

Challenging Heterosexism:

Towards Non-Heterosexist Policy and Regulation in Health and Social Security Agencies

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Abstract

Health and social security agencies have policies and regulations that are generally based in heterosexist assumptions about the nature of family and relationships. This action research project used electronic communication technologies to develop tools through which health and social security agencies and practitioners can assess and correct the heterosexist bias in their programs and activities. The project used a home page and web conference to address this issue in the context of being lesbian in rural Newfoundland. The tools and policy analysis developed in this project can be used in quality assurance, total quality management, accreditation and collective bargaining. Strategies have been developed for disseminating project results through an on-line magazine (<http://www.mun.ca/the>) which will continue after the project is over, through scholarly papers and presentations, through presentations to professional groups, and through individual consultations. The project revealed strengths and limitations with the model of electronic communication used. Suggestions are presented for adaptation of this project for future social action projects.

Challenging Heterosexism: Towards Non-heterosexist Policy and Regulation in Health and Social Security Agencies

1. Summary of the Research Project

1.1 Goal

Our project goal was to use electronic communication technologies to develop tools through which health agencies and practitioners can assess and correct the heterosexist bias in their own programs and activities.

1.2 Project Objectives

- (a) Involve concerned community members, interested health and social security professionals and university based researchers in the health and social service disciplines in a collaborative research process that will be safe, empowering for lesbian and other participants.
- (b) Use new electronic technologies in the process outlined in (a).
- (c) Through (a) and (b), engage participants in identification of the heterosexist bias in the policies and regulations of government and non-profit health and social security agencies relevant to the lives of lesbians in rural Newfoundland, and to develop tools to assess and correct heterosexist bias, for use in quality assurance, and total quality management, accreditation and collective bargaining.
- (d) Document the experience for adaptation with other groups and in other settings.

1.3 Current Knowledge about Heterosexism in Health and Income Security Agencies

Health and social security agencies and programs have had policies and regulations that have been generally heterosexist in their assumptions about the nature of families and relationships. Some government policies have been successfully challenged in individual court cases, such as the initiative supported by the Legal Action Fund concerning spousal support for same sex partners following their separation (Jan/Feb *LEAF case bulletin* 1999). The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is now interpreted as forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Wintermute 1995). The federal government has consequently implemented legal reforms, and some provinces are following suit. Most Canadian provinces have human rights legislation that also prevents discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

However, changes in national and provincial macro-level policy may not be associated with change in policy and the mezzo and micro levels. The heterosexist bias in community attitudes, particularly outside large metropolitan centres, encourages gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals to remain closeted (except for small groups of friends). Local challenges to heterosexist policies and regulation can be risky. *Challenging Heterosexism* began to address this issue in the context of being lesbian in rural Newfoundland because such lesbians

are particularly marginalized and vulnerable in a rural context where social values may be conservative and anonymity cannot be maintained.

This study uses the concept of *heterosexism*, defined as an ideology or taken for granted belief that constructs heterosexual as normal and superior and entitling one to privileges (Adams 1994; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1993; Robinson 1997; Rothblum and Bond 1996; Shortall 1998). Heterosexuality was first problematized by Rubin (1975) as “obligatory”, because it keeps women dependent on men and maintains men’s access to women. More recently, Halley (1993) has argued that compulsory heterosexuality works to coerce people into complicity with heterosexual eroticism, for fear they will be expelled from the privileged heterosexual majority. Much of the social science literature on families (Benkov 1995) and on aging (Dorfman et al. 1995; Berger 1984) has been challenged as having a heterosexist bias, so that non-heterosexual people are either rendered invisible, or their problems discounted (Browning 1995).

The concept of heterosexism is related to the concept of *homophobia* (Epstein 1994), but is preferable for the purposes of policy analysis because the latter locates the problem in individual fear and pathology (Kantor 1998) rather than in an oppressive social structure. Blumenfield (1992) uses the concept of *institutional homophobia* to denote structural bias against non-heterosexuals, such as policy concerning gays and lesbians in the military (Brillon 1995). However, the idea of institutional homophobia remains problematic since it suggests that the bias is based on fear, rather than in privileging the heterosexual as normal.

The concept of *gender* has itself been challenged as heterosexist, as a binary concept treating men and women in relation to the other and discounting same sex relationships. Some recent literature treats gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals as further gender categories. However, given the concept’s origin in studying relationships between men and women, and given the privilege given heterosexual relationships, use of the concept of gender remains problematic.

Challenges to heterosexism have generally had one of three objectives: legislative reform, public education and appropriate mental health strategies. West and Green (1997) document legal and extra legal controls on homosexuality across countries and Wintemute (1995) documents international progress in terms of legislation. Some document “gay rights” initiatives pressing for legislative change (Palmer 1995; Herek 1990). Others focus on heterosexism in educational settings (Holzhauer 1993; Shortall 1998) and strategies for reducing heterosexism and homophobia (Chan 1996; Epstein 1994). The therapeutic and child welfare literature also includes articles on the issues and needs of gays and lesbians, given their particular family forms (Borhek 1988; Fairchild et al. 1996; Metx 1997; Morrow 1996a; Okun 1996; Rankow 1998; Reilly 1996; Rosenthal 1982; Rothblum and Bond 1996; Spaulding 1993; Sullivan 1994; Tasker and Golombok 1997) and life style risks (Otis and Skinner 1996; Proctor and Groze 1994; O’Hanlan 2000). This literature emphasizes the pervasiveness of heterosexism, and the resultant internalized dominance (Di Angelo 1997) and relative invisibility experienced by non-heterosexual individuals and groups (Potter 1985). These issues are also being addressed in professional education (Aronson 1996; Cain 1996; Herr 1997; Morrow 1996; Newman 1989; Trotter and Gilchrist 1996).

This project to challenge heterosexism is policy oriented rather than focusing on education or therapeutic modalities. We intended to move beyond the macro level of legislation to look at the mezzo- and micro-level policies that affect lesbians' access to programs and services. While some examples are listed in the popular literature, these more local and specific examples of heterosexism have not generally been the focus of academic study or structured action for social change (Ortiz and Scott 1994). We have developed tools to identify heterosexism in mezzo- and micro-level policies and regulations, and suggested strategies for their remedy. A sustainable process for disseminating project results and furthering the process of reducing heterosexism has also been developed.

1.4 Heterosexism in Newfoundland and Labrador

Muzychka (1992) identified some of the issues facing lesbians in Newfoundland and Labrador. Through interviews with a variety of lesbians, Muzychka identified issues concerned with kin right (such as access to one's partner in an intensive care unit) and quality of care issues related to insensitivity and to inappropriate treatment. A paper to the province's social policy committee (Hodder, Lacy and Shortall 1995) also documented the need for change. In 1997 Newfoundland and Labrador amended its Human Rights Act to include sexual orientation as a prohibited group of discrimination (Shortall 1998), one of the last Canadian provinces to do so (Wintemute 1995). However, evidence suggests that both heterosexism and homophobia persist. Shortall (1998) and Morrison (1994) confirm that both persist in the province's schools. A recent anti-heterosexist poster context attracted no entries from one rural school district, in spite of generous prizes (Hynes, in interview, 1999). In this region, workshops directed to "acceptance" of diverse sexual orientations were not well received, but revised workshops focused on "tolerance" were more successful. Initial discussions with NGALE, the province's gay and lesbian rights organization, suggested support for our proposed web-based project to challenge heterosexist policy.

This project was thought to be timely in Newfoundland because of the expanded community access to the Internet in the province. Libraries, colleges, women's centres, regional economic development boards and community centres provide community Internet access. An expanding literature supports the use of the Internet for community networking and development (Spender 1997; Balka 1996).

1.5 Methodology

The central research tool for this project has been a web site (www.mun.ca/the or "the definite article") and associated web conference.¹ The web site defined the nature of the problem of heterosexism, explained the project and introduced the project partners. A tabloid format and associated exaggerations introduced humour, and was used to increase interest and accessibility, and to avoid an "academic" look. The name *The Heterosexism Enquirer*, or *THE*, derived from our choice of a tabloid format like that of *The National Enquirer*. Through the web site the visitor could visit "safe surfing" and informed consent pages, which guide them to the research oriented web conference. The web conference itself used Altavista forum technology that is

¹ See Appendix F for a hard copy of the first page of the web site as originally posted (full appendix available in Final Report, Volume 2, at MCEWH). This report is also available on *THE*'s transformed electronic magazine, *THEzine*, at <http://www.mun.ca/the>.

currently used in Memorial University of Newfoundland's on-line courses. Altavista Forum provides for messages to be posted, and for visitors to reviewed new and old messages organized by theme. The content of the web conference, as recorded from the day the web site was initiated in November 1999 to project completion in July 2000, created a database that was analyzed on an ongoing basis, reported on in monthly newsletters on-line (and also in hard copy to begin with) from January to June 2000. Web conference content is summarized below.

The Human Subjects Committee of the School of Social Work at Memorial worked with us extensively to develop content and procedures that would be safe for visitors and for those associated with the project. We described how people could prevent others from knowing which sites they had visited. We gave warnings about on-line dating. We ensured that spaces for the computer equipment and fax machine for the project would be physically secure. We included a "panic button" on the site that people could use if they found offensive material had been posted to the web conference site. We warned that even with all of our provisions, we might not be able to prevent hackers from accessing information about who had registered or communicated in the forum. At the request of the committee, and for the safety of project staff, we rented an off-campus mailbox.²

The Heterosexism Enquirer web site and web conference were launched in November 1999, and the web conference continued to July 2000. The web site was promoted through organizational contacts of the partners on the advisory committee, through the traditional media, and through various workshops. A bookmark designed to promote the site was distributed widely. A poster campaign was conducted on the university campus, and subsequently in St John's as a whole. Careful attention to metatags and to submission to search engines ensure that THE would be placed highly when anyone searched the web for information on heterosexism. The site was registered with major search engines (excite, Go.com, LookSmart, Lycos, Netscape, Yahoo, Canada.com, WebCrawler, NewToo, Hotbot, About.com, snap, Altavista), and re-registered when we added significant new material. We also e-mailed the link to our web site to Canadian gay and lesbian organizations, including NGALE, EGALE, WAYVES and Gay Canada. The project was also registered with CASSW's on-line registry of "Social Work Projects and Curriculum Development Initiatives". Links between our site and other related sites were solicited and developed.

1.6 Project Partnerships

Partnerships were essential to the appropriate design of the web site. A list of initial partner organizations, and of the other organizations that collaborated during the course of the project is included in Appendix B. Partnerships with community organizations and with interested scholars have been strengthened and extended during the course of the project. The result is a broader network of individuals and organizations committed to challenging heterosexism. We consider this aspect of the project to be both successful and promising.

1. All initial project partners have served on an advisory committee to the project. In this capacity they reviewed hard copy and/or disk copies of the *THE Heterosexism Enquirer*

² A hard copy of the resultant security pages are in the hard copy of the site pages included in Appendix F (Volume 2) of the full final report available at the MCEWH.

web site before it was posted to the web. Their comments and suggestions helped us improve language and site navigation. Some advisory committee members navigated the proposed site as we watched, allowing us to improve it considerably. For example, colours, fonts and navigation symbols were adjusted after review by the NGALE representative, Faye Freeman. Dr Ellen Balka was also particularly helpful in technical comments on web site design.

2. The initial partners also helped in various ways to promote the site. Both Memorial University and the School of Social Work flagged our site as “new” in prominent places on their home pages. Also, the **Newfoundland Women’s Health Network** provided a link to our site from their own web site and posted our announcements on their list serve. We were also welcomed to their conference, to demonstrate our site and to distribute the bookmarks we used to promote its use. **NGALE** (Newfoundland Gays and Lesbians for Equality) also assisted with promotion, including a link on their own web site and inviting us to a meeting of their members where we could present and promote the project. To further this partnership, the principal researcher Leslie Bella has joined NGALE’s education committee, and is participating with NGALE in some joint educational venture that use the site. At NGALE’s invitation she participated in a CBC open line radio show for Gay Pride week and also spoke at the launch of the Gay Pride parade in July 2000. The researchers attended meetings at with members of local Status of Women’s councils organized at the Women’s Centres in both Stephenville and Corner Brook, to demonstrate the use of the site and to distribute bookmarks and other associated materials.
3. New partnerships were also developed during the course of the partnership. These included the **Bay St George Coalition to End Violence**, which subsequently collaborated in a violence prevention proposal. Memorial University’s gay and lesbian students’ organization also partnered with us to promote the site on campus, and to participate with us in further research and action projects. Links were developed with organizations engaged in similar work in other provinces. These included the **Nova Scotia Gay and Lesbian youth project**, from whom we learned more about “Gay Straight Alliances” in schools. Also, we created links with the **University of Toronto** office, and learned of their “Positive Space” campaign. We have promoted both of these options for reducing heterosexism on THE’s web site. The project has also been invited to join the St John’s **Interagency Committee to End Violence**. Through this link we can inform other agencies about our work, and are invited to participate in various activities sponsored by the committee. The committee also helped us with development of the site, which as a result now includes a list of “Answers to Political Incorrect Questions”. This committee contact also enabled us to demonstrate THE web site at an anti-violence youth forum for students and teachers and anticipate that the site will be accessed as part of high school curriculum. Memorial university funding for graduate and undergraduate student employment positions enabled us to strengthen connections within the university community.
4. Partnerships were further developed in our attempts to obtain further funding to extend this project. Advisory committee members reported funding opportunities to us. We submitted letters of intent under as a Community Alliance for Health Research and under

SSHRC's Society, Culture and the Health of Canadians. We also submitted a full proposal under the "community participation" component of the province's crime prevention strategy. Although most of these applications have been unsuccessful, each opportunity attracted more potential partners and refined our plans for the project's future development. Appendix A lists the research proposals submitted as a result of this project.

5. We anticipate that most of these community and academic partners already associated with the project will become part of the network supporting *The Heterosexism Enquirer* in its ongoing development as an electronic magazine dedicated to challenging heterosexism and homophobia. Initial responses to this initiative, announced at the start of the Gay Pride march in St. John's in July 2000, have been very positive. We are actively recruiting editorial board members and correspondents from among THE's partner organizations.

1.7 Expected Outcomes and Final Results

The concrete deliverables for this project as defined in our original proposal are tools for challenging heterosexism in health and social security agencies. As promised, these are available in electronic form through THE's web site, and have also been circulated in hard copy.³

1.7.1 Assessing Individual Heterosexism

A questionnaire was developed for individuals to assess their own heterosexism (see Appendix H). This was included first as an attachment to the web conference, and after comments and revisions suggested by web conference participants, was included posted for public use on the web site itself. Hard copies have been distributed to interested university in the human services, to advisory committee members, and at various workshops involving human service workers and agencies.

1.7.2 Heterosexism in Newfoundland's Income Security Programs

The project conducted an analysis of the heterosexism inherent in Newfoundland's own social assistance legislation and regulations. This analysis reveals that legislation is relatively neutral as to sexual orientation, but that detailed regulations are discriminatory (see Appendix J). Since our analysis revealed that gay and lesbian individuals may actually benefit from discrimination in existing regulations, we consulted with NGALE before posting the analysis to the web conference. NGALE supported publication of our analysis, which was subsequently posted to THE web site.

1.7.3 Assessing Institutional Heterosexism

³ Hard copy of the following tools are available in Appendices G, H and I (full version available in Final Report from MCEWH). Our ongoing *THEzine* (<http://www.mun.ca/the>) also includes on-line versions of these documents.

We have also developed a questionnaire for agencies to use in evaluating the heterosexual bias in their agencies (see Appendix I). After feedback from those using the web conference, we made this questionnaire available on THE web site.

1.7.4 Challenging Heterosexism with Positive Space Campaigns

The “positive space campaign” model from University of Toronto is promising for challenging heterosexism in this province. This model has been described in THE’s on-line newsletters, and we have further information for those interested individuals. Combined with the questionnaires for individuals (1.8.1) and organization (1.8.3), we have some of the components for beginning such a campaign in Newfoundland and Labrador. We will need an institutional auspice for such a campaign, which we will be discussing with some of our partner organizations as part of the process of transforming THE into an electronic magazine.

1.7.5 Challenging Heterosexism with Gay Straight Alliances

The “gay straight alliance” model promoted in schools in Nova Scotia and British Columbia is also promising for this province. This model has been described in THE’s on-line newsletters, and we have further information for interested individuals and organizations. While probably not directly relevant in health and income security agencies, this model made be useful for human service workers organizations, such as unions and professional groups.

Our original proposal also suggested that we would produce a “less concrete but possibly more significant concrete deliverable” in the form of a concerned and informed electronic network able to press for use of the tools outlined in 1.8.1 to 1.8.5. The project has resulted in the creation of three networks. The first is the identifiable network of partnerships referred to in 1.7 committed to continuing to challenge heterosexism and to supporting *The Heterosexism Enquirer* as part of that venture (see Appendix B). The second network consists of those visiting THE web site. This is less easily described, but we do know that between launch in November 1999 and July 2000 we had over 4,000 site visitors. The third network consists of those who registered in the web conference, which reached a maximum of 32 by June 2000, 81% from within Newfoundland.

2. Project Evaluation

As can be understood from section 1.8, this project has done what it set out to do. However, some aspects of the project have not been as effective as planned, while others have succeeded beyond our original expectations. The web site, for example, has been positively acclaimed in all responses to it. On the other hand, use of the web conference, both in terms of registration and level of activity, has been disappointing. In this evaluation section we explore the reasons for both our successes and our weaknesses. Our strength in terms of strengthened community partnerships has already been commented on above. Finally, attempts to obtain further funding have been limited. The project as originally conceived was a social action research project, and this has not appeared to be an attractive model for research funding agencies.⁴ We have

⁴ We do not yet have evaluative comments from most of the funding agencies who turned us down, but our CAHR letter of intent was well received. Reviewers recognized the project as needed and

succeeded in funding THE as a magazine from Memorial University's own resources, including continued hosting of the web site and support of the project through funding until April 2001 of a part-time student position as journalist.

2.1 The High Quality of *The Heterosexism Enquirer* Web site

The Heterosexism Enquirer has been welcomed as a quality web site. Its combination of the serious with the humorous has been well received. This has been evident in oral communication to both Lori Yetman as research coordinator and Leslie Bella as principal investigator. As this is an "on-line" project many of these comments arrived by email. From our email records we have selected the following as typical of the enthusiastic response to the web site. First feedback came from "insiders", on the advisory committee or associated with the funding agency:

I really love *The Heterosexism Enquirer*! I've been wandering around the site, and just finished looking through the Answers to Politically Incorrect Questions, which is a really terrific page.

I have just finished visiting your cool site.

The creativity and skill are quite evident even in quick run. And it is FUN!!

I was just reading *The Heterosexism Enquirer* and I would like to remind everyone that this seems to be a local project well worth our energetic support.

I am impressed with the heterosexist (sic) inquirer (sic) well done.

Just found *The Heterosexism Enquirer* - impressive. I'm a new appointee to the MCEWH steering committee and am familiarizing myself with its projects.

Congrats! You have managed to have a very enthusiastic, friendly and educational presentation.

Unsolicited feedback also came from people arriving on the site in an Internet search or because of community connections or advertising. They variously described *The Heterosexism Enquirer* as "amazing", "a triumph", and "fabulous".

Let me tell you I love your homepage and will be sending it as a link to many I think will be interested.

Your *Heterosexism Enquirer* is a triumph!

Your newsletter is well done and very informative.

as well conceived. However, at the point this letter of intent was submitted our community partnerships were less developed, and this was a major factor in not including us among those invited to submit full proposals. We believe that were we to submit a comparable letter of intent to day, our partnerships would be recognized as sturdy, extensive and meaningful.

Amazing site... What a find for this dyke ex-pat from Newfoundland!

Just wanted to let you know the website is fabulous!!

The site is great!

I think its really informative and I really enjoyed reading it.

Some found the site useful in their research or when planning educational events. For example, the site was used in planning a youth conference in British Columbia; teaching sociology student at MUN in a course on gender; teaching guidance counselors about heterosexism and teaching social work students about social action “on the web”. A journalist preparing a piece for McLean’s on the receptiveness of university campus for gays and lesbians found the site and had to let us know he loved our homepage, and would be sending it as a link to many others. Material was also requested from THE for a provincial conference on family violence. THE’s editor was also asked to represent Newfoundland on CUPE’s Pink Triangle committee, but could not because she is no longer in a unionized position. As we look forward to a transition into an emagazine, we have also attracted volunteer correspondents:

Great! I’ve a lot of people interested in the upcoming issue! I look forward to working with you! THE will be a lot of fun and give me an out for my gay pride issues!

One on-line journalist described the site as “elaborate spoof” put together by “a couple of very smart lesbians in Newfoundland”. Further recognition from the Internet specialists came when research coordinator Lori Yetman was nominated as technodyke of the month for August 2000. The site was also submitted for Cool Canuck Award #1.

We also received complaints and suggestions, and responded to them wherever possible. We had helpful suggestions about specific wording, typographical errors and potentially offensive visuals. The latter was a response to a figure of an extraterrestrial in a warning about cyberdating, not a response to our use of nudity! More substantive comments and suggestions concerned inclusivity, navigability, suggestions for advertising and links, and about the “out” status of the principal researcher and the research coordinator.

1. Concerning inclusivity, the beginning emphasis on “lesbians” in our contract with our funders left bisexuals and transgendered individuals feeling left out. The apparent omission of gay men also annoyed others. However, we emphasized inclusivity in the text within the site and from correspondence from forum registrants as they registered we know that as the project developed participation came from all sectors of the LGBT community. Our strengthened partnerships with NGALE, EGALE and LGBTQMUN also reinforced our inclusivity.
2. Navigability of the site has been a continued challenge for the project. To begin with we had too many different symbols for various forms of navigation, and some had trouble finding their way around. We simplified navigation after the first month. Then as the site became more complex, with newsletters, positive space advertising and links to other

sites, we added straight forward search engines allowing visitors to locate items within the site chronologically or by key word.

3. The site introduced a page of “positive space” for advertising of gay positive businesses and services. This was attractive to local businesses that participated in our poster campaign. However, after discussion with a Memorial University official, we decided to restrict our advertising of gay positive services to those organizations, or to individuals with professional registration for providing the service they were offering. In addition, we added links to other gay positive sites and joined relevant web rings. Some were with organizations that became our partners in the course of the project. Site visitors recommended others. In many instances we also obtained a reciprocal link with the other site.
4. Early in the project we established the policy of not outing anyone. This was partly because we did not want to put anyone at additional risk and partly because we wanted to develop a project that reflected the principles of a gay/straight alliance in which we would all stand in solidarity with LGBT people. This meant that neither of the principals associated with the project claimed heterosexual privilege. The principal researcher was challenged in an e-mail from a site visitor for not being “out”, but explained that consistent with project philosophy she preferred her sexual orientation to remain ambiguous. The project did not want to be associated with “outing” anyone.

2.2 Evaluating The Web Conference Process

The success of the web conference is more problematic. We attracted only 32 registrants, 26 or 81% from Newfoundland. The remainder came from the United States (2), Nova Scotia (2), Ontario (1) and British Columbia(1). Ten participants were “out” on the web conference, ten were “anonymous”, and the remainder were “partially out”. Most registrations were received in December, January or February, with only seven arriving after the end of February. Only about half participated actively, and participation was slow to begin and trailed off again in the last months of the project. We explore below the possibility that the lack of registrants may be associated with human subjects protection issues, or with the generally lower rate of home Internet access for Newfoundlanders. The slow start and latter decline of participation may also be associated with project timing, and the increasingly interesting content of the site itself which may have distracted visitors from detouring into the web conference.

2.2.1 Home Internet Access in Newfoundland

When the project was nearing completion we finally learned that Newfoundland lagged significantly behind other provinces in Atlantic Canada in terms of computer use and Internet access at home. Only 30% of Newfoundlanders have Internet access at home, compared to 40% in the other Atlantic provinces. Therefore, site visitors might have relied on using work based or public terminals, where the risk of being observed could deter participation. This project may have been slightly ahead of its time for Newfoundland, which suggests we should persist with the electronic magazine.

2.2.2 Informed Consent Procedures as a Barrier

To register in the web conference a site visitor had to scroll through (and was expected to read) an extensive “informed consent” page, which in turn directed them to pages that explained how they could disguise their own identity on-line. Instructions concerned such things as non-identifying hot mail accounts and how to remove your record of sites visited from cache. While these were clear to those of us familiar with our own computers and with the web, the instructions may have been over-facing for some and discouraged their participation. Our “informed consent” information told them that unless they were technically expert enough to remove the traces of their activity, people in their school, workplace or library would be able to tell they had been visiting a gay positive site.

2.2.3 Complexity of Web Conference Software

Finally, the web conference software is difficult to navigate and control for first time visitors. I used it for the first time myself in fall 1999 in teaching a graduate course. I found graduate students required to use the web conference software took several weeks to take full advantage of some of its features, such as the button that lists all the items you have not yet visited. In the e-magazine format we will continue to communicate with site visitors who wish to be kept informed, but by using the blind copy function on mass e-mailing software. With permission, we will post this correspondence to *THEzine*, as “letters to the editor” or as short articles and news items.

2.2.4 Time Constraints

Lack of time has also affected the success of the web conference. The project start date was postponed by six weeks by a delay in signing a contract and cutting the first cheque. The principal researcher and committee completed staff selection but the research coordinator could not be hired until salary negotiations were concluded when the principal researcher returned from holiday. During that holiday her spouse died, further delaying her return to the University. In the end, the research coordinator, Lori Yetman, did not join the project until mid August.

Consultation and design of the web site proceeded quickly thereafter. However, human subjects approval negotiations were complex because committee members had never dealt with a project quite like this before and felt they needed expert consultations. With their help and support the home page was launched in late November 1999. This was just before Christmas, when few people have time to explore the web. By January we were seriously worried that we had no participants. Our publicity campaign included an advertisement in the *Newfoundland Herald*; articles in the Memorial student newspaper, in the St John’s *Evening Telegram* and three local papers in western Newfoundland; and stories in gay and lesbian publications, such as *WAYVES* in Nova Scotia and *EXTRA* in Toronto. We organized presentations for various partner organizations, including women’s centres in western Newfoundland, the province’s Women’s Health Network and NGALE. Lori Yetman presented at a Queer Studies Symposium in Ontario, and Leslie Bella made presentations in the Maritime School of Social Work in Halifax and visited potential partner organizations in Halifax, Fredericton and Toronto. As a result, registration increased to its ultimate peak of thirty-two (see Appendix C).

2.2.5 Reluctance to be the First

Activity on the site began fairly lethargically. No one wanted to be the first to say something. We inserted into the headings for the web conference some of the anecdotes from Muzychka's (1991) study of the experiences of lesbians in Newfoundland, and asked people if these were consistent with their own experience. This led to some discussion. Transferring some of her understanding of groups from her experience as a social worker, Leslie Bella began to introduce contemporary issues from her own following of the news. In this way, the passage of Bill C-32, the disciplining of Dr Laura Schlesinger and the B.C. teachers acceptance of Gay Straight Alliances as legitimate in their schools were all introduced to the forum. In addition, major documents produced by the project, including the questionnaires for evaluating heterosexism and the analysis of the province's social assistance policy, were introduced on the web conference so people could comment. These were only made available on THE website after an opportunity for feedback within the web conference.

2.2.6 Winding Down

We all knew the project would end in June or July 2000. Therefore, interest in activity on the web conference declined from May onwards. We believe this is partly due to the season. Who wants to be tied to a computer in the summer in Newfoundland? Also, there was a sense, we believe, that the project had met its initial objectives of sharing information and was ready to move on to the next stage.

2.2.7 Appropriateness of Web Conference Technology

Finally, although the web conference is interactive for those who enter it, it is not as active and responsive as the list serve we had originally intended to create. In a list serve each registrant would have received a series of emails containing each other's information, ideas and responses. Registrants would have been reminded about THE's existence every time one of these emails arrived at their in box. In the design of *The Heterosexism Enquirer's* web site we deliberately committed ourselves NOT to email those who had registered in the site, to preserve their privacy should they be sharing computer. This limited the interactive and community building potential of the web conference format for a voluntary group. In my experience using the same software with a class of university students, lively discussion and community building are both possible because the student is expected to visit the site at least weekly, much in the same way as they are expected to be in class. Similarly, we did not develop a mass emailing facility for letting interested people know when new material had been posted on the web site. We plan to include such a facility for visitors to the transformed *THEzine*.

2.3 Evaluating the Web Conference Content

While as researchers we would have liked more registration in and participation in the web conference, the actual content was relevant and informative. Those who did participate shared their own stories about heterosexism, and gave suggestions and examples of how it can be remedied. We thank you all, and hope that in its transformation as an electronic magazine THE will continue to be interesting and useful for you. This safe space on the web was also used by participants to work out ways of negotiating their way through the world, exchanging information about gay positive spaces in our community and on the web.

The following summarizes all the messages posted to the web conference from November 1999 to June 2000, inclusive. Not included are the quotations from the Muzychka study that we used to stimulate discussion under various headings. However, the contributions of the editor and the principal researcher are identified. Some headings attracted no responses (e.g., health care/confidentiality, child custody/parenting, citizenship, media sensitivity, confidentiality and respect), although respondents did address these issues under other headings. The content is organized by communication strings so that an initiating message and all responses to it are grouped together. These communication strings are grouped by the month in which the initiating message was posted. However, several strings continued for more than a month. Thus for example, several messages dated in one month actually extended through several (e.g., 02/22/00), but all responses are included under the month the string was initiated. All identifying information has been removed from these messages, except where messages refer to the editor or principal research or to major public figures (e.g., Dr Laura, Svend Robinson).

Web Conference Summary
(organized by date of initiating message)

November 1999

- Q: Registrant's story about inadequate health care because of heterosexist assumptions. (11/30/99)
- A: Reinforced by another registrant with horrendous personal story.(11/30/99)
- A: Another anecdote about being forced to "come out" to a GP, and difficulties in privacy at drug stores. (12/17/99)
- Q: Registrant talks about how closely her counseling practice was supervised, because she was lesbian. (11/25/99)

December 1999

- Q: Lesbian registrant introduces herself. (12/17/99)

January 2000

February 2000

- Q: Lesbian registrant describes mental health difficulties from being lesbian in rural Newfoundland. (02/22/00)
- A: Principal researcher asks registrants for suggestions about good gay positive counseling. (02/22/00)
- A: Principal researcher responds "welcome home!", and talks about "positive space campaigns". (02/22/00)
- A: Editor writes about availability of spaces for heterosexuals, and lack of "positive space". (03/06/00)
- A: Principal researcher adds experience of this. (03/14/00)
- A: Registrant suggestion for handling harassment in a chat room. (04/15/00)

- A: Registrant recognizing this advice. (04/15/00)
- A: Registrant reports harassment on gay ICQ. (04/16/00)
- A: Participant talks about “tolerant” and “positive” spaces in St. John’s. (04/26/00)
- A: Registrant introduces the new PRIDE store downtown. (04/26/00)
- A: Registrant introduces safe ICQ spaces for gay lesbian people. (05/15/00)
- A: Editor asks if these should be in newsletter. (05/15/00)
- A: Decision not to publish outside forum, because then they would no longer be as safe and could be hit with “rude” comments. (05/15/00)
- A: Registrant disillusion with web as place to meet gay people. (05/23/00)
- A: Editor acknowledges pain and recommends NGALE support line. (05/23/00)
- A: Registrant wants to use THE for support, but knows it can’t really do that. (05/23/00)
- Q: Editor reprints “Urgent” call for support for Bill C-23, which risked being watered down. (02/23/00)
- A: Editor follows up with new about amendments watering down Bill C-23 by adding heterosexual definition of marriage. (03/28/00)
- Q: Editor asks for feed back concerning any THE posters found defaced on campus. Many had disappeared. (02/28/00)
- A: Experience of heterosexism in residence - scary! (02/28/00)
- Q: Principal researcher introduces an article in CMAJ about experiences of gay and lesbian physicians. (02/24/00)

March 2000

- Q: Gay man left school because of the negative experience of its homophobic atmosphere. (03/06/00)
- A: An out of province group is doing education in schools to counter heterosexism/homophobia. (03/19/00)
- A: Comments about heterosexist T-shirts worn in class, and homophobic atmosphere in MUN residences. (03/19/00)
- A: Editor deplores T-shirt as promoting hatred of women as well as gays. (03/19/00)
- A: Gay man associated with a gay lesbian youth project outside the province talks about his experience, and proposes Gay Straight Alliances in Schools as a solution. (03/31/00)
- A: Editor adds that B.C. teachers are supporting Gay Straight Alliances. (03/31/00)
- A: Yes, this is good news. (03/31/00)
- A: Story about homophobia in an all male dorm in another province. (4/08/00)
- Q: Editor includes obituary for activist James Egan. (03/16/00)
- A: Anti gay ridicule challenged in a chemistry laboratory. (03/21/00)
- A: Apologies from the offender. (03/21/00)
- A: Editor acknowledges this success. (03/21/00)
- Q: Principal Researcher asks if THE is heterosexist in warning about Internet dating. (03/17/00)
- A: We cannot assume that same sex relationships are free of violence. Anti-rape materials tend to be heterosexist. (03/17/00)

- A: I agree. (03/17/00)
- A: Editor: What would a non-heterosexist anti-rape pamphlet look like? Anyone seen one? (04/14/00)
- Q: Being lesbian in rural Newfoundland is like drowning (03/09/00)
- A: Editor acknowledges. (03/09/00)
- Q: Participant complains that she and her partner cannot get health benefits as a couple, but have to pay into two separate plans. (03/13/00)
- Q: Editor introduces appeal from Svend Robinson for gay and lesbian couples to apply for benefits under CPP. (03/15/00)
- Q: Editor quotes story of a mayor in B.C. refusing to proclaim Gay Pride day. (03/28/00)

April 2000

- Q: Participant is “trying to find her way around your new site”.(04/26/00)
- Q: Editor introduces new project with “politically incorrect” questions, and answers to them, asking for examples of questions and answers from people’s experience. (04/12/00)
- Q: Editors request information about initiatives to challenge heterosexism. (04/14/00)
- A: Organization is “hoping to continue ‘in-school’ presentations”. (04/14/00)
- Q: Editor announces April newsletter. (04/16/00)
- Q: Editor asks for feedback on “Are my attitudes Heterosexist?” (04/20/00)
- A: I love it. (04/20/00)
- A: I think the test is wonderful, with suggestions. (04/20/00)
- A: Great! (04/20/00)
- Q: Lesbian has difficulty opening bank account with her partner. Has to describe her as “friend”. (04/22/00)
- Q: Should be more Queer studies in university curriculum. (04/15/00)
- A: Description of “sexual diversity studies” program at University of Toronto. (04/15/00)
- A: Should have this at MUN. I’ll try for transfer credit for U of T courses. (04/15/00)
- Q: Inquiry about “correct” language use. (04/21/00)
- A: The editor comments about “queer” and about “ALGBTQ” acronym. (04/21/00)
- Q: Participant describes opportunities to see LGBT content on TV in NF, and lists gay positive web sites. (04/14/00)
- A: Another registrant adds more information about TV programs. (04/14/00)
- A: Another registrant lists movies with gay or lesbian visibility. (05/28/00)

- A: Principal researcher comments on gay/lesbian collection in a local video store, and their gay positive atmosphere. (03/28/00)
- A: A registrant likes this store, too. (04/14/00)
- A: The editor is distressed by content of “Boys don’t cry”, and wonders how transsexuals do when denied hormone follow-up, as happened to a person in this province. (04/22/00)
- A: Registrant recommends another good movie. (05/28/00)
- A: Registrant includes another store with gay positive videos. (05/28/00)

May 2000

- Q: Participant posts an article from the Washington Post, commenting that she does not see attitudes as gay positive as the article suggests. (05/12/00)
- A: Editor agrees that this is “urban” perspective, and rural communities may be more conservative. (05/14/00)
- Q: Registrant posts information about LGBT youth retreat. (05/23/00)
- A: Registrant asks for more information. (05/23/00)
- Q: Principal researcher introduces story about disciplining of “Dr Laura” for homophobic comments. (05/12/00)
- A: Comments that she is still “on the air” in the province on VOXM. (05/12/00)
- A: Suggestions on how to “stop” Dr Laura. (06/15/00)
- Q: Editor includes story about A.P.A.’s decision to cancel a panel on altering homosexuality by therapy. (05/22/00)
- Q: Editor comments on lack of discussion on web conference. (05/12/00)
- Q: Principal researcher on the qualifications required for those advertising gay positive professional services in THE. (05/12/00)
- Q: Editor adds letter from mother of gay son, about how cruel people can be. (05/14/00)
- A: The editor suggests NGALE’s support line. (05/23/00)

June 2000

- Q: Editor’s description of feelings about vandalism that included spray painting of “faggot” on a house and mail box in neighbourhood. (06/02/00)
- A: Its everywhere, said a registrant. (06/02/00)
- A: “I found one on locker at school. I’ll never forget the hurt, anger and embarrassment in his face.” (06/02/00)
- Q: A registrant comments about homophobic instructors at MUN. (12/06/00)

A: Reinforced by another student registrant. (12/06□□/99). Topics raised on the web site,

Our analysis of the web conference content shows that some issues raised by the editor or by the principal researcher attracted no response (e.g., certain national news items). Participants raised other issues with response from the editor or principal researcher but no one else (e.g., some of the stories of personal pain). Some of these pointed clearly to the need for gay positive services accessible to all regions of the province. Finally, some issues resulted in a chain of communication. Several of these chains addressed issues of direct concern to our study, such as the one on heterosexism in health care beginning in November 1999. Others addressed more generally the experience of being gay or lesbian in rural Newfoundland (02/22/00, 03/09/99), in the school system (03/06/00) or in university (12/06/00), eloquently expressing the pain that results from heterosexism and homophobia in these settings.

Notably, the registrants also used the safety, anonymity and privacy of the web conference to exchange information needed to survive in their communities. Several of the more developed communication chains concerned locating gay positive television programming, videos and video stores (04/14/00), web sites, chat rooms, stores, restaurants and bars (02/22/00). By creating a safe space on the web, *The Heterosexism Enquirer's* web conference allowed gay and lesbian individuals to exchange information without harassment and without a sense that this information would be freely published to the web.

At no time during the project did anyone post inappropriate or abusive content to the web conference. No one used the panic button to tell us of offensive materials on the web conference, and no one threatened the principal researcher, the editor or any of the advisory committee as a result of participation in this project. No information from the web conference found its way into the public domain unless released in printed form or posted to our web site by the project itself. In retrospect the concerns about safety expressed initially by our human subjects committee may have overstated risks to participants. However, we are very pleased that we have not had to deal with negative public or private comments arising from our association with the site.

2.4 Plans for Dissemination of Project Results

A draft of this report has been circulated to all members of the project advisory committee for comment and possible amendment.

1. The primary form of dissemination of this project's results are the transformation of *The Heterosexism Enquirer* into an ongoing electronic magazine. The enclosed brochure (2.5 below) summarizes findings and promotes the new *THEzine*. We enclose it in Appendix E in place of the "Fact Sheet" traditionally provided at the end of projects, and will provide multiple copies in brochure format upon request. All materials associated with the project, including this final report, will be available through our electronic magazine, and we are actively recruiting an editorial board and volunteer journalists and correspondents for the site.
2. *The Heterosexism Enquirer* continues to be represented on the Interagency Committee for the Prevention of Violence, which allows us to keep our community's agencies up to

date with information available on our site. In addition, we have registered with Memorial University's School of Social Work's "Innovative and Collaborative Social Work Program", offering a consultation service to agencies concerned about heterosexist bias in their services.

3. We have submitted proposal for conference presentations and poster sessions (see Appendix C). Those proposals accepted to date include a poster session at the national conference of the Canadian Mental Health Association in St John's, Newfoundland in August 2000; and presentations at a conference of the province's Health Board's Association in St. John's Newfoundland in October 2000, and a national conference on Feminist Utopias at University of Toronto in November 2000.

Appendix A

Research Proposals Submitted as a Result of this Project

September 1999

Memorial University, GRADSWEP (Applied for part time graduate assistant for winter 2000. Successful)

January 2000

Principal researcher was a collaborator in Ellen Balka (Simon Fraser University) letter of intent to create an Interdisciplinary Health Research Team, “Health Information Technology: Constraints and Opportunities for the Provision of Health Information and Delivery of Health Care Services” (\$251,820.00, unsuccessful)

“Using Emerging Technologies to Research and Remedy Heterosexist Policies and Practices”, letter of intent submitted for Community Alliance for Health Research (\$785,000, unsuccessful. Reviewers supportive but indicated partnerships insufficiently developed. In January 2000 this was true. By April 2000 it was not.)

March 2000

“Preventing Anti-Gay Violence in Newfoundland and Labrador”, presented by THE and NGALE under community mobilization component of violence prevention initiative (\$32,400, unsuccessful. Reviewers comments not available).

April 2000

Heterosexism and the Health of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Individuals, letter of intent to SSHRC under Society, Culture and Health of Canadians II (\$487,000, unsuccessful. Reviewers comments not yet available.)

Memorial University, MUCEP (Applied for part time undergraduate journalist for summer 2000, fall 2000 and winter 2001. Successful.)

Appendix B

Partnerships for The Heterosexism Project

Initial Partners

Ellen Balka, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University
Faye Freeman, NGALE
Vanessa Glasgow, Bay St. George Status of Women Council, NF
Joyce Hancock, Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women, NF
Beth Lacey, Women's Policy Office, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador
Marth Muzychka, Health and Community Services, St John's Region, NF and WHMUN
Sherri Northcott, Corner Brook Status of Women Council, NF

Additional Partnerships Developed during the Project

Derrick Bishop, NGALE, NF
Dr. Roy Cain, Health Studies and Social Work, McMaster University
Dr. Rosemary Clews, Social Work, St Thomas University
Marc Colbourne, Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Project, Halifax, NS
Joseph Courtney, LGBT-MUN Resource Centre, Memorial University
Claude Olivier, AIDS New Brunswick
Lorraine Sheehan and Bernice Morgan, Co-chairs, Bay St. George Coalition to End Violence, NF
Anne Shortall, School for the Deaf, NF
Judith Tate, LGBTQ Support and Services, University of Toronto
Susan Tirone, School of Physical Education and Recreation, Memorial University
Kim Vance, EGALE
Wendy Williams, Avalon Consulting, Vancouver, BC
Lori Yetman, Memorial University

Appendix C Presentations, Press Stories and Media Coverage

Leslie Bella and Lori Yetman, “Challenging Heterosexism in Health Services”, **3rd Annual Women’s Health Forum: The Environment of Women’s Health**, St. John’s, 15 October 1999.

Leslie Bella, “Introducing *The Heterosexism Enquirer*”, **Making Connections**, NLASW, January 2000.

Leslie Bella, Presentation, **A Policy Forum on Women’s Health and Well Being**, MCEWH, St. John’s, 29 February 2000.

Leslie Bella, “*The Heterosexism Enquirer*: Using the Web to Increase Personal and Community Resilience”, a poster session, **Roots of Resilience**, national conference of Canadian Mental Health Association, St John’s, 9 – 12 August 2000.

Leslie Bella, “Health Care Access for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered Individuals”, abstract accepted for **Accessibility and Sustainability: A Health System for the 21st Century**, Newfoundland and Labrador Health Boards Association, St John’s, 25 – 27 October 2000.

Leslie Bella, “Using the web to Challenge Heterosexism: Lessons from a Pilot Project involving Lesbians from Rural Newfoundland”, abstract accepted for **Feminist Utopias: Redefining our Projects**, Toronto, 9 – 11 November 2000.

Derrick Bishop, Anne Shortall and Leslie Bella, **Crosstalk**, a CBC open line show during Gay Pride Week, 20 July 2000.

Eleanor Brown, “Biff! Bam! Pow: Queer Studies go Tabloid”, **XTRA**, 13 January 2000, No. 397.

Michael Connors, “Parading Equality”, **Evening Telegram**, St John’s, 24 July 2000.

Matt Goerzen, “Web site reaches out to rural homosexuals”, **Evening Telegram**, St John’s, 13 December 1999, p. 3.

Karen Griffin, “*The Heterosexism Enquirer* On-line”, **MUSE**, 28 January 2000.

Gary Kean, “New website sets to right wrong attitudes about lesbians”, **Western Star**, Corner Brook, 22 February 2000.

Zeny Mandryk, “Sociologists battle heterosexism”, **The Georgian**, Stephenville, 22 February 2000.

Kim Vance, “Web based study of heterosexism launched in Newfoundland,” **Wayves**, December 1999 - January 2000.

Lori Yetman, “Challenging Heterosexism”, **Queer Studies Conference**, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 15 January 2000.

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Appendix E
Brochure Promoting the New *THEzine*

Appendix F
THE's Website (Page 1) (at launchdate, November 1999)

Appendix G
THE's Newsletter Sample (February 2000)

Appendix H
Enlightened Minds Want to Know, Are My Attitudes Heterosexist?

Appendix I
Enlightened Minds Want to Know, Is My Workplace Heterosexist?

Appendix J
Heterosexism in Income Support Policies in Newfoundland and Labrador

