

“I’m wasting away on unrequited love” :
gendering same sex attracted young women’s love sex and desire.

Lynne Hillier

Published in Hecate, 27(1), 119-127.

Lynne Hillier

NH&MRC Postdoctoral Fellow

Australian Research Centre in Sex Health & Society

La trobe University

215 Franklin St

Melbourne 3000

It has long been recognised that young people are sexually active at an increasingly younger age and that a major organising principle of sex and related behaviours in young people is gender (Donald et al 1995; Holland et al, 1992; Lees, 1993; Richardson, 1996; Robinson, R. 1996; Wyn, 1993). In 1996 we gathered the meanings of sex and safe sex from 1200 secondary students in Australian towns (Hillier and others 1998; Hillier and others 1999). We also asked questions about relationships and sexual behaviours and found in young people's writings about sex, a number of rules about sexual behaviours which were largely organised around gender. The following summary reflects some of these basic organizing principles about understood and appropriate behaviours for young men and women. They are simplistic, there may be overlap in some areas, and they may be diluted in urban areas, however, there is a consensus that gender remains a powerful organising feature of heterosexual young people's lives.

Insert Table 1 here

Over the last five years in Australia there has also been a marked increase in interest in non-heterosexual young people's sexual explorations, but within this, almost no attention has been paid to gender and there has been little interest in a gender critique. Part of the reason for this is that many of the studies have been restricted to young men. Since the advent of the HIV pandemic, the Australian government has funded research into HIV prevention with heterosexual young people and same sex attracted young men. The assumption has been that same sex attracted young women are not at risk for HIV and therefore HIV research dollars should not be committed to their issues.

Similarly, based on the belief that woman to woman transmission of STIs and related illnesses is unlikely and rare, there is a common assumption that lesbians are immune from STIs. The recent campaign *Lesbians need pap smears too* was an attempt to redress the popular belief that lesbians do not suffer from the secondary effects of STIs. The main flaw in this type of thinking is the assumption that lesbians do not, and have not, had sex with men.

A third reason for the lack of research focus on same sex attracted young women is the gendering of youth suicide as male. Overwhelmingly the research has been restricted to

young men. There is the assumption that it is only young men, and in this case same sex attracted young men, who suffer the hostility and resulting alienation of homophobia that drives them to suicide. A recent study by Howard and Nicolas (2000) in New South Wales is a welcome exception and found that lesbians were at no less a risk of suicide than young gay men..

In summary, because of the belief that it is young men and not young women who are 'at risk', we have a lot of research evidence about these young people which is on the surface gender undifferentiated, but which mainly tells a story about young gay and bisexual men. This information is important but leaves half of the group silenced and invisible.

This paper has a number of aims. First I want to demonstrate how the rules of gender are reproduced in the ways that same sex attracted young women play out their sexual desires and how this is very different from young men. Second, I want to address the assumptions that have resulted in same sex attracted young women's invisibility in the sexual health & wellbeing research and third, using the results from a project with same sex attracted young people and the Internet, I want to explore some possibilities for young women and their sexual desires.

To achieve these aims I will draw on data from a number of research projects in which my colleagues and I have been involved over the last few years. These studies are:

The rural mural – a 1996 study with 1200 young people in rural areas of Tasmania, Victoria and Queensland (Hillier Harrison & Bowditch, 1999; Hillier Harrison & Warr 1998; Hillier & Harrison, 1999)

Writing themselves In (1998) a study with 750 same sex attracted young people throughout Australia (Hillier et al, 1999; Dempsey et al 2001).

The Internet as a safe space (2002) – an exploration of the use of the Internet by 206 same sex attracted young people

Secondary students, HIV and sexual health, a national research project with 3,500 secondary students in Australia (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997)

Where it helps throw light on young women's experiences, I will use young men in the same studies as a comparison. Moreover, comparisons with heterosexual young women will also be used to this end.

What do we know about SSA young women?

We now have strong evidence that, at any one time, around 10% of young women in Australia are not unequivocally heterosexual (Hillier et al, 1996; Lindsay et al, 1997).

Through the *Writing Themselves In* project we have learned about the stark realities of the daily lives of same sex attracted young men and women, including the abuse and discrimination they endure, their feelings of sexual attraction, sexual identity, sexual behaviour, drug use, support, and information sources (Hillier et al 1999). In many areas eg physical abuse and discrimination there were no differences based on gender. Regarding information about gay and lesbian safe sex and relationships, less than one in five were able to access gay-related information and one in 10, lesbian-related information from school and family though this was not significant. There were however a number of significant differences in young men and women's experiences, first in their sexual orientation, second in the amount of verbal abuse they suffered and third, in their drug use. These differences have been described in detail elsewhere (Dempsey et al 2001) and will be summarised here.

Sexual Attraction, sexual identity and sexual behaviour

Sexual orientation was measured in three ways: sexual attraction, sexual identity and gender of sexual partner. Gender differences in these items showed that the young women were more likely to be attracted to both sexes, identify as bisexual and to have sex with both sexes or the opposite sex only. In contrast, the young men were more likely to be attracted to the same sex, identify as gay and to be having sex with men only. Young women were also less likely to have acted on their same sex desires than were young men (Dempsey et al 2001; Hillier et al, 1998). This data paints a picture of the young women as being less sure or more fluid regarding their sexuality.

Another piece of information from *Writing Themselves In* which adds to our understanding of the sexual lives of same sex attracted young women is that these young women were more sexually active than their heterosexual peers. Three-quarters of these young women had had sex (63% of 14-18 yr olds) compared with around half of year 12 students in Australian secondary schools (Lindsay et al, 1997). Moreover, in Lindsay et al's national research project same sex attracted young women were four times more likely to report having had an STD than their heterosexual peers (8% vs 1-

2%). This result is unexpected if one adheres to the assumption of lesbian immunity from STIs presented earlier. It would seem that the key to this paradox is in the need to differentiate between sexual identity and sexual practice and sexual attraction and sexual practice. We cannot assume from a young woman's same sex attraction that she will not have sex with men, nor can we assume this from a lesbian identity.

Verbal abuse and drug use

The two final gender differences in *Writing Themselves In* were in relation to verbal abuse and drug use. Boys were more likely to suffer homophobic verbal abuse than were girls (52% vs 39%) and finally, the levels of 'ever having injected drugs' for this group were higher than for their heterosexual peers (11% in *Writing Themselves In* vs 1% in Lindsay et al), with young women more likely than young men to have ever injected drugs (15% vs 7%) (Hillier et al, 1998).

It is possible to explain these gendered findings by looking at young people's stories, their comments in the open-ended items in the research and by referring back to Table 1 and the rules of gender behaviour.

Explanation One - Young women who are attracted to their own sex have few socially safe, anonymous outlets to explore those feelings. Young men often talked about discovering beats and using them to explore their sexual feelings and act on their sexual desire. This was the case even in rural areas. Tim who was 20, described his experiences when he was a 14 year old student in a rural town:

My first sexual experience was when I was 14. I went out of town weekly for choir practice and had been warned never to go near the toilets at the park which was close to the railway station where I'd catch my train home. At these toilets I meet an older guy....17-18 I'd guess who gave me a head job. It was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to me... After that I'd go every week to the toilets for sex and within a few months had tried most things sexually...and eventually even started going back to guys places, as long as they promised to drop me off at the station before my train came. (Tim, 20yrs)

Of course, beats are unsafe in many ways and we do not necessarily recommend them, however they do create a space for young men to act on their sexual desires anonymously and this was not available to young women.

Explanation Two – Because there are no equivalent outlets for young women and because the rules of gender dictate that sex should occur within relationships, these

young women very often desired and ‘fell for’ their girlfriends. Unfortunately for them, acting on this sexual desire was extremely risky as Carlie discovered:

I first knew I was attracted to the same sex when my first ever sexual encounter was with my best female friend. Since then I have had sex with both sexes but I did not ADMIT it to myself until I fell for a girl at my school. She subsequently found out and ridiculed me for 5 years (Carlie 18 yrs).

Carlie paid a high price for acting on her sexual desire with five years of ridicule. Young women knowing that their feelings are transgressive and that the object of their sexual desire is a risky proposition, would often use alcohol to give them the confidence to act. Sharon who was 15 was contemplated this strategy:

I’ve never had sex with or even kissed a girl. I think it’s necessary that I do. It will either make or break me. I’ll either think “ewe, gross” and go straight, or “mmm,yummy” and decide I’m fully gay.. who knows. I’m now in love...or **really** like another girl who I have met recently and am good friends with. She’s shown no sign of being gay/bi, but knows that I am, and has not discriminated me because of that. I was going to do the “usual” thing, where you get drunk at a party and kiss her.. but, what do you know, she doesn’t drink. What can you do? Telling her of my feelings when sober, could indefinitely ruin our friendship, and I’m not sure if that’s something I’m prepared to do. (Sharon, 15 yrs)

Explanation Three - We know that boys suffer more overt verbal abuse and this can be a very negative influence in their lives. It does, however, also give them feedback on the possibilities for their sexual lives. Boys are verbally abused for not adhering to traditional masculine pursuits such as sport, and for involvement in less masculine activities such as the reading and the arts. Girls are allowed to be tomboys. Jody, who was 20, described her experiences:

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 of Neighbours. 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. The next day I took all my posters down and cried as I stared at the blank walls. (Jody, 19 yrs)

Families and communities wait for girls to grow out of being a tomboy - but they panic and act against a boy who is a sissy. This is in line with the finding that verbal taunts are more likely to be directed at boys. It is not until girls exclude the opposite sex

sexually that they are punished with name-calling. It may be also that homophobia takes a different form with girls because different things are important to them.

Explanation Four - the rules of gender behaviour tell us that girls can be passive, do virtually nothing and still be regarded as heterosexual. Many young women in the study described just going along rather than actively seeking out opposite sex partners:

Well I certainly didn't grow up "knowing" - life certainly would be easier if I had (maybe that's because I went to an all girls school so there were no guys around to notice a lack of interest on my part). I dated a few guys because I felt that, that was what was expected. I never picked the guys (I figured I wasn't interested in guys because i was 'sexually immature ' but I think at 21 that doesn't wash anymore) the guys always picked me and I just went along with it. (Liz 21 yrs).

Unlike girls, boys have to act out their heterosexuality, and this can present problems when there is no desire. However it can also be an advantage in feeling comfortable with actively seeking same sex partners. For girls, the passive default is heterosexuality and they have to learn the difficult task of taking an active role if they want to act on their same sex desire.

In summary, same sex attracted young women are experiencing their sexuality in very different ways to same sex attracted young men and we would argue that this is the result of the different positions that are available to them as females and as same sex desiring subjects. These young women's sexual health and well-being cannot be explained under the umbrella of male sexuality. They are not tucked away safely, screened from danger by female passivity and lack of dangerous equipment. They are sexually active, they are very frustrated, they are using drugs and they have real sexual and other health issues. What is happening for them needs to be addressed on its own terms.

Possibilities for same sex attracted young women – safe spaces

I want to turn now to the notion of safe spaces and possibilities for same sex attracted young women. While we all want to see a community in which sexual diversity is embraced and young people are supported in having their needs met, this dream is still a long way away from fruition. In the mean time, young people are finding spaces in which they are free to perform their same sex attraction without fear of shame and punishment and where their needs for information and support are met.

Despite living in hostile environments and despite their alienation and frustration, 60% of young women in *Writing Themselves In* said that they felt 'great' or 'pretty good' about their sexuality. Part of the reason for this may be the discovery and use of safe spaces.

According to Fine and Bertram '...young people are finding unsuspected places within their geographical locations, and their spiritual lives to sculpt real and imaginary spaces for peace, solace, communion, personal and identity work [and sex?]....These new homes are not just a set of spatial arrangements but theoretical, analytical and spatial displacements, a crack a fissure in an organisation' (1999 p 158).

A recent research project aimed to explore the Internet as a safe space for same sex attracted young men and women. Of interest here were the possibilities of the Internet as a 'spatial displacement' where the negative subject positions available in real life are turned upside down, a safe space where young women can forge positive sexual identities, find information and support and other young women with whom they might form relationships for support and intimacy.

There were 52 same sex attracted young women (154 young men) in this project. They filled out a qualitative/quantitative survey about Internet use, its importance, its dangers and strategies for safety, disclosure, support, information and meeting people off the net.

We can see from Table 2 that young women were less likely to be involved in sexuality related activities on the Net as young men, and we found from their stories that they tended to be far more concerned about the inherent dangers of the Net. However, within this there was a group of young women for whom the Internet provided a safe space which changed their lives.

Insert Table 2 here

We know from *Writing Themselves In* that young women have difficulty developing networks and finding information, support and same sex partners. We learned from these women's stories that the Internet helped make other same sex attracted young women visible, it increased networks and support and in over half of the cases led to

meetings in real life. Although the young women were cautious about these meetings and put in much time and preparation into them, many young women eg Jemma and Kaz established long term friendships:

We met in a public place. I had a friend with me. Me and the woman from the Internet hit it off immediately. One year later we are still friends.... [The Internet] has strengthened my resolve and made me proactive (Jemma 15 yrs)

She flew from Melbourne to Sydney and no my feelings haven't changed. We get along well and plan to meet again. The Internet has helped me to find people with the same interests as me. (Kaz 21 yrs)

Young women also found romance, love and sex through the Internet

[The meeting was] better than imaginable, confirmed feelings of love. Best thing that ever happened....[The Internet has] been a great help. I wouldn't have had the courage to come out if I hadn't met people online with the same experiences and sexual orientation.(Eva 21 yrs)

She was legendary! Not like she came across through the net. She was much more down to earth and that was fab. We ate mangoes and she talked about.....[The Internet] has given me more avenues to explore it [same sex desire] (Em 17 yrs)

I actually met my first girlfriend via the net. I'd accidentally clicked "reply all" on a long chain letter, and days after I received an email from this girl. After general chit blah blah blah for a few weeks we discovered we were at the same school, met up, built a friendship and things developed from there. I guess without the net I would never have met her. (Liz, 15 yrs)

We met, I met some of her friends and we instantly clicked , after one month of getting to know her and her friends we are now in a relationship together. We have been together for three and a half months now. I thank the internet with all my heart. (Cassy, 16 yrs)

There was also evidence that the Internet was being used to enrich young women's sex lives

I have been trying to find out the best ways for my partner and I to have a fulfilling sex life by adding variety and using the things I have read about on the net (Tina, 19 yrs)

The numbers of young women in the Internet project were small, but their stories do give us a picture of the possibilities of the Internet as a space in which they can forge positive sexual identities, find information and support and other young women with whom they might have intimate relationships. Moreover, there was evidence that these young women felt good about their sexuality, something that comes with having identity affirmed and supported. The Internet is not a geographical space and it has been until now free of the surveillance which in the real world creates invisibility, hostility

and frustration for this group. The Federal government in Australia has recently passed legislation to restrict young people's access to the Internet. It would be a shame for them to lose this space when they are only just beginning to take advantage of it.

References

- Donald, M., Lucke, J., Dunne, M. & Raphael, B. (1995). Gender differences associated with young people's emotional reactions to sexual intercourse. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 24(4), 453-464.
- Hillier, L., Dempsey, D., Harrison, L., Beale, L., Matthews, L. & Rosenthal, D. (1998) *Writing themselves in: A national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same sex attracted young people*. National Centre in HIV Social Research, La Trobe University, Carlton
- Hillier, L., Harrison, L. & Bowditch, K. (1999) "Neverending love" and "blowing your load": The many meanings of sex to rural youth. *Sexualities: Studies in Culture and Society*. 2(1), 69 - 88.
- Hillier, L., Harrison, L. & Warr, D. (1998) "When you carry a condom all the boys think you want it": Negotiating competing discourses about safe sex. *The Journal of Adolescence*. 21, 15-29.
- Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Scott, S., Sharpe, S. & Thomson, R. (1992). Pressure, resistance, empowerment: Young women and the negotiation of safer sex. In P. Aggleton, P. Davies & G. Hart, (eds) *AIDS: Rights, Risk and Reason*. London: Falmer Press.
- Hollway, W. (1995). Feminist discourses and women's heterosexual desire, in Wilkinson, S. & Kitzinger, C. (eds), *Feminism and Discourse*, London: Sage Publications.
- Lees, S. (1993) *Sugar and spice: Sexuality and adolescent girls*. London: Penguin.
- Lindsay, J., Smith, A. M. A. & Rosenthal, D. (1997). *Secondary students, HIV/AIDS and sexual health*. Carlton, Australia: Centre for the Study of Sexually Transmissible Diseases, La Trobe University.
- Richardson, D. (Ed) (1996). Heterosexuality and masculinity *Theorising Heterosexuality*, Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Robinson, R. (1996). Heterosexuality and masculinity: Theorising male power or the male wounded psyche? In D. Richardson, (Ed) *Theorising Heterosexuality*, Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Wyn, J. (1991) Safe from attention: Young women, STDs and health policy. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 31. 94-107.

Table 1. The gendered nature of sex and relationships

GIRLS	BOYS
Passive in sex related behaviours	Active in sex related behaviours
Sex as a means to a relationship	Sex as an end in itself
Sexually inexperienced	Sexually experienced
Controls her sexual feelings	No control of sexual feelings
Responsible for safe sex & contraception	Not responsible
Sets limits on sex	Breaks through limits
Does NOT initiate (or plan for) sex	Intitiates and plans for sex
Much to lose from having sex	Little to lose much to gain

Table 2 Gendered differences in Internet use for sexual/sexuality purposes

	Young women	Young men
Disclosed sexuality on the Net	77%	94%
Used sex chat-rooms	58%	83%
Used the Net for cybersex	27%	43%
Downloaded sex materials	48%	80%
Used the Net to meet for sex	10%	43%
Accessed sexuality information	35%	59%
Met people off the Net	51%	83%