

## **School's Out: Homosexuality, Bullying and Suicide**

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*Suicide is now the leading cause of death by injury in Australia ahead of car accidents and homicide, and it is the largest single cause of death in Australian men. In recent years, several reports have linked homosexual orientation to youth suicide. Studies estimate nearly 30 percent of gay youths attempt suicide (Nicholas and Howard, 1998), but the complex relationship between the two has not been studied. This paper, therefore, focuses on the cultural context of suicide and asks questions about how it comes to be constructed as an option for young people experiencing harassment due to sexual orientation. The data are based primarily on interviewee responses to a scenario that describes the experiences of Chris, a young person, who confides in a teacher that s/he is considering suicide due to the marginalization s/he feels as a result of a gay identity. This paper explores the views of young people, teachers, youth counsellors, parents and community leaders about the role of school communities and key actors within them in the development of this situation and their role in overcoming it. The paper concludes with an investigation of implications for pastoral care of gay youths and professional practice in schools.*

### INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

This paper is an abstracted version of the 2003 AARE conference presentation of the same title and will form the basis of a forthcoming publication on this topic. The aim of this paper was to explore the views of young people, teachers, youth counsellors, parents and community leaders in one community regarding a scenario where a young person experiences harassment due to sexual orientation. Both how a young person could come to see suicide as an option and the role of the school community in overcoming it are discussed.

The findings of this paper are drawn from a larger three year ARC funded study investigating the socio-cultural context of youth suicide in a community we have named Subcity. Subcity is a fictitious name for a group of suburbs on the outskirts of a large Australian city. The informants were a cross-section of the community - young people aged 15-24 (not necessarily suicidal) and adults who were in close contact with young people. Forty-one people were interviewed in all.

Youth suicide has been an issue in Australia for some time, with the rates of suicide for young males rising sharply in the past few decades (Dudley, 1998). Suicide is the largest single cause of death for young Australian men age 12-24 (24 deaths per 100,000) and while the female: male suicide ratio is 1:4, the rate of attempts for women is much higher (Moon, Meyer and Grau, 1999), making it an issue for both men and women.

The past three decades have produced growing evidence of increased suicide risk amongst same sex attracted youth (SSAY) (Remafedi, 1999; Howard et al. 2002). Bullying at school

is thought to be a contributing factor. In a recent study by Hillier et al (1998) of 14-21 year old SSAY, 46% reported they had been verbally abused because of their sexuality and 16% had been physically abused. This paper is interested in looking at this within a specific cultural context.

All the informants were asked a series of questions, and then were presented with some scenarios and asked to comment on them. Their responses to the Chris scenario form the basis of this paper:

*Chris goes to a high school teacher to talk about being teased at school about being gay. Classmates have prevented Chris from joining their group and sports activities by ignoring Chris, insulting and even threatening Chris. Chris is scared and very upset about this constant harassment. Chris began to think about the consequences of being gay and how others might react. After hearing what Chris said, the teacher was worried because Chris had been thinking about ending it all.*

## RESULTS

### Chris and Gender

The Chris scenario was purposely written to be gender neutral, all but one of the informants assumed that Chris was a young man. After the informants had finished discussing the scenario, they were asked if they felt that this situation would be any different if Chris was a young woman.

Nearly all felt that it would be worse for Chris if he was a young man. Informants believed that straight men are not accepting of gay men but do not have a problem with lesbians, and they felt that women tend to be more tolerant in general. They also thought that lesbians were less obvious, less noticeable or just fewer in number than gay men, both these beliefs are supported by the literature (Sullivan, 2001). Informants felt that while girls could be bitchy and vindictive, they would still be able to maintain some close friendships.

It is important that parents and teachers are aware that this could in fact happen to a young woman - as they are not expecting it, she may be less likely to find help and support. Also, as the situation is considered to be worse for young men, they may be less likely to confide in someone and therefore more likely to be isolated. So again, teachers and parents should be on the look out for it.

### Gender differences

There were major differences between some of the responses from men compared with women. Women had more to say generally, in particular were more likely to think Chris should talk to family than men were, as well as suggest a counsellor.

One of the few responses that was more popular with men was that Chris should just deal with it and get over it.

*Well I mean, first of all Chris has to deal with it. While I don't condone the activities of the group, it is reality and Chris has to*

*learn to deal with living outside the mainstream" (Stuart, coach).*

In this quote here we are beginning to see the attitude that people in trouble are responsible for solving their own problems and should be self-sufficient. Also, members of minorities are discriminated against, and had better get used to it. There was a type of acceptance of the way things are, which while the informants might not agree with it, but they are certainly not trying to change it.

These findings suggest that young men, as well as male carers of young men, may have few ideas about what to do if faced with a situation like Chris', making this is a potential area for intervention. It is possible that as young men may have less idea what to do for help generally, and this is exacerbated by anticipated harsh treatment, that this may be one of the factors that contributes to increased suicide rate of SSAY.

### **The way things are**

Informants tended to be fatalistic or accepting of prevailing attitudes at best, and resigned to "the way things are". They either didn't feel that anyone in particular was responsible for scenario arising, or, if they did they tended to feel it was society in general (but what can you do), otherwise they felt that Chris must take some blame himself. The informants are not prepared to change (or do not think it is possible to) change the way things are and it is Chris that should be doing something different.

A degree of acceptance of bullying and homophobia can also be seen in comments that Chris should change schools and how teacher's hands are tied. There is little acceptance of any responsibility on the part of the school for assisting Chris, or changing its culture. These informants did not consider the issue that other schools might be the same. It is unclear whether they were expecting Chris to do a better job at disguising his sexual orientation at the next school, or what grounds they had for believing that other students will have more tolerant attitudes. SSAY are doubtless aware of this high level of acceptance of homophobia, making support difficult to find even when they are stressed and not coping. Even though people don't agree with homophobia, accepting it as a given makes SSAYs' lives even more difficult.

### **What can be done?**

Informants were asked what could be done to help Chris and what should he himself do. Most agreed that Chris needed to find to find someone who will listen to him, support him and help him without judgement. Who they actually approach was considered less important, as long as they could be trusted. However, almost before they have finished making a suggestion, the informants were coming up with reasons as to why their suggestions may not work. They recognise that at best people will have no idea what to do for him and at worst, they will be hostile. Once again it is up to Chris to have the skills to identify a suitable confidante - it is his responsibility and he had better choose his mark wisely, as the informants believed that telling most people could make the situation worse.

### *Parents*

The romantic notion of families pulling together still prevails, yet at the same time informants acknowledge the failure of parents to support their children.

## *Teachers*

Most informants agreed talking to the teacher was a good option, but were evenly divided on what the teacher should do about it. Some felt that the teacher should deal with Chris personally if they felt equipped to do so. Otherwise they felt that the teacher should refer Chris on to an appropriate service. Therefore teachers need to know firstly how to respond and secondly who to refer Chris to.

A number of parents felt teachers should inform parents of Chris' situation, regardless of Chris' wishes. This raises the issue of confidentiality. Teachers are in a difficult position all round in situations like this. They may not be very knowledgeable about or sympathetic to homosexuality, they often feel inadequately prepared to deal with issues such as mental health or bullying among students, they may not have support of specialist services in which they have confidence, (such as that provided by school counsellors) and they are under pressure to inform parents or others (such as the school principal) even if they feel that this may exacerbate Chris' problems due to an unsympathetic response. If teachers attempt to deal with a situation like this themselves, and Chris' situation deteriorates, they are likely to be criticised for inadequately dealing with it. In addition, they usually have little time available to engage in one-to-one interaction with the students.

Some informants (all adults) thought that the bullies should be disciplined. Young people on the other hand did not mention this, and 2 young men even stressed that this should not be a course of action as it will make matters worse. Young people seemed to favour riding it out and not rocking the boat for fear of making things worse.

Anti-bullying policies were mentioned only by the service providers. This could suggest that the people who are involved in making these policies are the only ones who are either aware they exist, or think that they work.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research suggesting that SSAY are at increased risk of suicide has had little impact on the views of most of the informants from this particular community. Our investigation has revealed that support networks are spare for same sex attracted young people. Parents and in particular fathers seem likely to hold negative attitudes and be unable to support their children. Teachers are also in a difficult position as they may have limited time, feel unable to cope, not know where to refer young people and also have to deal with the issue of parents and confidentiality. School counsellors may not be able to provide support to Chris or teacher, or at least they are not seen as being able to. There is also an underlying assumption that the gay community should and will look after its own. Chris himself therefore has limited resources available to him, has limited capacity to seek help (as he is a young man as well as because of his own internalised homophobia) and is suicidal. In spite of all that he expected to find own help, which means that all things considered, Chris could be in trouble.

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