

Shifting the discourse about same sex attraction from the 'moral' to the 'safety and rights' arenas: a collaboration between research, the community and those who liaise between them.

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In 1996 and 1997 Australian research established that somewhere between 8% and 11% of young people experience sexual attraction towards people of their own gender. At the same time, various workers with young people were grappling with how to provide for this group of disenfranchised youth who remained on the whole anonymous because of fears for their own safety. Workers who expressed their concerns tended to also become disenfranchised in a moral quagmire. In 1998 a report *Writing Themselves In* described the experiences of same sex attracted young people at home, at school and in the community at large. Their stories described harsh violent and neglectful environments, particularly at school and the negative outcomes of these, including higher drug use, higher rates of STIs, homelessness, depression and suicide.

The research, which framed the issue as a shameful societal neglect of its young, was launched in 1998 and "research retailers" working in a research-into-practice role within the University set out to disseminate the research. Some of this work involved direct marketing of the research through seeking grants to disseminate and utilise the findings on the national stage. Most of the work however involved developing partnerships with workers and using the research collaboratively to open doors. Critical to this process was the shifting of the paradigm within which homosexuality was understood from a conventionally moral one which limited the available and willing players in the field, to the safety and duty of care framework comfortably espoused by most professionals. This paper describes this highly successful strategy in capacity building.

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Social Change Theory

There is no doubt that research has a powerful capacity to contribute to social change despite the relatively modest traditional expectations of academic researchers when it comes to dissemination of results. The provision of research grants and university infrastructure funding is geared around the promulgation of research outcomes to the academy through publication in refereed journals. The research process is seen legitimately to finish with the consignment of the academic journal article to the mail; the research world has been slow to recognise, value and legitimise time put into dissemination beyond the academy (Sobell 1996; Casey 1996). Nevertheless, it is self-evident to say that research outcomes, if they can be made accessible to a broader range of users, have a critical role to play in providing data to inform and facilitate processes of social change at a grass roots level.

It is likely that many researchers see such an outcome as desirable, even if they are not sure how to accomplish it but this desire does not necessarily ensure the interest of the majority of practitioners and policy makers. They are generally out in the field getting on with their work with little regard for, or time to explore, what research has to offer. (Simonato 1991; Lomas et al. 1993). The challenge to both researchers and practitioners is to find ways of working together to meet shared goals and to operationalise research findings to create real change.

There is a growing body of literature which theorises this process, proposing models to describe its facilitation (Lomas 1993; Johnson et al. 1996; Farquhar 1996). Lomas (1993) makes a clear distinction between passive diffusion and active dissemination. The more active process he sees as supplanting the previously held vain hope of researchers that end-stage users of the research will seek out and assess its value before taking it on board. Active dissemination is seen as more relevant in the face of the increasing flood of potentially relevant research in areas relating to social change and to the greater demands for accountability placed on practitioners. Casey (1996) has noted the importance of intermediaries such as educators and professional associations in legitimising the transfer of research into practice. Active dissemination has created what Lomas also sees as a new role in the information market place for

“retailers”: organisations and ad hoc groups that ideally are credible to both producers and consumers and are able to accurately synthesise and disseminate research information (Lomas 1993, p. 442)

Critical to this process is an understanding of the cultural differences which exist between the worlds of research and practice and act as barriers to the cooperative work which is needed for grass roots change. Lomas’ “retailers” may come from either the research or practice area but must have an understanding of these differences and work to close the gap by facilitating accommodations on both sides. They recognise that research is not a static set of findings but can be “marketed” in different ways to both seek the engagement of a wider audience, and enhance the likelihood that practitioners will recognise their own wisdom and experience within the research outcomes. These factors are necessary precursors to using research as a facilitator of social change.

The social context to the Writing Themselves In Research

The research and retailing package that we want to describe today concerns the sexual health and well-being of same sex attracted young people in Australia. We adopted the term 'same sex attracted' for a number of reasons. First, young people tend to experience sexual attractions long before they assign themselves with a sexual identity and so by using attractions as our criterion we were maximising our potential research population. Second, unlike the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian', 'same sex attracted' is more user friendly for organisations and young people. We were, for example, given permission to distribute the rural survey through education departments using a question about attraction where we may not have been able to use the terms gay or lesbian. Third, by using the term 'same sex attraction' we are not foreclosing on young people's sexual futures. Young people who are same sex attracted today may or may not become the gay or lesbian adults of the future.

In this paper we will focus on the impact of the research in Victoria, although it is clear that it has also had an impact on a national scale. The research took place in 1997/98 and the retailing has been an ongoing process since that time. In order to help clarify the changes that have taken place over the time, we will describe some aspects of the socio-political climate of 1997 when this project was conceptualised.

- In 1997, the only research about same sex attraction that was likely to be funded by mainstream organizations was for HIV/AIDS research and for obvious reasons that research focused only on gay men. The 'connection' between homosexuality and disease was etched into the psyche of most Australians.

- In 1996 a campaign to address the problem of suicide in young people in Western Australia ended abruptly when the federal labour government cancelled its funding. The campaign included two posters aimed at same sex attracted young people, of a boy kissing a boy on the cheek and a girl kissing a girl on the cheek. Young people who experienced same sex attraction were encouraged to seek support rather than end their lives. The relevant Minister explained that the funding had been removed because of concerns that the campaign might be seen to be encouraging a certain lifestyle.

- In 1997, it was still legal in many states to discriminate against someone on the basis of their sexual orientation and this mitigated against positive gay or lesbian role model in the school community.

- The Rainbow Sash Movement was in its infancy with the first challenge by one man occurring in 1997 and on Pentecost Sunday in 1998, this was repeated on a larger scale. Sexuality was thought to be a moral issue, and homosexuality an immoral lifestyle choice.

- Same sex attracted young people were largely invisible, especially in schools. They suffered the double jeopardy of invisibility in the curriculum and abuse in the playground. In other words visibility was negative and because of fear of the repercussions young people who were not 'outed' chose to remain anonymous. It was not uncommon for a school administration to insist that there were no SSA students enrolled at their school.

- Those workers in the youth sector who were aware of SSAY issues and tried to bring about change were frustrated and stigmatized. Networks, where they existed, were underground and connections tentative – there were no official networks or organizations for SSAY.

Two Australian research projects in the mid 1990s (funded by the Commonwealth and carried out by researchers at The Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society) provided the rationale and impetus for the SSAY research. These included a study of the sexual health of 1200 young people in small towns in three states (Hillier et al, 1996) and a study of the sexual health of 3500 senior students (Lindsay, Smith and Rosenthal, 1997).

In both these studies a questions about sexual attraction was asked¹. These studies established that somewhere between 8% and 11% of young people are not unequivocally heterosexual. Focus groups with students and interviews with teachers in the rural research revealed high levels of homophobia in these towns raising questions about the wellbeing of this stigmatised group. Same sex attracted young people were over represented in a sample of 850 homeless young people (14%) with sexuality often being the reason that young people left home (Hillier et al 1997). Furthermore the 1997 national survey revealed negative health outcomes for same sex attracted young people including higher levels of drug use and higher reported rates of STIs than the heterosexual students. Though no Australian data concerning suicide and depression in this group were available at the time, research in the US suggested the rates to be many times higher than in their heterosexual peers (Gibson, 1989). We were left with pressing questions about the welfare of these young people in their schools, families and the community. In particular we wanted to document their experiences of homophobia and its impact on their sexual health and well-being.

Challenges of the research

Having decided on the research questions for our next large study and having funding as part of a larger research program, the challenges of our research task became apparent. How could we carry out research with a marginalized group of young people who choose to be unrecognisable for very good reason and once we found them, how could we carry out the research without doing them harm? Our first step was to establish a Reference Group of experts in the youth and sexuality fields to help us work through the challenges of the research.

We knew unintentional disclosure of a young person's same sex attraction was likely to result in social rejection, discrimination and abuse and that coming out needed to happen when a young person was ready. Moreover, in order to make the process as safe and comfortable as possible, participation needed to be as much as possible within their control. Our solution was to advertise the research in magazines and radio to all young people around Australia in the hope that same sex attracted young people would come to us in their own time and place. Young people were given a number of different participation options (the Internet, the post and the telephone) and could choose the one that was the most convenient and/or safest for them. In order to ensure depth to the data, we asked young people to send us their stories about when they first knew about their sexuality, the good times and the bad and their hopes for the future. Another potential for harm to young people participating in this research was the inner turmoil that it could cause. We provided non-gay specific telephone numbers for referral in the advertising and on the surveys. There was the concern that gay-specific referrals might be construed as encouraging a 'certain lifestyle'.

The ethical requirement of parental approval was the next challenge. In normal circumstances, when minors are involved in research, ethics committees dictate that to protect the child, parental consent must be obtained. Given that same sex attracted young people tell no-one at all about their sexuality at first when they are sorting through the issues (this may take several years) and given that they almost never disclose to their parents first (Hillier 2001), the parental consent requirement meant either that there would be no one in the research or that young people would be forced to tell their parents before they were ready. Neither of these outcomes was acceptable to the researchers and so we argued against needing parental consent. Fortunately the La Trobe Human Ethics Committee had the foresight to accept that our arguments were reasonable and we were

able to recruit young people 14 years and over without parental consent. Moreover, with the vulnerability of the group in mind and the risks of disclosure through sending a signed consent, we argued successfully for implied consent in our ethics application believing that by filling out the questionnaire, young people were clearly agreeing to participate.

Findings of the Writing Themselves In Research

Seven hundred and fifty same sex attracted young people, 14-21 years, took part in the research (Hillier et al, 1998). They were from urban and rural areas in every state and territory of Australia and one in five had told no one about their same sex attractions. One third reported having been discriminated against and over 50% verbally and or physically abused because of their sexuality. Most of the abuse occurred at school (70%) at the hand of other students (60%). Eleven percent had injected drugs and this was significantly related to having experienced abuse. Few of these young people received information about gay (10%) or lesbian (5%) safe sex from school or their families and many felt unsafe at school. One in 20 stories described suicide attempts. These results revealed a breach in the duty of care that schools (and the community generally) owed to their students who were same sex attracted.

Using the Community Liaison Model

The Australian Research Centre In Sex, Health and Society in which the research was conducted was, to some extent, unique in its capacity to disseminate research. From its inception it had a full time position designated for a research “retailer” who would undertake research-into-practice projects. This was a role that was not for a researcher but rather drew on the skills of community development, health promotion and adult education. This role also allowed for the establishment and fostering of a culture amongst the researchers themselves who were committed to, and willing to privilege, research dissemination. Applications for research grants generally requested and received additional funds for this process and it was a basic tenet of the work that as much time should be spent on dissemination as had been spent on collecting the data. The mission of the Community Liaison Unit which grew out of the initial “retailer” position has been to ensure that the research carried out at the Centre meets the needs of the communities it serves, and that the research findings are disseminated in the most effective way to those who can use them in formulating better care, education and prevention programs and policies. This dissemination must take place on a number of fronts to ensure that the findings are genuinely accessible and comprehensible to a range of different audiences who might have an interest in them. A primary aim of such a process is to ensure that research participants have access to the findings or, if providing direct access is not possible, they must gain some benefit from the way in which the findings are used.

While academic journal articles remain a high priority at the end of a research project (this research has in fact resulted in 6 such publications), the first product of any research carried out at the Centre is a plain English community report which gives an overview of most of the findings. This report is written in a form that makes findings accessible to the relevant practitioners and is generally widely distributed free of charge. *Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same Sex Attracted Young People* (Hillier et al 1998) was released on 17 November 1998 at a launch “event” by a media personality and was taken away by about 80 local teachers, youth

workers and others on the day. More important than this was the press release which went out that morning.

The marketing of this research was consciously directed towards creating and supporting processes of social change. Decisions about what would be emphasised in the report had already been made with the current difficulties for SSAY in mind. The report concluded with eleven recommendations for change in the areas of school policy and curriculum, appreciation of the diverse nature of same sex attracted youth, particularly in relation to culturally and linguistically diverse young people and those from rural and remote areas, and in expanded options for counselling and supporting them. These recommendations had no official status but represented an explicit “call to action” to practitioners and policy makers responding to the research.

We constructed the press release around these same recommendations with the key focus placed on the lack of safety for same sex attracted young people in schools. The headlines reflected a change in emphasis from morality to concern about the well being of same sex attracted young people in schools. “Schools unsafe places for gay youth” and “Schools with an attitude problem” are indicative of the headlines which featured in newspapers in all states and territories that day and which led to 31 radio broadcast news items as well. On the first week also the website on which the report was available recorded 6000 hits. There was clearly a climate of public interest which exceeded that which we had experienced with other research projects and a readiness to look at the issue in the safety framework.

The use of this particular framework for marketing the findings was somewhat serendipitous and something of a knee jerk response to the particular finding which was most shocking to the researchers. Nevertheless, it was a coup of great significance with long term ramifications. It in fact cut through the climate of moral panic, religious views and fears of “recruitment” putting that debate to one side. Safety for all young people as a basic human right, particularly in school, was something that everyone could respond to irrespective of their personal moral stance. The safety paradigm endowed the cause with respectability; anyone could get behind such a banner without fear of suspicion and criticism. In short it removed seemingly insurmountable blockages to action and cleared the way for social change.

The press release and community report in the early stages of dissemination were supported by a school staffroom poster inviting teachers to think about the safety issues and directing them to the website for the research. The poster was developed to give something positive back to the young people who had participated by seeking to create change at the sites where most of their difficulties were experienced. It depicted a group of young people sitting behind frosted glass. On the poster was a call to action similar to the one used in the press release:

Many teachers say: “I’ve never seen a gay student”
Just because you don’t see them, doesn’t mean they aren’t there
Australian national research shows 9% of young people between 14 and 18 are sexually attracted to the same sex.
Our national survey of same-sex attracted young people found that:
 Over 50% experienced verbal or physical abuse.
 Nearly all of this abuse happened at school
Schools have a responsibility to support ALL young people, regardless of their sexuality
Help them make the journey through adolescence

Don't assume the whole world is heterosexual
Don't allow homophobic bullying
Don't support homophobia by staying silent

The poster was distributed to 2000 schools across Australia in the first few weeks after the research was released and a demand created to print more. At this point the Australian Education Union and the Australian Independent Education Union were approached to pay for the reprint and to be the agents for further distribution. Their willing engagement in this process brought two bigger players behind the movement for change.

Finally, armed with both the poster and the community report, the researchers and research retailers acted as speakers at meetings and conferences and conducted forums and training days to keep the findings out in the public arena. This process allowed for a dialogue between researchers and practitioners and a greater understanding of what further resources were needed to push this work forward.

Creating Change

The research provided a legitimate rallying point for previously disenfranchised youth workers in the field. Within 12 months of its release a path of action was established and this has been repeated many times over the last 6 years resulting in over 20 social support groups in Victoria. Using the research, a worker would raise the issue with his or her organisation which in turn held a public forum at which the research would be presented and action called for. This was usually followed by the successful application for funds for a social support group for same sex attracted youth in the local government area, very often funded by School Focussed Youth Services. As one group facilitator commented *'When the research came my way I suddenly had backup for what I was doing....the research has given credibility that simply wasn't there before'* Other funding became available as well. After a request for the researchers to speak to a Vic Health working group about the research, funding was made available for 12 small community development projects for same sex attracted young people in rural areas.

The final legitimisation of the process for change began to be evident between 2000 and 2002 when major funding to support projects to further the welfare of this group became available. This situation would have been unheard of before the research conferred upon funding proposals the dignity of being scientifically documented, pertaining to rights and safety and being above the charge of moral repugnance. In these years the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing provided ARCSHS major funding for curriculum development and a supporting framework in the area of sexual health, to be based on the research. Information for same sex attracted young people and material to combat homophobia was included in the *Talking Sexual Health* resources which have now been implemented in schools Australia wide. The STEP program was also implemented under the mental health banner to train workers about the mental health issues of same sex attracted young people.

Commonwealth Youth Suicide Prevention grants funded three projects in Victoria relating to the wellbeing of same sex attracted young people, one of which was exclusively devoted to training whole school staff groups to combat homophobia. A similar fund through the Victorian Department of Human Services supported a formal research project to examine how services could better collect data on young people, sexuality and suicide, and two major community development projects. These latter projects, one rural and one urban, worked with same sex attracted youth, schools, health services and local councils

raising awareness, developing resources and providing training at a grass roots level. In addition, several government funding bodies combined to resource a network project to consolidate the work that was happening in schools and develop further resources where gaps were evident. All of these successful funding applications had drawn heavily on the research to provide a rationale for action and would draw on it over again in the face of public criticism.

Also in these years the Victorian government established a Ministerial Advisory Committee on gay and lesbian health which drew on the health aspects of the SSAY research to require that all funding for youth projects through the government meet pre-determined requirements.

Proposed initiatives must be able to demonstrate:

that they are inclusive of the needs of gay, lesbian and transgender young people or those young people experiencing confusion around these issues;

that measures are in place to ensure that issues for of gay, lesbian and transgender young people can be addressed in a confidential, informed and sensitive manner as they arise;

that they do not pathologise issues of same sex attraction or gender identity; but locate the problem in the society around the young people who experience difficulties with these issues;

that they address the issue of appropriate support and/or training in the area for all those involved in the project, whether they be GLBT young people themselves, families, community organisations or health care providers.

These were incorporated in Health and Sexual Diversity: A health and wellbeing action plan for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) Victorians (Department of Human Services 2003) which drew on the original research and made action to carry out the original recommendations as part of official government policy.

The current situation

In 2004, the requests for copies of the research and for speakers to present the research at forums and other meetings continue and new groups are still forming. Two overarching SSAY networks have been established in the eastern, western suburbs of Melbourne. A third network for facilitators and others working with same sex attracted young people all over Victoria meets regularly and has an active email network to share information and ideas and provide support. A large body of resources now exists to facilitate and legitimise the work of the increasing numbers of workers in the field who have the responsibility for the well-being of these young people. These resources include teaching manuals, information booklets, school audits, information cards, parent booklets and posters, stickers and T-shirts for heterosexual young people who want to support their same sex attracted peers. The research has moved on from describing the horrors of homophobia and discrimination and its effects to a focus on young people's active resistance to hostile environments and the creative ways that they subvert and discover spaces that are safe and nurturing for them (Hillier and Harrison, 2004; Hillier, Kurdas and Horsley, 2001). Many groups are involved in activism for change. Research is evaluating the effectiveness of the community development projects to ensure that there is a solid base of research evidence for the change models that are used. The national project Writing Themselves In

has been repeated in 2004 and this time 1700 young people filled out the questionnaire and 500 sent us stories of their lives. The data is not yet ready for analysis but we hope to see a positive change in same sex attracted young people's experiences at school and in the wider community.

While it is impossible to claim that a single research project is responsible for the recent major shift in the social climate around young people and sexuality, it has clearly been a driving force in that change. The importance of facilitating links between researchers and practitioners and working in a genuine partnership cannot be overestimated. Such work is resource intensive and needs to be regarded as core business for all those doing social research. This includes funding bodies accepting resource claims for dissemination as legitimate. It also requires criteria for the provision of government infrastructure funds to be modified to reward such enterprise instead of focussing only on publications in academic journals where valuable research has been lost. The rewards of this ongoing involvement for researchers are enormous. Research can play a significant contribution in bringing about social change only if it is made readily accessible to those best situated to act on it.

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