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Background Paper

Young People

Draft Background Paper – Young People
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Coming Out Proud Program
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Coming Out – What’s the big deal?

Many people whose sexual attraction is exclusively to the opposite sex find it difficult to understand the significance for the GLBTI Community of “coming out”. It isn’t an issue for most people in the general community because when others assume that they are heterosexual, that assumption is correct. However, for those of us whose attraction is not to the opposite sex, or not exclusively to the opposite sex, the assumption of heterosexuality is incorrect. Coming out is the process whereby we decide to tell other people that their assumption is incorrect. By coming out, the individual can be honest and open about who they really are, and live in the community with self-respect and dignity.

Coming out is a process that individuals can undertake at any age. Because of the assumptions that other people make and the pressures to conform to the norm, many GLBTI people don’t reject a wholly heterosexual identity until well into adulthood. In many cases men and women have married an opposite-sex partner and have had children before realising that they no longer identify as wholly heterosexual.

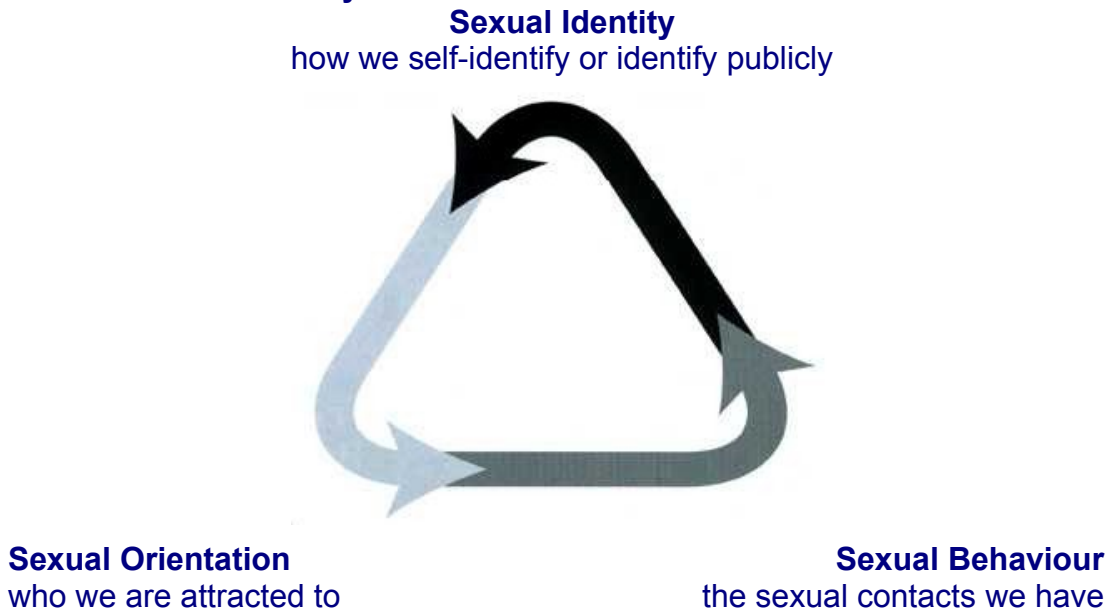
Sexual Identity/Orientation/Behaviour

In the landmark studies, “Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male” (published in 1948) and “Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female” (published in 1953), Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues reported observing a pattern of changes in both sexual identity and behaviour over the lifetimes of participants in the studies. Many of the findings of the studies, which involved 5,300 males and 5,940 females, caused shock and outrage at the time - both because they challenged conventional beliefs about sexuality and because they discussed subjects that had previously been taboo. For instance, it was reported that 46% of males had “reacted” sexually to people of both sexes in the course of their adult lives, and at least 37% had had one homosexual experience.

The Kinsey data and the methodology used to collect it have been subject to criticism. However, the most enduring aspect of the Kinsey reports is that the authors avoided using terms like heterosexual and homosexual to describe individuals. The authors asserted, on the basis of their data, that sexuality is prone to change over time, and that sexual behaviour can be understood both as physical contact as well as purely psychic phenomena (desire, sexual attraction, fantasy). To describe the range of sexual behaviours that their respondents reported, the authors used a seven-point scale of sexual behaviours – a continuum between exclusively heterosexual (0) and exclusively homosexual (6). On the basis of their responses, 11.6% of the white males (aged 20 to 35) were categorised as 3 (equally heterosexual and homosexual) throughout their adult lives, and more than 10% of all males were categorised as 5 or 6 (more or less exclusively homosexual) between the ages of 16 and 55. 7% of single females and 4% of previously-married females aged between 20 and 35 were categorised as 3, and between 2% and 6% of females aged 20 to 35 were categorised as 5 or 6.

Contemporary understanding is that there is an inter-relationship between sexual identity (how we self-identify or identify publicly), sexual orientation (who we're attracted to) and sexual behaviour (who we have sexual contacts with), as shown in the following diagram. An individual is much more likely to experience psychological conflict when there is dissonance between these three aspects of their sexuality.

The Sexual Trichotomy



Same-Sex-Attracted Youth (SSAY)

It must be recognised that, while the coming out process is often difficult for adults, it is usually even more difficult for same-sex-attracted Youth. Identity formation and individuation are major psychological tasks for young people, and those struggling with their sexual identity in a predominantly heterosexual environment can experience a range of negative feelings and psychological effects. Coming out is not a safe option for some young people and it is important that they are supported to come out only when and if they are ready. They may have picked up a lot of homophobic messages from their environment (for example, that they are sick or perverted), and this can result in their having feelings of depression and isolation and a bleak outlook for the future.

It is important to affirm the feelings of a young person about their attractions, even if they are not sure or are confused about their feelings. It's particularly important, if you're the first person that they've talked to about their same-sex attraction, that you give them a positive and non-judgemental response. Responses to be strenuously avoided include:

- How do you know?
- Are you sure?
- It's probably just a phase that you're going through, and you'll probably get over it!

Homophobia in Australia

In July 2005, The Australia Institute published a study entitled "Mapping Homophobia in Australia". The report defines homophobia as referring to the unreasoning fear or hatred of homosexuals and to anti-homosexual beliefs and prejudices. A total of 24,718 people aged 14 or over participated in a self-completion survey for the report.

"While not a phobia in the literal sense, it is a useful term of social description for everyday emotional tension about sexual identity that is widespread among heterosexuals. While not everyone who is homophobic engages in discriminatory behaviour towards gay men and lesbians they are more likely to contribute to a general attitude of intolerance. Thus derogatory and insulting remarks about gay men and lesbians by, for example, prominent radio personalities reinforce intolerance and appear to sanction discriminatory behaviour. The forms of discrimination faced by gay men and lesbians include: denial of access to housing; refusal of health treatment; inconsistent laws regarding the age of consent; lack of official recognition of same sex relationships; and various forms of vilification including violence."

Overall, 35% of the respondents believed that homosexuality is immoral – 43% of males and 27% of females hold this view. Significantly, Tasmania (along with Queensland) was the most homophobic state. The Burnie/Western region of the state was very nearly the most homophobic in Australia, with 50% of respondents believing that homosexuality is immoral. Age is also an important factor – those over 65 were found to be more homophobic than those aged 18 to 24 (53% vs 26%), although those in the 14 to 17 age group, especially boys, are much more inclined to hold anti-gay views (43% of males and 23% of females). The report observes that "it would seem that high school is a particularly toxic environment promoting anti-gay beliefs, but that for many these dissipate once they leave school". The report also noted that homophobia declines as individuals attain higher educational levels, although even among tertiary-educated people it is at relatively high levels (33% of males and 17% of females). Among organised religions, Baptists were found to be the most homophobic (68%) and Catholics the least homophobic (35%). Significantly, people with no religious affiliation were the most tolerant (only 19% were homophobic).

Homophobia as experienced by Young People

In 2004 the Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society – based at Latrobe University – published a report entitled "*Writing Themselves In Again - 6 years on: the 2nd national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same sex attracted young Australians*". As the title indicates, the report follows up a 1998 report on the same subject, which was based on a survey of 750 young people. The 2004 report is based on information provided by 1,749 young people aged 14 to 21 – 1,106 males and 643 females. All states and territories were represented in proportion to their youth populations and 21% came from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD). Eighty percent of

young people came from major cities, 15% from inner regional Australia and 5% from remote areas.

There was a shift from the 1998 survey towards more positive feelings about their sexuality (76% vs 60%), and the young people were more likely to have reframed their experiences of homophobia as an issue of bullying and not truths about themselves. Key findings of the report are that:

- Discrimination in terms of gender and homophobia are key issues for schools.
- 8 - 11% of students do not identify as exclusively heterosexual.
- 38% of same-sex attracted young people have been abused because of their perceived sexuality.
- 74% of this abuse occurs in schools.
- Teenage suicide is 2-3 times higher in same-sex attracted youth.
- Drug use is substantially higher than for heterosexual young people – double the number of SSAY have injected drugs.
- 80% of young people found sex education at school to be useless or fairly useless while 20% found it to be useful.
- Young people who were Christians, who attended Christian schools and/or belonged to Christian families were often forced to choose between their sexuality and their religion. In many cases, rejecting their sexuality resulted in the young people hating and harming themselves.
- Young people from rural areas felt less safe at social occasions than their urban peers. They had, understandably, more difficulty accessing information through gay media and in the qualitative data expressed many concerns about their isolation and fear of exposure in rural areas.

The Tasmanian Context

In March 2003, Blanch Consulting published a "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Health and Wellbeing Needs Assessment", commissioned by the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services. While the report focussed on the services delivered by the Department of Health and Human Services, its recommendations in regard to service delivery are clearly more generally applicable.

A literature review found that the significant health and wellbeing issues reflected in current research were:

- The process of coming out for GLBT people, regardless of which subgroup they belong, is a critical time in the life experience and is associated with increased drug and alcohol use, unsafe sex practices, self harm, suicide attempts and suicide.
- Living with discrimination in areas of health and education service provision leads to under-utilisation of health services, poor health

information, increased sexual health issues and impacts on educational outcomes.

- Living with the pervasive effects of homophobia/transphobia impacts on rates of depressive symptoms, the ability to form connections to the GLBTI community, lowers self-esteem, increases psychological distress and lowers the likelihood of self-disclosure.

Consultations with key informants and feedback from a community survey corroborated the findings of the literature review, but because Tasmania has a small, decentralised and rural population there is an increased sense of isolation and lack of cohesiveness between any of the GLBT community members.

“The following key health and wellbeing issues emerged for same-sex attracted people or people of diverse gender expression in Tasmania:

- An acute sense of isolation from the general community, and a sense of invisibility expressed by a large proportion of GLBT people are also accompanied by lack of support networks and a sense of community among GLBT people.
- That the coming out process is a critical point in the life of the GLBT person and support at this time is pivotal for both long-term and short-term health and wellbeing outcomes. Coming out is an individual thing and is often dependent on the situation/reactions of significant others and/or the support people have around at the time,
- That homophobia/transphobia impact on physical and emotional health and wellbeing. The effects of homophobia/transphobia vary from living with an underlying apprehension to experiencing physical violence, verbal abuse and bullying.
- That discrimination and ignorance from health and well being service providers is a disincentive to accessing health and wellbeing services. The discrimination may be overt or covert and based on an assumption of heterosexuality.”

Service Delivery

“In order to address the identified issues, the health and wellbeing service system design will need to incorporate:

- GLBT-specific service types in combination with a strengthened enhanced mainstream service system;
- Fostering and strengthening of partnerships between services at all levels – community, government and non-government together with the development of service provider and community networks;
- Training and education of mainstream health and wellbeing service providers; and
- Development of a culture of continuous quality improvement through program evaluation, monitoring and review of performance.”

Challenging Homophobia in Schools

In recent years the Pride and Prejudice program has been run in a number of Tasmanian schools:

- 2003: New Norfolk, Newtown and Rosetta High Schools
- 2004: New Norfolk, Newtown and Rosetta High Schools and Campania District High School
- 2005: Campania District High School
- 2006: Exeter and Rosetta High Schools and St Patrick's College – Launceston

These schools represent a broad cross-section of school communities. The 2006 programs were formally evaluated for the Department of Education by the University of Tasmania's Institute for Inclusive Learning Communities, which found Pride and Prejudice to be an effective program for countering homophobia and a starting point for the development of further, comprehensive anti-homophobia programs in schools. The Institute's report recommended that:

- the program continue to be offered in Tasmanian schools;
- a 'train the trainer' style program be developed and undertaken as a Graduate Certificate in Education;
- 15 trainers be available by December 2008 to facilitate the program;
- the program be evolved to the Tasmanian context; and
- a further project exploring how to address homophobia embedded within the curriculum be developed and undertaken.

The Tasmanian Government has welcomed the Institute's report and committed \$50,000 to further development. The major short-term constraint appears to be the number of trained facilitators available to run the program in schools.

The original program was developed by Daniel Witthaus, a project worker with the City of Greater Geelong Youth Services. Supporting gay and lesbian young people, Daniel observed that they were experiencing abuse and harassment in their everyday school lives. Further discussions with local workers and teachers highlighted that homophobia in schools was indeed a reality, and an unacceptable one at that.

Pride & Prejudice - a formally evaluated educational package that is relevant, appropriate and adaptable to educational settings - was created in response to communities who see the well-being of all students as an overwhelming priority. The experience of teachers and workers is that schools are concerned with sexual diversity and homophobia, yet feel it falls outside of their skill base and experience. Teachers and workers typically respond that they would readily address these issues, however lack adequate training and preparation to challenge and support students dealing with these issues.

Anecdotal and formal evaluation of the program have identified that both heterosexual and non-heterosexual students believe that issues of sexual

diversity and homophobia directly impact on their school experience, and that school initiatives are welcomed and required to address these adequately.

It is clear that the package does have a positive impact on students. Deakin University Psychology found through formal evaluation that through the program the attitudes of students toward gay men and lesbians changed significantly over six weeks (Health Promotion Journal of Australia, December 2001).

The program explores the notion of sexual diversity and homophobia with students in a secondary school context. The program is a realistic attempt to challenge rather than change student attitudes and beliefs. This involves the provision of accurate information and the opportunity for all viewpoints to be aired safely.

How does Pride & Prejudice work?

The six-week program is interactive and challenging, providing students with an avenue to discuss sensitive issues and topics. The package includes a video, an outline of each session with the aims, the key skills required to undertake the session and optional homework.

It is not a sex education program. There are distinct differences between previous actions on sexual diversity and homophobia actions and this education package, which focuses on social differences, discrimination, gender issues and how these relate to gay and lesbian people.

The essence of the program is to provide real examples of gay and lesbian people as well as to provide a safe, supportive and nurturing environment where students can explore issues of sexual diversity and homophobia with their peers through discussion.

Conclusions

The Kinsey reports, which overturned a binary understanding of sexual identity and behaviour, were published over half a century ago. Yet, still today, the level of understanding of human sexuality is relatively low in the Australian community. As a consequence, people who are not exclusively heterosexual experience a high level of homophobia, with more than a third of Australians regarding homosexuality as immoral. The region around Burnie has one of Australia's highest recorded levels of homophobia, with half the population believing that homosexuality is immoral.

Such an environment is poisonous for the 8% to 11% of young people who do not identify as exclusively heterosexual. Nearly two in five are abused because of their perceived sexuality, and three-quarters of this abuse occurs in schools. Consequently, depression and drug use is substantially higher among same-sex-attracted Youth and their rate of suicide is two to three times higher than the average. This is a disgraceful situation, which must be addressed.

Homophobia is an attitude that must be challenged and, given the psychological vulnerability of young people who are not exclusively heterosexual and the high incidence of abuse of them which occurs in schools, it is in schools that the challenge must be initiated. There is good evidence from the implementation of the Pride & Prejudice program in Victoria and Tasmania that the attitudes of students towards gay men and lesbians changed significantly over the six weeks that the program was run.

Such change is most likely to occur in the context of a safe, supporting and nurturing environment where students can explore issues of sexual diversity and homophobia with their peers through discussion. Daniel Witthaus, the program's author, has observed that many teachers feel that such discussions fall outside their skill base and experience, and feel that they are inadequately trained and prepared to meet the challenge. The Graduate Certificate in Education proposed in the report by the Institute for Inclusive Learning Communities seems a good model to provide that training to teachers. However, the essential prerequisite for the running of a Pride and Prejudice program is the availability of a trained and accredited facilitator who can work with teaching staff. If the program is to be offered throughout Tasmania at times suitable to schools, it is essential that volunteers from groups such as the Coming Out Proud Community Liaison Committees be trained and accredited. Partnerships between schools and CLCs could ensure that programs can be offered, that teachers feel supported and that accurate local information is available to them. The time for the Coming Out Proud Program to seek training and accreditation for volunteers and partnerships with local high schools is now.

Sources for this paper

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Mapping Homophobia in Australia: The Australia Institute, July 2005

Writing Themselves In Again - 6 years on: the 2nd national report on the sexuality, health and well-being of same sex attracted young Australians: Australian Research Centre for Sex, Health and Society – Latrobe University, 2004

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Health and Wellbeing Needs Assessment: Blanch Consulting, March 2003

Pride and Prejudice One Pager: Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health – Flinders University

The Coming Out Proud Program

The aim of the Coming Out Proud Program is to provide strategies that will enable gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) people in Tasmania to “come out with pride” and live in their community with dignity as fully respected and participating members.

For further information, see our website: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~copptas/>

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