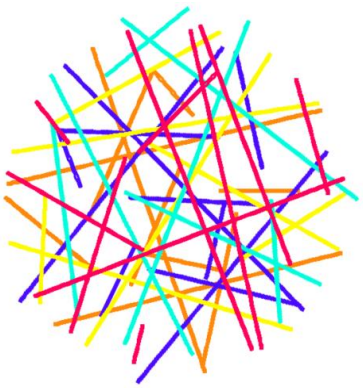
Engaging Young People in Sexuality Education Research Project



Position Paper No. 2: Gender theories

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The *Engaging Young People in Sexuality Education Research Project* (*EYPSE*) aims to enhance the sexual health of young people in Australia by improving sexuality education in secondary schools. How gender is understood and theorised is an important aspect of the project. Gender is one of the key lenses to examine and explore sexuality education in schools, yet it is often conspicuous by its absence in what young people learn.

If gender is examined it is overwhelmingly discussed in terms of biology, where there are presumed to be binary categories of female and male which are similar regardless of sexuality, class, ability, geography, culture, or history (Connell 2009). Such a framing ignores the ways in which gender is socially produced, constructed, and contested by young people. Dominant discourses in (Western) society position sex, gender, and sexuality in alignment, where social relations and institutions are based on a two gender, heterosexual model which is viewed as 'natural', and is what many scholars in the field refer to as 'heteronormative' (Holmes 2007, p. 21). In some cases, sex and gender are used interchangeably, as matching immutable categories. The view that gender is socially or discursively produced rather than 'natural' was well articulated as early 1949 by Simone de Beauvoir's well-known declaration in *The Second Sex* that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'

(Beauvoir 1972, published in French in 1949). The *EYPSE* research project views gender as socially and discursively produced and performed in interaction with institutional, social, and cultural contexts where gender is 'actively created in social processes' (Connell 2009, p. 30). Hence, gender is 'an ongoing situated process, a "doing" rather than a "being"' (West and Zimmerman 2009, p. 114).

The theorising of 'gender', which is socially and culturally produced, has been written about by feminist theorists, amongst others, since the 1970s. The word 'gender' itself was used by feminist writer Ann Oakley (1972) in the early 1970s, in an attempt to distinguish biology (sex) from culture (gender). Oakley's work on gender was inspired by the sex and gender distinctions used by psychoanalyst Robert Stoller (1968) who specialised in gender identity issues. Oakley argued that different cultures have different ideas about gender but that each society believes that their understandings of gender 'correspond to the duality of sex' (1972, p. 158). This distinction where sex related to biology (female/male) and gender related to society and culture (women/men, femininity/masculinity) was important in order to disrupt the presumed biological basis to behaviour, particularly as it resulted in the privileging of men (as a group) over women (as a group). From this perspective, gender differences were no longer viewed as 'natural', unchangeable biology (Connell 2009). One of the ways in which this approach was used was to theorise gender in relation to a process of socialisation into gender roles. While socialisation is said to occur throughout life, the focus is often on babies and children, who are thought to take up the gendered messages they receive from society, particularly their parents (Holmes 2007). This model helped to further critique the idea of gender as 'natural' and unchangeable, but failed to account for contradictory messages about gender (Holmes 2007), the pleasure and resistance that go into learning about gender practices (Connell 2009), and the implications of power (Connell 2009). In addition, the sex/gender perspective broadly has been critiqued because sex is viewed as more 'real' and secure than gender because it is perceived to have a biological base (Connell 2009, p. 59).

This earlier thinking about sex/gender and gender roles was important in viewing gender as a social construction. Social constructionism is characterised by a rejection of biologically determinist explanations, and the notion that identities are fixed or natural. Instead, social constructionism relies on social explanations for how identities are formed, with a particular recognition of cultural and historical settings. Thus, as Chris Beasley argues, '[r]ather than attending to what people *are*, Social Constructionism is concerned with what *people do together*' (2005, p. 99, emphasis in original). Thus, gender is socially constructed because it is produced, created, and maintained in interactions. In many societies, gender is currently constructed as a two gender model of 'men' and 'women' where minimal differences (mainly relating to bodies and reproduction) are made to be significant by the cultural production of (and emphasis on) difference (Connell 2009). Yet, as Raewyn Connell writes, '[s]exual reproduction does not cause gender practice, or even provide a template for it' (2009, p. 68). Furthermore, this production of fixed binary genders which are sexually attracted to each other ignores and excludes the multiplicity of practices and identities relating to gender and sexuality. This has significant implications for young people who are gender diverse or transgender. For example, a recent Australian report found that two thirds of gender diverse and transgender young people surveyed viewed school sexuality education as inappropriate to their needs (Smith et al. 2014, p. 51). Another Australian report surveying same-sex attracted and gender questioning young people found that the sexuality education they had experienced often focused on heterosexuality, and was at times even homophobic (Hillier et al. 2010, pp. 84-86).

We have found the work of Connell to be particularly useful for conceptualising gender as historically and locationally specific. In other words, she theorises how what may be viewed as relating to biological bodies are read, produced, and created differently in time and place. Emphasising the way in which a two-gender model is constructed, Connell writes:

> Whenever we speak of 'a woman' or 'a man', we call into play a tremendous system of understandings, implications, overtones and

> allusions that have accumulated through our cultural history. The 'meanings' of these words are enormously greater than the biological categories of male and female. (2009, p.83)

In addition, Connell's (1987; 2005) work is significant in that she moved away from singular conceptions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' to theorise multiple masculinities and multiple femininities which are historically and situationally constructed and hierarchically positioned. Gender is relational, where masculinities and femininities are created and structured in relation to one another, as are multiple forms of masculinities, and multiple forms of femininities (Connell 2005). Connell (1987; 2005) theorises a hierarchical framework of gender, where hegemonic masculinity (the culturally exalted form of masculinity which works to uphold the current gender order) is positioned at the top. Hegemonic masculinity is produced in relation to other masculinities, which are complicit or subordinate to it, and all femininities, which are subordinated by it. While Connell's theories have received some critiques, such as for her tendency towards a modernist understanding of identity and power (see, for example, Beasley 2012), they offer key ideas relating to the plurality of gender practices and the unequal power relations between them.

A more thorough-going theory of gender as socially produced can be found in feminist post-structuralist theorising. In this broad approach, gender tends to be viewed as produced in discourse where, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, discourse is defined as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (1972, p. 49). In the context of the *EYPSE* research project, this means there are multiple discourses about gender and sexuality which compete for claims to 'truth'. Certain discourses are privileged over others where they are supported in social practice and gain institutional support, thus they subvert, but do not erase, competing discourses (Jones 2011). Power is produced and mobilised in discourses, rather than held by particular people. Importantly, in post-structuralist theory, 'maleness and femaleness do not have to be discursively structured in the way that they currently are' (Davies 2003, p. 12). We draw on the work of Judith Butler (1999)

who theorises gender as a repeated performance, where there is no 'true' or 'original' gender identity behind the performance. Butler's concept of gender as performative positions people within discourses, where they have access only to the particular discourses about gender which currently exist and which are available to them (Holmes 2007, pp. 61-62). Butler theorises the heterosexual matrix, similar to the idea of heteronormativity, which highlights and critiques the construction of the 'natural', particularly the ideas that sex and gender match and that heterosexuality is the norm:

> I use the term *heterosexual matrix*... to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized... [I] characterize a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (1999, p. 194 note 6, emphasis in original)

Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose (2008) show that while the heterosexual matrix is pervasive, their research with tween and teenage girls demonstrates ways in which it can be resisted and disrupted.

The different understandings of gender discussed above are at least partially reflected in the way in which gender is conceptualised in sexuality education. Jones (2011) provides an analysis of sexuality education discourses, categorising them under four overarching approaches: conservative, liberal, critical, and postmodern. According to Jones, conservative approaches have a 'bi-polar' view of the contents of sex, gender, and sexuality (there are only feminine heterosexual females and masculine heterosexual males), where anything outside of this is invisible or pathologised. Liberal approaches have a similar 'bi-polar' approach but recognise that there is some diversity, whereas critical approaches take this further and actively support some aspects of diversity which differ from the 'bi-polar' approach,

viewing these as equal alternatives. Finally, the postmodern approach views sex, gender, and sexuality as able to be explored and deconstructed by students.

The *EYPSE* research project is being conducted in South Australia and Victoria, states which lead Australia in their approaches to sexuality education and have a national reach. However, it is still the case that '[o]verwhelmingly, school-based sexuality education uses the notion of gender in heterosexualised and traditional terms' (Harrison and Ollis 2015, p. 318). The key resources, policies and programs developed in both states (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2004; 2008a; 2008b; 2011; SHine SA 2006; 2011), draw on the *Talking Sexual Health National Framework* (Commonwealth of Australia 1999). *Talking Sexual Health* (1999) discusses gender as a social construction, arguing that education should include issues about gender, including in relation to power and equity. This document supports some aspects of diversity in relation to sexuality, and includes a brief critique of the presumed heterosexuality in sexuality education programs in the 1990s. Victoria's 'Catching on' resource includes the following description of gender: '[w]hile sex differences are understood as biological, gender differences refer to those behaviours and attitudes which are learned through day-to-day activities and practices. Gender behaviour and attitudes change and are changeable' (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2004, p. 25). A similar definition is used in the South Australian curriculum resource 'Teach It Like It Is 2', which emphasises gender as a social construction, defining gender as '[s]ocially constructed expectations about what is acceptable to be masculine or feminine, including behaviour, dress, interests. Varies in history and in different cultures' (SHine SA 2011, p. 269).

For the *EYPSE* research project we use gender as a key lens to explore current practices in secondary schools, as told to us by students. Our project is positioned within the broader context of current work which is supportive, expansive, and inclusive in terms of gender and sexuality, reflected in initiatives such as the Safe Schools Coalition. Furthermore, the project is based on the premise that young people can reflect on and inform us about their experiences of sexuality education,

and that this should be taken seriously in curriculum development and pedagogy. However, we note that there are potential tensions in terms of how we approach gender theoretically and the impact of dominant gender discourses influencing how students may understand and experience gender in their own lives. Students are situated in a society in which dominant understandings of gender centre on a binary two-gender model, and many students may derive pleasure and security from some of the normative expectations relating to their gender. It is also likely that students may resist and subvert dominant gender and sexuality discourses in multiple ways. Through our research with secondary school students about their experiences of sexuality education, we explore the ways in which gender is learnt and constructed, and what this means for improving sexuality education.

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