

The Hidden Curriculum of Bullying

The struggle for true openness and intimacy is a lifelong struggle for all of us, gay and straight alike. And besides, a difficult life brings you to the core of yourself, where you learn what justice is and how it has been fought for. (Monette 1995, 204)

By the time children reach first grade, they are already familiar with what it means to be included or shunned, how it feels to be helped or to be hurt. Students in the early grades have already compiled a significant understanding — or misunderstanding — about what it means to be queer in a heterosexist society. Much of what they learned may be incorrect, born of fear and prejudice rather than factual information. As children grow into young adults these lessons intensify and are learned at home, in the media, and through interactions at school. Sometimes the lessons are brutal, involving bullying that is so persistent and hateful that young people take their own lives, whether they have been targeted for their sexual orientation, gender identity or any other number of reasons. At the time of writing this passage, the parents of a fifteen-year-old boy, Ashkan Sultani, were grieving his suicide, a death they attribute to the intense bullying he experienced at school (Bellaart 2010). The Sultanis are advocating for links to be made between bullying and suicide in suicide-prevention efforts of the Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District where their son attended school.

The Sultanis are among an increasing number of people who are recognizing schools as sites that produce and reproduce social hierarchies. For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, two-spirited and queer (LGBTQQ) identities are often denigrated. Students who claim these identities may be subjected to bullying behaviours that reinforce the “boundaries” of proper gender and sexual identity. But educators and students also have the potential to create an ethos of respect for queer people and to adopt a more radical, anti-oppressive approach in schools. El-Bushra (2000, 82) claims that the “institutions which shape the formulation of destructive identities can also be employed to shape constructive ones.”

Enabling students to construct positive sexual and gender identities requires that transphobia and homophobia be acknowledged and addressed in the thick of conflict in high schools. Some argue that this is beginning to happen. In the past decade, increased attention has been given to bullying

behaviours in schools. One needn't look any further than the daily news to see reports of student "swarmings" or vicious online bullying. School administrators and "experts" have devoted resources to enhance safe school policies and programs that have been implemented in the educational system (Walton 2004). Recently, school administrators, politicians, and the public in Canada have acknowledged that homophobic and, to a lesser extent, transphobic bullying is a concern in schools. That said, we also offer some evidence of a fairly leaden response or failure to respond to ongoing bullying, not only of queer students, but other students who may be easy targets for beatings, threats and shunning.

Relying on evidence of the prevalence of homophobic and transphobic (HTP) harassment among youth, we take as a given that HTP does happen in schools. The sixteen queer youth we spoke with shared retrospective accounts of experiences with HTP in British Columbia (B.C.) high schools. Their motivations for participating were to increase the visibility of queer youth in schools and to raise awareness about how even seemingly innocuous forms of HTP can manifest as a form of "gentle violence."

In keeping with feminist research principles espoused by Dorothy Smith (2005, 225), we treat the sixteen participants as the experts on their own lives and therefore of the HTP they experienced. This book is a venue for their voices, and they are presented throughout. Although research questions were devised before launching the focus groups and interviews, the themes that emerged and the recommendations made are a product of participants' experiences and the knowledge they shared with us.

Terminology

Definitions for the "queer vocabulary" used in this book are listed in the glossary preceding this section. As terms used throughout the book, however, a basic understanding of "homophobia" and "transphobia" would be beneficial. According to the *Routledge International Encyclopaedia of Queer Culture* (Forde 2006, 277), homophobia is "the fear or hatred of homosexuality" and is "based upon the assumption that homosexuality is unnatural or inferior to heterosexuality." Remarkably, the same encyclopedia does not include an entry on transphobia or gender bashing; Shelley (2008) notes how unfamiliar this term is to those in mainstream society. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Canada (Glossary 2009; emphasis in original) offers the following excellent definition of transphobia:

[A] reaction of fear, loathing and discriminatory treatment of people whose gender identity or gender presentation — or *perceived gender or gender identity* — does not match in the socially accepted way, the sex they were assigned at birth. Transgender

people, transsexuals and intersex people are most frequently the targets of transphobia....

Several authors (Birden 2005; Redman 2000; Shelley 2008) believe that using the term “phobia” to explain harassment of LGBTTQ people “suggests a causal explanation for the subjugation of trans [and queer] lives, the thesis that transpeople incite — by their very existence and presence — *fear*” (Shelley 2008, 32; emphasis in original). These authors argue that using “phobia” implies that threats, putdowns and general harassment of queer people stem from individuals’ psychological impairments, a focus that does not address societal and institutional roots. Because of the widespread knowledge of the term “homophobia” and its association with harassment of queer people, it is a term used throughout this work.

“Transphobia” is also a commonly used term in the trans community and this encouraged us to include it as well. For space considerations, we have shortened the phrase “homophobia and transphobia” or “homophobic and transphobic” to HTP in this book.

Distinguishing whether an interaction is evidence of transphobia or homophobia is often difficult, especially in a high-school environment where queer youth may not be “out.” Even where youth are “out” as LGBTTQ, it can be difficult to assess motivations behind their harassment given the tendency to associate certain gendered behaviours and appearances with hetero- or homosexuality.

People often make stereotypical assumptions about one’s sexuality based on gender expression. For example, females who engage in rough-and-tumble sports and who are outspoken are sometimes seen as masculine and perhaps suspected of being lesbians. Conversely, soft-spoken or artistically inclined males may be seen as effeminate and are often presumed to be gay. Gender plays a large role in what is often deemed homophobic harassment, and these events are not just about sexual orientation; discomfort with gender nonconformity is also likely a factor. To emphasize the importance of gender variance in incidents frequently labelled as homophobic, the term transphobia is adopted in this book. “Transphobia” is used broadly and applied to situations where gender variance or gender nonconformity (terms adopted from Wyss 2004) may have been an impetus for harassment. This was often the case for participants in this study.

Finally, the terms bullying and harassment are used interchangeably in this book. This project was not built on a preconceived definition of bullying, an approach that allowed participants’ conceptualizations of bullying to be explored in the discussions. As Walton (2006, 11–12) points out, most research on bullying relies on a “generic conceptualisation” that focuses on “psychological motivations and the policing of behaviour, and thus do not

address negative perceptions of difference that underlie incidents of bullying.” For example, Olweus (1993, 9), a prominent scholar in the field of bullying, defines bullying as “repeated negative action towards a student or students.” Negative actions include intentionally inflicting or attempting to inflict harm verbally or physically, or through social exclusion (Olweus 1993, 9). Walton (2006, 12), on the other hand, says that “the moments now widely known generically as bullying” reflect social anxieties about difference. Traditional conceptualizations, Walton (2006) contends, do not go far enough to acknowledge the normality of bullying nor the normalizing effects that bullying can have on others. As a form of social control, bullying works not only to devalue certain behaviours or appearances, but specific identities as well.

Whether HTP behaviours are termed bullying or harassment, they are not just sporadic incidents perpetrated by one or two “bad apples.” HTP sentiments and their manifestations are the result of widespread heterosexism and rigid gender frameworks (genderism) in society. Indeed, participants in our study discussed how school environments mirror those in the larger society and contemplated how changes in B.C. high schools might effect change in the larger Canadian society.

About Our Study

Research from the U.S. (Kosciw, Diaz and Greytak 2008) and Canada (Egale Canada 2009) offers a glimpse into some contextual factors of HTP bullying: who are the bullies, who are the victims, how many people are involved as bystanders, how often bullying takes place, where it is likely to occur and how harm is manifested. To date, however, there has been an acute shortage of research exploring factors that lead to and characterize homophobic and transphobic harassment in Canadian high schools. We sought to close the gap in research by starting from the assumption that HTP does happen in high schools. Accordingly, we set out to explore experiences with these forms of harassment. Through interviews and discussion groups, we spoke with sixteen queer youth who had recently left a B.C. high school about their retrospective experiences with harassment based on sexual or gender identity in the school setting. Table 1.1 displays the gender identity and sexual orientation of each participant.

We asked each youth about the nature of homophobic and transphobic bullying (i.e., types of bullying, frequency, who was involved, location), and the effects the harassment had on them. Participants were asked to hypothesize about possible causes of HTP bullying and to suggest ways to prevent such bullying in high school. We also asked volunteers to share their positive experiences and outcomes. The weight of research on HTP rests on an assumption of bullying as a “social problem”; this study left room for more

Table 1.1 Demographics of Participants (N=16)

Gender Identity			
Female	Male	Gay/Androgynous	Left blank
3	8	3	2
Sexual Orientation			
Queer/Lesbian, Queer/Gay, Queer, Pansexual	Gay	Bisexual	Left blank
6	7	2	1

Note: Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity. In the descriptions of participants in the quotes, an asterisk means that the young person did not identify either their gender identity or sexual orientation.

positive aspects linked with bullying and its aftermath. For instance, youth shared experiences in which they believed that school staff or classmates were accepting and supportive of their sexual or gender identities. When asked what came to mind when she first heard about the study, one young person said:

For me, the first thing I thought of was a teacher that I had... he was openly gay.... It was his idea to found our school's GSA, I was the founding member. He was so supportive, he was always there to listen, he was always there to back me up on anything, so I just thought of him, like just the support that he provided for me in high school. (Phoenix, queer, androgynous)

As researchers, we struggled with how to convey our findings and use key theoretical concepts without the excessive use of jargon. Writing in a clear manner was important for this book. To borrow from the eminent sociologist Howard Becker, we sought to write in a more accessible and a less obscure, "ceremonial" way (see Becker's 2007 chapter "Persona and Authority"). Becker (2007, 34) says that the desire to be seen as elegant, smart and classy frequently compels social scientists to adopt a writing persona that involves the use of "fancy language, big words for little ones, and elaborate sentences."

With the advent of postmodern and poststructuralist critical theories and their considerable popularity in many disciplines, there has been ongoing critique about the limitations of these perspectives, including their lack of practicality (for example, Leavitt 1999 in the context of Criminology; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985 on social problems theorizing; Sokal, 2008 in the natural sciences; and Norris 1990 and 1992 in literary studies). These critiques are levelled most frequently at “sceptical” postmodernists, who have been described as “pessimistic, negative, [and] gloomy” (Rosenau 1992, 15). Some critics find it easy to discount sceptical postmodernists, viewing them as cynical, even hypercritical, and long on critique but short on constructive solutions. Other critiques of postmodernist and poststructuralist writings are associated with the virtually impenetrable, abstruse writing styles that characterize some postmodern projects. Working through postmodern writings can be gratifying, but this book is not meant to be overly laborious.

Still, theory remains a significant part of this work. As Pfohl (1985, 9) notes, “Theoretical perspectives provide us with an image of what something is and how we might act toward it.” This book is an attempt to balance practicality with useful theoretical insights. A single book will not dramatically change the homophobic and transphobic elements of educational institutions, but a book that is both informed by theory and accessible to various people (e.g., educators, students, administrators, politicians, activists, researchers) will hopefully have more impact than one that is limited to abstract theorizing. We tried to make this book stronger by clarifying abstract concepts and terminology and writing for those interested readers who do not have a background in criminological and queer theories.

Aside from language, other challenges we experienced in conducting our research centred around the lack of data from a Canadian context on which to base our study. There have been recent efforts to examine homophobia in a Canadian context. In some instances, however, the threat of a tarnished identity prevents students from reporting harassment, compels school staff to avoid discussing homophobia and transphobia with their peers and students, and dissuades researchers from exploring harassment motivated by the phobias.

We also want to acknowledge two key frameworks that are not developed in this book. First, we did not engage in a thorough analysis of how cultural background, ethnicity, social class, immigration status and other identities that intersect with sexual orientation may have shaped our participants’ experiences with HTP. We acknowledge, though, that “oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that all oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins 2000, 18). For example, harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity may be compounded by racialized

discrimination and this may especially be the case for people who identify as two-spirit.

According to Lerat (2004, 6) the term “two-spirit” was originally “used by North American Aboriginal societies to describe what Europeans now call Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered and Transsexual people.” Two-spirit was useful for representing male-bodied Aboriginal people who had female intuitions and women who had the physical characteristics of males but still possessed female intuition. Those identified as two-spirit frequently held special status in their communities as spiritual advisors and mediators (Lerat 2004, 6).

Despite holding such coveted statuses in traditional Aboriginal societies, colonization has resulted in the denigration of two-spirit people. The now-defunct Residential School programs in Canada continue to affect two-spirit and other Aboriginal people. Lerat (2004, 6) claims that, “as a direct result of the residential school experience, homophobia is now rampant in most Aboriginal communities, even more so than in mainstream society.” Consequently, two-spirit people are often marginalized in mainstream and Aboriginal communities due to their multiple stigmatized identities.

The second area of analysis not explored in this book is cyber-bullying, a phenomenon that is increasing apace with the recent advances in communications technology. Harassment can happen through texting with cellular phones and through almost any social networking site on the Internet. In their 2008 study, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that over half of the students in their sample experienced some form of cyber-bullying in the year leading up to the survey (Kosciw, Diaz and Greytak, 2008). In Canada, several organizations and websites have been created to address cyber-bullying and promote safe use of the Internet (e.g., cyberbullying.ca, safecanada.ca, and PREVNet).

One area given extra attention in this book is our intention to leaven the negative, even lethal impact of HTP bullying with some degree of positivity. Optimism about our ability to bring about change in society (a characteristic of “affirmative postmodernism”) is an important part of this project (Rosenau 1992, 15). Where oppressive experiences are relayed, we’ve tried to give voice to the agency and techniques of resistance engaged in by participants as individuals, and possibly as part of an emerging social movement against the oppression of high-school students. Additionally, young people’s experiences with supportive teachers or students and the positive effects of their experiences with homophobia and transphobia are presented, accounts often missing from all but the most recent research on HTP in schools. Before presenting findings from our discussions with queer youth in B.C., we turn to some key background information on what is known about homophobic and transphobic bullying.