

The role of gender and sexual relations for young people in identity construction and youth suicide

HEIDI GILCHRIST & GERARD SULLIVAN

Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract

The suicide rate among young people in Australia has caused considerable concern and been the focus of research and intervention. Issues related to sexuality and gender can be the source of conflict for young people within their communities, and have been implicated in suicide attempts. This paper examines the cultural context of youth suicide, and asks how youth suicide may be related to emerging sexual identity, which all young people must negotiate through the customs, discourse and taboos of their society. In particular, it focuses on the situation of young heterosexual women. The findings are based on interviews with 41 young people, parents and youth service providers regarding youth suicide. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, and conducted in a suburban community. They included the use of scenarios or vignettes. Findings suggest that traditional constructions of gender remain widespread, and that these are often disadvantageous to both young women and young men. Parents may be unaware that they have little control over, or even knowledge about, their teenagers' behaviour. Young people are more inclined to confide in their friends, who may not be equipped to deal with crises.

Résumé

Le taux de suicide parmi les jeunes en Australie est une préoccupation majeure sur laquelle la recherche et les stratégies d'intervention se concentrent. Les questions de sexualité et de genre peuvent être source de conflits pour les jeunes au sein de leurs communautés et ont des retentissements dans les tentatives de suicide. Cet article examine le contexte culturel du suicide chez les jeunes et explore le rapport entre ce dernier et l'identité sexuelle naissante que tous les jeunes doivent négocier à travers les coutumes, les discours et les tabous dans leur société. Il se concentre plus particulièrement sur la situation des jeunes femmes hétérosexuelles. Des entretiens semi-structurés et sans limite de durée ont été menés dans une communauté de banlieue avec 41 jeunes, parents et prestataires de services. Des scénarios et des vignettes ont été utilisés au cours de ces entretiens. Les résultats suggèrent que les constructions traditionnelles du genre restent très répandues et qu'elles se font au détriment des jeunes, aussi bien de sexe masculin que de sexe féminin. Les parents peuvent ne pas être conscients de leur manque de contrôle ou de connaissances sur les comportements de leurs enfants ayant atteint l'adolescence. Les jeunes ont plutôt tendance à se confier à leurs amis qui ne sont peut-être pas compétents pour faire face aux crises.

Resumen

La tasa de suicidios entre los jóvenes australianos es un tema de gran preocupación y ha sido el foco de investigaciones y estrategias de intervención. Las cuestiones relacionadas con la sexualidad y el género pueden ser fuente de conflicto entre los jóvenes en sus respectivas comunidades y se relacionan directamente con los intentos de suicidio. En este ensayo analizamos el contexto cultural del suicidio juvenil y nos planteamos en qué medida el suicidio de los jóvenes puede estar relacionado con la identidad sexual incipiente que los jóvenes deben negociar de acuerdo con las costumbres, los discursos y los temas tabúes en la sociedad en la que viven. Abordamos especialmente la situación de

Correspondence: Gerard Sullivan, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, Sydney NSW 2006, Australia.
Email: g.sullivan@edfac.usyd.edu.au

las mujeres jóvenes heterosexuales. Los resultados se recabaron a partir de entrevistas con 41 jóvenes, padres y profesionales de servicios para la juventud en las que se habló del problema del suicidio juvenil. Se llevaron a cabo entrevistas abiertas y semiestructuradas en una comunidad suburbana. También se utilizaron diferentes casos y viñetas en las entrevistas. Los resultados indican que las construcciones tradicionales de género están bien arraigadas y suelen ser desfavorables para ambos sexos. Es posible que incluso los padres no se den cuenta del poco control que ejercen sobre sus hijos adolescentes o incluso que ignoren sus problemas y comportamientos. Los jóvenes tienden a confiar más en sus amigos aunque éstos posiblemente no sepan cómo afrontar las situaciones de crisis.

Keywords: *Young women, young men, suicide, gender, sexuality*

Introduction

Adolescence is a time when young people usually begin to assert themselves as more independent individuals. Developing a sexual identity is often an important component of this process (Bancroft 1990, Graber *et al.* 2001). Gender and sexual identity are inextricably linked. The communities in which young people live play an important role in the construction of identity and provide the cultural context for their development. Research has established this association for young gay men, who are more likely by a factor of between two and three times to attempt suicide (e.g., Gibson 1989, Proctor and Groze 1994, Remafedi *et al.* 1998, Buhrich and Loke 1998, Lebson 2002, Fenaughty and Harre 2003). This paper examines this issue in regard to young, heterosexual women.

Dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity

In the past, biological differences between men and women were largely thought to account for their differences in behaviour, both sexual and otherwise. Many people now acknowledge that gender differences are socially constructed to some degree. This paper takes a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2003) in its understanding of gender and identity, in the belief that many different gendered subjectivities may be experienced by young women and men, and these are constructed both actively from within the individual and by external influences. The construction of individual identity is complex, fluid and changing (Connell 2002). However, there are undeniably dominant cultural constructions of what constitutes appropriate feminine and masculine behaviour, and these exert a strong influence on most young people.

According to Connell (2002), gender categories, while not fixed by nature, are based on the patterns enacted in the politics, economics and mass-culture of contemporary society—what he refers to as the gender order. Traditionally in this gender order, Australian (as with most other Western) women are expected to be sexually passive and submissive in contrast to the ideal masculine role of independence, activity and sexual desire.

It has been argued that with the advent of feminism, subsequent social change that has occurred (e.g., policy, structural changes, awareness) has brought about greater uncertainty for individuals within heterosexuality in general (Segal 1994, Smart 1996) and for heterosexual femininity in particular (Mann 1996, McRobbie 1994). In theory, this social change allows young women to more readily resist conventional femininity by providing more empowering ways of being young, female and sexually active (Holland *et al.* 1996). Similarly, with the changing gender order, young men should in principle find a greater variety of acceptable masculine identities available to them (Connell 2002). This article seeks to show how issues surrounding gender identity and sexuality are of significance in relation to youth suicide.

Youth suicide

Suicide remains the most common cause of death for young people in Australia, accounting for 19.9% of male deaths and 13.1% of female deaths in the 16–19 year age group and accounting for 26.1% of male deaths and 11.6% of female deaths in the 20–24 year group (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004). The higher rate of death by suicide for young men has led to a focus on them, however when attempted suicide is considered, it is clear that there is much distress among young women as well.

In New South Wales, (the largest Australian state, of which Sydney is the capital) for females aged between 15 and 24 years the rate of hospitalization following a suicide attempt has increased by a factor of 3.3 in 1990–1 to 404.9 per 100,000 ($n=1772$) in 2002–3,¹ whereas the rate of hospitalization following a suicide attempt for males aged 15–24 years was 168.4 per 100,000 in 2002–3 (Population Health Division 2004). Concern over the statistics for suicide completion for young men has in some ways led to a relative neglect of the important issue of suicidality in young women.

Public, professional and government concern about youth suicide remains high and has resulted in many attempts at intervention (Commonwealth of Australia 1999, 2000). Much of the research into the nature of youth suicide has focused on individuals and been concerned with the problem of mental health/illness and with identifying individual pathology (Hassan 1995). However, studies that show correlations between youth suicide and various social factors are often unsatisfying in that they do not provide insight into the social processes connecting them. To better understand these in regard to sexuality and gender issues, the current research focused on the cultural context of suicide in order to gain insight into the question of how suicide may be constructed as an option for young women. To answer this question we asked young people, parents and youth service providers about their understandings of youth suicide, how young people experience and respond to stress, what support structures do or should exist for young people in stressful situations, and about the community context within which this occurs.

The study

Much of the evidence that underlies the conclusions reached in this study is based on in-depth interviews with 21 young people (15–24 years of age) and 20 adults involved in the lives of young people (such as parents, teachers, sports coaches, police, youth workers). In keeping with a social constructionist perspective and our interest in the community context of youth suicide, adults were included in this qualitative research project as they influence young people's lives. The participants were all residents of Subcity, which is a fictitious name for a group of suburbs on the fringe of a large Australian city.² The age of participants varied from 16 to over 65 years. A variety of methods was used to recruit research participants, including posted notices; a community newspaper story; personal contacts of the researchers; referrals from other young people, parents or youth service workers (snowball sampling) and selection of key participants from youth or suicide prevention related organizations. We did not specifically target young people who had contemplated, attempted or been affected by suicide. The aim of sampling was to maximize the range of participants in terms of socio-economic background, education institution and level, sex, age, suburb and field of employment (Llewellyn *et al.* 2004). Pseudonyms are used in this report to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

Most interviews took place in participants' homes or workplaces and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. They were all asked nine general, open-ended questions about youth suicide such as 'Do you think youth suicide is an issue in your community?' and 'What do you think can be done to reduce the level of youth suicide?' and then presented with one scenario (or more if time permitted) involving a suicidal young person. The use of scenarios (also known as vignettes) in research is well established as a method to focus participants' attention on key factors and to determine their importance (Rossi *et al.* 1982, Sniderman and Grob 1996, Miles and Huberman 1994, Rahman 1996, Soydan 1996).

Scenarios were drawn from the epidemiological literature about youth suicide and were designed to focus and stimulate discussion related to topical or key issues in the literature on youth suicide in Australia. Other scenarios were used and presented to participants on a rotational basis, designed to stimulate discussion of unemployment, sexual orientation, ethnicity and parental control. Space does not permit discussion of the other scenarios in this article. The scenario discussed in this article described a relationship dissolution:

Jane was in Year 9 at the local high school when she and her friends became interested in boys. She had a crush on Mike who was two years older and was working full-time in the local butcher shop. Jane thought Mike was cute and pretty cool because he had older friends who had cars and did what they liked. Regular parties were held at the local beach with heaps of beer and music. Mike asked Jane along to these parties and soon she began to spend all her time with him and much less with her friends. After a few dates, Jane slept with Mike and not long afterwards he lost interest in their relationship. Jane was devastated and felt utterly alone. A few weeks earlier there had been a lot of talk about a girl from another school who had committed suicide. Jane used the same method to end her own life.

Scenarios were read to participants, who were then asked to discuss whether they felt it was realistic and comment on any aspects that they thought were relevant to the issue of youth suicide in their community. They were also asked who Jane could have gone to for help, as well as who was responsible for the situation arising and what they might do differently. Twenty-two participants were asked to comment on it. Their responses form the basis of this paper. Typical quotes have been selected which highlight issues associated with sexual and gender identity development and their connection to youth suicide.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed into a word processing program, and then coded and thematically analysed with the assistance of NVivo software, according to the principles outlined in Minichiello *et al.* (1995). Patterns and contrasts in the responses given by the participants were identified. Cases were contrasted according to type of participant (young person, service provider, parent) and also by sex using matrix tables (Miles and Huberman 1994). Throughout the analysis, we vigorously debated interpretation of data until we reached close agreement. Case summaries and matrix tables assisted in the identification of themes, and made clearer contrasts and comparisons between different types of participant. Data analysis followed the method recommended in Browne and Sullivan (1999) to maximize the rigour and trustworthiness of the results.

Findings

Without exception, conventional (subordinated) constructions of femininity prevailed in conversations about Jane and young women generally in Subcity. In particular, such

constructions were evidenced in the participants' thoughts about a young woman's sexual reputation, their different sexual expectations for men and women, a young woman's motivations for commencing a sexual relationship and the allocation of blame in a failed sexual relationship. All were suggested by the participants as potential contributors to a young woman contemplating suicide.

Sexual reputation

A sense of the importance of sex and sexual reputation for young women was apparent in several participants' comments, for example:

[Jane is] just feeling used and [is worried about] the reaction from her friends, like they'll look at her and think, 'Oh, what a slut sort of thing'. (Paul, 17)

For most, the idea that young women must protect their sexual reputation and be seen to be sexually virtuous (i.e., inexperienced), particularly at Jane's age, was implied in comments about why Jane didn't seek help. As a school counsellor pointed out:

If she was in Year 9, she wouldn't have been game to tell people that she'd slept with this guy. (Rita, counsellor)

According to a typical mother in the study, having had sex with a young man was something of which Jane would likely be embarrassed:

Well, she was probably embarrassed, you know. She was probably embarrassed that people had heard about what had happened, you know, that she'd slept with him. (Carole, mother)

And in one young woman's opinion, telling parents in particular would be very difficult:

Well, she could have spoken to – I don't know, it's really hard...I wouldn't want to go and talk to my Mum about being with a guy when I was that young. It would be really hard to talk to your parents. (Penny, 23)

In these participants' opinion, young women in situations like Jane's would fear that they would be judged harshly for having had sex with Mike, and would therefore choose suicide over suffering the consequences of such potential humiliation.

In keeping with Holland *et al.*'s (1996) findings, sexual reputations and relationships were seen by the participants, particularly the young people, as being important, but of unequal significance for men and women. Similarly, other research has demonstrated that young women feel under pressure to safeguard their reputations while young men are under pressure to demonstrate theirs (Hillier *et al.* 1999, Holland *et al.* 2000). This was obvious in comments such as Gary's (aged 15), who, (after first saying 'it's hard to say ... it's not like I've ever slept with anybody') exclaimed what an idiot Mike was, that he could find a girl who would have sex with him only to then dump her. However, Gary offered that: 'He [Mike] probably had in mind that, you know, you score as many girls as you can'. According to the participants, what is acceptable for Mike is totally unacceptable for Jane.

That young women like Jane would feel 'used' was the most common description given by participants of both sexes and all ages—implying that young men like Mike get what they want at young women like Jane's expense, and that young men's reputations are possibly even bolstered while young women's are potentially damaged. Evidence for this conclusion

was provided by several participants who assumed that Jane was previously a virgin and that by 'giving' Mike her virginity she had lost something very special. They presumed that part of the reason for her suicide was Mike's abuse of her 'gift':

Losing your virginity is heaps special ... but it has been degraded because some boy used her. And she thought like 'Oh, this is the guy' and then he's left her. (Paul, 17)

Well, she's lost everything hasn't she? She gave up on her friends. She spent too much time with him. So, she lost the friends and then she lost her virginity, and then she lost him and she seemingly has nothing left now. (Carole, mother)

Participants spoke about Jane as if she was deluded or duped into thinking that Mike was 'the one' with whom she would marry. Most participants also accepted that the subsequent rejection was more than she could bear. The situation Jane found herself in was a surprise to no-one in this research (with the possible exception of her suicide)—it was a readily accepted cultural script that went unchallenged. According to most participants, it was Jane's naivety and inexperience that led to her feeling used and rejected, and they lacked empathy or sympathy for young women like Jane.

The pressure on young women to be sexually abstinent can cause conflict for them, as at the same time they are also expected to please their partner (who may be struggling with a different set of masculine standards) and be submissive. It is a no win situation for young women like Jane if they are expected to both resist and, to some extent 'give in' to (assumed) masculine assertion and placate young men with whom they are emotionally involved, but by doing so are seen by large segments of the community as behaving in a sexually unacceptable or inappropriate manner. The opinions of the participants in this study are not new or unusual with regard to young people and sexual relationships. What surprised us, however, was that such attitudes are still so prevalent in an otherwise contemporary, urban community. Nevertheless, research in other communities have reported similar findings (Hillier *et al.* 1999, Holland *et al.* 2000).

Love versus sex

As well as conformity to the double standard of sexual reputation, we found evidence in nearly all the participants' comments about Jane of the stereotype which many authors, including Holland *et al.* (1996) describe, that is women want love, men want sex. It was assumed that women like Jane would only want to have sex with someone with whom she is in love:

I think it [the reason for Jane's suicide] would be the sex issue ... For guys it's a step, but it's not a huge one. With a girl I'd say it would be a huge step—it's a big part of the relationship, but she can't tell her parents because she has just had sex. (Eddie, 16)

She's young, she doesn't know any better. She probably thinks she is going to marry him. (Isabel, 16)

Boys may want a relationship, but they also want to have sex ... and what the girls want more than anything else is a relationship. (Sally, mother)

It is worth noting that, as demonstrated by Eddie's comment above, all the young men interviewed understood the presumed dilemma of love and sex confronted by young women such as Jane, as well as (if not better than) the young women.

Jade's belief (see below) that Jane had sex with Mike to keep him interested is supported in other research which shows that young women are more likely to think of sex as a way of maintaining, keeping and developing a relationship, rather than something to be experienced for its own sake (Hillier *et al.* 1999):

All boys want is sex and sometimes maybe you're not ready when you are in Grade 9 but they are pressuring you and you just want so much to fit in ... You start seeing a guy and you want him to like you and you think you have to have sex with a boy for him to like you. I know a lot of girls who do that. (Jade, 21)

The adults interviewed also believed that Jane was looking for love and their responses suggested that sex should be limited to mature people in committed relationships:

She probably thought Mike was going to last forever, so it was all right to sleep with him because she loved him. But what was love, you know, I mean, what's love in Year 9? (Carole, mother)

Carole struggled to see young women such as Jane as young adults and was quite dismissive of their feelings, indicating what would likely be an unhelpful attitude for a parent if involved with a situation such as Jane's. This indifference to Jane's emotions is not an isolated incident but something that comes through in many of the interviews. Even when there was talk by parents of what could have been done to avoid this scenario, it involved teaching the girls to 'protect themselves', and there was little talk of change of views or values—just education about the way things are:

I know that it is quite common, that once a girl has had sex with a boy he just forgets them. I think there really needs to be – I mean girls need to know that. Guys are really interested in them because they want to have sex with them. There's nothing wrong with that. I mean, that's just the way it is, but girls need to be taught strategies on how to deal with that. If they're happy with that, well that's fine, that's an individual choice. (Sally, mother)

The lack of acknowledgment of alternative feminine and masculine identities was again surprising, as many of the adult participants would have been witness to (though apparently not participants in) the sex and gender revolution of the last 40 years. Interestingly, the most progressive solution provided was to give young women a better education about 'the way things are', rather than a more pro-active attempt to change the way things are. The *status quo* in Subcity did not appear to be challenged by any of the residents to whom we spoke.

Attitudes to young women's and young men's sexual behaviour

Almost half the participants (six of the eight young women and three of the four boys but only one parent and no service providers) expressed the view that young women like Jane were at fault to think that young men had the same feelings as them. They judged that young women should realize that sex means much less to young men. Jade (19) said accusingly:

There were girls at school who started sleeping with guys when they were 13. I mean I was never very good friends with any of them and I know they got used all the time, but to me, they let themselves.

Nowhere was this lack of empathy for Jane more obvious than when the issue of who was responsible for this situation arising was discussed. A variety of views were expressed, ranging from no-one, to society in general, but the most common opinion was that Jane was responsible for her own situation. Adults and young people alike expressed this view, but it was the young women in the study who were most likely to believe this:

Jane should have understood that. I mean what can you say? Guys are going to use girls. (Leanne, 23)

These young women participants knew what was expected of them in their community; knew the penalty for non-compliance (e.g., being ‘barred’ by friends); and therefore had no patience for Jane, who had it all wrong.

Three of the four young men also considered that Jane had brought this upon herself—again judging her for not upholding the standard they expect of young women:

It is her fault. Just because she’s become so sort of, you know, boy crazy and he probably says ‘Oh, I love you’ and she thinks that’s so nice that she just lets him have sex with her. (Paul, 17)

Some might argue that views such as these indicate the influence of feminist thinking and a desire for young women to be more empowered in their relationships. However, we found little evidence of ‘feminist’ thinking in Subcity among men or women. Our understanding is that this quote exemplifies the conservative views of gender relations held by most participants in this research in that many felt that young women should continue to resist men’s sexual advances unless they obtained what they really desire, which is emotional commitment.

This idea of young women like Jane being responsible their own situation, however, was mitigated in the eyes of a number of participants by her young age. Some participants felt that because Jane was only in Year 9 (about 14–15 years-old) she would not have either the knowledge or skills to prevent the situation from arising (that is, to avoid having sex) or the experience to deal with the outcome of such a relationship,

She is only in Year 9 so she is very impressionable and wants to do what is cool. (David, 24)

although he also says:

I think she is responsible for it, she is the one who did it.

Ken, a youth minister, pointed out that ‘if you have only lived a short life then you have nothing to fall back on’ and to Renee (22) the problem was that young people in their first relationships have little relevant experience on which to draw. Stuart, a lifesaving coach, referred to a lack of life skills. David spoke about young people being at an age where they are trying to establish their own identity:

When I was in Year 9 I was going through a lot of changes both physically and mentally ... so I can imagine that she [Jane] is struggling to find her own identity. Then she latched onto someone that she thought was cool.

While some participants realized that young women like Jane were at a vulnerable point in their life, many participants contradicted themselves (see David, for example) by believing she

should have known better. They felt that young women should know that they are too young for sex. This attitude puts women like Jane in another ‘no win’ situation and shed light on why a young woman in circumstances such as Jane’s might come to view suicide as an option.

In contrast to participants’ attitudes to Jane, many saw Mike’s behaviour as predictable (and even acceptable) and nearly half the participants (9 of 22) made comments to this effect. Mike was described as a ‘typical bastard male’ (Renee, 23), and his actions as ‘standard male behaviour’ (David, 24). It was also suggested that Jane was distressed by the break up because she was a woman, and that men don’t feel these things as much:

Well obviously girls are a lot more emotional than boys. If a girl has sex with a guy and then breaks up with him, it doesn’t worry him. But it obviously affected Jane.

The similarity of the young men’s and young women’s responses to this scenario is indicative of a critical area of collusion in the production and exercise of male power. Young women, just as young men, were perhaps responding to what Holland *et al.* (1996) describe as the ‘male in the head’, that is, the ‘surveillance power of male-dominated heterosexuality’ (p. 240). There appears to be little if any alternative discourse of heterosexuality readily available in Subcity. Like the young men, the young women judged Jane and Mike’s behaviour by the only standards they have—those constructed within a framework of male-dominated heterosexuality. These constructions of heterosexuality limit the masculine and feminine identities available to young people. However this discursive control of gender relations is also a potential site for change as there is no single controlling factor, but subtle, diffuse control from many different directions.

The conflicting ideas of a parent’s role

Some participants (particularly the adults) felt there was a lack of positive parental influence in Jane’s situation, suggesting that ‘good’ parents would have prevented it from occurring. For example, Carole, a parent said:

I mean here she was driving around in a car with a guy going to parties where there was alcohol. Well why wasn’t she at home? Didn’t her parents know where she was? That’s the first thing. She shouldn’t have been there in the first place. She should never have been in that situation and so she’s already been let down really. I mean her parents should ... I think—Goodness gracious!

Stuart, a lifeguard and coach, was also adamant that considerable responsibility lies with Jane’s parents:

Look, it’s my personal point of view that if it was my daughter it wouldn’t be happening. It just wouldn’t have happened.

Carole’s 16 year-old daughter Isabel (who was interviewed separately) agreed that her mother wouldn’t have let her get into a situation like this, but she was also quick to point out that parents sometimes have no idea what teenagers are doing:

In Year 9, I wouldn’t have been allowed to go out with someone who was in Year 11 probably, and I probably wouldn’t have wanted to anyway. But they do start young—Year 7—all got boyfriends. It’s true. It’s a lot worse than you think, than everyone thinks—all adults. Like it’s ‘Oh I got with so and so on the weekend, blah, blah, blah’ and it’s over within a week. It’s really disgusting actually.

The young people were more likely to think that the parents wouldn't necessarily be in a position to prevent Jane's relationship with Mike and that they certainly wouldn't have known the extent of the relationship, as Eddie (16) described:

They [Jane's parents] wouldn't know about that [the parties, the beach...] for sure. Not a clue. Even though I don't do anything, parents wouldn't know half of the shit that my mates get up to.

The discrepancy between the control that adults (particularly parents) think they have over situations where their children are involved, versus the control young people think their parents have, was a recurring issue in this research. Young people believed it was the parents who were naïve when it came to teenage behaviour. It seems that parents did not have as much control as they believed in regard to being able to prevent young people from encountering what parents considered 'risky' situations. The parents who participated in this research believed that young teenagers (especially girls) should not be sexually active and that they should be protected from situations where this might be challenged. Given statistics on teenage sexuality, this is often an unrealistic expectation.

Most participants indicated that if Jane had confided in someone then she may not have reached a point where suicide seemed the only option. However, when it came to who she could tell, they were less certain in their views. Almost without exception the participants acknowledged that if Jane did try and tell someone about the way she felt, it would have been unlikely to be her parents. Participants who were parents tended to think that while Jane should have spoken with her parents and that they would have been able to help, even they realized that she was unlikely to want to open up to them. Young people, especially the young men, were more adamant that Jane confiding in her parents was not an option, firstly because they believe 'parents will do anything to prove they are right' (Gary, 16) and secondly because 'I know what would happen if my daughter came and spoke to me' (David, 24)—implying that he would be judgemental and intolerant of this sort of behaviour from his daughter. We found only a narrow range of masculine identities among young men in Subcity which resulted in harsh judgements of all those unable to conform with the hegemonic constructions of gender. That parents may not know about activities and situations in which their children participate, such as that of Jane in the scenario (regardless of whether they have tried to prevent it from arising) seems fairly certain.

The importance of peers

Nearly all participants were in agreement that a critical factor in Jane's suicide was the loss of peer support. Participants believed that Jane may have felt less isolated if she had kept in touch with her friends, without whom it may have seemed to her that she had lost everything. Ken, a youth minister, felt quite strongly on this point:

She has been isolated from her support network by this fellow, so that is very, very sad. At a time when she needed all her friends they weren't there. What a difference that would have made.

While other participants did not appear to share his view, Ken's remark could be read as him blaming Mike for Jane's isolation (although he also stated that her friends were not there for her when she needed them). To this extent, Ken attributes a lot of power to Mike

in the situation and sees Jane as relatively helpless. Leanne (24) was also judgemental, but of Jane, and not very sympathetic:

Basically she had dumped all her friends to go out with this guy and then he's rejected her, so she had no-one.

Most participants thought that distressed young people, such as Jane, should tell their friends what had happened in order to seek help and support, and that if she was going to tell anyone it would be them, although the young women in the study knew that this would be a difficult task. As Penny (23) put it: 'Girls get really bitchy and ostracize someone, especially if they all hadn't had sex'.

Reasons the participants gave for young people not confiding in their friends included embarrassment that people would think that a young woman like Jane was a 'slut'; friends ignoring or ostracizing her; or friends not understanding what she was going through because of their lack of experience. Participants understood the extreme measure of suicide to be an indication of the danger of isolation and lack of acceptance for teenagers in particular. This is consistent with research findings which shows that high levels of peer support are positively related to good mental health (Resnick *et al.* 1997) and points to the importance to young people of feeling strongly connected to their peers, being able to support each other and be aware of appropriate referral opportunities, since they may be the first (and possibly the only) people to have an opportunity to intervene in critical situations.

Conclusion

This research has proceeded from a broadly social constructionist perspective. As such, even in the most conservative and homogenous communities, identities and behaviour patterns are fluid to some degree, and are heavily influenced by daily discourses, interactions and experiences. Contemporary scholarship in the field of gender studies argues for the importance of a range of masculinities and femininities (Connell, 2002; Thorne, 1993; Haywood and Mac en Ghail, 1996). On the basis of this research, we suggest that these views may understate the power and pervasiveness of hegemonic masculinity and traditional expressions of femininity. Given the sex and gender revolutions of the past 40 years and the range of femininities and masculinities lived in contemporary Australian society, how does it come about that the residents of Subcity, who live in a modern city, have such conventional mores and attitudes in regard to gender and sexual relations? Clearly, diversity is not evenly spread throughout the nation.

While we do not claim to represent the viewpoints of all Subcity residents, we did attempt to sample widely and believe our findings to be indicative of prevailing attitudes in the area. It is likely that Subcity's geography and demography offer partial explanations. As a suburban, beach-side community, with a reputation for a good standard of living and quality of life, Subcity attracts residents who value and aspire to that type of life. At the same time, with a large city nearby, young adults who feel stifled by these conventions can escape to live in more diverse or alternative neighbourhoods. In this regard, Subcity is typical of many other communities in Australia.

Our findings are consistent with those of Hillier *et al.* (1999) and Holland *et al.* (1996): the dominant sexual stereotype for young women in Subcity was that of traditional femininity, with concern for protecting their sexual reputation and a desire for romantic love, while the sexual script for young men involves building a reputation based on sexual

conquest. A good many parents contribute to the reproduction of this culture by working more with their daughters to prevent them from being in situations where their sexual reputations may be at risk than with their sons to prevent them from being opportunistic or exploitative.

Parents are often seen as unapproachable by young people struggling to establish their sexual identity because they are perceived to have a conservative stance on sex. Nevertheless, both young women and men perpetuate traditional patterns of sexual behaviour by showing little sympathy for those who do not adhere to them. Feminist perspectives (not to mention gay liberation) as yet have had surprisingly little influence in Subcity when matched against the discursive, surveillance power of male-dominated heterosexuality which is reinforced by parents, peers, the media and schools (Shibley Hyde and Jaffee 2000).

This study indicates that peers are often the first people to be approached by young people who are struggling with a problem related to sexuality or relationships, but that these young confidantes often lack sympathy or understanding. When this occurs in a generally unsupportive, hostile environment, it is not difficult to see why young people who are struggling to establish their sexual identity sometimes come to construct suicide as an option when they resist the constraints of gender stereotypes and traditional sexual mores.

Stewart (1999: 277) writes that the 'conscious recognition of the gendered nature of ... sexual practice opens the way for a diversity of socially legitimate femininities'. Indeed, this might be one way in which young people could learn to accept a diversity of sexual and gender identities. In practical terms, what does this mean? According to Hughes *et al.* (1999, cited in Aggleton and Campbell 2000) young people often describe sex education as too little too late, with an over-emphasis on the mechanics of sex but an avoidance of issues such as confidence, self-esteem, non-sexual ways of showing affection and the pleasurable, emotional and relationship aspects of sexuality. We recommend that a higher priority be given to the timely provision of this information. The attitudes of parents and the wider community regarding sex affect young people's development. Open communication about sex is therefore likely to lead to better sexual health in young people (Aggleton and Campbell 2000). However, such education and support can only be successful if there is an awareness of the existence and limitations of the gender order, so that the gender relations can be revised to offer young people a broader range of gender identities. There is also a need for parents, teachers and other service providers to work together more closely in the roles of educators and carers, to form a partnership to assist young people to cope with stressful circumstances when they are encountered.

In response to concern about youth suicide, many intervention programmes have focused on improving 'suicide awareness', or recognition of the correlates of suicidal behaviour. While this is undoubtedly useful information, it should not be the only prevention method employed. We recommend a far more holistic approach to education about the issue which includes discussion of non-traditional constructions of sexual identity and gender relations (Holland *et al.* 1996). We conclude that improving the sexual health of young people may have important implications for youth suicide prevention.

Although the scenario given to the participants focussed on the effect of this situation on Jane, and accordingly participants spoke more about young women, clearly, young men and gender relations formed an inextricable part of the story and attracted much comment as explanatory factors in the outcome. Like young women, some young men may feel trapped by pressures to conform to culturally dominant constructions of masculinity, which sometimes leads to self-harm. Holland *et al.* (2000) advocate a re-working of the public and

private faces of heterosexuality beyond very limited boundaries which are collectively held and policed in communities such as Subcity, so that young people may safely step outside the dominant ways of being. Risking the opprobrium of significant others in their lives could be at best uncomfortable. Young people like Jane often pay a high price for transgressing sexual mores. An ideology of gender equality shared by peers and adults in responsible positions could help to provide some support.

While mainstream media does not generally play this role, one might have expected the education system to offer alternative constructions of gender relations and for young people to be somewhat responsive to these. This apparently does not occur often in Subcity, or is ineffective. As a desirable, middle class residential area, Subcity may have a more conventional, and possibly older, group of teachers due to low turnover of staff in sought-after schools. If parents prefer a conventional education, there is little incentive or support for schools to do otherwise, particularly if this would result in opposition. Parents who wish for a more progressive education could send their children to city schools. Hence, it is easy to see why the *status quo* prevails.

Current educational theory suggests that appreciation of alternative lifestyles by all members of the community, and manifested in classrooms, homes and general interactions with others, will provide more latitude for young people to negotiate the difficulties of growing up (Hurley *et al.* 2001). An important motivation for communities to adopt this approach could be the opportunity to reduce the risk of suicidal behaviours in young people.

Notes

1. Part of the recorded increase in hospitalisation following a suicide attempt from 1998 may be due to revised protocols for the management of suicide risk.
2. A partner study was conducted in a regional city, the results of which are reported in Fullagar (2001, 2003) and Fullagar and Sandwith (2003).

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