

**CREATING HEALTHY
SEXUALITY FOR RURAL
YOUNG PEOPLE**

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In this paper I'm wanting to explore two issues – firstly, the complex discourses or meanings young people are required to negotiate in becoming sexual. It is my argument that a failure to negotiate these complex meanings puts young women at risk of violence and young men at risk of perpetrating violence. In the second half of the paper I want to take a critical view to community work approaches to violence prevention in rural communities.

My interest in creating healthy sexuality for rural young people arises from my own experiences of growing up in a small rural community as well as the experiences of rural young women interviewed as part of an Honours Thesis in 1989. My Honours thesis focussed on the experiences of unemployed young women in the town of Forbes, in Central Western NSW (Rawsthorne, 1989). What was a constant and unexpected experience for these young women was violence. Their stories suggested my own experiences of violence may not be unique and I decided to look at the issue in greater detail. The teenage years are particularly interesting – they are a time when most people have their first sexual intercourse (Rosenthal & Reichler, 1994; Lindsay, Smith & Rosenthal, 1997) and a time of vulnerability to sexual violence. The incidence of rape for teenagers is, in fact, higher than in any other age group (Hall & Gloyer, cited in Rickel & Hendren, 1992 p 143). It was my hunch that these two factors are not unrelated. My research suggests the need for a serious rethink of current youth policy and crime prevention priorities (see also Wilson & Wyn, 1993; Wyn & White, 1997).

This paper draws on research undertaken for a PhD completed in 2000 (Rawsthorne, 2000). The fieldwork involved interviews with 55 young people in Years 9, 10, 11 and 12 at three different high schools in rural New South Wales. In addition to the interviews with young people, teachers and community workers (such as health workers, police, refuge workers and neighbourhood centre workers) were also interviewed. Workshops were held

with parents and teachers providing feedback on the research and looking at developing strategies to address the issues identified.

My research highlights the complex field of meaning that young people are required to negotiate in order to become sexual safely, or more accurately how many young people were unable to negotiate this complex field and experienced or perpetrated violence. My argument is that given the co-existing contradictory meanings surrounding sexuality we should not be surprised many young women experience violence and many young men perpetrate violence. And, it follows, that meaning is key to violence prevention strategies.

To set the scene I want to firstly look at how this group of young people understands sexuality and sexual violence. These quotes do not come from a single young person but expressed beliefs widely held within the group.

[You] go to a party and stuff like that and everyone else is together and all that and um, you sort of feel left out so you just go along with someone. (Year 9 girl)

Because like if they have been going out for a while, like boys sort of usually want it the first week or so... but if you really don't want to do it then you just don't, but sometimes people are scared to do that because they will say 'oh you're frigid' and stuff like that, so they just go along with it. (Year 11 girl)

Like the guy usually does [initiates sex] but... yeah I'd prefer him to start... I don't know, I think I would be too embarrassed [to talk about what I wanted]. (Year 11 girl)

"Well depends on how far you wanted to go, just sort of keep going and gradually moving and they stop you. You stop if they stop you but if they don't stop you, you go all the way ... plus you sort of know what the girls are like around here so you know whether they'll go all the way or whether they will stop you, so, you just sort of wait for the girl." (Year 11 boy)

She [my girlfriend] tells me, I make sure, um she told me that she used to say things were good just for me and I got mega pissed off... I don't want to do something to her and she is just saying it feels good to please me or she just lays there and I feel like a dickhead later on...

*cause that happened a couple of times and I just said 'just tell me'.
(Year 11 boy)*

*It wasn't what I expected, they sort of, there is this big emphasis on
sex and stuff, like these days, it wasn't what I expected, no I didn't
really enjoy it that much... (Year 12 girl)*

*People are judgmental... ah, if you've had sex and stuff like that,
people have a lesser opinion, some people do... they think I have had
sex too much or something... like I've been called a slut before but
that's about as far as it goes. (Year 12 girl)*

*Like my mum says to me now, she says oh like I have only ever slept
with your father and kissed two other guys and girls they get onto
anyone or, and half of them make love to all these different people she
says it is just revolting [laughter] I can see her point though... (Year 11
girl)*

*Um you would blame yourself [if you were raped] and you would feel
all guilty and all withdrawn, like that, I think [my parents] would be
ashamed that's for sure. (Year 12 girl)*

*Yeah, there was a girl who had a reputation and she said she was
raped and he said no, you have not, and a lot of people have had her
and a lot of people have the attitude that she sleeps around and she
deserves it, sort of thing. (Year 10 girl)*

*I don't think I'd charge him [my rapist] especially being a student and
being in a place like Springfield, it would be everywhere, all over the
papers and that would make me feel worse that everyone knew about
it. (Year 10 girl)*

*None of my friends have been raped or anything, but one of my
friends was forced to have anal sex and she was really crook
afterwards. (Year 12 girl)*

It would seem to me that a range of discourses that co-exist but sometimes contradict shapes these young people's understandings. These include:

Youth sexuality discourse –

- The uncontested position of heterosexual intercourse
- That all young people are 'doing it' and you're 'frigid' if you aren't

- Having sex will change your world

Traditional femininity discourse –

- That ‘good girls’ don’t have sex and those who do are ‘sluts’

Aggressive masculinity discourse –

- That men are driven to have sex and young men who don’t aggressively seek sex are ‘fags’
- Men take the sexual initiative

Within traditional femininity and aggressive masculinity discourses there is a complete absence of autonomous female desire

Responsible sexuality discourse –

- Sex should take place within a ‘committed’ relationship
- Communication is the key

Rural discourse –

- The rural life is more ‘pure’
- Everybody knows everybody (allowing surveillance of behaviour)

Rape discourses –

- Some young women (‘sluts’) deserve to be raped
- Young women are to blame for rape

So young people, in becoming sexual, face a jumble of meaning that operate in different settings and at different times. To explain what I mean lets look in more detail at the discourses at play in the decision to have sex or not. The vast majority of those interviewed believed ‘everyone was doing it’, that is having heterosexual penetrative sex. This belief is shaped by the discourse of youth sexuality. In reality a comparison between self-reported sexual activity and students estimates of their peers sexual behaviour indicates a considerable over-estimation. This creates pressure on young people, both external and internal, towards being sexually active. This gives rise to experiences such as Trudy’s:

You should have sex when it feels right. When you decide you want to and if they are ready for it... I don’t know why I had sex with him, I

guess I was so young. Well I really liked him so I couldn't back down, I don't even know what made me do it. I hate him now.

For Trudy co-existing with this discourse of youth sexuality is a number of at times contradictory discourses shaping the meaning given to femininity. Traditional notions of femininity remain strong in many rural communities, portraying those young women who are sexually active as 'sluts'. Traditional notions of femininity also have a strong romantic meaning, which has led Trudy to equate 'love' with 'sex'. At the same time, feminism has demanded the right for greater self-expression and power for women. Added to this myriad of meaning is the construction of the 'passive female body' within aggressive masculine discourses. It is not surprising then that young women like Trudy (who was in Year 9 when she first had sex) are left confused about what they really want and find negotiating sex difficult. After having sex for the first time Trudy became the subject of gossip due to the heightened scrutiny and attempts to control young people's behaviour evident in small communities employing rural discourses, explaining her comment about 'hating him now'.

At the same time, for young men negotiating consent the field of meaning is also complex. Discourses of sexual responsibility place importance on 'communication' and 'consent', however, many young women indicated they did not want to 'talk about it' and if the boy 'really loved them' they would know what to do (shaped by a romantic discourse). Running almost directly counter to this discourse of sexual responsibility was that of aggressive masculinity which positions men as the aggressor and positions active heterosexuality as central to 'manhood'.

The danger of 'getting it wrong' was very high for both young women – exposing them to sexual violence – and young men – placing them at risk of perpetrating violence. For some young people the only way through this complex field of meaning was to get drunk, as being drunk they could not be held responsible for their actions (whatever they might be). Adding alcohol to this mix makes the situation even more explosive.

How then can we help young people safely negotiate this complex field of meaning? My research suggests that current sex education and violence prevention strategies are inadequate and in some cases damaging for young people. Reflecting community concern about sexually transmitted diseases,

teenage pregnancies and promiscuity most school based education or health programs focus on what I call 'responsible sexuality'. These programs encourage young people to practice safe sex within committed relationships, to avoid the 'dangers' of sex. They are, on the whole, silent about pleasure. In one of the schools I visited considerable focus was given to the importance of sex within relationships. For some young people, influenced by rape myths, notions of aggressive masculinity and youth sexuality, this meant that if two people went out for a while (anything more than a few days) the boy had the right to force the girl to have sex, i.e. to rape her. In another of the schools, the teachers actively participated in the labelling and demonising of a young woman who had breached their moral code by being sexual. The unbearable tragedy of this particular incident was that the young woman was in fact a victim of violence who had been orally raped. Her comment to me was 'they think I'm a slut so I may as well be one'. The 'informed' part of 'informed consent' seems to be missing from the 'responsible sexuality' discourse in its current form in schools and health services.

One possible violence prevention strategy then would be to provide young people with the skills to make 'informed decisions', the skills to 'peel back' the layers of meaning surrounding sexuality. Possibly some of our difficulties as feminists in affecting the cultural tolerance of violence against women arise from our belief that we could rectify or replace such 'false' or destructive discourses. Maybe a more productive political strategy would be to expose the power dynamics embedded in the creation of meaning. So, when young people hear someone called 'a slut' they need the skills to ask who is applying this label, why are they applying this label and what does this label actually mean? Through this they may discover that the label is being applied by adults who seek to control young women's sexual behaviour for religious, moral or health reasons and the label gains its meaning from the assumption that being sexual is wrong. Instead of focusing on creating a 'true' discourse or countering the 'false' discourse of these teachers maybe we could help young people find a language to articulate their own needs and assert these. In this way they could also ask how does this label ('slut') affect their own sexual behaviour and to explore what they really want to do in any given situation. We could help young people understand that consent is not static but requires ongoing negotiation. Just because they have acted one way at one particular

time doesn't mean they have to act the same way next time. It may also help them to understand violence has no place in their sexual relations.

Turning now to the second issue, I want to look now at some specific ideas for violence prevention in rural communities. Whilst my work relates specifically to rural communities it would seem that some of the same issues may be relevant to other small communities such as small non-English background communities or religious communities. I would be interested to hear people's opinion on this at the end of the paper. What these communities have in common is a predominance of strong ties, with people knowing each other well and possibly having multiple connections, such as neighbour, teacher, soccer coach. These communities, due to geography, language or religion have minimal 'weak ties', that is people who have only a fleeting relationship with the community. Interestingly, communities dominated by strong ties have been shown to have a propensity towards interpersonal violence (Wilkinson, 1991; Hogg & Carrington, 1998). Social stability and healthy communities require a network of weak and strong ties (Wilkinson, 1984, 1991; Granovetter, 1973).

Rural young people's experiences are shaped by both physical and cultural factors. In general, they live in smaller, more stable, communities affected by distance and poor or non-existent public transport. These communities are characterised by the strong ties between people, that everyone knows everyone at least at an acquaintance level. Whilst many rural communities now have some community services these are affected by cultural factors, particularly the lack of anonymity. It is, however, the cultural factors that make naming and dealing with sexual violence so difficult. Our stories, art, literature, music and history abound with idealised images of rural life (Kapferer, 1990 p 87). This rural idyllic discourse portrays rural life as egalitarian, independent, robust and rural people as concerned with the family, Christian faith, sexual moralism and reward for effort (Verrall, Ward & Hay, 1985 p 21). Rural life (and its values) is often juxtaposed to urban life which uncaring and dangerous (Dempsey, 1990 pp 35-37). These images shape how rural people see themselves and serves to obscure the more oppressive aspects of rural life, including a cultural tendency towards conservatism, resistance to change and discrimination (Hillier, Warr & Haste, 1996 p 6; Share & Lawrence, 1997; Kapferer, 1990).

Naming, prosecuting or even seeking to prevent sexual violence is a fundamental breach of the rural idyllic discourse, of how rural communities understand themselves. Women who breach this discourse to name violence are rarely believed, usually blamed for the violence, find their experiences dismissed and are often excluded from the community (Dempsey, 1990 pp 32-33). It is my contention that in this setting an orthodox community work approach to dealing with violence is unlikely to succeed. An orthodox approach to this situation would be for the community worker to immerse themselves into communities, to gain the communities trust and work with the community to bring about change (see for example Beresford & Croft. 1993; Walmsley et al., 1993). In order to gain 'acceptance' within the community, however, workers need to share the rural idyllic discourse. Once the worker shares this discourse they are brought within a network of strong ties, with expectations and responsibilities, that make a critical perspective very difficult (Killen, 1996).

In my research this was evident for most of those mandated to support the victims of violence – such as police, refuge workers, teachers and health workers). Perpetrators, or more importantly their families, were known to these workers. In deciding to act on an allegation of violence these workers had to weigh up the risk to their standing in the community, their friendships, and on many occasions decided to disbelief or not support the victims. Criticism of their town (implicit in an allegation of sexual violence) is simply not accepted, with rural communities being very skilled at closing rank around the locals and excluding anyone that challenges the community's views of itself (see also Macklin, 1997). The sexual assault worker in one of the communities I visited had been harassed, abused and disbelieved by members of the community, other workers (particularly the police), since taking on the job. It is little wonder that services find recruiting staff to such positions difficult.

For workers who the town had become 'home', particularly those not directly dealing with the victims, it was sometimes easier to turn a blind eye. It would seem to me that successful violence prevention work in rural communities requires a critical understanding of your own position within the community. I'm not suggesting that it's simply a matter of going in all guns blazing, naming all the perps in town and thinking this will bring about change. Workers need to be aware when their relationships within the town may

influence their decision-making and find strategies to overcome this, such as referring particular matters to a regional decision maker. Community workers in rural communities, by the nature of the strategies they employ, quickly become enmeshed in a network of 'strong ties'. An awareness of this will enable them to reduce their enmeshment and actively cultivate weak ties. For example, by physically living outside the community they may maintain a degree of separateness or weak tie. If it is simply not possible to maintain such separateness, workers need to network with statewide organisations such as Family Planning, Rape Crisis, Dymphna House and the Domestic Violence Advocacy Service to introduce 'new' ideas or services to the community. New technologies, particularly the Internet may also provide an important weak tie for many communities. In my research I gave a number of young people information about 1800 free-call services. These young people understood their problems would not be dealt with confidentially or necessarily with empathy within their community. These statewide organisations from outside the community can challenge community norms without risking their position in the community. Interestingly, a number of health workers saw my research as an opportunity to raise the issue of violence among young people, seeing me as a weak tie.

To conclude, I want to acknowledge the difficulty we face in preventing sexual violence. It would seem a clarity of thought and an ongoing review of political strategy is required. It is for this reason that conference such as this is so important. Whilst I am not surprised I am saddened that so many young people fail to negotiate the complex meanings surrounding sexuality safely. They are faced with a myriad of meanings that they simply do not currently have the skills to 'peel back'. Community workers in rural communities face specific challenges in seeking to prevent violence. An orthodox approach will see them quickly 'caught' in a network of strong ties, inhibiting their ability to do their job. The notion of 'strong' and 'weak' ties may provide a strategy to deal with this.

It is my hope that through this conference we are all reinvigorated in our efforts to prevent sexual violence – sadly the need continues to be urgent.

Thank you.

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