



Gendered (s)explorations among same-sex attracted young people in Australia

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This paper seeks to import a more complex understanding of gendered subjectivity into discussions of young people and homosexuality, and is based on an Australian national survey ($n=749$) of same-sex attracted youth (SSAY) aged between 14 and 21. Results revealed significant gender differences with regard to patterns of sexual attraction, behaviour and identity labels among participants. For the young men in the study, there was more congruence between feelings of gender atypicality, same-sex attractions and same-sex behaviours. Overall, young women displayed more fluidity with regard to their sexual feelings, behaviours and identities. Young women were more likely to be engaged in private explorations of lesbianism, concurrent with participation in heterosexual sex and relationships. Young women were also grappling with more limited and emotionally risky opportunities for sex with other girls who were already known to them as friends. The invisibility of lesbianism as an identity or practice led to confusion about what feelings meant for the future in the arena of lived experience. The paper concludes that more research is needed into the impact of gender on the development of young people's experiences of homosexuality, particularly the manner in which invisibility and lack of social acceptance of a full spectrum of sexual diversity may disadvantage young women's emotional health and well-being.

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Introduction

Studies of young gay men (and to a lesser extent) young lesbians and bisexuals have proliferated in the academic literature in recent years, in an attempt to debunk the once prevalent myth that "real" homosexuality belongs exclusively to the realm of adult experience (Savin-Williams, 1989, 1990; Schneider, 1989; Rosario *et al.*, 1996, Savin-Williams and Cohen, 1996). This largely North American body of research has done much to document the existence of same-sex attractions and behaviours among teenagers and young adults, as more emotionally significant and complex than a "phase" they go through on the way to adulthood.

However, several commentators have noted that the body of empirical social research into homosexual identity and experience (for young people *and* adults) in Western cultural settings has privileged gay male populations (Rust, 1993; Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1995), under-represents women and bisexuals (Diamond, 2000) and does not sufficiently differentiate between homosexual experience for women and men (Eliason, 1996). Although it is well-documented that same-sex attracted young women experience sexual attractions for other women at a later age than young men, are older when they act on these attractions, are more likely to begin questioning their sexual identities at a later age than young men (Bell *et al.*, 1981; Savin-Williams, 1990; Rosario *et al.*, 1996) and also tend to report higher rates of heterosexual behaviour than young gay men (Savin-Williams, 1990; D'Augelli and

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Hershberger, 1993; Rosario *et al.*, 1996), relatively little attention has focused on *understanding* these phenomena in the homosexuality literature. Research has tended to emphasize similarities across the genders, the assumption being that homosexuality is the defining feature of “difference” in heteronormative culture.

It makes sense that gendered subjectivity impacts on the way in which homosexual feelings and experiences are processed, given that all young people are socialized into heteronormative cultures. A large body of literature on adolescent *heterosexual* experience has considered the manner in which dominant cultural discourses concerning masculinity and femininity shape all young people’s self understandings of their sexuality. Encapsulating key themes in this literature, Connell (1987), in his analysis of gendered power relations, speaks of “hegemonic masculinity” which is contrasted with “emphasized femininity”. He notes that hegemonic masculinity in Australia (overwhelmingly heterosexual) is constructed in relation to a number of subordinate masculinities (a key form of which is homosexual). Given that all forms of femininity in Australian society “are constructed in the context of the overall subordination of women to men”, no one type of femininity is hegemonic in the same manner. According to Connell:

Power, authority, aggression, technology are not thematized in femininity at large as they are in masculinity. Equally important, no pressure is set up to negate or subordinate other forms of femininity in the way that hegemonic masculinity must negate other masculinities (1987, p. 187).

Hegemonic masculinity, which finds expression in widespread adulation of various sporting heroes and media representations of men with power, authority and virility, also brings into focus that which it defines itself against. Hence, the visibility and particular investment in public displays of homophobia directed at gay men in contrast to the relative invisibility of lesbians.

In Connell’s formulation, emphasized femininity is a very well publicized discourse yet explicitly linked with the “private realm of the home and bedroom” and reinforced particularly in the content of mass-circulation women’s magazines and television. This dominant cultural discourse stresses “compliance, nurturance and empathy as womanly virtues”, and is clearly a femininity which is performed especially to men (Connell, 1987: p. 187).

Other Australian research has considered how the content and practice of sex education programmes within Australian schools continue to concur with and reproduce hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. In focusing on sexuality which is heterosexual, penetrative and reproductive, male sexuality is constructed as active and expressive, in need of being kept in check by the more passive, responsible female. Further to this, for young women, sex is expected to occur within an important relational context or feelings dimension, whereas there is a cultural understanding that young men will have sex for its own sake (Harrison and Hillier, 1999).

Despite the fact that other positions apart from the dominant are taken up by individual young people, empirical studies generally demonstrate that young heterosexual people in Western cultural settings view their own experiences in line with these dominant discourses regarding appropriate masculinity and femininity. For example, young heterosexual women continue to emphasize the emotional or “feelings” dimension of their sexual encounters while bodily pleasure or desire is a missing discourse. For young men, however, an active

sexuality is understood, assumed and crucial to the construction of an acceptable masculine heterosexuality (Holland *et al.*, 1992; Tolman, 1994).

How then might young same-sex attracted people (SSAY) internalize these dominant cultural discourses? If notions of hegemonic masculinity as articulated by Connell hold true, SSAY men will still be likely to experience their sexuality as more agentic and less passive in comparison to SSAY women. It is also likely that young people in general will be more aware of sanctions placed on male homosexual behaviour, whereas lesbianism as a practice is an absent rather than a highly visible discourse. And it could also be expected that SSAY women are more likely to internalize expectations of the “relational” or “feelings” dimension of their sexual liaisons, while SSAY men will internalize a greater capacity for sex in and of itself. In this paper, we argue that these dominant cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity, particularly the manner in which young people understand themselves as active or passive in relation to their sexuality impact as much on the self-understandings and practices of SSAY as they do on young heterosexuals.

The paper reports on patterns in quantitative and qualitative data with regard to same-sex attractions, behaviours and identity labels. The data were obtained from the first national Australian study to comprehensively investigate the experiences of this group. In referring to young people’s stories about their developing sexuality, we will attempt to explain how gender impacts on the experience of coming to terms with one’s homosexuality.

For the purposes of this paper, we examine the qualitative data primarily to shed light on the broad patterns emerging from the quantitative results and to look at the type of socio-cultural influences relating to gendered subjectivity, evident in the stories young people have written about their lives. Some consideration of the implications of observed gender differences will also be provided, with the aim being to understand how young women and men in Australia are constructing, interpreting and negotiating their homosexual attractions and experiences.

Methodology

A priority established for this research was to make contact with young people (aged between 14 and 21) who did not currently identify with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and who were isolated from support services. This presents a departure from much of the published research conducted with young people of “non-heterosexual” orientation. In light of the stigma attached to homosexuality, many researchers have drawn samples of young gays, lesbians and bisexuals from university and community agency populations, groups which could be expected to have a more politicized awareness of their sexuality and be more acculturated into local gay communities (e.g. Martin and Hetrick, 1988; Rosario *et al.*, 1996). The aim of this research was to attract young people who were more isolated and less likely to be linked in with gay community support networks, for example, those young people living in rural areas, in addition to those with some experience of gay community.

Recruitment

Following on from the above, it was a priority for the research to recruit participants via the Internet. Given that use of the Internet as a research tool is in its infancy, it is worth briefly discussing the relative strengths and drawbacks of the medium.

Although only 22 per cent of Australian households are connected to the Internet, 74 per cent of young Australians aged between 18 and 24 had accessed the Internet at some time during the 12 months prior to a recent survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). Further to this, anecdotal evidence suggests that large numbers of SSAY utilize this medium to explore and validate their sexuality. Before undertaking data collection, random surfing of the Internet gave us access to a number of personal websites young people had constructed which were devoted to their own experiences of coming out, which reinforced anecdotal accounts. The number of actual households with Net access may be small, but many schools and libraries now provide access to the medium for research purposes at minimal or no cost to users. While arguably, young people have limited privacy when accessing the Internet in public places, at least some provision is made in schools and libraries for quiet study time which could conceivably allow young people the opportunity to follow up on extra curricular activities.

Another attractive feature of the Internet was the fact that it allows for more anonymity on the part of participants than a postal or face to face questionnaire. Young people can freely express themselves in emailed responses with the knowledge that they cannot be seen nor necessarily identified by their electronic addresses. We felt that this may give those who would not otherwise participate in research into stigmatized behaviour and identify the required sense of control over the process.

Clearly, there are trade offs in relation to the above strengths of the medium. By its very nature, use of the Internet demands considerable literacy, plus knowledge of and access to up-to-the-minute technologies. As a consequence of this, it is likely that the young people marginalized due to literacy problems and without the institutional support of schools, libraries and stable households will be underrepresented when data is collected this way.

As such, it was also considered important that the survey be made available via other means. A coupon was placed in a number of mainstream youth magazines and also the free street press in several Australian cities, in response to which young people received a reply-paid questionnaire. Fliers and questionnaires were also sent to a number of youth support agencies, LGBT friendly support services, university and other tertiary education colleges, and included in a mass mailout organized through an Australia-wide HIV/AIDS peak body.

Electronic data collection

The questionnaire was uploaded to the University website and configured as a mail back form. Links to the project web page were negotiated with several generalist youth Internet sites (notably a national youth radio station) as well as a number of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community sites (including newsgroups, bulletin boards and email lists). This allowed participants to link to and complete the survey anonymously "on line" then electronically mail it to the research team's alias E-mail address. To ensure anonymity was maintained, the mail-back process was configured to conceal participants' E-mail addresses. Generalist rather than LGBT-specific youth sites were targeted in the first instance, in order to prioritize attracting young people less comfortable with accessing gay-specific sites.

Survey content

Next, a brief description of the survey, the results of which provide the context for examination of the qualitative component of the research. Using the phrase "same-sex attracted" was felt to be inclusive of a range of non-heterosexual behaviours, feelings and identity labels among young people. Particular care was taken not to make the assumption

that same-sex *attractions*, and *behaviours* necessarily lead to gay, lesbian, bisexual or other non-heterosexual *identities*. Rather, the nature of the links between many different facets of young peoples' sexuality was sought.

The questionnaire included items on: general feelings of well-being, drug use, experience of verbal and physical abuse, self-understandings of sexual attractions and identity, gender of sexual partner and safe sex behaviour, sources of sexual health information, and issues associated with disclosure about homosexuality to friends and family members.

Results

Survey data

The Internet proved the most promising avenue for the receipt of completed and valid questionnaires, with over half of the participants utilizing email to forward their responses. Response rates cannot be calculated as we have no way of knowing how many young people exposed to the survey were eligible to participate.

A valid sample size of 749 was achieved (no gender differences, mean age=18, S.D.=2.08). Of those who completed the survey, 93 young women and 97 young men also contributed a story (from several paragraphs to several pages in length) which outlined their personal experiences of same-sex attraction. Of those 97 young men, five submitted the address of their personal website, which enabled us to use the stories they had published on the Internet as data for the project.

In line with our goal of attracting participants who were more isolated in relation to dealing with sexuality issues, almost one in five of those who responded had spoken to no one about their sexuality. Almost three quarters (73%) of the group were students attending school or university/further education courses and 65 per cent 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 per cent were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

The demographic characteristics of the sample suggest that young people from more disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances are underrepresented, for example, the number of unemployed young people in our sample was well below the Australian Bureau of Statistics figure for national youth unemployment. The results need to be viewed with this in mind.

Three aspects of the survey data, namely those related to sexual attractions, behaviours and identity, are of particular interest to this paper.

Sexual attractions and gender. When asked to describe their sexual attractions at the moment, participants largely fell into two even groups: those who were exclusively same-sex attracted ($n=340$, out of $n=746$ or 46%) and those who were attracted to both sexes ($n=340$ or 46%). A minority of young people were unsure about their sexual attractions ($n=56$ or 7%), and an additional 1 per cent stated they were only attracted to the opposite sex.¹

Chi-squared analysis showed significant gender differences with regard to this question, $\chi^2(3, n=746)=61.2, p<0.0001$. Sixty-five per cent of the young people who were exclusively same-sex attracted were male, with females accounting for only 35 per cent of

¹These young people indicated "non-heterosexuality" in other questions, e.g. with regard to their behaviours or fantasies.

this group. In other words, 60 per cent (367) of young men yet only 32 per cent (379) of young women stated they were exclusively attracted to members of their own sex.

The reverse was true of respondents attracted to both sexes where 65 per cent (220) were young women and 36 per cent (120) were young men. Young women were also more likely to be “unsure” of their attractions (56 or 39%). Equal and relatively small numbers of young people of both sexes claimed exclusively heterosexual attractions (10 or 1%).

Sexual identity and gender. Most participants chose the categories “gay/lesbian” ($n=333$, out of $n=745$ or 45%) or “bisexual” ($n=264$ or 35%), with a sizeable minority selecting “heterosexual” ($n=64$ or 9%). The remainder chose “other” ($n=57$ or 8%) or “unsure” ($n=27$ or 4%).

Chi-squared analysis revealed significant gender differences with regard to sexual identity, $\chi^2(6, n=745)=58.2, p<0.0001$. Two hundred and twelve (58%) young men identified as gay whereas only 121 (32%) young women identified as lesbian.

Following a similar pattern to the question on sexual attraction, young women were much more likely to identify as bisexual than young men ($n=162$ or 61% as opposed to 102 or 39%). Young women also accounted for 63 per cent of the heterosexual identity category (compared with 37% of young men), were more likely to state they were “unsure” about identity, more likely to nominate the “other” category which included alternative labels (e.g. “queer”), and also to write statements regarding refusing to label oneself.

Same/other sex behaviour and gender. Chi-square analysis, performed on those who were sexually active ($n=541$), revealed significant gender differences with regard to the orientation of young men’s and young women’s sexual practice, $\chi^2(2, n=541)=41.3, p\leq 0.0001$. Fifty-nine per cent (157) of the sexually active young men indicated that over the last year they had only had sex with males. This compared with 29 per cent (79) of young women who had only had sex with females. Twenty-eight per cent of young men (74) had had sex with both sexes, and 14 per cent (37) had only had sex with females. More young women had had sex with both males and females (39% or 107) and nearly one-third were having sex only with males (32%). Overall, young women were far more likely than young men to report having had a person of the other sex as a sexual partner in the past 12 months.

Labelling of sexuality and gender. Finally, participants were also asked to consider five possible factors (and “other”) influencing how they labelled their sexuality. This was a multiple response question, and most young people chose several of the possible options. Basing identity on “sexual attraction” ($n=559$, out of $n=742$ or 75%) was the most popular response for both young men and young women, with “fantasy” (489 or 66%) and actual sexual experiences (380 or 51%) also nominated by substantial numbers of participants. Gender differences with regard to choice of the above categories were negligible, however, young men were more likely to say they “just knew” about their sexual identity, $\chi^2(1, n=396)=13.4, p\leq 0.0003$ and young women were more likely to say they had not defined their sexuality yet, $\chi^2(1, n=164)=9.9, p\leq 0.002$.

Congruence between attraction and behaviour by gender. Chi-squared analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and behaviour for those attracted only to the same sex (those not sexually active were deleted from this analysis). Cells were screened for expected frequencies less than five and all exceeded that. There was a significant association between gender and behaviour, $\chi^2(2, n=253)=14.58, p<0.005$.

Eighty-three per cent of same sex attracted boys ($n=130$, out of $n=157$) were having sex only with boys, whereas 62 per cent ($n=59$, out of $n=96$) of same sex attracted girls were having sex only with girls. Standardized residuals were examined to determine for which cells observed and expected frequencies differed significantly. The only cell was for girls who had sex with both sexes, and this cell contained more than expected.

A second chi-squared analysis was conducted for young people attracted to both sexes. Cells were screened for expected frequencies less than five and all exceeded that. There was a significant association between gender and behaviour, $\chi^2(2, n=245)=7.92, p<0.05$. Fifty-four per cent of boys attracted to both sexes ($n=48$, out of $n=89$) were having sex with both, whereas 48 per cent of girls ($n=75$, out of $n=156$) were having sex with both. Standardized residuals were examined to determine for which cells observed and expected frequencies differed significantly. The only cells which neared significance were for boys having sex only with those of the same sex (more than expected), boys who were having sex with the opposite sex (less than expected) and girls having sex with the opposite sex (more than expected).

Summary: quantitative results. The quantitative data demonstrated that young men were more likely than young women to exhibit behaviour, attractions and a sense of sexual identity which supports a binary construction of sexuality. Young men were more likely to consider themselves unambiguously gay, more likely to be exclusively attracted to other males and also much more likely to be sexually active with other males. They were also more likely to have a sense of “just knowing” about their sexuality. Young women, on the other hand, reported more ambiguity and fluidity in their sexual orientation. They were more likely to consider themselves “bisexual” than “lesbian”, and more likely to indicate attractions to both sexes. Moreover there was poorer congruence between reported same-sex attractions and actual sexual behaviour among young women, who despite sexual attractions to their own sex were more likely than young men, to be sexually active with the other sex. Of those attracted to both sexes, young men’s non-congruent behaviour was in the direction of homosexuality, whereas for young women, it was in the direction of heterosexuality.

Qualitative results

We turn now to the qualitative data, which assist in explaining young men’s tendency towards same sex attractions, behaviours and gay identity labels and the stronger congruence between same sex attractions and behaviour. The qualitative data are considered with reference to four major themes discussed by participants in the course of making sense of their sexuality, namely gender atypicality, passive *vs.* active homosexual behaviour, labelling of sexuality by self and others, and outlets for homosexual activity.

Gender atypicality. Considering gender atypical behaviour in childhood as linked to homosexual orientation in the future is part of a well-established Western tradition of thought (Bell *et al.*, 1981; Troiden, 1989). The “girly” man or the “butch” woman feature readily in popular stereotypes of homosexuals, and reflections on this type of gender atypicality featured in many young people’s stories about coming to terms with their sexuality.

Consideration of one’s early childhood behaviour as gender atypical had different implications for young men than for young women in terms of self-identity construction as homosexual. Awareness of childhood “girly” behaviour was more keenly felt by male

respondents, indicating their awareness of how strongly the boundaries around appropriate masculinity were policed, and that refusing to respect those boundaries had implications for their future sexual identity:

In primary school, I would always feel more comfortable playing jacks, elastics or some other game with the girls. I wasn't into football, cricket or basketball...as a result, I was always being called a girl (Quan, aged 19).

This is not to suggest that Quan's feelings of gender atypicality were what gave rise to his same-sex attractions. A discourse of desire coexists with this memory of being "girly". This same young man also recalls having had a very strong response to a television presenter at that time, who made him feel safe and loved, and later explicit sexual attractions to various boys in his class at school. It is that early sense of "difference" he puts together in his story with the later erotic attractions in considering that he "just knew" he was gay.

It is clear that young women, on the other hand, who felt they exhibited traits conventionally considered masculine had available to them a discourse of tomboyism. It made less overt sense to girls to link their lack of "femininity" as young girls to being a lesbian. Some toyed with the link between a masculine appearance or interests and sexuality in their stories, however, the conclusions to be reached were more ambiguous as demonstrated by the examples below:

I guess I was about 9 years old when I first really noticed I was different. Back then of course you were simply called a tomboy and no-one really cared if you liked cars better than Barbie. My best friend was a rather effeminate boy and we were practically inseparable. We both loved dressing up and acting out scenes from Neighbours [popular Australian soap opera]. The only thing is, I always wanted to be Scott and he wanted to be Charlene. My wall was plastered with my prized collection of over 40 posters of Kylie. I never thought anything of it until one day another friend of mine told me I was weird because I didn't have any posters of boys on my wall. This was the first time I was ever ashamed of who I was (Jody, aged 19).

In the above scenario, Jody's refusal of the appropriate heterosexual interests then became the issue with her friends, rather than "masculine" interests *per se*. She was subsequently able to make herself socially acceptable to her friends by removing the offending posters and hiding her grief at the slur. Unlike Quan, Jody was able to resurrect her reputation and defer the resolution of issues associated with her sexuality. The point to be made here is that Quan's lack of appropriate masculinity was relevant to his sense of "just knowing" about his homosexuality, whereas Jody's tomboyism does not necessarily provide her with similar cues.

Labelling by others vs. "outing" oneself. Linked to the theme of gender a-typicality was the theme of labelling. In Quan's story above, labelling by others was also part of the process of coming to see oneself as "different" and associating this difference with sexual orientation and identity. Although research conducted on the expression of hegemonic masculinities within schools has determined that the label "gay" is projected onto young men for a variety of reasons which may or may not have to do with actual sexual orientation, e.g. working hard, being good at art, and having a high voice (Steinberg *et al.*, 1997), for young men who are experiencing same-sex desires, this labelling by peers can also be an important part of a process of self-recognition.

As Jim explained it:

the name calling started, then I started to hate myself because although I was denying everything they said, I knew it was probably true. I didn't want to be a faggot, but everyday other kids were reminding me what I was (Jim, aged 18).

For Jim, then, the task was coming to terms with what he was, yet there was little question in his own mind that "a faggot" was what he was.

Consider in contrast the experiences of the following young women. When it came to "outing" it was more common for young women to refer to having disclosed their sexual feelings or behaviour to others, rather than have a label imposed upon them in response to perceived "different" appearance or behaviour. This "self-outing" was likely to be quite at odds with the mixed feelings the young woman reported experiencing, and one which often required the disinhibiting effects of alcohol:

A few weeks ago I got drunk at a party with friends from work and told them about my feelings. The next time at work I heard a few rumours going around that I was in love with my boss (Kirsten, aged 15).

One week a guy my friends knew came down from Melbourne, he was the first gay man I had ever met and immediately I was so intrigued and jealous of his open feelings. We all ended up getting extremely drunk and I apparently told God knows how many people I was a lesbian. I can not remember ever coming out and was totally humiliated, so much so that I avoided [these friends] for a while. It was never mentioned again until early this year when I broke down to another friend who didn't take it very well and has not been as close to me ever since (Lauren, aged 16).

The effects of this self-outing behaviour appear ambivalent in these young women's stories. While clearly there was some level of censure experienced, Lauren and Kirsten's outbursts drew less explicit punishments in terms of branding or labelling from peers. Lesbian identity is not assumed as a consequence of lesbian disclosures or behaviours.

Passive and active homosexuality. Previous research has demonstrated how a lack of any overt sexual desire on their own part poses no impediment for heterosexual young women in maintaining physical relationships with young men (Holland *et al.*, 1992; Hillier *et al.*, 1999) The young women represented in this research spoke often of situating themselves passively in relation to their more forbidden and risky desires for other young women in allowing themselves to be publicly chosen by interested males. A number of young women described the ease of having sex or relationships with young men because this was a relatively passive option which allowed them to blend in with their heterosexual friends:

I still felt the need to conform to what was accepted around me, and as a result I repressed my feelings and dated guys (Linda, aged 20).

I never chose the guys (I figured I wasn't interested in guys because I was "sexually immature"), the guys chose me and I just went along with it (Jeanette, aged 21).

This kind of repression of sexual feelings and recourse to going along with what was socially acceptable was a relatively rare feature of the stories submitted by young men. While this type of behaviour allowed many young women to hide the attractions which made them

potentially open to becoming social outcasts, it meant they were shut off from active expressions of their lesbian sexuality. Declaring love for a best friend and wondering if she felt the same way was a recurrent theme for female participants. In the examples below, young women positioned themselves passively in relation to unrequited love for best friends and school mates:

I need help with my situation. I'm very unsure about coming out. Most of the people I mix with are not helpful at all about what I'm going through. Everything's very confusing. . . I wonder whether my best friend has the same feelings for me too. I'm a little bit scared, but also tremendously happy about liking her (Wendy, aged 19).

The first time I heard the word homosexual, I didn't know what it meant. Like most girls, I too had crushes, however, I had them for mostly girls. They were so passionate, all my energies seemed to be wasting away on unrequited love (Lisa, aged 17).

Young women such as Wendy and Lisa may well embark on same-sex behaviours when these can be explored without risk to established friendship networks, e.g. after completion of school or after leaving home. Yet their stories convey more of a sense of being held captive by their forbidden desires rather than a sense of agency in active sexual exploration. And in Linda's and Jeanette's examples, concurrent with their same-sex attractions, they were very likely to be involved in socially acknowledged heterosexual relationships and also heterosexually active with young men.

Anonymous outlets for exploring homosexuality. It was also clear that young women had fewer anonymous outlets to explore lesbian sexuality with others in an active, embodied way. Young men were more likely to discuss opportunities for sexual encounters with other males, away from the prying eyes of school, family and their immediate peers:

My first sexual experience [with a guy] was when I was 14. I had been warned never to go near the toilets at the park close to the railway station. . . At these toilets I'd meet an older guy, 17–18, I guess, who gave me a head job. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me (Jim, aged 18).

I joined a dating service which opened up the opportunity for meeting other guys on the line and initially, just having sex (Joe, aged 17).

Many young men described experimentation with neighbours their own age, older men in the context of beats (public places such as toilets where men meet for the purpose of having sex), and venturing out into the gay bar scene. It was very rare for young women to discuss exploring their sexuality in such a way. On the contrary, young women tended to disclose relationships or tentative sexual encounters with those known to them from school or close friendship networks:

When I was 15, I started my first lesbian relationship with my best friend. I had been attracted to her for some time and one night, I slept over at her house. . . (Mirella, aged 17).

I first had homosexual feelings in year 8. . . [which] started to come back when I met my significant other. We were friends before anything else. I decided that I had to confront my homosexuality and I told her how I felt. We are still together and as blissed out as ever. . . (Mandy, aged 16).

The above examples illustrate that agency is possible for some young women with regard to exploring lesbian sex, “emphasized femininity” is not an inevitable outcome of the process of socialization. Although same-sex desires were acted on in the above examples, the focus on the emotional and relational aspects of sexuality among young women made the seeking out of sexual encounters a process more fraught with the danger of destroying established friendships.

Summary: qualitative results. In summary, young men tended to discuss the above themes from a different perspective to that of young women. In the first instance, young men emphasized the equation homosexuality equals gender inversion. Where gender inversion (being girly or feminine) was felt to be personally relevant (and it is important to stress here that it was not relevant to all male participants) this was often accompanied by descriptions of labelling by others as part of the process of realization about homosexuality. Where sexuality was discussed by young men, there was generally more of a focus on opportunities for active homosexual activity and a greater awareness of outlets for this behaviour.

On the contrary, young women were less likely to equate gender atypical tendencies with being a lesbian, and less likely to discuss others labelling them for having “lesbian” tendencies. Lesbian did not feature as readily as a slur or insult in the same fashion as “faggot” or “poofter”. Young women also wrote frequently of passive acceptance of heterosexual relationships coexisting with lesbian desires. There was a relative absence of discussion of outlets for expression of an active lesbian sexuality, and desire for other young women was often revealed in a manner which emphasized the emotional and unrequited rather than the physical and readily obtainable.

Discussion: gendered (s)explorations

While not each of the above themes was relevant to every participant, and there were clearly exceptions to these rules, the gendered nature of their treatment in young people’s stories helps us to explain the general trends which we observed in the quantitative results, i.e. that young men were more likely than young women to exhibit behaviour, attractions, and a sense of sexual identity which supports binary constructions of sexuality, that is, congruence between all aspects of their sexuality, whereas the norm for young women was sexual fluidity.

In the first instance young men were clearly more attuned to the relevance of inappropriate gender cues to their developing sexuality. While both or neither of these issues was necessarily relevant to every young man, the manner in which young men discussed them was evidence of perceived clearer cultural pointers among young people to gay as opposed to lesbian identity.

It has been stated that “masculinity has particular investments in homophobia” (Steinberg *et al.*, 1997, p. 144). In the Introduction, we elaborated on this point in making reference to how hegemonic masculinities operate in relation to emphasized femininity. Our data gives some clue to how these notions are operationalized in relation to young people’s developing sense of sexual identity in heteronormative culture. The restrictive scope of hegemonic masculinities serve to reinforce binary constructions of sexuality, whereby young men experiencing same-sex desires come to understand themselves as gay. The school environment, which more young men than young women experience as a battleground (Hillier *et al.*, 1998) is pivotal in this process of identity construction. Young men such as

Quan were unable to earn their masculinity and implicitly their heterosexuality by actively engaging in the somewhat narrow range of activities and modes of self-presentation sanctioned as masculine by the dominant culture.

Young women's stories about their developing sexuality point to a lack of such overt prescriptiveness with regard to the appropriate relationship of femininity to homosexuality. A young woman's sexuality is not questioned until her behaviour or her disclosures actively invite such questioning, and even then her status as a lesbian is less likely to be assumed or overtly punished than a young man's status as a "faggot" or gay. This is evidence of the general devaluing of the feminine in our culture; spoiled masculinity poses more of a threat to the dominant social order.

A further indicator of the above was the extent to which young women's stories contained far fewer references to sexual labelling and abuse. In the absence of more intrusive external interventions into the formation of their identities, i.e. the taunts of "poof" or "faggot" from peers that male counterparts are subjected to with greater intensity and consistency, young women were more likely to be pondering their sexuality in the privacy of their own minds. The blurring of the boundaries between emotional attachment, physical desire and love for girls was also more apparent and did not allow for an easy resolution. Added to this, the relative invisibility of a public face for lesbian identity, the absence of overt gender cues and available anonymous outlets for experimentation with same-sex behaviour, the meanings of intense attractions to other women remained unclear.

It was apparent that sexual fluidity was a source of considerable anxiety for young women. A lack of obvious sexual identity was generally presented as an issue which needed to be resolved. "Bisexual" was a label which often denoted confusion, and as previously discussed, young women were also far more likely to nominate "unsure" in the sexual identity question. We are not meaning to suggest that the goal for young women (or young men for that matter) should be "resolving" their sexual identity issues, in terms of making a decision as to being *either* heterosexual *or* lesbian/gay. Indeed the diversity of participants' expressed attractions and experiences indicates the complexity of sexuality and the broad spectrum of possibilities it represents. However, we clearly live in a culture which rewards those who do so. Ambivalent attitudes to bisexuals still exist within the LGBT community and will do so until homosexuals attain equal citizenship status to heterosexuals in Western societies.

Although the relative invisibility of lesbianism culturally provides young women with some protection from overtly abusive and discriminatory treatment, the confusion which results from attempting to resolve issues of attraction and identity potentially explains why young women in this study were prone to much higher rates of substance abuse than the young men, a somewhat puzzling result in the context of general population studies of young people and substance abuse. Although not the explicit focus of this paper, usage of marijuana and injecting drugs was very high among these young women, in comparison with that of their male counterparts (Hillier *et al.*, 1998). In similar studies conducted with "general population" young people, smoking marijuana and drug injection is more frequent and more prevalent among young men.

One interesting quantitative result which is difficult to theorize about with reference to the qualitative data is the disparity between the genders with regard to reported attractions to the other sex. Why were so many more young women than young men sexually *attracted* to both sexes, as opposed to sexually *active* with both sexes? While sexual activity is relatively easy to explain with recourse to the evidence of the social desirability of being seen to be

heterosexual and the relatively passive role young women are socialized to take up within heterosexual discourses, sexual desires are more elusive phenomena.

One explanation for this result is that fewer young women had actually had sex with another woman and therefore had no lesbian experiences with which to compare their more embodied knowledge of heterosexual sex. A number of young men and young women who had sexual experience with both sexes acknowledged that their attractions for the opposite sex receded as their experiences with their own sex proliferated. It makes sense that attractions need to be tested out and a preference for one sex may result from actual same-sex experiences which in turn leads to a more active involvement with other gays/lesbians and the fading of those opposite sex attractions. Accessing an actively homosexual culture would also assist in this process, and as discussed above, the interview evidence suggested that this option was more available to young men (whether through beats, bars or telephone hotlines) than to the young women who spoke of relative isolation from a community of lesbians.

However, this finding also makes sense in the context of gendered differences in terms of understandings of "attraction". In line with the previously cited studies of adult women and adolescent heterosexual women, which indicate a strong link between emotional and physical desire for women, there was evidence that many young women defined attraction as involving components of emotional closeness, love and physical desire. Young women may well have had feelings for the boys they were just "going along with" sexually, which they defined as "attraction". For example, Rachel spoke about her feelings for boys in the following manner: "Even though I have felt attracted to some boys, I never felt that I'd like to go out with them or have sex with them". We did not explicitly ask participants how they defined attraction (as measured by the question regarding "sexual feelings"). Young men may well have defined this term as equating with a more narrow definition of genitally focused sexual arousal. This would be consistent with previous studies conducted with young heterosexuals (Hillier *et al.*, 1999).

Conclusion

It is our belief that sexual diversity could be enjoyed, explored and celebrated by all young people given a social climate of acceptance and adequate information regarding the broad spectrum human sexuality encompasses. Our participants were clearly experimenting with and exploring their sexuality, yet disadvantaged by both a prevailing climate of homophobia, and the restrictiveness of available gendered positions from which to explore and understand their sexuality.

The detrimental effects of homophobic labelling on young men who found themselves in public violation of hegemonic masculine gender conventions was evident in the research, and the adverse effects of verbal taunts and physical assaults on a substantial number were clear. However, being labelled was not be an entirely negative outcome and for many young men was depicted as part of their own process of self-discovery as gay. For many young men, the task of coming to terms with sexuality was one of self-acceptance of one's being gay, and the public cues as to what being gay is for men are clearer.

For young women, however, there was no parallel "reification" of lesbian identity in a social sense. While this does not necessarily need to be problematic under conditions of social acceptance of sexual diversity, the invisibility of lesbianism as an identity or practice

led to confusion about what feelings meant for the future in the arena of lived experience. Ambivalent or fluid sexuality could potentially be a freedom yet it is more likely to create a sense of anxiety among young people in a culture which continues to constitute sexuality in binary terms and bestow privileges upon those who make heterosexual choices with regard to how they choose to openly live their lives.

Several directions for future research are suggested by these results. In the first instance, more studies are needed into the impact of gender on the development of young people's sexuality, particularly the manner in which the relative absence of a public discourse around lesbianism impacts on young women. It was a source of some concern to find that young women often situated themselves so passively in relation to their lesbian desires and had appeared to have less access to a language of lesbian embodiment. Whereas the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Australia has opened the door to some level of public acceptance of discussion about gay male sexual practice, there is a relative absence of a public language around lesbian sexuality and desire. It can no longer be assumed that same-sex desire constitutes the major axis of difference among young people, or that young gays, lesbians and bisexuals represent a coherent minority.

Attention also needs to be paid to the conditions which foster a positive self-concept among sexually fluid young people. While there was some evidence of a nascent celebratory discourse emerging around bisexuality within this group, there is still considerable pressure within the gay community and straight society to be clear about who you are with regard to your sexuality, i.e. either homosexual or heterosexual. This will continue as long as heterosexuals (of both genders) remain privileged as sexual citizens.

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