the strategies which allowed these young people to feel positive about their sexuality. Despite the dominance of heterosexist discourse many young people successfully managed to fault, dislodge and change them and create positive identities for themselves.

A strong theme running through young people’s stories was an awareness of the term ‘homophobia’ as a descriptor for the abuse, neglect and hostility directed at them in their everyday lives and ‘homophobic’ to describe the perpetrators of the hostility. It was clear that many young people had been exposed to this alternative discourse at school and there was evidence of its use in addressing abuse at the schools of a small number of the participants. For others, exposure to the term came with their contact with gay community and gay friendly sites on the Internet. This successful introduction of new discourse into the field of sexuality should serve as a model for those working to address heterosexist abuse and discrimination.

It is possible to see a movement in the discursive field around sexuality in the opening story of this article; in the visibility that was afforded the controversy around Amelie Mauresmo, and the fact that she was able to publicly resist the negative positioning by Davenport and Hingis. Mauresmo’s handling of the verbal attacks gave her the upper hand in the debate and resulted in Davenport and Hingis recanting on the television screen. Mauresmo had many resources at her fingertips including an entourage of personal supporters with whom she was open about her sexuality. However, her visibility as a lesbian and her astute reframing of the negative comments of her opponents is one that same-sex attracted young people could add to their growing repertoire of strategies of resistance to being positioned negatively within dominant discourses.

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Notes

1. According to Mills (1997), dominant discourses are generally derived from the beliefs of historically powerful institutions, for example, psychology, religion and science.
2. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for her ideas on this.
References


Résumé

La recherche chez les jeunes attirés par les personnes de même sexe dans les cultures occidentales a identifié une minorité d’adolescents dont la
sexualité est niée par les institutions et les personnes qui occupent une place importante dans leurs vies. Très souvent, dans la famille et à l’école, le silence règne sur les rapports sexuels entre personnes du même sexe et lorsque l’homosexualité d’un(e) jeune est soupçonnée ou révélée, il/elle souffre de déni, de discrimination et de maltraitance. Il n’est pas surprenant que vivre dans des environnements hostiles confronte ces jeunes à un risque élevé d’abus de drogues, de dépression et de suicide. Cet article décrit quelques uns des moyens grâce auxquels les jeunes résistent lorsqu’ils sont confrontés à ces situations négatives. En utilisant les récits autobiographiques de 200 jeunes australiens attirés par le même sexe, nous documentons le champ discursif de la sexualité dans lequel ces jeunes luttent pour se construire des identités positives. Les participants se montrent bien au courant des discours dominants qui caractérisent l’homosexualité, comme étant: «mal – une maladie – contre nature». Cependant ils utilisent plusieurs stratégies pour prendre en défaut, détourner et réduire ces perceptions négatives, et mettre en lumière d’autres discours qui les positionnent positivement.

**Resumen**

En un estudio entre jóvenes que sienten atracción por personas del mismo sexo en culturas occidentales se ha descrito a un grupo minoritario de adolescentes cuya sexualidad es negada por instituciones y personas importantes en sus vidas. Muchas veces en la familia y en la escuela se ignora la sexualidad con personas del mismo sexo y cuando se sospecha o se descubre que una persona joven es homosexual, ésta padece rechazo, discriminación y abuso. Como es lógico, al vivir en un ambiente hostil los jóvenes corren altos riesgos de consumo de drogas, depresión y suicidio. En este documento se describen cómo se resisten los jóvenes a ser situados en estas actitudes negativas. Mediante historias autobiográficas de 200 jóvenes australianos que sienten atracción por personas de su mismo sexo, documentamos el campo discursivo de la sexualidad en el que estos jóvenes luchan por construir identidades positivas. Los jóvenes conocían bien los discursos dominantes que caracterizaban la homosexualidad como ‘malvada, enfermiza y no natural’. Sin embargo, utilizan estrategias diferentes para poner pegas, apartarse y menospreciar estos conceptos negativos y recalcar otros discursos que les sirvían positivamente.