

SIX

The Ideology of "Fag"

The School Experience of Gay Students

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(completed for publication by Dorothy E. Smith)

Gay and lesbian youth attend schools throughout the nation. . . . These students—from every ethnic and racial background, in urban, suburban, and rural schools—have sat passively through years of public school education where their identities as gay and lesbian people have been ignored and denied. They have done this because of their own fears and isolation, and because of the failure of gay men and lesbians to effectively take up their cause.

—E. Rofes, "Opening Up the Classroom Closet"

THE IDEOLOGY OF "FAG" is key to the organization of the heterosexual/homophobic dimensions of the school regime. It is a practice in language. Mikhail Bakhtin's work is used to devise ways of "seeing" social organization in the speech and graffiti in which the ideology of "fag" is realized in schools. His conception of the dialogic explicates the relationship between researcher and informants, as well as the dialogues internal to informants' narratives. Excerpts from their stories create windows into the local practices of the ideology of fag as they experienced it and made available the social organization of their everyday school lives. Analysis focuses on how speech, whether as verbal abuse or homophobic graffiti, conceals antigay activities, articulating to the wider organization of gender and the school as a regime.

Informants' stories describe how fag as a stigmatized object is constituted in "gossip." Aspects of youths' appearance are interpreted with reference to fag as an underlying pattern. Everyday practices of "fag-baiting," such as poking fun, teasing, name calling, scrawling graffiti on lockers, insulting and harassing someone, produce the fag as a social object. The language intends a course of action isolating the gay student and inciting to physical violence. Verbal abuse both is and initiates attack. As a form of public speech, graffiti constitutes a depersonalized form of threat and harassment. Whether a gay student is identified as fag or not, he acquires a gay identity/consciousness through the practices of the ideology of fag.

What this chapter describes is a normal part of school organization. The social relations of heterosexuality and patriarchy dominate its public space. Being gay is never spoken of positively (in these informants' experience). Teachers are reported as being generally complicit by their silence if not actively participating in the ideology. Attacks on and ostracism of gay students are taken for granted. The heterosexism of the regime makes fag the stigmatized other, and reflexively, "fag" as stigmatized other feeds into the regime's heterosexism. Thus, the gay students' stories show the school's complicity in the everyday cruelties of the enforcement of heterosexist/homophobic hegemony.

This study investigates and reports on the treatment gay youth receive in school and on the effect this has on their education and ultimately on their lives. It is part of a collaborative project, funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, researching the everyday school experiences of gay and lesbian teenagers. My colleague, Didi Khayat (1994, 1995), researched the school experience of lesbians, and I investigated the situation of gay males. This chapter is a report on what I learned from the gay youth I talked to. My interest in this topic comes out of my own educational history as a gay youth who went through high school and then on to a career in elementary and secondary school teaching before going on into graduate studies. It has also been influenced by my involvement, during the 1970s and 1980s, in the Canadian Gay Liberation Movement.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

I interviewed gay young men about their school experiences. I talked to individuals who were either still in school or who had left school just recently. I wanted my information to be current and sufficiently detailed in order to describe how they were actually treated in contemporary schools. The informants whose stories are the data for this study were treated not as objects of study but as individuals knowledgeable about how schools work, at least as far as students are concerned (Devault, 1990).

The research approach is that of institutional ethnography, which rests on the ontological presupposition that an actual world exists that people actively bring into being and that can be studied and described. The part of this world I was interested in was the current educational regime—a particular system of education based on a specific set of social norms. The interviews opened various windows on different aspects of the organization of this regime. Each informant provides a partial view; the work of institutional ethnography is to put together an integrated view based on these otherwise truncated accounts of schools. The aim is to describe the heterosexist/homophobic social relations of the current educational regime in schools.

The interviews were designed reflexively to create a dialogue between two gay individuals, myself and my informant, about the school experiences of gay students. The dialogic character of the interviews was essential to this reflexivity. I located myself as someone who, after a thirty-year hiatus, was catching up on how schools treated gay students. Critical to establishing a dialogue was, first, that my informant was assured that he was not the object of study—schools were—and second, that he felt in this situation that he was someone who knew more about his school than I did. I was there to learn from him. These and similar procedures organized taking up schools from the standpoint of gay students.

In locating informants, I started with a community organization in Toronto, Lesbian and Gay Youth Toronto (LGYT), as a source of informants. The group met each Tuesday evening at a community center in the heart of Toronto's gay community. At the beginning of each meeting there was an opportunity for me to advertise for informants. This I did on three or four occasions. The contacts I made sometimes referred other students to the study. I also recruited informants from my contacts in the gay community. Didi Khayat, my research colleague, also referred gay students to me from her contacts with her lesbian interviewees. Last, I recruited some "street youths" from a Toronto community service agency, the Street Outreach Services (SOS).

Very few of my informants were still attending secondary school at the time they were interviewed. Some were university undergraduates who had recently graduated from high school. They were bright, articulate, self-selected individuals who had often given considerable thought to their high school experience. Some of them arrived for their interview prepared to give witness to their school experiences. For example, one brought in his high school notebook with the pages marked where he had recorded, as part of a very systematic practice of note-taking, the homophobic remarks made by one of his teachers. It became clear, however, that most of these students had been "in the closet" during high school. They had finished high school and gone on to a university. Nonetheless they could describe the harassment of gay students who were "out" at school and who eventually for the most part "dropped out" before completing high school.

This latter group bore the violence of high school homophobia. It became clear to me that the school experiences of students who were "out" would be different from those who were "in the closet." I wanted to capture this difference as part of my work. To do so, I arranged to interview "street kids" who were SOS clients. Unlike the IGYT interviewees, the agency staff selected these young men. Whom I interviewed depended on who turned up that day, provided they were willing to be interviewed. All of the young people I talked to from this agency had "dropped out" of school, and one reportedly had attempted suicide. All but one of these individuals "dropped out" because they were discriminated against for being gay. Interestingly enough, like their college counterparts, most of these young men had been enrolled in an academic program. They were bright, engaged, and engaging.

The gay and bisexual students interviewed were clear, at this point in their lives, about their sexual orientation. Some realized from an early age that they were "different," while others had only recently determined their orientation for sure. One student said categorically that he had always known he was gay. Another said he had "funny feelings around age nine" and "that by age twelve [he] knew without a shadow of a doubt" that he was gay. What struck me about these young men was the positive attitude they had about being gay, although this was probably tied to the fact that they were largely self-selected and all were "out" at the time of interview. It was equally clear, however, that they had this attitude in spite of their schooling. Here is an example, a story told by one of the informants.

INTERVIEWEE: So when I was reading my speech [in class], the principal happened to walk in just as I admitted that I was, in fact, gay. As far as I can remember his chin hit the floor, he was so flabbergasted . . . and called me to the office afterwards.

RESEARCHER: He called you to the office. And what happened there?

INTERVIEWEE: Basically he warned me that if I didn't keep my sexual preference under wraps that I'd be suspended. And I said, "Well it's my business, and if I want to share it with people it's up to me; nobody can tell me not to tell other people who I am . . . 'cause I'm not afraid of it, so why should I be?" That's basically what my attitude was back then and still is. I was suspended for being rude and insubordinate.

What was typical of these young men, in the end, was their straightforward attitude toward their sexuality. What emerged over and over again was a strong belief that they were not the horrible people others made them out to be simply because they were gay. My informants, whether high school students, university students, or "street kids," viewed their sexual orientation as a

normal, natural part of themselves. This self-knowledge and clarity of identity stood in stark contrast to the popular conception most teachers, administrators, and fellow students held of homosexuals and homosexuality.

Gossip and the Ideology of "Fag": The Social Organization of Stigma

The fag as stigmatized object is constituted in "gossip." Gossip projects the fag as object of the ideology's activities; a fag is pivotal to their actualization even if one has to be invented.

RESEARCHER: How often would they occur? Who was beaten up? People they just thought were fags?

INTERVIEWEE: Yeah. I would say the last point is really the most important. It's quite often that they were only people perceived to be fags. I don't think that half the time, they ever really were. Or half the time what people . . . if people really knew what a fag was, to be that intent on determining whether that person's sexual orientation was one way or the other. What it would entail was, depending on the circumstances, I mean, I . . . there was a few times where fights would break out in the cafeteria I recall, but more often it would happen after school. Somebody would be sort of systematically singled out, and a group of people would harass that person, and if a fight ensued, then usually it wasn't in the individual's favor. There would usually be a number of people involved, even if it was only one person who was actually physically beating on that person.

Within the ideology of fag, characteristics made visible by the organization of gender are seen as documenting the "underlying pattern" of fag. Here the documentary method of interpretation enforces the difference, required by heterosexual hegemony, between what is properly male or female. Characteristics that blur this boundary (e.g. effeminacy, being "bookish" or unathletic) document the underlying pattern of fag. This is not just a mental activity, as the documentary method of interpretation seems to imply. Rather, it forms a social course of action contextualized by the relations of gender. Identifying a fag, and thereby engaging the ideology, is an activity usually organized within a group of male heterosexual students.

INTERVIEWEE: I mean, it was assumed that you were heterosexual, and I think that more than anything was my biggest problem. So maybe it's more productive to talk about heterosexism than homophobia, because it was just assumed that you were, and if you went to a school dance and you

knew more than one or two steps then you were a fag. If you made any conscious attempt to look well dressed or were perceived to dress "funny"—you know, in quotations—you were a fag.

The above interview excerpt points to the social character of being labeled "fag." Finding the fag is socially, indeed dialogically, organized in speech, primarily through gossip, and, as we see below, sometimes textually in the form of graffiti. The interpersonal organization of gossip as the activities of speakers and listeners, writers and readers, makes this a piece of social organization there to be described.

RESEARCHER: What about this kind of gossip or that kind of thing, what form did that take?

INTERVIEWEE: Primarily it would be comments overheard in the halls as people were at their lockers and someone would walk by and either an explicit comment would be yelled at them, such as "fag," "queer," or "cock-sucker," sometimes, and either that or you'd hear little whispers like, "She's a dyke," or "I hear she lives with another woman," or whatever, or "Avoid her in the showers," whatever, something like that, so it was to my mind very, very petty backbiting sort of . . .

I want to examine more carefully two informants' accounts of activities in which the fag as stigmatized object operates as a coordinative device. The first is a report of graffiti scrawled near a men's toilet; the second reports an English teacher's routine comments to students hanging out near the men's toilet at an alternative high school. The similarities of these accounts—the same rhetoric is in both—points again to the generalized character of the ideology of fag.

RESEARCHER: Was there any sort of graffiti on the walls or any jokes or anything like that? Can you tell me anything about that?

INTERVIEWEE: Okay, in this one washroom in the school, it was like downstairs, there was like graffiti written on the walls and, "Anyone found going in this washroom, we will know is . . ."

RESEARCHER: Is queer?

INTERVIEWEE: "Anyone caught going in this washroom, we know is a faggot."

INTERVIEWEE: Even the English teacher . . . [who] was really the most open-minded, the most nonconformist, in the sense that he dressed always in whatever he wanted to. No other school would see a teacher dressed like that. The thing is he went to the students' . . . the lounge for

the alternative school was right . . . outside the lounge there were two doors—one for the women's washroom, one for the men's washroom—and therefore a lot of students would just . . . instead of going into the lounge to talk to other students, they'd just stand outside, as they were passing each other by, and they'd just talk. So the men would be standing beside the men's washroom, and the English teacher would walk by and often say, "Oh you know what they say about guys who hang out by the washroom." So they have things like that constantly.

Both of these accounts show how producing fag is organized in language among writers and readers, speakers and hearers, active in particular social settings. In the first excerpt above, the social character of the activity is textually mediated in the writing and reading of graffiti. The exchange that produces a fag connects the writer and readers of the text. Reading the graffiti "activates" the text, coordinating a social course of action—a form of consciousness. Even if nobody was seen using this toilet, everyone is alerted to be on the look out for a possible fag. Every reader has learned from the text one way of identifying a fag. Every reader has been given a basic lesson in homophobia in learning how to produce a fag as a stigmatized object. Thus, the social organization generated by the text shapes the consciousness of students, setting up this course of action as potential, waiting to be actualized, waiting for the opportunity to produce a "fag" on some appropriate occasion.

In the second excerpt, producing the "fag" is locally organized in the talk between teacher and students. In this instance, the teacher's remarks engage the process and coordinate it as a course of action. Most probably the teacher is using this "joking" form of queer baiting as a method of control—that is, to stop the students from congregating in the hallway. His remarks deploy the same rhetorical device as the graffiti. In this case, the dialogic organization is striking. Students are hooked as listeners into a discourse already being carried on by others—"Oh, you know what they say . . ." The teacher's remarks teach the documentary method of interpretation that produces the fag as a stigmatized object.

Informants reported a range of antigay abuse and violence. These activities, as with finding the fag, were organized through utterances, whether as talk or text. Informants could not describe what had gone on in their schools without remembering or reconstructing comments, snatches of conversations, or graffiti scrawled on students' lockers, toilet cubicles, or school walls. The utterances they recalled included their own internal conversations. My informants were caught up in the organization of these ideological practices and how they were located by them as gay men. Through them, they came to identify themselves as gay, if they had not already done so, and to experience being gay in school as isolation.

VERBAL ABUSE: ACCOMPLISHING THE IDEOLOGY OF "FAG" IN TALK

The peculiar form of social organization I have called the "ideology of fag" is assembled reflexively: The language used intends a course of action, and the resulting course of action actualizes what is latent in the rhetoric of fag, for example, by isolating the gay student or subjecting him to physical violence. Carrying out such a course of action accomplishes what speech has already intended. The pivotal role of language in this process displays the reflexivity of the course of action. Verbal abuse identifies the stigmatized object, thereby marking him for attack, but is itself part of the attack. The organization of the activity is both in and coordinated by talk.

In the following accounts, informants make use of their knowledge of how antigay speech works and how the social organization of homophobic courses of action unfold in school settings, starting with talk and ending in physical violence. Each of the following examples gives a different account, but all reflect the same social organization. It is the ubiquity of this form of organization that locates the generalized form of the ideology of fag. This property does not rely on the procedures for arguing from a sample to a population (in a sense, I am not concerned with individuals here) but on the actual recursive organization of constituent practices. The generalized ideology of fag is part of the real world, there to be described.

RESEARCHER: Can you give me some examples of how you determined that it [homosexuality] was "fiercely taboo," as you put it?

INTERVIEWEE: I think just the language, and what you would overhear in the hallways, just being very negative. Okay, if a few people did talk about people being gay, then that would be immediately followed by not associating with this person, ostracizing this person, often actually following through and doing that, harassing the person on a regular basis, to their face.

The practical work of identifying gay students and attacking them is a course of action with a distinctive social organization. I have described how the ideology of fag is put in place through the use of language. Its effect is to isolate the individuals identified in a variety of ways. This process I call "entering" the ideology of fag. One student, at the time in the closet and so with no problems at school arising from his sexual orientation, described how an "out" gay friend was treated to what he calls "ignorant comments." He reported that his friend "didn't have that many friends. People just kept away from him." The use of what one informant called "negative" language is followed by not associating with him or by outright ostracism.

INTERVIEWEE: So what would happen if people flaunted it [i.e., did not hide the fact that they were gay]?

RESEARCHER: People like George, for example, they'd call him "faggot." He would be ostracized. People would exclude him from different things. You know students, generally I guess, wouldn't go out of their way for him. They might drop a door on him or . . . wouldn't talk to him. He felt very excluded. Actually I think he ended up feeling so excluded that he left school. He thinks he was driven out of the school.

A further intensification is regular harassment "to [his] face," a confrontational form of abuse that foreshadows violence. Harassment builds into borderline or actual physical attacks.

RESEARCHER: Oh they'd pick on you, in the cafeteria?

INTERVIEWEE: I had one incident when I was going up for a meal, one of the junior kids at the school decided that—he walked by and he tripped me and [spilled] my tray and said something like "a faggot needs to be on his knees."

Antigay violence is, as one informant described it, the "logical conclusion" to the antigay abuse. Another said it was "kind of odd" when this outcome did not materialize. Thus the sequence organized within the ideology of fag goes from naming that identifies the fag through verbal abuse and ostracism to harassment in which verbal attacks are combined with petty violence and finally to outright violence.

GRAFFITI: THE TEXT-MEDIATED ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE IDEOLOGY OF FAG

The ideology of fag may also be coordinated by the practice of scrawling antigay graffiti on toilet stalls, on someone's locker, or on the walls of the school. Graffiti are a form of public speech but with a permanence lacking in speech. Antigay graffiti are sometimes used to identify a fag as when the word *fag* is written on someone's locker, and in such instances they serve to isolate gay students and incite harassment of them. As with verbal abuse, graffiti both identify the stigmatized object and are a form of attack upon the fag. They also set up a dialogic process, linking writers and readers. In these respects, there is little difference between talk and text in coordinating the ideology of fag. However, the text's relative permanence gives them a powerful role. Detaching utterance from author, they speak to every passerby who cares to look and read. A depersonalized form of threat and harassment

against an individual is produced, coming from no one in particular, but inciting readers in general to marginalize and attack the gay student they identify. Their relative permanence gives them a powerful role in organizing the ideology of fag.

Accounts of homophobic graffiti figured prominently in how my interviewees were treated at school. Again their accounts display the ubiquity and generalized character of the ideology of fag.

RESEARCHER: So was there any other incident that comes to your mind about that period that was sort of homophobic? You said that the school was really homophobic in a "people way." What other kind of things . . . how would you describe that?

INTERVIEWEE: Among other things, spray painting fag on a locker, the person's locker, going off and carving into the school . . . you know how some people love to carve hearts with J. H. or something. Well, they'd scrawl the person's name and then put "queer" or "gay" or something like that.

INTERVIEWEE: I said that homosexuals are people too. "Look at me, I am one." And I think the whole school just about died. [laughter] The next day I had "faggot," "queer," and "homo" and all sorts of junk like that all over my locker to which I just drew a big pink triangle and said, "I am so, and I'm proud of it." Didn't seem to bother me at all. But the ridicule I got from people physically and verbally was a little bit much. So I ended up quitting school.

The work done by graffiti reflexively coordinates and directs the ideology of fag. A writer uses graffiti to make public statements that he cannot make publicly himself, perhaps because he fears official censure or because he has no access to a medium of public communication. Graffiti claim the authority of the public space. Though they may not always be successful in accomplishing what they intend within the ideology of fag, they are read, even if reinterpreted or read ironically. But often they do work. Over and over again the young men I interviewed described how the graffiti isolated them at school, in some instances forcing them to leave school altogether. The patriarchal forms of heterosexism graffiti coordinate are not exclusively the writers'. Though graffiti as a medium are ordinarily identified as speaking from an underground, antigay graffiti trade on the general patriarchal relations that are the basis of school life. Lack of administrative intervention is tacit acceptance of the ideology of fag. It is a measure of the school administration's heterosexism and its complementary homophobia.

THE DIALOGIC OF THE STIGMA OF FAG: GAY CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION

Students first learn to identify fags and how to treat them through the social organization of talk and text in school. This is equally true for homosexual and bisexual as well as for "straight" students. Indeed, it is in part out of the dialogic of the ideology of fag that some gay students come to see themselves as gay and take on gay identity. Though presumably not intentionally, the ideology of fag thus accomplishes gay identity/consciousness. As informants describe the process, consciousness emerges dialogically in the characteristic sequence of the ideology of fag, beginning with gossip and foreshadowing if not actually concluding in violence. A gay consciousness is formed dialogically in this socially isolating process.

The antigay rhetoric enters these students into the ideology of fag as a form of consciousness for them, whether or not they are subject to direct attack. Many of my informants reported that they knew they were "different" early in life but that entering the ideology of fag during their high school years identified and shaped their consciousness of difference. School gossip and sometimes verbal abuse were the dialogic context in which some homosexual students develop fully fledged gay identities.

INTERVIEWEE: [W]hen I was in elementary school, I did a lot of ballet. I was at the National Ballet School one summer. And that sort of stigma [laugh] which I never thought was a stigma, or could be a stigma, but which became a stigma, followed me into high school. And that was followed with comments continually—"fag," you know, "fag." I think that was actually . . . one of the reasons why I eventually gave up ballet was just because of the constant harassment and also pursuing other interests. But I think that was at the back of my mind a lot of the time with the harassment, and realizing that they're right. That's what I was. I knew that that's what I was.

The organizing effects of fag rhetoric on the gay consciousness of my informants was profound. This use of language, this naming within the patriarchy, sets up an internal dialogue within individuals.

INTERVIEWEE: I never really thought about it [passing]. I just acted like the way I always did—normal. I didn't put up a front to say I wasn't gay or whatever. People always called me "homo," and I said, "If that's what you want to think, go ahead." And in the back of my mind I'd think, "I wish you knew how right you were."

Some gay students took up the ideology of fag as a set of practices and activities for protecting themselves:

RESEARCHER: What did you then do to hide it [being gay]?

INTERVIEWEE: I had to lie, like, "Hey man, so what if I know gay people, doesn't mean I'm gay." And like one guy goes, "I know you are. Just admit it." I said, "I ain't no faggot!" And the way I came on to him . . . I came on strong, and he goes, "I'm just kidding, relax." And I said, "Relax! You called me a fucking faggot, and I'm going to relax about it?" And so I said, "Just get out of my . . ." Then after he left, I'd be laughing to myself.

Some became preoccupied with being identified as gay or almost compulsively concerned with avoiding stereotypical fag behavior.

INTERVIEWEE: Well, . . . it would have been just everything, from being, like, nervous about, am I walking the right way? Am I talking the right way? Do I move my hands too much? I mean, that sort of thing. I mean, that's just sort of general paranoia.

The contradictions one informant experienced made self-isolation a forced choice.

INTERVIEWEE: I just stayed to myself in school . . .

RESEARCHER: How long were you there in that school?

INTERVIEWEE: Almost three months. I just stayed really to myself.

RESEARCHER: Yes, and then you left?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes . . . I had like, kids in my own class would come up to me and start talking like, "Do you want to go . . . ?" or, "What are you doing on noon hour . . . ?" and I said, "Oh I don't know." And like, "So you want to go and smoke a [inudible] somewhere?" . . . "Oh no, I don't do anything like that. I've got to meet somebody at noon hour."

RESEARCHER: So then you just left that school. Did it have anything to do with your being gay?

INTERVIEWEE: I didn't like the thought of me just having to ignore everyone. I could have played like the straight guy, like, "Check that baby out, uh huh." I could have done that, but I just like, stayed to myself, did my school work, left school. I wouldn't take the bus home either. I didn't want to meet anybody.

The gay consciousness of my informants was organized by the ideology of fag. This view of consciousness as social activities based in language con-

trasts to the conception of consciousness as a private mental state. The social organization of gay consciousness is visible in social activities that are ordinarily available to be described. Its dialogic creates for gay students a breach in everyday consciousness through which they come to see themselves as marginalized, isolated, and other.

THE IDEOLOGY OF FAG AND RELATIONS OF GENDER

The ideology of fag is embedded in and organized by contemporary heterosexual relations of gender. Take, for example, one informant's description of the work of passing as heterosexual in order to avoid the stigma of fag. On this occasion, it is the gendered organization of the setting that initiates fag baiting. Passing in this and in every other instance depends on knowing how to assemble heterosexuality. So, in describing the work of passing, my informant reveals how the ideology of fag is embedded in the social organization of heterosexuality. Lack of interest in the opposite sex can trigger fag baiting and fag-baiting gossip.

RESEARCHER: How was it when you were in the closet in school? How would you go about passing? What sorts of things would you have to do to make sure that you stayed in the closet? How did you . . . ?

INTERVIEWEE: Okay, well I'm happy you asked that. It's unreal what people have to do. You know when all the guys would be making the girl jokes, you'd have to go along with them, as much as you tried not to, you still had to chuckle here and there to not raise suspicion . . . very frequently, jokingly, some students would say to other students—when they didn't necessarily conform to all the jokes and the way of thinking of women students—they'd say, "What, you're not gay, are you?" just jokingly . . . it was said jokingly but half seriously, so you didn't want that accusation left about you. If it was, you'd know you'd be ready to deny it wholeheartedly, and to that extent you'd even talk about other female students at school that you said you were interested in. When in reality you weren't . . . and you had to make sure you did stuff like that.

In this description, the language of "girl jokes" coordinates a particular set of gender relations and a particular form of male consciousness. My informant describes this as a "way of thinking about women students." On one level these jokes express an interest in the opposite sex. But this says little about how they work as jokes among students. As social organization, they create for the students involved a heterosexual masculinity defined by treating women as objects of heterosexual humor and as inferior to men. The ideology of fag is used to coerce a male student who "didn't necessarily conform."

Activities that define heterosexual masculinity are activities of men in groups. Failure to join in risks initiating the cycle organized by the ideology of fag. Informants' accounts often distinguish between such group displays of heterosexual masculinity and associations of other kinds with students, including genuine friendships. Thus, informants' accounts show the ideology of fag operating at the level of public or "popular" relations among students. It organizes males as groups but not necessarily the practices of single individuals. Fag baiting at school was described almost invariably as launched by groups of students and under pressure from peers.

INTERVIEWEE: It [avoiding me] depended on whether they were in a group or if they were by themselves. If they were in a group they would be much more homophobic and stick together as a group, and whereas alone they might not . . . they might still talk to me. It would vary. They might realize that since they weren't in a group and the peer pressure wasn't an influence on them and so that changed.

Gay students are located differently from their heterosexual counterparts in the gender relations of the school. The social consciousness in which they participate is differentiated from the heterosexist domination of the public space and hence is embedded in different social relations.

One of my informants who was "out" at school described how his friendly association with girls could trigger the ideology's sequence of harassment and violence.

RESEARCHER: How does that work? How does the violence come in and what was it like?

INTERVIEWEE: Well the violence comes in because now you get a bunch of guys who . . . "Oh my God, there's a fag," or if they're associating with girls or whatever or other friends of theirs, the jealousy . . . they can't see how I get along so good with these girls and so the jealousy and the fact that you're gay that's a turn off for them, and they say, "Oh, we can't see this happening," and they don't think, they're just . . . they start with the names and then with the pushing and . . .

A distinctive feature of the ideology of fag is that it is basically the work of males. Informants' accounts suggest that gay students would be more likely to be out to women than to men in school. Moreover none of my informants described being verbally abused or harassed by women students, though this does not mean that it never occurred or that the girls were not to some degree homophobic. In interview after interview, informants made visible how the

ideology of fag enforced the rule of heterosexual males and hence the relations of patriarchy in their schools. Among males, behavior subverting these relations brought the ideology into play to coerce conformity.

HETEROSEXIST HEGEMONY IN THE SCHOOL

With the help of my informants, I have been describing the antigay activities that are a normal, everyday part of school social organization. I have identified these activities as the ideology of fag. In their ubiquity, they are independent of any particular individual and of any particular school. Informants' lives were shaped by the ideology of fag no matter where they went to school. Virtually all the schools that the interviews investigated were organized as local iterations of these generalized ideological practices. The recursive properties of the ideology constitute it as a general phenomenon. A gay student might have genuine friends, male or female (though more often female), but heterosexism had hegemony in the public consciousness.

Popularity in school is a publicly defined status. The social relations of heterosexuality and patriarchy dominated the public space of the school, and popularity was defined within that public space. Students identified as gay, whether by themselves or by others, could not be "popular" in schools. Public status among students in the school meant being straight or acting straight. One sixteen-year-old youth, a member of the student council, had just quit school because he was afraid of the social repercussions when his fellow students found out he was gay. What triggered this set of events was simply that a young woman from his school saw him going into a gay club in downtown Toronto.

"Passing" is generally understood in terms of the individual, but in relation to the heterosexist hegemony over the public spaces of the school, it must also be understood as it affected the possibility of the formation of gay groups or open gay friendships in schools.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, and another thing, I found out, when we were talking with my friends now, who live in . . . they also thought other people were gay but they never went up to that person to say, "Are you gay?" because they were scared to do that in case they might be wrong, and everyone would know for sure that they were gay, and also, it's a problem hanging out with each other, because if everyone thinks you're gay and like individuals who are gay, and then those individuals hang out together, you know it's like a confirmation, so . . .

Many of my informants who were closeted in school claimed that, as far as they knew, they were the only gay person in their high school; later, they

learned of many high school contemporaries who were also gay. Over half of the young men mentioned, after having left school, meeting or hearing about high school contemporaries who turned out to be gay.

Not knowing who else was gay at school made any form of support and solidarity among the gay students virtually impossible. This isolation of gay students as individuals was a major feature of the social organization of "passing" as straight at school. Though gay students might find individual support from friends and teachers, no school is reported as challenging the heterosexual hegemony of its public space.

The Official Silence of the School

At best, the official organization of the school assumes that all students are heterosexual; at worst, it implies that it is professionally appropriate to attack and isolate gay students on the basis of their sexual orientation. When my informants got support from teachers, it was always a personal matter and not the result of official school policy or professional responsibility.

One informant had kept a notebook recording the heterosexism of teachers. Notebook in hand, he described to me the ideological practices of his history teacher, constituting homosexuals as beyond the pale of moral society.

INTERVIEWEE: I have all the quotations of all the homophobic comments and so, like off the top of my head, the one like . . . he did talk about homosexuals but only in very negative context, so he talked about when the Nazis, Ernst Roehm . . . like we were talking about Nazi Germany and Hitler and all that, and he was talking about the Nazi system, the storm troops, and how Roehm was head of that, and he was making fun, the history teacher was making fun, of him. Like how he was from an aristocratic background, but was really into leather and young boys. And it was the night of the long knives in 1934, and he was found in bed with his chauffeur, or something, and killed. And this history teacher was much more homophobic in making light of it, and he would do imitations of homosexuals . . .

The patriarchal context makes gay the stigmatized other. Such ideological practices are supported by and support the social relations of gender pervasive in the wider society. In school, this is visible in how school authorities—teachers, counselors, and principals—give tacit support and sometimes even approval to the local practices of the ideology of gay. Tacit approval of the ideology was given when teachers pretended not to hear and, hence could ignore, the use of gay-baiting language in the corridors and classrooms.

RESEARCHER: Now the staff and the school would never have access to this kind of gossip [in the corridors of the school]?

INTERVIEWEE: They might have. They could walk up and down the halls and hear it the same as anyone else. Generally however, I think that most of the staff either ignored it or pretended to ignore it. They simply would refuse to give comments.

Counteracting homophobia or heterosexism was not part of the professional responsibilities of teachers, as it might be in curbing the ideology of "race."

INTERVIEWEE: But when you're in a general classroom, when you hear somebody up front say, "Oh ya, fucking faggots," or something to that effect, you couldn't do anything, whereas if they'd said, "Those fucking niggers," the teacher would probably say something, most likely . . .

Worst of all were teachers who would encourage or even join in the anti-gay talk. One student, whose teachers generally were supportive, described some teachers who, when he was verbally abused, laughed along with the students. Some teachers were openly homophobic. This seemed particularly true of physical education teachers. Indeed, physical education programs were notable in this respect and were especially alienating for gay students. Like public sporting events, physical education operates as an organizational node coordinating patriarchal relations in our society, authorizing the male teachers' participation in the ideology of gay. Beer advertisements on television, for example, or the way wars are described, the use of sports metaphors in managerial occupations, and the topic of sports as a kind of male lingua franca all trade on the relations of male hegemony.

INTERVIEWEE: I find that's probably one of the most intimidating things about phys ed, (a) how competitive it was, and (b) always being exposed to phys ed teachers and particularly this one that I can recall, who constantly poked fun at people who were not informed, and part of poking fun is this notion of "sissy" and then you know, whether they carried that over into something that I would label homophobic or not, and I seem to recall that he did on several occasions. Often students would, after class, carry on and taunt you and that would, you know, if this authority figure said, it's okay to call you a sissy and determines that you're a sissy then, wow, talk about carte blanche, we have freedom to basically feel . . . make you feel shitty about yourself and did often.

RESEARCHER: The phys ed instructor was . . .

INTERVIEWEE: Definitely very homophobic, and I even suspected him of being gay at times . . .

Some informants reported that teachers would attack fellow teachers who were gay (and must have done so where they could be overheard by students).

RESEARCHER: What happened around that?

INTERVIEWEE: He led a very straight lifestyle, and he was also very well liked by the student body, although behind his back, there were tons of jokes, even from the other teachers or the other faculty, making jokes about it [the fact that he was a homosexual].

Some reported teachers who were supportive on an individual basis.

INTERVIEWEE: I found that with the teachers, because you get some kind of relationship with the teachers, so the teachers are more understanding because you see them every day and talk to them. I'm not saying with all teachers but the teachers that you get along with, they would help you out, they would ask you if you were having problems, but with the principal, I don't think so. Although there are large numbers of homosexuals in the society, homosexuality is a forbidden topic of instruction in most schools. This means that most students remain ignorant of a substantial minority of people in contemporary society.

One informant described consulting a counselor whose response made it clear that the school's hands-off policy toward homosexuality was official.

INTERVIEWEE: And also, at one time, I was very confused about my sexuality, and I felt the need to talk to someone, and I went to the school guidance counselor, and he responded with, he's not allowed to talk to us about the subject because he'd get in trouble with the school board. He didn't give me a phone number, he didn't give me the stress number or L.G.Y.T. or anything like that. He just sort of just left it at that and closed the subject before it was really open, so that was another piss off, and that made me stay in the closet a little longer than I had to.

Consistently, these stories in various ways make visible the official tolerance of the local practices of the ideology of fag as an implementation of the hegemony of heterosexism in the schools.

CONCLUSION

That the ideology of fag is primarily a practice of (some) male students seems to divest teachers and counselors as well as the school administration of responsibility. But the foregoing analysis and the accounts of the experiences of gay students in schools shows the power and effectiveness of a public regime of heterosexism. The ideology of fag dominates the public space of schools and defines its public discourse. Teachers may overtly participate in or

just go along with its local practices. Those who may be supportive of gay students as individuals lack a public voice. Curriculum materials in social studies, literature, and health avoid the topic of homosexuality. Counselors appear to be untrained in providing the kinds of support that gay students need and act merely as buffers that individualize the "problem." The local practices of the ideology of fag are never penalized or publicly condemned. Explicitly homophobic ridicule in sports contexts goes unremarked. Effective toleration of the ideology of fag among students and teachers condemns gay students to the isolation of passing or ostracism and sometimes to a life of hell in school.

Those who were "in the closet" were consigned by the official tolerance of the ideology of fag to a dialogue with it in which they sorted out their sexuality in isolation, ignorance, and fear. For students who were "out" in high school the ideology of fag conducted a sequence in which verbal abuse, ostracism, and harassment culminated in the conclusive isolation of dropping out. The occasional hero who sought a gay appropriation of the public space of the school suffered heavy penalties. Schools must be held responsible for the arbitrary suffering of gay students as well as for the barrier to education that it creates, at least for those who are driven to the final exclusionary logic of the ideology of fag. The experiences of gay students as they have spoken them in the examples recorded in this chapter show schools as complicit in the everyday cruelties of the ideology's enforcement of heterosexist hegemony. This is a school-created environment and an act of government.