Different youth, different voices

Perspectives from young lesbian wimmin*

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This paper presents and examines issues pertaining to young lesbian wimmin in an Australian setting, with particular emphasis on the 'coming-out' process. Stereotypes as presented by Western culture are examined. Society's honouring of the masculine at the expense of the feminine and the effect this has on young lesbian wimmin, and the development of non-heterosexual adolescents in general, is also discussed. Specific examples of episodes from a research project using memory-work methodology are used to highlight the experience many young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people encounter as they come to terms with their sexuality in a heterosexual culture.

* I have chosen, except where direct quotes are concerned, to use the alternate spelling of women (wimmin) as a means of self empowerment and as a political stance against the patriarchy which we as wimmin face on a daily basis.

I would like to thank my partner, Beth, and my friends and 'family' for their love, support and encouragement.

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> *If we wait until we are not afraid to speak, we will be speaking from our graves.* (Lorde, 1984, p.4)

The way in which lesbianism is portrayed and stereotyped in society impacts upon the way in which lesbians feel about themselves, the occupations they choose and their relationships with and acceptance by their families and friends (Kitzinger, 1989, 1996a, 1996b; Perkins, 1996).

Our western culture has a long history of valuing men and masculine traits over wimmin and feminine traits. Lesbians, in contrast to gay men, have 'been largely ignored by the church, the law, the media and the scientific literature' (Richardson, 1981, p.112). In fact, it has been the popular belief and attitude of science, the church and the law that homosexuality is a permanent characteristic, an immutable quality of the self. It was not until the 1970s that the American Psychological and Psychiatric Associations changed their policies to state that homosexuality was not a mental disorder (Gonsiorek, 1991). Therefore it is not surprising that these misinformed and uneducated images of homosexuality have impacted upon the way in which the rest of society views lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, as well as the way in which these people view themselves. This in turn has fuelled the fire to denigrate and stigmatise anyone who does not identify as heterosexual within our culture despite estimates which state that 50 million Americans are either lesbian or gay or have a homosexual family member (Fassinger, 1993; Patterson, 1995).

I have a vested interest in lesbian issues and basic human rights, especially those concerning young wimmin, because I am a young lesbian wommin. The more I read and search, the more obvious it becomes that little pertinent information is available for young lesbian wimmin at any stage of their development. For instance, one only has to look at the lack of information involving safe sex practices for lesbians and the denial of various government departments world-wide that lesbians are also 'at-risk' within our society of contracting Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) infection (Albury, 1993; Axell, 1994; Gale & Short, 1995; Hanna, 1995; Kelly, 1993; Lampton, 1995; Mac Neil, 1993; Rosen, 1992; Short & Gale, 1995). The struggles young wimmin encounter in dealing with identity issues, their own uncertainties and the reactions of others can lead to them engaging in high risk behaviour. Moreover, wimmin have been expected to fit, or slot into findings from research based on male participants. For instance, drug trials for HIV and AIDS are a relatively recent example of this (Gale & Short, 1995; Hanna, 1995; Mac Neil, 1993; Rosen, 1992). Additionally,

> lesbian-centred research has been neglected compared to research focused on gay men. It is important to acknowledge difference as well as similarities to conduct investigations accordingly.
> (Elliott, 1985, p.71).

Moreover, as Rich (1995) states,

> lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through 'inclusion' as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatised is to erase female reality once again (p.318).

Therefore it is not surprising to discover that much of the literature and research concerning sexual orientation and identity development has been based on, or is biased towards, gay males (Fassinger, 1995; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Schneider, 1989). It is also not surprising that society views lesbianism in terms of pseudo-male, which means that 'lesbian relationships, as well as lesbian sexuality, have been interpreted in terms of traditional assumptions about heterosexual relationships' (Richardson, 1981, p.113), that is, butch and femme (Loulan, 1995).

Unfortunately also, prejudice, discrimination and violence are often a part of everyday life for the gay community in a world which has been built upon a heterosexist belief system (D'Augelli, 1989, 1992; Herek, 1993; Herek & Berrill, 1992; Morgan & Brown, 1989); that is, as Herek (1993) states, 'an ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatises any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship, or community' (p.90). It is in opposition to this heterosexist belief system that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people strive to create their non-heterosexual identities (Brown, 1995; Fassinger, 1993; Patterson, 1995).

The repercussions on one's mental and physical well being have yet to be thoroughly studied (Richardson, 1981; Signorile, 1995). For instance, the psychological strains involved in trying to pass as heterosexual include feelings of denial, loneliness and being untrue to one's lesbian identity (Richardson, 1981). Young lesbians during the 'coming-out' process may experience anxiety and therefore try to conform to societal expectations of heterosexuality. This stress only exacerbates the 'coming-out' process.

So where does all of this leave non-heterosexual youth? Recent studies involving adolescent development have ignored non-heterosexual pathways of development, for example, Nelson (1994). This is significant because issues surrounding homosexuality in adolescence are likely to impact significantly on a young person's growth, self esteem and self worth (Anderson, 1995; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gabhard, 1953; Patterson, 1995; Rotherum-Borus, Rosario, Van Rossem, Reid & Gillis, 1995; Rutter, 1980). Furthermore, many homosexual youth differ from other minority groups because they do not grow up in settings with other people like themselves (Jennings, 1994). Instead they are often the product of heterosexual families who have had minimal positive experience with anyone from the homosexual community. Moreover,

> ... according to Professor James Sears of the University of South Carolina, the average student realises his or her sexual orientation at age thirteen ... gay students rarely feel able to ask their families, friends, school or community to help them out, fearing the possible response they might get. Many of the ... efforts to make things better have taken place in urban centres, far from where many youth live, meaning that progress is yet to be felt in the lives of many gay adolescents. Often feeling completely isolated these gay and lesbian youth still face difficult lives.
> (Jennings, 1994, pp. 262 - 263)

Not only are lesbian and gay youth more at risk from AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, they are also more likely to attempt suicide, experience higher incidents of verbal, physical and substance abuse, and have higher levels of stress than their heterosexual peers (Baumrind, 1995; Deisher, 1989; Hunter, 1995). They are also more susceptible to mental health problems because of victimisation and stigmatisation of identifying as gay or lesbian by family members, friends and society in general (Baumrind, 1995; D'Augelli, 1989, 1992; Hersberger & D'Augelli, 1995; O'Connor, 1995; Patterson, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1995, Unks, 1995).

This is due to a general lack of understanding and acceptance Western society has towards non-heterosexual people, especially young people, in addition to a void of appropriate safe sex information designed specifically for young people. Governments have been, and are still, reluctant to fund or distribute explicit educational materials regarding the transmission of AIDS and safe sex practices regardles of the intended target group (Watney 1988).

The following excerpt is from a speech by a student about her experiences as a young lesbian and highlights many of the points I have raised:

> I, and all of us, are presented with images of gays as degenerate, shameful, and perverted until I accepted them as truth. Not only does society shout at me that I am bad, but an inner voice, internalising these homophobic stereotypes, whispers it as well. I felt that I could only be a real lesbian if I dressed like a man, shaved my head to the scalp, hated men, and liked whips, chains, and little girls. In other words, do things I despised. I couldn't and still can't think of a single positive image of lesbians in our society, so I was forced to rely on negative stereotypes for role models ... this initiated in a downward spiral of self-hate and anger motivated by homophobia. I hated myself for being what seemed to be everyone's worst nightmare, a homosexual. I was angry because no matter what I did I couldn't change that ... for me, my silence equalled the death of my sanity. I'm not telling you this to make you feel sorry for me, the poor, disillusioned lesbian, or to preach at you, but because I want to give you an idea of what it is to be ostracised from society because I don't conform to its standards of normal.
> (Jennings, 1994, p. 271 - 271)

Young lesbian wimmin are faced with the difficult task of living in a patriarchal society which permeates through to the gay and lesbian community. For instance, Kissen (1993) states that the:

> ...majority of those who attend meetings of gay - lesbian support groups are in fact male. Gay teenagers are not immune from the gender role-playing that afflicts their heterosexual peers, and young men in these groups often behave in ways that intimidate and alienate young lesbians (p. 58).

As a consequence, it is important that research projects involving gay and lesbian youth continue, but also that space is established for young lesbian

wimmin in the area of research, as well as culturally and socially.

A MEMORY-WORK STUDY

My own research (Burnett, 1996), using Haug's (1987) memory-work method, confirms many of the findings I have presented here. Essentially, memory work involves the formation of a small group where each member is a co-researcher. That is, each member takes on the active role of researcher and subject by sharing her earliest memory of a particular topic on which the group has previously decided. For instance, the group for this project decided to brainstorm issues they found significant when they were first coming-out. Each member then, in turn, chose one of the topics decided in the brainstorming session to be followed through. As a result, each member's contribution was seen as worthwhile and valuable, each had ownership or a vested interest in the group (Belenky, Clinchy, Golberger, & Tarule, 1986; Crawford & Kippax, 1990; Davies, 1990; Kippax et al, 1988). The memories are written in third person prior to each session (Crawford & Kippax, 1990; Crawford et al, 1992; Kippax et al, 1988). Consequently, inclusions of biographical facts, justifications of actions, or recollection of supposed guilt are less likely to occur because of the third person genre (Crawford et al, 1992; Davies, 1990). After each member has read in turn, the group then attempts to find, collectively, similarities and differences between the memories as well as trying to interpret and theorise the underlying social structures which are inherent in our culture.

To maintain the privacy of the participants, I asked each of them to choose an alternate name to be used in this project. The group consisted of five wimmin, Monte, Zora, Fletcher, Melissa and Poppie. All of the wimmin, including myself, are from white Anglo-Saxon cultures and ranged in age from 19 to 25. Some have always lived in Brisbane, whilst others have come from various parts of the state or interstate. Three of the wimmin no longer live at home with their parents. Two of the wimmin are pursuing second tertiary degrees, at both an undergraduate and postgraduate level, whilst the other three are at various stages of their first tertiary degree. The majority of the group are out to their immediate families and friends. Only two are currently involved in long-term relationships.

FIRST FEELINGS OF DIFFERENCE

During a session about 'First Feelings of Difference', not only were issues of feelings of difference recognised but also isolation, loneliness and an unwritten understanding that these feelings had to be hidden in order to survive. These memories also highlighted the point at which the five individuals involved in this project started to address their own internalised homophobia.

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In each of the written memories for this topic everyone talked about feelings of difference, isolation and being lonely and about not being able, or knowing how, to do anything about it. For instance, Monte wrote, 'it was hard to find a precise time where she didn't feel the same as others around her. She never really fitted in anywhere'. Zora's difference was made obvious from a very early age, not only because of her weight, left-handedness and obsession with drawing naked wimmin, but also because she was taken to various therapists and agencies. She knew that this was not the case for other children at her school, which served to reinforce her feelings of difference. In all of the memories, the participants were reasonably young and in all cases still dependent upon their families for everyday survival and educational needs. Even though the participants could not vocalise their understanding of what was going on in their heads and in their hearts, they knew they had to keep their feelings of difference to themselves; to survive they had to 'pass' as being like everyone else around them. As a result, they learnt how they were supposed to feel and act, putting their own feelings and desires towards the back of their minds in order to survive. Monte wrote,

> It was more difficult in high school. If you were different, your life was difficult. She didn't want this to happen to her so she conformed as much as she could. And she did an excellent job of it.

The self exploration of the language used to describe homosexual people and the connotations that our culture attaches to lesbian and gay youth accompanied many of the experiences about which the participants in this project wrote. The participants found that, even at an early age, they were exploring the relationships between themselves and the 'g' word, and their families' expectations of them.

> I wonder if I'm gay she thought to herself. She played around with the idea in her head for a while. How could she be? How would that fit in with her life, family and all the values she'd been brought up with? If she didn't think about all that stuff then it could be a possibility because she knew she felt different from all her friends, her sister and her family's expectations. She believed, or tried to believe her mother who said that one day she'd meet the 'right' man when she least expected it. At least she could get away with it right now. With not having a boyfriend because what mattered right now was studying and doing well at school. She had to go to uni and get away from this place. She quickly put the idea of being gay or different out of her mind. It was too much for her to deal with right now, she needed to feel safe before she could deal with it. And right now the only way she could be safe was to blend into the environment. To state openly that she felt different, whether just to herself or publicly, wasn't going to help her pass through the system to a safer place. She knew she could come back to it at a safer time'. (Poppie)

FIRST FEELINGS ABOUT COMING-OUT

During another session which focused on 'First Feelings About Coming-Out', we were able to explore the array of mixed feelings we experienced during this time, how we came to terms with and developed our own boundaries, how our identity affected our families and friends and finally how we struggled to find common ground between how we portrayed ourselves and how others actually saw us.

For everyone these memories held a mixture of very powerful feelings and emotions. It was a time of coming to terms with the myriad of unexplained and confusing feelings we had been experiencing. These memories held the awakening of our sense of self, of pure adrenalin and excitement, as well as fear. Monte, Zora, Fletcher and Poppie all wrote about coming to a point in time where they could no longer deny their feelings for other wimmin, that they could not remain silent or in denial about it anymore.

Along with the feelings of excitement in this session came the fear of possible rejection by family and/or friends. There was concern about how we portrayed ourselves to other people and how other people actually saw, thought and accepted us. We also had to develop and refine our boundaries, especially in coming to terms with how public we would be about our sexuality and what kind of effect this would have on family, friends and employment prospects. In her written memory, Fletcher wrote,

> For one and a half years she had not had a decent conversation with her family. Since the discovery of her sexuality and since she had been seeing a woman, conversation had seemed to cease with her normally close family ... she had only just come back from a trip to America where she had fled to because her girlfriend had decided that as a couple they had no choice but to come out and live together. So she had gone to make up her mind before making what seemed like an irreversible step .... she came back sure of her decision this was who she was and if she was going to live a successful happy life she couldn't be closeted to do it. Living in the closet was not only wrecking her relationships with other people but was also extremely limiting to the relationship she was in.

It was also during this session that we discussed events which were the turning points in our lives, that is, we had come to a point in our lives where, both physically and mentally, we knew we had to gather all the courage we possessed and consciously make contact with other people to explore our same sex feelings. For many of us this was the accumulation of many, many years of denial, trying to forget and needing to forge through the impasse.

The process of 'coming-out' takes courage, passion and unshakeable faith and belief in oneself as a person ...

FEELING GUILTY

The session about 'Feeling Guilty' highlighted our concerns about how our sexuality would impact on our families and close friends. This was also the case for some of the other sessions but in this instance the feelings tended to sway more towards how we felt we could not share our true selves and lives with them. It was like a part of ourselves would always be a stranger to them and that ultimately they were losing out but we were somehow being made to feel guilty about it. If they felt bad or were adversely affected by our orientation then we were responsible for it, it was our fault.

> Again she would have to make her parents unhappy by not being able to be just normal and 'fit in' ... she felt bad that now she could not fulfil so many of the expectations society nearly demands of people. Would she end up being a lonely, sad person? ... She felt dishonest and most guilty about the secret thoughts and feelings about herself and women that she'd always tried so hard to hide from people, even if this had meant pretending to be homophobic once or twice. Even before she was able to actually think about herself as not being straight there had always been this kind of 'covering up' of her real feelings inside her head. It must be her fault, she had thought. She just wasn't trying hard enough at the business of being straight. (Zora)

Poppie too wrote and spoke about feelings of guilt and anger. She did not feel she could share her life with her mother as she had done previously. She also felt guilty that she had been unable to defend her gay male friend when her mother had:

> ... lecture[d] the girl about the evils of homosexuality, how it was a cult and they could suck you in. The mother also felt that if the girl associated with people like that then she'd never meet the 'right people', others might also get the wrong impression of her or worse may assume that she was one of them. The girl just lay there overwhelmed by the onslaught of emotions which hit her like a truck driving into a brick wall at high speed.

The anger which accompanied memories like Poppie's seemed to stem from unreasonable requests and expectations which were used in such a way that would emotionally beat us into submission through feelings of guilt.

Everyone, especially those in authority, have the obligation to work towards creating a safer place for lesbian and gay youth in schools, tertiary institutions, work and social settings, and in their homes (Jennings, 1994; Kissen, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1995).

The process of 'coming-out' takes courage, passion and unshakeable faith and belief in oneself as a person who deserves the right to love and live. It is every person's right, whether young or old, to be able to express and explore their sexuality in a safe environment and society. When lesbians and gay men can feel safe both as youth and adults to explore and express their sexuality, hold hands, kiss in public, attend functions, such as school formals and graduation ceremonies, with same sex partners, receive appropriate health care, walk the streets without fear, be able to talk openly about our relationships and sexuality in all aspects of our life and work without fear of reprimand, receive funding for support groups for people coming to terms with their sexuality, then – and only then – will we be able to live, love and work as who we really are – ourselves. □

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