

*Disrupting heteronormativity: What about the girls?*

Currently in Australia a number of discourses are interrelating to create an important moment in which the disruption of heterosexism and homophobia can take place in schools. Through a combination of the rise in profile of gay and lesbian communities, the greater interest in issues of sexuality and schooling, and the interest in boys' education, some spaces are being presented to address and disrupt heterosexism and homophobia in schools. However, with the displacement of girls from the educational agenda as a result of the 'What about the boys?' discourse, spaces seldom exist to challenge anti-lesbianism and misogynist cultures in schools in the same ways that they do in relation to homophobia and hegemonic masculinities. A conference held in an Australian capital city in 2001 presents an example of an attempt to take up this disruptive space, and demonstrates the ways in which these spaces are not equally available for the interests of females and males.

This conference was intended to raise awareness around homophobia, heterosexism and anti-lesbianism in schools<sup>1</sup>. The group of people who organised this conference were motivated by a concern for the interests of gay and lesbian young people. However, in an attempt to broaden the scope of the conference they did engage with the more general debate of how homophobia impacts on boys' educational experience. While the conference was intended to address the experiences of gay, lesbian and straight students, there were multiple layers of resistance to address the experiences of straight and lesbian girls – this disruptive space was not available to challenge anti-lesbian cultures in schools. This resistance was manifest in assumptions such as equating female experiences of anti-lesbianism and heterosexism as the same as male experiences of homophobia and heterosexism, and thus understandable as a derivative of the male experience; yet concurrently seeing the gay male experience of homophobia and heterosexism as more oppressive than any other. The consequences of this exclusion were that the liberatory potential of this social movement was lost for everyone.

Whilst the conference was in many ways successful, the emancipatory potential of this conference, and the social movement behind the conference<sup>2</sup>, was undermined by a series of practices that have emerged within liberatory social movements in the past. These practices relate to internal conflict, and historically the result has often been the exclusion of, or abandonment by, members who represent minority groups (c.f. Poirier 2000; Stanley 1982). In this case it resulted in the marginalization of women, and a consequence of this was the dismantlement of the social movement. Nancy Fraser (1990; 1995), Iris Marion Young (1990a; 1990b; 1990c) and Anna Yeatman (1992; 1993; 1995) have theorised this practice and have accordingly recommended that the different experiences of social injustice for members of social movements need to be acknowledged if their liberatory potential is to be realised and maintained. This social movement was debilitated in the same way that social movements of the past were, which suggests that this continues to be a significant obstacle in the liberation of minority groups.

This paper suggests that if girls are excluded from discussions around educational disadvantage, then any steps implemented to enact change will be similarly impeded. This discussion will look at the current interest in boys' educational disadvantage, the history of social

movements when gays and lesbians allied, the social movement behind the conference, and theoretical approaches to avoid the practices that undermine social change.

### Boys – the educationally disadvantaged

Since the early 90s there has been increasing focus on the educational experience of boys (Epstein et al 1998; Hayes and Lingard 2003; Mills 2003; Weaver-Hightower 2003). Popular representations indicate that there is a crisis in boys' education; that boys are currently underachieving in education; and that boys are disadvantaged socially and as learners (c.f. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training 2002; Fowe 2000; Williams 2001, March 23; Sattery 2003, May 21; Douez 2002, November 28; Arndt 2000, June 17; Cook 2001, June 6). Rather than argue the legitimacy or illegitimacy of boys as educationally disadvantaged subjects, I am looking at the interest that this subject commands as an indication of its power as a social phenomenon. Lynn Raphael Reed (1999: 94) explains this thus: "This is not an argument over whether male educational underachievement exists or not: its 'reality' is a measure of its productivity in reshaping the landscape of educational policies and practices".

The 'reality' of boys' educational disadvantage offers the potential to marginalise and detrimentally affect the educational experience of girls, and some boys. Certain arguments within this discourse oversimplify, generalise and silence the educational experiences of girls and some boys; imply that concerted effort on the behalf of girls' education need no longer take place; and that the changes that have been put into place to improve the educational experience of girls have achieved their goals, and may even have gone too far and need to be made redundant (Mills and Lingard 1997; Mac an Ghail 1991, 1994; Lingard and Douglas 1997; Lingard 1998; Lingard et al 2000).

What this focus does do however, is create opportunities for cultures of gender identity that work against positive experiences in school environments to be addressed. Cultures of masculinity that serve to limit the ways in which boys engage with learning, engage with each other and make meaning of their world are being questioned in many of the attempts to address this 'crisis' (c.f. Martino 1997; Mills 2003; Collins and Kenway 2000). The problem is that this space is only created for some students – excluding girls and some boys (Mills 1997). While it is a matter of concern that some boys are performing less well academically than some girls, the 'What about the boys?' debate has displaced girls from the educational agenda (Hayes 1998). Cultures of masculinity, and male power and privilege are central to any pro-active analysis of and response to boys' under-achievement and disadvantage in schools. However, the lack of similar opportunities for girls to explore cultures of femininity and gender relations fails to acknowledge how girls are complicit within cultures of masculinity, male power and privilege. In addition, girls can be disadvantaged by cultures of femininity and masculinity and opportunities are not presented to address this. The 'What about the boys?' discourse presents a moment in which disruption of heteronormativity is possible. Yet it is only possible for some. This limited possibility relates to a number of factors, some of which are enlightened by an understanding of the history of social movements.

## History of alliances in social movements

'[gays and lesbians are] the oddest political bedfellows ever, a forced marriage'

Torie Osborn – Writer/Activist (Poirier 2000)

Alliances between lesbians and gays have historically been struck to strengthen groups, to create a sense of community, and to address the injustices gays and lesbians face (Weeks 1985). In many ways these alliances are based on shared experiences. Gays and lesbians can have a common experience of derision, ostracism, abuse and terror enacted on the basis of their sexual orientation (Frye 1983); and can similarly experience work-place discrimination, discrimination in relation to tax, insurance and recognition of relationships, as well as the experience of harassment in public places, on public transport, and perhaps even in their homes (Jeffreys 1993). They can suffer assault on their pride and self worth by feeling the need to hide romantic relationships, by restraining from public signs of affection, and by dealing with the constant barrage of heterosexist assumptions which silence their experiences and position them as abnormal (Jeffreys 1993). Lesbians and gays may have the common experience of loss of family, the struggle to gain custody or access to children, and the need to build friendships and communities for survival (Jeffreys 1993; Poirier 2000).

While these common experiences have repeatedly served as an uniting force for alliances between gays and lesbians, these alliances have often resulted in discontent and the exclusion of, or abandonment by, women (c.f. Stanley 1982; Poirier 2000). Criticisms of these alliances suggest that the focal issues tended to relate more to men - such as attempts to legalise sex between males, and awareness-raising about AIDS -, and multiple levels of sexism, discrimination and resentment that discourage females from participating (Poirier 2000; Stanley 1982). In addition, some female participants sensed that while women contributed energy towards issues that specifically related to males, energy for the issues that affected females was not contributed to by male participants: that the males were prepared to use female participants' energy to further their interests, yet refused to acknowledge that females' needs were different (Stein 1972; Stanley 1982; Thompson 1985; Poirier 2000;). Such experiences led to comments like the following, made by Pam Stein, published in the *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* in 1972:

After reading this article you may realise...why the women in Gay Lib feel threatened and fucking mad...When the men in Gay Liberation put us down by ignoring us, by saying we are aggressive when we are being assertive, when they refuse for the reason of masculine ignorance to participate in our movement, and also when they are too bloody lazy to look for themselves and come to the women and ask us what they can do. Brothers, if you can't see for yourselves or even take the time to look for yourselves why women are angry, then Gay Liberation is worth nothing in our eyes.

As a result of such perspectives, claims have been made that the differences between gays and lesbians, and their agendas, may "turn out to be so profound as to cast doubt on the assumption that there is any basic cultural or political affinity ... upon which alliances could be built" (Frye 1983: 130).

Frye (1983: 145) argued that gay male politics are incompatible with lesbian politics because same-sex-attracted social movements have been more congruent than discrepant with a male supremacist society that is hostile to females, and ignorant to the motivations and aims of the female liberatory movements:

The general direction of gay male politics is to claim maleness and male privilege for gays and to promote the enlargement of the range of presumption of phallic access to the point where it is, in fact, absolutely unlimited. The general direction of lesbian feminist politics is the dismantling of male privilege, the erasure of masculinity, and the reversal of the rule of phallic access, replacing the rule that access is permitted unless specifically forbidden with the rule that it is forbidden unless specifically permitted.

Similarly, Weeks (1985) argued that while for gays the issues have essentially been about validating a denied sexuality, for lesbians, particularly feminist lesbians, it has often been about a political identification in which sexuality plays a problematic role. Frye (1983) argued that there is not a cultural or political affinity between gays and lesbians, and that the absence or failure of alliance is not due to some sort of hitch or barrier, which obscures the common interests or makes conversation difficult, rather, patriarchal features of society result in incommensurable discrepancies. According to this argument the differences between the agendas of lesbians and gays predetermine conflict in any instance in which alliance is made because the experiences and needs of lesbians are incompatible with those of gays.

Historically, alliances between gays and lesbians have been problematic and the effectiveness of these alliances is questionable. This has led to refusal to ally as Stanley (1982: 211) expressed when, in a conference paper, she stated:

I will no longer work with gays. There is no way, absolutely no way, in which our interests could be said to be the same. Gays, perhaps more than any other men, ally themselves with the activities and products of sexism

While the exclusion of females from gay and lesbian liberatory social movements may not have been entirely deliberate, gays and gay male interests have dominated these same-sex-attracted, often actually called 'gay', movements. This review of the history of such

alliances would seem to paint a sorry picture for any alliance between men and women attempting to address the experiences of lesbian and gay people, and the alliance that occurred for the conference that provides the data for this paper would seem to provide further evidence of this.

### The Conference

This conference was organised with the intent to draw attention to the experiences, needs and strengths of young people who will or do identify as gay or lesbian, yet it allowed some focus on the adverse effects of heterosexism, homophobia and anti-lesbianism on straight students. The people who constituted this social movement were a mix of volunteers and representatives from educational bodies. There were forty people who contributed over the two years that planning took place, and fourteen of these, whether due to consistent attendance or substantial contribution, form the core group. These people participated because they had been the victims of homophobia, anti-lesbianism and heterosexism, because they had a commitment to making schools safer and friendlier places for all students, or for both reasons. The timing of the conference meant that teachers, administrative bodies, and the State government were better disposed to hear and acknowledge the arguments. Provisional levels of support and assistance were given to the conference by representatives from the State education administrative body, the State Parents' and Citizens' Association, and Catholic Education because, among other reasons, the focus on boys' education has highlighted the need for oppressive cultures of masculinity to be addressed.

While throughout the two-year planning process, post-conference projects and activities were often discussed, just six months after the conference had been held – and after just two meetings – the social movement had disintegrated. This was despite heightened awareness around the issue, an email network of conference delegates with a desire to continue this work, and hard-fought-for official acknowledgement by the State Education department of the need to address homophobia and anti-lesbianism in schools. While this social movement had begun with the belief that schools were a significant site of oppression of sexual diversity, where the needs of young people, particularly young gays and lesbian females, could be addressed, internal conflict limited the potential of this movement. This internal conflict related to tensions between male and female participants and the way in which their experiences of homophobia, anti-lesbianism and heterosexism were interpreted and acknowledged. In this discussion excerpts from emails, interviews and group meetings shall be used to illustrate the tensions that emerged in this social movement. These excerpts shall be used to explore how the conference was structured, and the four tensions that were evidenced in the social movement.

### The Tensions

There were four practices demonstrated by members of the group that worked to marginalise the experiences of women with regard to heterosexism, anti-lesbianism, and homophobia, all implying that the experiences of young women are less important than the experiences of young men. Firstly, suggestions that were made regarding how to address the experiences of how heterosexism and

anti-lesbianism affect young women imply that the experiences of young women are less important than the experiences of young men. Secondly, when using the term homophobia it was assumed that the subject was gay men. Thirdly, without any information about or understanding of the experiences of heterosexism and anti-lesbianism for young women, it was assumed that the experiences of homophobia/anti-lesbianism were more obvious for young men than for young women. And finally, some members of the group attempted to silence individuals who brought up and advocated the issue of the experiences of heterosexism and anti-lesbianism for young women. Each of these tensions shall be discussed.

*Tension # 1: Addressing experiences of homophobia, anti-lesbianism and heterosexism through the conference*

General discussion regarding key-note speakers began in a group meeting on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 2000, almost a year before the conference. Fourteen Australian identities were suggested - ten males and four females – who were either known to do research in the fields of homophobia, were gay or lesbian public identities, or were identities from the educational sphere (of course some of these categories cross over). Two males, both academics, were contacted regarding their suitability, availability and willingness to speak at the conference. After conversations in person, or over the phone, and reports tabled to the planning group, these two men were invited to speak at the conference – one on the links between homophobia and masculinity, and the other to explore strategies to address homophobia within the school context. In a later meeting it was decided that the two female academics suggested in the July meeting would be approached: one as a speaker to specifically address issues relating to girls and the other to give the opening address. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2000 it was reported to the group that both women had agreed to speak at the conference: one to be the opening speaker and the other to present a keynote address on strategies for addressing homophobia, notably similar to the address of the second male speaker. That the keynote address would be on strategies for addressing homophobia rather than the links between femininity and anti-lesbianism was neither explained to, nor questioned by, the group. In the meeting on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2001 it was reported that the keynote speaker was, due to other commitments, no longer able to present at the conference. It is the actions from this point on that are most indicative of the resistance to address anti-lesbianism and femininity in the conference.

One suggestion from Sarah was to address anti-lesbianism through a workshop: “It is actually a good workshop topic, because there is actually going to be enough interest from people to want to hear about how it is different and to be focussed on young lesbians”. This suggestion contrasted strongly with how masculinity and homophobia would be addressed and indicated the value that Sarah had placed on this issue – namely that it was not as important, and even though there would be some interest, there would not be as much as there would be in homophobia and masculinity. In this recommendation the emphasis was defining anti-lesbianism in relation to homophobia, as if it was a central point from which to work. Another suggestion came from Mckey:

My preference for that would be to have beside [the male speaker to address the links between homophobia and masculinity] a lesbian high school principal. ... I want a woman. I want her to be lesbian. I want her to work in schools, to preferably be a principal, and ... for her to actually cover the stuff about how the homophobia affects everyone and to focus on how it affects young women and to focus on how it affects staff.

While for the male speaker what was important was his research and his ideology, for the female speaker what was important, at least to Mckey, was her status. Perceiving that whatever this speaker would have to say would be less important than her appearance was indicative of the perception that this issue was not as important. The inclusion of the speaker was to meet, or to appear to meet, the aims of inclusivity and equal representation. Larry also made a suggestion:

The trouble that I think we are running into is that we have a limited amount of time, we have [the male speaker] talking about how homophobia affects the construction of masculinity, I don't think we have time to actually stick up a token person to talk about how homophobia affects the construction of femininity. There are other issues. I would like to see, if possible, [the male speaker] cover that in his talk. And have a lesbian or a woman talk about some other issue relating to schools. I think a trap that we need not to fall into is to put, for each of the issues that we are covering, a man speaking and then a woman, because I think we will be doubling up and wasting time and being tokenistic. For example, if we have a woman talking about awareness raising stuff of homophobia, I as a man would need to trust that the things that she brings up would be the ones that are relevant to me as well as the ones that are relevant for the women. And also, if we have a man talking about how homophobia affects the construction of sexuality and gender, which I think is what we really need to have [the male speaker] do, is to cover both of those, even if he hasn't done research on that I think he would be able to do that, that the women who are in the audience trust that their issues are being covered as much as the men's even though it is actually a man that is doing the speaking.

Larry felt that he thought it would be a waste of time to have a female speaker address women's issues in the conference, and recommended that the male speaker address those issues instead, regardless of whether he had any knowledge regarding femininity and anti-lesbianism, assuming that he would be able to do that anyway. Such a perspective contrasted strongly with both the process that was adopted to find a speaker to address boys' issues, and the problem that Larry had previously commented on, to be discussed shortly, that he, as a gay man with predominantly male friends, had little idea about the experiences of homophobia, heterosexism and anti-lesbianism for women. Why would an academic renowned for his work on boys just be able to 'cover' girls? Furthermore, the notion that having a male and female speaker would be 'doubling up' further established Larry's perception that the male experience of homophobia could be generalised to be the experiences of all same-sex-attracted people.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> May 2001 it was reported to the group that a person had been found who was conducting specific research on the different experiences of homophobia, anti-lesbianism and heterosexism for males and females. While a male speaker to address the links between homophobia and masculinity had been retained ten months prior to the conference, a female speaker to address the links between anti-lesbianism and femininity was not found until six weeks prior. Suggestions that this issue be addressed through workshops, or through male speakers expanding their speeches indicated the perception of importance of this topic. In addition, the assumption that the person who addressed homophobia and masculinity would speak first, as well as the implication that who the female speaker was was more important than what she would say, also indicate beliefs around this issue.

In the end an excellent female academic discussed femininity and anti-lesbianism in a keynote address. She spoke after the male speaker who addressed the links between masculinity and homophobia. This end result indicates a small fragment of the tension around this issue. It was a significant source of tension for the social movement, as shall be indicated in the following excerpts.

*Tension #2: Homophobia only affects boys*

Homophobia was the only term used in the conference title and the planning process, and through the implicit and explicit use of language, heterosexism and homophobia were seen to be the experiences of predominantly young men. In a meeting in March 2001 a discussion ensued on the meaning of the term 'homophobia', which demonstrates this practice.

Elizabeth: I am assuming when we talk about homophobia we are including not just fear of homosexual people, but also bisexual and transgender people and I was thinking maybe we need to have something in there about that, for the sake of being pedantic.

Eric: That might be one of our essential bits as well in the sense that what homophobia is is not that it affects everybody but it is, that the word homophobia is characteristic of, so we are not actually using a narrow

Larry: So what should I write down?

Eric: When we are talking about homophobia, when we use that word all the time we are not just talking about gay boys, we're, is that what people are saying? (*Murmurs of yeah*) We're actually talking about a whole pile of sets of the population that is affected by the first definition: fear and hatred of people perceived to be homosexual, bisexual, transgender

Sarah: And I think we need to add: those who support them

Eric: It is broadening the definition of the word homosexual.

While the second comment made by Eric claimed that when the term 'homophobia' was used it did not just refer to gay boys, this comment revealed that the group, or at least Eric, had assumed prior to this discussion that when the term had been used it had been referring to gay boys. The second part of Eric's comment was also interesting for in the supposed broadening of this term, women were still not explicitly included. While the terms 'homosexual' and 'homophobia' can be inclusive of both males and females, and therefore can theoretically be quite neutral terms, these terms are not neutral, but are an example of the many instances in which a neutral body is implicitly a masculine body (Gatens 1996). Moria Gatens (1996: 24) argues that man is the model and the centrepiece of legal and political arrangements and that female embodiment is "confined literally to the margins of man's representations". The practice that Eric demonstrated by assuming that the subject was male when terms such as 'homophobia' and 'homosexual' were used was the practice that positions the masculine body as the centrepiece of understanding. While Eric claimed that the group were "broadening the definition of the word homosexual", the only people that this was being broadened for were the male participants, and in doing so he managed to exclude everyone else.

### *Tension #3: I suffered more than you*

Early in the planning process tension arose around the value and meaning attributed to female and male experiences of anti-lesbianism, homophobia and heterosexism. In a message posted to the e-group<sup>3</sup>, Larry stated:

Having a talk with Natalia yesterday I found myself saying "this is a conference about homophobia, not about feminism!" and we had a discussion around this. After talking I am realising that it is unrealistic to expect a lesbian to talk about her oppression by homophobia and omit talking about her oppression by men. The work for me is to hear talk about oppression of women by the patriarchy or by men and not take it personally, and hence not to either attack or silence myself. I also want to stand for a role which says that it is the young men who cop the most flack from homophobia in the schoolyard, it is the young men who are the main victims of homophobic violence, and it is mainly the young men who are killing themselves.

Initially Larry stated that this was to be a conference about homophobia and not about feminism. This suggests that homophobia (assuming he was meaning the experiences of both males and females) and feminism are separate, and that sexism plays no role in anti-lesbianism, homophobia and heterosexism. He then clarified that after a day of thought he could see that it was necessary for women to frame heterosexism and anti-lesbianism with sexism, but he denied any participation in sexist practices.

Bob Connell (1995:79) uses the term 'patriarchal dividend' to explain the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women. This dividend is experienced even though not many men actually meet the normative standard of hegemonic masculinity, and the number of men practising the hegemonic pattern may be quite small (Connell, 1995). Similarly, Chris Weedon (1987) argues that patriarchal relations are structured and are separate from any individual agency: while individuals can play a role

in patriarchal oppression, essentially patriarchal relations exist in institutions and social practices, not in individuals. Thus even if Larry did very little to oppress women and to maintain hegemonic patterns, he had a relationship of complicity with the hegemonic project, a relationship he was unwilling to acknowledge. However, Larry's reluctance to listen to and acknowledge others' experiences was explicitly oppressive. As Adrienne Rich (1986: 210-211) notes, "the systems men have created are homogenous systems, which exclude and degrade women. ... [Yet] both straight and homosexual men take refuge in those systems". By trying to limit what Natalia could talk about, and by stating that he would interpret anything she would say as having no relevance to him, Larry demonstrated resistance to allowing her to have a voice. Secondly, he pre-determined the meaning of anything that she might have had to say about female experiences by claiming that the experiences of gay young men were more significant. This email did not stand alone. In fact, it was followed by two other email amendments.

With no public emails posted in response, Larry sent a second e-mail forty minutes after the first:

I am realising that the last message I sent could be interpreted a number of different ways. My intent is to open up discussion on issues which are around. I am also realising that although I have talked to a lot of gays about their school experiences, I have not talked in depth to any lesbians about what their experiences of school were like. My desire is that both men's and women's views need to be equally strongly presented at this conference.

In this message Larry contended that it was possible that people would misinterpret his previous message, and clarified his aim which was to 'open up discussion', not promote any gender's views more than another. Larry noted a potential flaw in his argument in that his only area of understanding was of the experiences of young males, and that his understanding of the experiences of lesbians was restricted. A third message, posted an hour later, still with no other public email responses, was shorter again and clearly seems to be in response to comments inspired by his previous emails: "I apologise for my first e-mail - it states that young men have a tougher time than young women; I understand how this is an alienating and hurtful thing to say. Sorry." As a series of e-mails these comments suggest that Larry was struggling to acknowledge that his experiences were shared. He wanted to have it acknowledged that the experiences of young gays, his experiences, were more significant than the experiences of young lesbians, and as a result he was finding it difficult to allow the space for others to articulate their experiences. Importantly, these comments suggest that the oppressive practices employed in this social movement were not driven by maliciousness, but by a lack of understanding both of the experiences of others and of the potential for social movements to be undermined by a failure to see experiences as shared.

Similar practices involved assuming that the nature of femininity meant that females were more able to express themselves, both through conversation and physical expression, and therefore were less likely to be attacked for performing their gender against tradition. It was suggested that females were less likely to be victimised by anti-lesbianism, were more able to deal with it if they were targeted, and that any victimisation had more to do with sexual harassment than anti-lesbianism. These assumptions were used to justify the belief that gays were affected the most, and that therefore their experiences were more significant.

#### *Tension # 4: Silencing the Other*

A meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2001 saw the culmination of the tension that had been developing around how female experiences would be addressed in the conference. This group discussion demonstrated that there was resistance to address the experiences of females, that there was prejudice against the individual who raised the issue, and there was an attempt to silence her. The discussion began with a comment from Natalia. She stated:

One of the things for me is that the issues for men and women might be quite different, and for me they are not as clearly identified for women as they are for boys. I think they are more visible and, like we kind of know to some extent what the issues are for boys, more I think than we do for women. In my case I was a punching bag too but it wasn't stated that it was homophobic violence. And yet I am fairly certain that it was because I was a lesbian.

This comment led to a lengthy group discussion around gender and experiences of homophobia, anti-lesbianism and heterosexism. Later in the discussion Natalia stated:

I guess I don't want to be in a position of fighting to get young lesbian issues on the agenda for this conference, and I can see how that might happen and I don't want to be sort of saying, "You know this is more important" you know? I think the issues are important for everybody, but I'd like to see that we make sure that gender representation is equal.

In response Mckey asked Natalia: "Are you aware that you bring that up at every meeting? And that at every meeting we go: 'Yep, you know like, yes we are going to do this'". Mckey was one of the conference organisers who was paid a wage in the six months prior to the conference and this statement revealed three things. Firstly, there was the implication that it was his conference and he had the power to accept or reject suggestions, because he spoke for the group in saying that it would be done. Secondly, through the use of the term 'we' Mckey was both taking on the role of group representative and excluding Natalia from the group. Richard Sennett (1998) discusses what he calls the dangerous pronoun 'we' and argues that when people use the term 'we' it is used as a defensive strategy against dislocation and confusion. The third revelation was that a comment such as "Yes it will be done" was all that was needed: that the issue had been dealt with and the topic did not need to be raised again or examined further. Rather than address the issues, or why Natalia felt that she needed to bring up the issues, Mckey's comments were directed at Natalia and made inferences regarding her attachment to this issue.

In individual interviews other participants made comments about this tension which further detracted from its perceived legitimacy. Larry stated:

I think she [Natalia] is really worried that women's issues are not going to be given a voice and are not going to be given equal space at this conference. What can I say, that is not what I want. ... At times there

might be more men than women. I don't know of any men in the group who actually want to silence or cut out the women from having a voice and having their viewpoints.

Similar to Mckey, Larry saw the problem to be Natalia's perspective, her worry, rather than something the social movement was or was not doing. Sarah suggested that the comments were attributable to individuals who had chosen not to participate:

I think that there are a number of people who aren't involved in the conference who are trying to manoeuvre this conference in certain ways through other people. There is a lot of pressure from outside that women's issues get up.

This element of conspiracy, picked up at another time also by Mckey, was used by these participants to devalue Natalia's comments and perspective – she was seen as a voice-piece for a hidden agenda and thus her perspectives were not seen to be legitimate. Similarly Nathan perceived some difficulty hearing Natalia's argument: "Natalia is constantly sort of saying 'what about young women', so it is hard to hear that and after a while, she probably feels that she is nagging: 'You know, I said it last week and I will have to say that again'". Nathan suggested that the source of the tension was not the topic as much as it was the way in which Natalia was continually raising it. These labelling strategies were adopted to limit the meaning and impact of Natalia's comments: suggesting that Natalia's statements lost legitimacy due to the manner in which they were raised.

Natalia was aware of these practices that delegitimised her and the issue. In an interview conducted a few days after the culminating meeting Natalia stated:

The fact that I am questioned about bringing that up – you know, he fairly came down on me last week for, you know, "Do you realise that you bring this up at every meeting?" ... And in some ways that is typical of pathologising women for actually having to raise issues and that I am hysterical, you know, a radical lesbian that isn't inclusive of men and therefore I have to keep pushing the women's issues.

Natalia saw the way that Mckey treated her as an attempt to position her as acting inappropriately, as being absorbed by 'her' issues, and of not being inclusive of males. These comments resonate with Mria Gatens (1996) who argues that there are many strategies that are used to silence those who dare to speak in another voice, and that in the history of feminist interventions one of these strategies was to reduce women to their sex. Gatens (1996: 24) explains that to reduce a "woman to her 'sex', involves treating her speech and her behaviour as hysterical". In this way the problem was positioned as residing in Natalia rather than in any practices of the social movement.

The tensions that have been discussed here resulted in the dismantlement of the social movement. The conference was held, and was met with enthusiastic support, but the tensions within the group meant that energy for later projects was lost. These tensions related to a set of assumptions that positioned gay men as the centre of understanding and that saw experiences of anti-lesbianism as less

detrimental than homophobia, and therefore less in need of disruption. Because social movements are often impeded by internal conflict, there are theorists who have looked at this practice.

### Theories about social movements

The potential of this social movement was subverted due to horizontal hostility (Wilson 2002), the 'ideal of community' (Young 1990c) and internal exclusions (Yeatman 1992) and the refusal of members of the group to acknowledge that experiences were shared. Horizontal hostility was initially a term used to explain infighting or factionalism within the feminist movements (White and Langer 1999). This hostility can exist in any minority group when criticism and anger is directed against other members of oppressed groups rather than against the structures of oppression. Horizontal hostility was an active practice in this social movement. Elements of infighting and factionalism were demonstrated that created tensions and resulted in the disintegration of the social movement. Horizontal hostility threatened the vision and strategy of this social movement, drew lines between participants on the basis of gender, and was a result of the lack of recognition given to the experiences of oppression for females, particularly the female participants.

Young's (1990c) discussion of failed alliance is also in response to problems encountered in the feminist movements when inter-group dynamics resulted in the suppression and exclusion of women who were not dominant. Young (1990c: 300) argues that the denial of interlocking and multiple oppressions occur as a result of the ideal of community which "privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one's understandings of others from their point of view". Thus internal differences are suppressed in order to present a communal image. The ideal of community presumes that subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves, and in this process differences within and between subjects are denied (Young, 1990c). This practice can be seen in the determination of participants such as Larry to compare experiences, as if the experiences were able to be compared. The communal image that Larry wanted to present was his experiences as a gay man. He was reluctant to develop an understanding of the experiences of lesbians, resistant to acknowledge that these experiences compared to his, yet concurrently assumed that these experiences could be adequately addressed under the banner of male experiences of homophobia. These practices were observable to different degrees in other participants as well. All of these practices denied differences within and between participants. This practice can also be seen in the group's attempts to gain system support from the State education administrative body.

While there was a representative of the State education administrative body in the core group for the duration of the planning process, they did not officially voice support for the conference until three days prior to the conference. Although support had been requested repeatedly from the second half of 2000 – it was not until just before the conference that the then Education Minister sent a letter of support, which was read out at the conference by a representative. This official support came not from the continuous requests that the group made to the State education administrative body, but from a collection of homophobic and anti-lesbian comments that were

posted on the Director-General of Education's electronic Chat group. These comments were in response to an advertisement for the conference that was placed in the conference advertisement section of the weekly newspaper circulated state-wide by the State education administrative body. The chat group is only accessible by government school staff and thus teachers or other school staff posted the comments. There were fourteen comments posted, including the response of the Director-General. It was assumed by many of the respondents that the State education administrative body was in support of the conference because the advertisement was contained within the newspaper. However, this assumption was false. Three comments requested that the State education administrative body retract support for the conference because it implicitly condoned homosexuality. Ten comments protested against these three comments, and one comment came from the Director-General in response to the recommendations, voicing support for the conference.

The initiating comment, made on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2001, was entitled "'Poofters' roaming about in QLD schools," and it criticised the support of the State education administrative body for the conference. This comment claimed that the community in general was opposed to "these types of people teaching in our schools" and therefore questioned whether it was appropriate to officially support or value "'poofters' teaching our children." This comment very clearly positioned gays and lesbians as Other and assumed a male subject. This comment went on to claim that gay and lesbian teachers and students should "leave their sexuality at home like the rest of humanity. One never hears of heterosexual teachers or students trumpeting their sexuality from the rooftops." This person claimed that the conference was "probably just an excuse to further the homosexual agenda" and recommended that the State education administrative body withdraw support. There were two comments that were posted that were in support of this initial statement. Comment number two, posted on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, stated: "I strongly agree with the comments in [comment number one]." Similarly, comment number ten also agreed with these sentiments stating "Oya, [comment number one]. Couldn't agree more".

The other ten comments, excluding the Director-General's response, picked up on issues that arose through the initial and the subsequent responses. Comment numbers three, six, seven, eight, eleven and thirteen stated that the first message demonstrated the need for such conferences, and/or that the State education administrative body should support the conference and should continue to support all efforts to address prejudice of any kind. Similarly, comment number four suggested, hopefully, that someone trying to generate some advertising for the conference had posted the initial comment, because it was so blatantly provocative. A number of the comments highlighted their protest to terminology such as 'poofter' and recommended that such language be refrained from. Comment number six stated that the use of the word 'poofter' served to illustrate the power of language to "demean and marginalise sexual minorities."

Sixteen days after comment number one appeared on the chat group, a response by the Director-General for Education was posted. The Director-General stated that the State education administrative body was in support of the ideology of the conference. The Director-General stated: "Our students, regardless of their colour, religion, gender, ability and/or sexuality have the right to respect, to feel safe,

and to belong in their school community.” It was acknowledged that schools play an important role in providing students with help before problems “escalate into mental health issues, early school leaving or risk-taking behaviours.” Finally, this response stated that staff who chose to attend the conference were fully supported by the State education administrative body.

The support of the State education administrative body was desired by the group because it was felt that if such a system were in support of the conference more people would attend the conference and more people would hear the message. This desire impacted upon the group structure. Representation of the group was tailored, both in terms of the title and terminology in the aims of the conference, and in the selection of people to speak at the conference. This group demonstrated Fraser’s (1990) observation that the aspirations of members of subordinated groups are often pressured to be regulated in order to have greater effect. This pressure came from the representatives of the State education administrative body and Catholic Education who participated in the organisation committee, but it also came from other sources within the group. This pressure related to perceived obstacles: the perception that same-sex-attraction, homophobia and anti-lesbianism were controversial issues. Due to these perceived obstacles the title of the conference was tempered, there were many discussions about constructing the conference in a way that was sensitive to the controversialities, and in general this contributed to a politics of community. The modifications that the group made to attain support did not result in their support, and whether it would have - would the Director-General of education have promised the support of the State education administrative body had the chat group discussion not ensued? – is debatable. The motivation of the group to obtain system support, in order to enhance the scope of the conference and to gain material support was not realised for support was not gained until the eleventh hour, and thus, to what end were controversialities and differences played down?

This practice can also be seen in the experiences of the women earlier explored in terms of the history of alliance, to which some people replied with separatism. Looking at the history of alliances between men and women in liberatory social movements it would seem that the practices that were demonstrated in this social movement not only had historical precedence, but may have been, as Frye (1983) argued, predetermined to fail. However, the members of this social movement were not driven by a desire to exclude people, nor did they want to invest energy, time and resources into a doomed venture. In addition, it is not possible to have a liberatory social movement that does not consist of alliances between people who are oppressed because oppression is experienced in ways that are endlessly multiple and interlocked.

Yeatman (1995) picks up on Young’s ideal of community when she argues that liberatory social movements that are structured by an orientation to universal human emancipation can have no consciousness of interlocking oppressions. Like Young, Yeatman argues that with any movement of human emancipation the specificity of the participants’ struggles are subsumed within the general project. Yeatman’s theory would suggest that when gays and lesbians are united to promote the interests of same-sex-attracted people, the ways in which oppression exists between and within gays and lesbians, and the ways in which oppression is experienced differently, cannot be recognised. Yeatman’s (1995) recommendation is that the idea of universal human emancipation has to lose legitimacy in

order that a consciousness of multiple and interlocking oppressions can take place. The solution that Young proposes is not separatism. Instead Young (1990c) presents a politics of difference, which she explains as the political vision of inexhaustible heterogeneity. A politics of difference does not require a united front. It leaves space for acknowledgment that some experiences are shared, yet it does not deny that oppression is experienced in multiple and interlocking ways. Similarly, Fraser (1995) identifies the remedy for cultural injustice as recognising and positively valorising cultural diversity.

What this means is that any argument that suggests that all humans need emancipation from the same things, in the same way, is flawed. An interlocking and multiple oppression that was observed and commented on in the group was that of sexism and anti-lesbianism against females. A number of the participants, particularly male participants, suggested that the experiences of lesbians were more related to sexism than anti-lesbianism. Ignoring the ways that heterosexism, homophobia, anti-lesbianism, sexism and misogyny, and patriarchal constructs interlock and oppress females in multiple ways subverts the power and potential of liberatory social movements. The needs of females cannot be met if there is resistance to acknowledge the ways in which patriarchal constructs serve to oppress and marginalise women and girls (Wedon, 1999: 58-66). If lesbians and gays are to work together for emancipation, and there is resistance to acknowledge the interests of all members of such social movements, then the greater agenda of such movements will continue to be subverted. Social movements cannot consist of one unitary human subject, and any attempt to embrace the illusion that there could be only one serves to weaken that movement.

### Conclusion

The conference was a huge achievement, particularly for a group of people with little experience in organising such events, and with little understanding of the politics of social movements. The planning of this conference is an example of an alliance between males and females, and is an example of a liberatory social movement. The experiences that this group had are not isolated: there is historical precedence for almost all of the obstacles that emerged in this social movement. Rather than interpret this to mean that alliances between men and women can not exist, my conclusion is that what needs to be determined is how to avoid alliances that internally oppress. Whether utilising Young's concept of the politics of difference, or Yeatman's argument to lose the idea of universal human emancipation the message is that there is nothing to be gained from denying difference.

In the face of so much interest in the educational experience of young men, there is a danger that the educational experience of young women will be, or will continue to be, marginalised; or that the educational experience of young women will be adversely affected in order to readdress a supposed imbalance. While the debate on boys' education does, in some instances, allow homophobia, and perhaps heterosexism, on the educational agenda, there is no similar opportunity being made for anti-lesbianism.

This conference is an example of how it is difficult to identify, recognise and address the experiences of heterosexism, anti-lesbianism and homophobia for young women, and an example of how the issues relating to young women are positioned second, and strategies to address these issues are resisted, are made the responsibility of women, and are at times met with hostility. Looking at the example of this conference, the inability to recognise that experiences are shared rather than oppose each other along lines of gender, meant that the greater aim of this conference was undermined. In the same way, if differences between boys, and similarities between the experiences of girls and boys are not acknowledged and are in fact denied, then the whole process of social justice and the aim of equitable education will not be reached. Denial of difference will mean that the needs of those who are not dominant will continue to be marginalised. The recognition and encouragement of certain kinds of masculinities perpetuates oppression of unrecognised and unencouraged versions. Finally, denial of difference, if motivated by a desire to strengthen the potential of the group, may fail to achieve anything long-term. An equitable education is about embracing difference and plurality. Arguments that suggest that boys need this, and girls need that, deny the differences that exist between girls, between boys, and between girls and boys, and dangerously serve to reinforce certain kinds of femininity and certain kinds of masculinity, which are themselves wrapped up in inequitable and disadvantageous educational outcomes.

## Notes

1. It should be noted that the term 'anti-lesbianism' was never adopted, or even discussed, by the group. In many instances 'homophobia' was used in a way that was supposed to be inclusive of the experiences of women. However, practices demonstrated by this group, and beyond this group, reveal that this implicit inclusion does not have real consequences, and thus I explicitly name homophobia in the experience of women as 'anti-lesbianism'. There are however, moments when 'homophobia' is used where it could be inclusive of both males and females.
2. This group will be referred to as a social movement. According to Fenzetti and Curran (1992: 354) a social movement occurs when a group form around specific issues and organise to promote a particular cause through collective action; when the individuals identify social structures or a social institution as the source of the problem rather than blaming themselves; and when individuals come to see the problems they are experiencing as shared by others like themselves. The participants in the conference planning committee formed around specific issues - experiences of homophobia, anti-lesbianism and heterosexism and its effects - and they organised to promote this cause through collective action - the staging of a conference, and the process of organising this conference. They identified the social structures of heterosexism as the source of the problems, and identified the social institution of education as a central site in the perpetuation of heterosexism, homophobia and anti-lesbianism, and as a site for its disruption.
3. An e-group was set up at the beginning of the planning process to allow group participants, and other interested parties, to discuss issues outside of meeting times and to allow for communication of meeting minutes and general logistics.

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