

‘Neverending love’ and ‘blowing your load’:

The meanings of sex to rural youth

Sexualities 2(1) 69-88

Lynne Hillier, Lyn Harrison & Kate Bowditch

National Centre in HIV Social Research

Centre for the Study of Sexually Transmissible Diseases

La Trobe University

Melbourne

Address for correspondence:

Dr Lynne Hillier

National Centre in HIV Social Research

Centre for the Study of Sexually Transmissible Diseases

La Trobe University

11-13 Lincoln Square South

Carlton South, Victoria 3053

Tel: (03) 92855360

Fax: (03) 92855220 Email l.hillier@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract

This paper reports on qualitative and quantitative research, conducted with senior secondary school students in small rural Australian towns, which explored the meanings of sex and relationships. Through a survey, the researchers identified the many ways in which these young people construct meanings around sex and sexuality and, combined with their beliefs about relationships, what impact these meanings might have on their ability to negotiate safe sexual relationships. Single sex focus discussion groups that explored aspects of developing sexuality within the context of small town culture, were also held in each town. Not surprisingly, the research revealed that young people in rural areas (like many of their urban peers) assumed heterosexuality as the norm, and penis-vagina sexual intercourse as the pivotal activity in sex. Beyond this, (though there was overlap), the young men and women tended to attach different meanings to sex around issues such as, its place in a relationship, the pleasure it affords, the pleasure it provides and the dangers it presents. There were significant gender differences also in the perceived advantages and disadvantages of relationships with the expectation to have sex being seen as a deterrent for young women and an advantage for young men. We examine the common meanings of sex and the gender differences in meaning for the ways in which they might impact on young people's ability and motivation to practise safe sex, in particular ways in which gender and power impact on sexual encounters. Finally, the paper focuses on the role that sexuality education might play in helping young people critique their own understandings about sex.

ADOLESCENCE SEXUAL HEALTH RURAL LIFE HIV/STDS GENDER

Introduction

This study, which was conducted in small Australian towns, explored the meanings of sex and relationships to rural youth. Not surprisingly, our research revealed that young people in rural areas (like many of their urban counterparts) assume heterosexuality as the norm and 'in a thousand different ways' work to maintain hierarchical gender boundaries which have profound implications for safe sex practices (Epstein, 1994).

The widespread belief that adolescence is a time when young people's sexual experimentation may increase their vulnerability to HIV infection has led to the advent of health promotion campaigns aimed at providing them with accurate information about the spread of the virus. Teachers have incorporated safe sex information into sexual health education in schools all over Australia with the aim of making young people aware of modes of transmission of STDs and to give them the information they need to make their sexual encounters safe (eg in Victoria, Harrison & Hay, 1997). It has become clear however, that giving young people information alone, is not enough to ensure that they engage in safe sex behaviours. Sexual behaviour is governed by numerous contradictory pressures, many of which cannot be described in terms of rational decision making. Very often, campaigns aimed at adolescents are particularly problematic because they assume that safe sex is a choice made by autonomous individuals.

As well as the assumption of autonomy, safe sex education in schools often rests on the notion that heterosexual encounters are being played out on a level playing field with young men and women occupying seamless positions of equal power with equal access to resources. Dominant constructions of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality, however, situate young men and young women differently, so that their experiences of sex and sexuality are always gendered. As a result these young men and women's 'expectations of [heterosexuality] and the power and privilege that accompany it, are experienced differently' (Robinson, 1996, p.120). The very different expectations and pressures they face from their communities and families are likely to influence the ways

that they see themselves as sexual beings and may affect the choreography of their sexual encounters, including whether they carry them out safely. As much as they may want it to happen naturally for them, many young women and young men have great difficulty conforming to heterosexual prescriptions. This can create tensions for them as they try to fit in. According to Mac An Ghaill 'heterosexuality is not unproblematic for students who are grappling with how to negotiate relationships and what kind of men or women they want to be, as well as confronting doubts about heterosexuality' (1996b, p.193).

Young women are often disadvantaged by being situated within dominant constructions of feminine sexuality and this disadvantage can take many forms but one is compromised sexual safety. According to Holland *et al* (1992) young women who want to ensure their own sexual safety 'have to be socially assertive and prepared to challenge, to some extent at least, the conventions of femininity' (p.142). However, resisting traditional notions of the good feminine can take a toll. In their recent research, Donald *et al* (1995) found that young men and young women had very different emotional reactions to sexual intercourse. The young women in their sample had more negative feelings after sex than did the young men, in particular, when their behaviour sat outside what they perceived to be the confines of the acceptable feminine. Young women reported feeling much happier after sexual intercourse if the sexual encounter occurred within the context of a steady relationship, if there was no alcohol involved and if they thought their peers were also sexually active. Young women were clearly walking a fine line between acceptable sex and unacceptable sex, and the delineation seemed in part to be due to contextual factors rather than the sexual act *per se*.

Holland *et al* argue that dominant femininities are characterised by the 'relinquishment of control in the face of love' (1992, p.278). It is expected that good girls should be naive where sexual matters are concerned. This naivety may not sit well with the assertiveness, the planning and the sexual knowledge they need to ensure that their sexual encounters are safe. It may not be surprising therefore to find that though adolescent condom-use has

increased over the last 10 years, many adolescents, particularly young women, are still having unsafe sex (Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1977). The condom is a male tool and, as might be expected, it is males who have the most say over whether they wear a condom. For a young woman the use of a condom or the practice of non-penetrative forms of sex may depend, not just on her awareness of the need for protection, but also on her ability to negotiate within the confines of prevailing norms about the meanings and motivations for sex.

Dominant modes of heterosexuality may not be totally satisfactory for many young men either, who suffer pressure to confine their behaviour to very narrow definitions of manhood. Holland *et al* have conducted extensive interviews with young men around sexual matters. They maintain that 'An idealised conception of the 'real man' pressures young men to differentiate themselves from gay men, women and failed men' (1994, p.123). There are potentially many ways to be masculine, however, conceptions of the 'the real man' are often reduced to that which describes the strong, aggressive, sporting, unemotional, sexually knowledgeable, active heterosexual male while at the same time proscribing behaviours that embrace the intellectual, artistic, weak, emotional, passive, cautious or homosexual male. Schools are one major site where these divisions are actively produced through the organisational structure of schooling and in the formal and informal curriculum. As Mac an Ghail has noted, '...schools do not merely reflect the dominant sexual ideology of the wider society but actively produce gender and heterosexual divisions' (1996a, p.195). Young men who are attracted to other young men must constantly monitor their own behaviour and live with the fear of exposure. Heterosexual young men also police the boundaries of acceptable (hetero)sexual behaviours with derogatory insults about 'poofers, sissies and girls' (Van De Ven, 1996).

The ramifications for safe sex that these dominant perceptions of masculinity and femininity produce are likely to be profound. The 'real man' knows about sexual matters

whereas the 'real woman' must not. The real man takes charge of the sexual encounter but the real woman must not. As a consequence the responsibility for safe sex is likely to be left in the hands of young men who perceive fewer risks in having sex and who may have less motivation to practise it (Hillier, Harrison and Warr, 1998).

Of particular interest in this paper, are the ways in which a rural lifestyle might exacerbate and complicate the more general obstacles to sexual safety faced by young people. It is surprising that we find little in the sexuality literature that explores this conjunction. Rural youth were labelled a forgotten group in a review of research on young people, sexuality and HIV several years ago (Rosenthal & Reichler, 1994).

One of the most pervasive characteristics of life in a small town is the public nature of the lives of the population. While young people in large urban centres are supervised by their parents and to a degree by their teachers and friends, this surveillance is limited by the anonymity of the city. In contrast, those who are born in a town where the population is small and generations of families have lived in the same area, will be known to most of the townsfolk through the church community, service providers, health professionals (hospital, community health and medical centres), local businesses and sporting and social organisations. Where the population is a stable one, surveillance of young women's activities, in particular, is likely to be far greater than in the city where the range and number of services and sheer size of the urban area are likely to mitigate against such public knowledge.

The remoteness, which often accompanies rural living, together with the need for a critical population mass to make health and other services viable, mean that the availability of sexual health counselling and medical and other support can be restricted or unavailable in some cases. Even where support services are available in the town, the ability to access them anonymously is likely to be compromised. Many small towns have only one chemist and one supermarket for filling prescriptions or buying condoms.

Having the people in town know that they are buying condoms or accessing sexual health services can create difficulties for the rural young people who depend on the good-will of the community for their well-being. These factors are likely to affect the ways that young people live out their sexual and romantic lives and the choices that they perceive are available to them.

Some notes on method

The data used for this paper were part of a wider study on rural young people and sexual health in towns with populations under 10,000 (not subject to an annual influx of tourists or seasonal workers)¹. We report on open-ended answers to a questionnaire item in which we asked ‘What does sex mean to you?’ as well as a checklist of nineteen items on why these young people might or might not want a boyfriend or girlfriend. We report data about sexual attraction and sexual behaviours in this paper as well as data drawn from transcripts of fourteen single-sex focus groups with the year 10 and 11 students in each of the towns visited.

The mode of data collection had a strong influence on the types of information elicited in this study and we need to be explicit about what these data can and cannot tell us about the meanings of sex to these young people. As is the case with all quantitative methods the survey data gave us a broad general picture of students’ knowledge, attitudes and reported practices and provided a good starting point for exploring the nuances of their responses using qualitative methods. The qualitative open ended responses on the survey item elicited privately, produced quite different discourses from those which emerged in more public focus discussion groups. Had we included one-to-one interviews in this research they may have produced different responses again. For example, there was a

¹ Data were collected through a comprehensive sexual health survey of secondary school students (n = 1168) in years 8 and 10 (year 9 and 11 in Queensland) in eight small rural communities in Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania. We have drawn the data for this paper from senior students only, 203 [40%] young men, 308 [60%] young women (n=511). The students were an average age of 15.8 years with ages ranging from 15 to 19. Ninety-seven per cent were born in Australia with English being the main language spoken in 99% of homes.

silence around same sex attraction and sexuality in the written ‘meanings of sex’ responses whereas the young people produced a variety of discourses in group discussions, many of which contained violent and discriminatory undertones. Silences around a positive sexuality for women were present in young women’s written ‘meaning of sex’ responses and their discussions.

In contrast, though the talk around being male in discussions was narrow, stereotypical and prescriptive, the written meanings of sex responses revealed many dimensions to the ways that young men thought about sex. These responses indicated that the young men could also be sensitive and romantic. In all, the group discussions seemed to produce a conservative response, and we suspect that though some of the quieter young men in focus groups may actually have been practising different forms of masculinity (other than homosexual), they would not have felt free to articulate this. In a similar way many young women may not have felt able to articulate feelings or behaviours outside the prevailing norms of femininity.

We are aware that our methods privilege gender differences over sexual differences and that one-to-one interviews may have allowed us to explore the latter. The realisation that all data provide only partial understandings however does not mean that we are left with nothing to say. The data in this study reveal strongly normative and conventional versions of heterosexuality among young people in rural Australia and add to existing accounts of how young people understand and represent their sexuality².

Results and Discussion

Sex as heterosexual

One hundred and ninety-four [38%] of these senior students had experienced sexual intercourse; 379 [74%] had experienced sexual touching and 430 (84%) passionate

² We are grateful for comments provided by anonymous reviewers of this paper.

kissing. Seven per cent (38) of these students reported being attracted to their same sex or were unsure.

The majority of young men and young women described sex as a solely heterosexual activity. On only two occasions did they make a concession to alternative sexualities, in both instances by young women. In one response the words male and female were followed by '*or two people*', privileging heterosex while making a concession to gay and lesbian sex. In the other response sexual orientation was not given precedence: '*When two people (doesn't matter what sex)...*' In the remaining responses, heterosex was either written explicitly or assumed implicitly eg. '*having sexual intercourse with your partner*' or '*intercourse fun*', leaving minority sex unacknowledged. Of the 38 students who were not unequivocally heterosexual, most left the '*What does sex mean to you?*' item blank and so we have no qualitative information for comparison. We did find from the focus groups that the young men in particular, and some of the young women, expressed very strong anti-gay sentiments.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY?

B1 Kill them

B2 They need aborting

B3 Stupid

B4 My Dad always told me something about Adam and Eve. He always said God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve.

B1 You're sick. Like in a way how could they do that, you know what I mean

B2 I reckon they're bloody weird

(young men's discussion group, Queensland)

Misson has argued that the two great fears about homosexuals and lesbians are 'violation' and 'contamination'. These fears are that:

the homosexual will not be able to control his or her passions and will attempt to use the straight person sexually, or that she or he will, vampire-like, turn the straight person into one of them, recruit them for their team (1996, p. 125).

The following comment by a year 11 boy was representative of the general attitudes of the rural young men and, not coincidentally given the dominant cultural meanings around homosexuality, reflects the fears identified by Misson:

I'd shoot myself if someone tried it. Like if I was drunk and some bloke took advantage of me and I found out. I'd kill them

(young men's discussion group,

Queensland)

These negative attitudes were expressed in almost all of the young men's focus groups. The young women commented several times that the young men's main ways of insulting each other were to use names that alluded to effeminacy and homosexuality.

Haywood and Mac an Ghail maintain that 'one of the most oppressive arenas for the production and regulation of identities' is male peer group networks (1996, p. 54). In this arena boundary transgressions designed to maintain differences activate 'techniques of normalisation'. One of these techniques is to 'direct terms of abuse at other males' sexuality' (p. 55). In this sense these young men are practising techniques of normalisation by bringing into play the Us versus Others opposition (Macpherson & Fine, 1995): 'they' are going against God, 'they' are weird or sick, 'they' are predatory, just waiting for a moment of vulnerability or they are victims who do not know any better 'that's probably what they're used to'. As Edley and Wetherell point out 'heterosexual masculinities presuppose an opposition to homosexuality, and...at least in part, they derive their coherence as identities from this opposition' (1996, p. 174).

Bronwyn Davies has argued that increasingly young men 'struggle to achieve themselves as male, only to find that male is no longer a wholly approved category' (1995, p. 3). In the last two decades, social movements (feminism/s, the men's movement, queer politics

) have problematised the traditional 'all action, no feelings' male as being an anathema to men's health and happiness and even their survival. The term 'testosterone poisoning' has been used to encapsulate the ways that young men in particular do terrible damage to themselves in accidents caused by their traditional male behaviours. Because of this, it is becoming increasingly difficult (at least in public spaces) for today's young men to use as 'other', young women and young men who do not fit the ideal of hegemonic masculinity in attempts to shore up their identities as 'real' men. The disruption of dominant masculinities is an important goal. However our work in schools suggests that although at some levels public displays of sexism and heterosexism are discouraged, this othering still remains an important component of young men's identity work.

Though on the surface the young women expressed more liberal attitudes than the young men, the same fears are present in their discussions:

G1 Young women are more open-minded you know. Fine it's up to her as long as she's private, if she didn't try it

G2 If she tried it on us we'd just tell her

(young women's discussion group, Queensland)

Notwithstanding expressed fears, the young women in our study were more likely to demonstrate a level of tolerance towards homosexuality that is consistent with other research findings (Van DeVen, 1996). For example, one girl in a year 11 group challenged the discriminatory attitudes of her peers:

G1 Just disgusting.

G2 Disgusting.

G3 I always thought I'd feel that way but recently I learned that it doesn't make any difference. Who's to say a lesbian is going to jump you. She may not even be attracted to you. And even if she was, the fear of trying it when they know you're not will keep them away. It doesn't matter to me, I have no problem with it at all.

G4 I just think. The thought of a man touching another man or a woman touching another woman, it's just not natural.

(young women's discussion group, Queensland)

Girl 3 here demonstrated what Diane Richardson describes as 'straight tolerance' (1996, p. 15) and in doing so attempts to challenge the dominant construction of homosexuality as incorporating uncontrolled passion ('Who's to say a lesbian is going to jump you. She may not even be attracted to you'). However, girl 4 attempts to reinstate the norm by insisting that homosexuality is 'not natural'.

We also know that in the target schools' sexuality education curricula, there was generally no room for discussion or even acknowledgment of sexualities other than heterosex except in terms of risky practices '...which implicitly links homosexuality and life threatening disease' (Boulden, 1996, p. 183). We can only speculate on the absence of more relevant meanings of sex for the students who were gay, lesbian, or unsure about their sexual orientation. However, one could assume that silence here was a safer option for these students. The exclusive emphasis on heterosexuality by the majority of the students was consistent with the general dominance of heterosexuality and the stigmatisation of gays and lesbians in these rural areas.

Sex as penis/vagina penetrative sex

A second underlying theme in most of the responses was sex as heterosexual penetration. Of the total group of over 500 only two young men and seven young women mentioned activities other than penetration in their meanings of sex. Some examples of these follow:

Sex means having penetration or oral sex to me.

Not necessarily penetration. Playing around: oral sex.

To get involved with someone of the opposite gender intimately with or without intercourse.

In contrast, the majority of answers that included physical descriptions of sexual acts unequivocally pertained to heterosexual intercourse. The following responses were typical of these answers:

Sex means that a guy and a girl have intercourse. The guy sticks his penis in the woman's vagina.

Sex means to have intercourse with a partner. To put your penis in her vagina.

Fifty young women (20%) and 47 young men (25%) gave responses which were the same as those above and for many more, heterosexual intercourse was implicit in their responses. Given that 70% of these young people had experienced passionate kissing and 60% had experienced sexual touching, it was clearly not lack of experience that restricted their definitions of sex to penis-vagina intercourse. According to Wyn, one problem with this single-faceted construction of sex (particularly after the couple has had sexual intercourse together) is that: 'It leaves no room for other forms of sexuality to be explored because they are excluded by definition' (1991 p.103). So normalised was the construction of sex as penis-vagina penetration that many of the students used euphemisms such as 'IT', and 'the real thing' in the belief that these meanings are so entrenched that we would know what they meant - and we did.

Of significance also in these responses were the active verbs used to describe the role of the male (penis) in sex. Verbs such as *inserting, thrusting, going, sticking, penetrating, ejecting and blowing* were used, while at the same time, verbs to describe the female experience were limited to *making love or coming together*. In general, there were no verbs to describe an active female sexuality. This dominant active/passive dichotomy, well documented in feminist literature and euphemistically described by one female student as '*Young men have young women*' (girl 0536) has ramifications for these young people's ability to negotiate safe sexual encounters. According to Lees (1994) the only terms for an active [and knowledgeable] female sexuality are derogatory. This leaves

young women in a no win position because they have to move outside constructions of the good feminine in order to actively ensure that sex is safe. In the same way that labels such as 'poofter' and 'sissy' shape young men's behaviour, terms like 'slut' and 'slag' often prevent young women from actively controlling and enjoying their own sexuality.

The dominant 'meaning of sex' as the penetration of a passive vagina by an active penis is also likely to affect the ways in which these young people experience sexual pleasure. Penis-vagina sex is consistent with reproduction, loss of virginity, the spread of sexually transmissible diseases and the penis as the primary site for male sexual pleasure (Waldby, 1995). Focus group discussions with the young people in this study, and the survey data on relationships (see Table 1 & 2) gave clear evidence that the young women felt ambivalent about sexual intercourse. Young women were far more likely to say that one of the negatives of a relationship was their boyfriend's expectation to have sex. Young men on the other hand were significantly more likely to report one of the good things about a relationship was *'So I can have sex'*. Young women often commented on the difficulties of handling these expectations within their relationships. As one young woman said: *'I don't want someone whos's just going to want to sleep with you, have sex all the time, do what they want to do'*. Wyn has argued that because heterosexual women are often positioned as the objects of desire in relation to the male sex drive, they are not in a strong position in which to negotiate. Rather the only options open to women are consent or refusal to a predetermined action (Wyn, 1991). These are not active options.

The reproductive function of heterosexual sex was one of the reasons for the young women's ambivalence about it. Indeed, fears of becoming pregnant were mentioned more often in focus group discussions than were their fears of contracting STDs. One group of year 11 young women expressed their concerns about having the sole responsibility for contraception and the possibility of an unintended pregnancy foisted upon them:

GI We've got more to worry about like pregnancy and stuff like that. You've got things to worry about.

G2 *So the young men have nothing to worry about. They don't care what happens to you.*

G3 *You get the odd one that does but they are rare.*

(Young women's discussion group, Queensland)

Wight (1992) has argued that, since the advent of the contraceptive pill, women are constructed as the decision-makers in the use of contraception and that the widespread availability of the pill has taken away a woman's right to refuse sexual intercourse on the grounds of contraception. Related to this, Macpherson and Fine (1995) argued that what is missing within normative heterosexuality is a discourse of male accountability. Comments from a group of year 11 young men in relation to pregnancy serve to illustrate these points:

B1 *It's going to be her problem. It's not going to be the male's problem as much.*

B2 *If they don't want to get pregnant they should stop.*

B1 *They're the ones who should like prevent it.*

B3 *I reckon they're [young women] more worried about getting pregnant than STDs at the moment.*

(Young men' discussion group, Queensland)

Constructing pregnancy as the main risk in heterosexual and successful contraception as the young women's responsibility lets young men off the hook. At the same time it leaves no room for young women to express any doubts they may have about engaging in heterosexual intercourse in the first place.

Young People and relationships

Young people generally agreed with statements about wanting a boy/girlfriend on the survey. The reasons they gave were to have someone to trust, to feel secure and loved, to have someone to give them hugs and because it was a way to gain a best friend. They generally disagreed that they wanted a boy/girlfriend for appearances or because

everyone else has one. T-tests on the items about the positives of being in a relationship (see Table 1) revealed a number of significant gender differences³ with boys being more likely to want a girlfriend so they could have someone to hang out with, so they could have sex and because they wanted to be seen to have a girlfriend. Few people strongly agreed with any of the statements about not wanting a boy/girlfriend and largely disagreed with items about sexual attraction and parents not liking it (see Table 2).

PLACE TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

Young Women's Pleasure, Relationships and Love

The young women in the sample were less likely to want a boyfriend because boys expect sex, it would affect schoolwork and career, their parents would not like it, they can be better friends with other friends and because they felt they were not ready for a relationship. Young women were more than twice as likely to describe sex and its pleasures within the context of love and a relationship (92 young women, 34 young men). It was clear that many young women (and a smaller number of young men) subscribed to the belief that they should not have sex without love or outside a relationship/marriage. Many of the young women thought of sex as very special (a word used often) which served as a means of fostering a closer relationship. The 'meaning of sex' responses below were typical of that given by the young women;

It is something special that goes on between people in a relationship who have been going out for at least two months.

It's the next step in a steady relationship. It means you love the person heaps and heaps and you want to share something special with them.

Penetration. A penis entering the vagina. It means commitment, love. A true love, an undying love, a never ending love!.

³ Alpha was set at .001 because of the large number of T-tests performed.

and in far fewer cases, the young men in the study;

Sex means to me that you feel special about someone.

It means that you are committed to your partner.

Sharing your soul with your partner.

Wight maintains that penetrative intercourse has 'symbolic significance' (1992, p. 16) as it is taken as a sign of a serious relationship. This symbolic significance is gendered in that young women are much more likely to attribute this meaning to sex than are young men. Young women were more likely to think of sex as a way of maintaining, keeping and developing a relationship, rather than something to be experienced for its own sake. From the quantitative data on boy/girlfriends, young women were more likely to want a relationship because it made them feel special, secure, loved and they could often have hugs. Sex was not the main part of the relationship, rather, one had sex to maintain the relationship. As one year 11 girl explained:

When you love someone you are going to sleep with them but there are other things you can do if you love someone you know. Like with them if you love someone it's just all sex

(Young women' discussion group, Tasmania)

Young women's pleasure was also couched in terms of a relationship:

An experience with someone you love or care about deeply, and pleasure.

Sex is part of my boyfriend and I's relationship. We have been going together for two and a half years. Sex is fun and enjoyable. I also feel loved while having sex with my partner.

In this sense the pleasure these young women derived from 'sex' was not so much in the physical act itself but in the whole context of relating to their partners - feelings of

closeness, nurturance, belonging and being cared about. For young women, sex for physical pleasure alone was a missing part of this equation.

•Young women's identity work appears to be intimately related to their desirability and to their ability to maintain relationships. Young men appear to have more diverse options available to them for affirming their identity (Lees, 1994). Certainly traditional constructions of heterosexuality have supported the notion that relationships and love are far more important to women than men. This is exemplified in Byron's famous lines: *'Man's love is of man's life a thing apart, 'Tis woman's whole existence'* and the words of the French enlightenment poet Diderot: *'To men, love is an incident; to women a vocation'* (Celibate's Apology). This means that there is a lot of pressure on young women to get it right in order to experience a positive affirmation of their identity.

Where young men and women place differential importance on love, sex and relationships, their ability to control the nature of a sexual encounter and negotiate its safety are also likely to differ. Elsewhere, we report on these young women's perceptions of sexual intercourse as a risky activity (Hillier, Harrison & Warr, 1998). Given this, their idealisation of sex, love and relationships, and the dominant 'meaning of sex' as penis-vagina penetration, it may not be surprising that they reported little physical pleasure in their 'meanings of sex' responses. When orgasm is used as a measure of sexual pleasure, penetrative heterosex privileges male over female orgasm. If general perceived riskiness is used as a measure of these young people's ability to enjoy sex, then sexual intercourse favours male over female well-being. Sex was rarely described as an embodied activity in the girl's responses and sexual pleasure did not refer to their own orgasm and rarely to their own physical pleasure.

The small number of young women who did give descriptions of physical pleasure in their responses, generally used male terms such as *'Having a good jab'* or *'Having a good shag with someone you like'* or describing male pleasure for example: *'When a male*

inserts his penis into a vagina and enjoys the thrills'. On rare occasions girls mentioned sexual pleasure for its own sake. In the example below, the student knew that she was transgressing the boundaries of the good feminine when she wrote: *'This will sound really bad but it is fun and I enjoy it'*. There were no 'meanings of sex' responses written by young women which described their bodies or their genitals as a site of sexual pleasure, instead, love and relationships were, more often than not, given as the reasons for having sex.

Young men's pleasure

Almost 60% of the young men (and young women) in this study had not experienced sexual intercourse and their responses, therefore, should be seen as emanating not so much from their own sexual experiences as from shared cultural meanings. However, with that said, the power of these words and meanings to shape their future experiences should not be underestimated.

According to Holland *et al*, '[m]ale fantasy and bravado expressed in performance stories help to define and reproduce the male model of sexuality to which young men are expected to aspire' (1994, p. 130). Given the relative absence of perceived risk and the dominant construction of sex as that which affords male pleasure, it is not surprising that many young men revelled in the pleasures of sex and were far more likely to describe sex as a positive activity in and of itself. Unlike many of the young women, their descriptions of pleasure, not unsurprisingly, were directly related to penetrative sex.

Rooting. (Blowing everywhere). A good heady and a good growl.

Ram pleasure.

To insert my beef banana into a juicy snatch.

Injecting your penis into her vagina until you blow your load.

Putting penis in vagina. Moving and blowing.

Not all young men described their pleasure in this way although these explanations were recurrent in their responses. None of the young women described sex in this way. These young men's descriptions are 'physical' in the extreme and sex is immediate with little sense of anything outside the act itself. The possible future consequences of having penis-vagina sex, for themselves or their sexual partner were far less likely to be mentioned in the focus group sessions or the written responses. In responses like these, the partner was either completely missing, or she was disembodied, reduced to a female sexual part such as a 'juicy snatch' or 'her vagina'. Young women's description of the 'meaning of sex' more often included the partner in the present and in a possible future whereas this was not the case with many of the young men's responses. Despite the fact that equal numbers of each sex were engaging in sexual intercourse, young men were more likely to express wanting sex and perceived that they had little to lose and much to gain from having it. On the other hand the young women, for reasons already explored, generally felt they had much to lose in terms of immediate rewards, and little to gain.

Conclusion

One of the strongest messages from this research is that these rural young women appeared to lack a sense of embodied sexuality. The silence around the body in both the written responses and the discussions indicates a lack of an available language, or permission to use language, to describe the sexual parts of their bodies and, more particularly, the ways that they work. This silence has ramifications for sexual health because in order to practise autonomy and agency in sexual encounters women need to feel connected to their own bodies and have access to a language to express their needs.

Wendy Hollway has lamented the absence in feminist discourses of a positive heterosexual feminist discourse of desire in which reciprocity in relationships is not based on an eroticisation of power. This absence is mirrored in the discourses available to the young women in our study and indicates an absence at a broader cultural level. She argues for:

...a feminist discourse on heterosexuality ...within which the full range of women's experiences can be located; from the experience of disempowerment to the sense of oneself as autonomous sexual agent; from the eroticising of the power difference to the experience of equality and sexual pleasure at the same time (1995, p. 87).

Hollway maintains that it is possible to have an 'emancipatory heterosexual practice' although 'an emancipatory discourse of heterosexual sex does not exist' (p. 100).

Hollway's words remind us to be cautious about making assumptions about a direct correspondence between language and practice.

Holland et al. claim that present day dominant constructions of (hetero) sexuality mitigate against safe sex practices because mores of feminine sexual passivity estrange women from their bodies. We would argue with them that these young women need to connect with their own bodies and be able to express their own desire. Only then will they (we) be able to understand, and respond to, the risks of heterosexual encounters. One way of doing this is to problematise heterosexuality as it stands (Wyn, 1991), in particular, dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity. Finding ways to help young women to see the connections between their lack of a public language of embodiment and their limited agency in a sexual situation which often results in their failure to ensure their own safety would be a start. This lack of a public language of embodiment is of course not only an issue for young women and we have explored elsewhere the many risks health educators face in promoting this stance (Harrison & Hillier, forthcoming). We also have to be careful not to reinstate cultural perceptions of young women as sexually passive and the bearers of sole responsibility for ensuring sexual encounters are safe (Holland *et al*, 1992). Young men often see teaching about contraception and safe sex as irrelevant to their concerns and an ongoing examination of hegemonic masculinity may open up ways to critically examine these perceptions.

A second absence in these young people's meanings of sex was that of a positive gay or lesbian sexual identity. As previously mentioned, ways of talking about homosexuality were either missing, as in the 'meaning of sex' responses, or vilified and demonised as in the focus group discussions, leaving nowhere for gay, bisexual or lesbian youth to situate themselves other than as an absence or as abhorrent. Gay and lesbian issues were not covered in sex education, nor did there appear to be an avenue for safe sex literature or services for these adolescents. We assume that sexual minority youth in these towns either accessed information and services from outside their town or remained uninformed and unserved. Either way, this should be of concern to health educators in rural areas.

A third absence, in young men's public talk around sex at least, was that of a sensitive heterosexual masculinity. One would not expect young men, who have a large investment in creating themselves within the terms of hegemonic masculinity to publicly recognise other forms of masculinity as valid because there is always the risk of public censure through insults and innuendo. Having made this point however, as Holland et al. (1994, p. 144) state:

Whether or not individual young men achieve or resist hegemonic masculinity, or develop sub-cultural styles of masculinity, the social processes which constitute 'becoming a man' shore up the enormous strength of men's sexual domination of women, and do this across men's social differences.

However, in their private responses, these young men did think about sex in ways other than the purely immediate and physical, and part of this included thoughts about love, romance and the future.

This research has highlighted a number of contradictions in the ways that Australian adolescents in rural areas think about sex and the ways that these in turn have an impact on their ability to exercise autonomy to insist on safety in sexual encounters. Young women are constrained by their own ideas of femininity as well as the restrictions placed

on them by their communities. Young men often resist the narrow definition of hegemonic masculine in private, but in public they are self-regulated. There is a role here for educators and health professionals which might centre around critiques of popular culture, and a problematising of narrow, restrictive ways of being masculine and feminine.

References

Boulden, K. (1996) 'Keeping a straight face: Schools, students and homosexuality - Part 2. In L. Laskey & C. Beavis, *Schooling and sexualities: Teaching for a positive sexuality*. Geelong: Deakin Centre for Education and Change, Deakin University, 175-186.

Connell, B. (1985). *Masculinities*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Davies, B. (1995). What about the boys? The parable of the bear and the rabbit. *Interpretations*, 28(2), 1-17.

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.

Edley, N. & Wetherell, M. (1996). Masculinity, power and identity, in Mac an Ghail, M. (Ed) *Understanding Masculinities: Social Relations and Cultural Arenas*, Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Epstein, D. (Ed) (1994). *Challenging lesbian and gay inequalities in education*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Harrison, L. & Hay, M. (1997). *Minimising risk, maximising choice: An evaluation of the pilot phase of the STDs/AIDS prevention education project*, Department of Education, Victoria, 1997. Carlton, Australia: National Centre in HIV Social Research, La Trobe University.

Harrison, L. & Hillier, L. (forthcoming). 'What should be the *subject* of sex education?' *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*.

Haywood, C. & Mac an Ghail, M. (1996). Schooling masculinities. In M. Mac an Ghail, (Ed) *Understanding Masculinities: Social Relations and Cultural Arenas*, Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Hillier, L., Harrison, L. & Warr, D. (1998). 'When you carry condoms all the boys think you want it': Negotiating competing discourses about safe sex. *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.

Holland, J., Ramazanoglu, C., Scott, S., Sharpe, S. & Thomson, R. (1994). Achieving masculine sexuality: Young men's strategies for managing vulnerability. In L. Doyal, J. Naidoo & T. Wilton, (eds) *AIDS: Setting a Feminist Agenda*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Hollway, W. (1995). Feminist discourses and women's heterosexual desire, in Wilkinson, S. & Kitzinger, C. (eds), *Feminism and Discourse*, London: Sage Publications.

Lees, S. (1994) Talking about sex in sex education, *Gender and Education*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 281-292.

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.

Mac an Ghail, M. (1996a). Deconstructing heterosexualities within school arenas, *Curriculum Studies*, 4(2), 191-210.

Mac an Ghail, M. (1996b). (Ed) *Understanding Masculinities: Social Relations and Cultural Arenas*, Buckingham, England: Open University Press.

Macpherson, P. & Fine, M. (1995). Hungry for an us: Adolescent girls and adult women negotiating territories of race, gender, class and difference, *Feminism & Psychology*, 5(2), 181-200.

Misson, R. (1996). 'What's in it for me? Teaching against homophobic discourse', in L.Laskey & C. Beavis, (eds) *Schooling and Sexualities*, Geelong: Deakin Centre for Education and Change, Deakin 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.

Van DeVen, P. (1996). Combating heterosexism in schools: beyond short courses, in L.Laskey & C. Beavis, (eds) *Schooling and Sexualities*, Geelong: Deakin Centre for Education and Change, Deakin University.

Waldby, C. (1995). Destruction: Boundary erotics and the refiguration of the heterosexual male body. In E. Grosz & E. Probyn (eds), *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism*. London: Routledge.

Wight, D. (1992). Impediments to safer heterosexual sex: a review of research with young people. *AIDS Care*, 4(1) 11-23.

Wyn, J. (1991) Safe from attention: Young women, STDs and health policy. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 31. 94-107.

Table 1 Reasons for wanting a boy/girlfriend

Item	t - score	df	total sc	ym	yw
I would have someone to hang out with***	5.74	507	3	3.3	2.7
I would be made to feel special	ns		3.4		
I would have someone I could trust	ns		4		
So I could have sex***	11.02	506	2.6	3.2	2.1
It would stop other guys/girls hassling me	ns				
Everyone else has a boy/girlfriend***	4.71	505	1.6	1.8	1.5
It's nice to have someone give me hugs	ns		3.6		
Your boy/girlfriend can be your best friend	ns		4.3		
It's nice to feel secure and loved	ns		4.3		
It's important to be seen to have a boy/girlfriend***		505	1.8	2.2	1.6
*** P < .0001					
(1 = strongly disagree - 5 = strongly agree)					
(1 = male, 2 = female)					

Table 2 Reasons for NOT wanting a boy/girlfriend

Item	t - score	df	total sc	ym	yw
I am not attracted to boys/girls	ns		1.5		
You don't see much of your other friends	ns		2.5		
Boy/girlfriends expect you to have sex***	-4.4	505	2.1	1.9	2.3
I'm not ready for a relationship***	-3.8	503	2.2	2.1	2.4
I need to concentrate on my schoolwork and career***	-6.6	503	2.7	2.3	3.0
Boy/girlfriends want to control you	ns		2.5		
Can be better friends with other friends***	-4.9	503	2.8	2.5	3.0
My parents wouldn't like it***	-4.1	501	1.8	1.6	1.9
Have to go through the hassle and pain of being dropped	ns		2.8		
*** P < .0001					
(1 = strongly disagree - 5 = strongly agree)					
(1 = male, 2 = female)					