'On my 50 year anniversary I want a letter from the queen'

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When I first really came to accept the fact that I am gay, I was afraid that I would miss out on things: wouldn't be able to get married, raise a family, etc. Things I'd really wanted to do. Now I realise that's all nonsense. I can still - and will - get married to someone of my choice, and raise children with them. Being gay really is no different from being straight. And I can't wait to marry the man of dreams and build a life with him :) (M 761)

Research in Australia consistently reveals that around 10% of young people are sexually attracted to people of their own sex or unsure about their sexual attraction. This figure remains fairly constant over a range of studies with young people in rural and urban areas, in every state and territory and from a range of ethnic backgrounds (Hillier et al, 1996; Lindsay et al, 1997; Smith et al, 2003; Smith et al 2009).

In terms of research specifically with same-sex attracted young Australians, three national studies have been carried out: in 1998, in 2004 and in 2010. Titled Writing Themselves In, (Writing Themselves in Again in 2004 and Writing Themselves In 3 in 2010) the research document these young people’s hopes, their dreams and their daily realities with over 5000 of these young people now having shared their stories with us. The first Writing Themselves In, in 1998, appears to have been a world first and described a minority group that was enduring high rates of homophobic abuse at school, at home and in the community, with one in five never having spoken to anyone about their sexual difference. These young people were having a hard time with little support, even from home. In 1998 there was little positive visibility in the media and the community of same sex relationships or queer people in general and those that were visible were embedded in negative publicity or in films where the gay or lesbian person is tragically killed off before the end. Young people were living in hostile environments and had difficulty imagining a happy future because there were few positive beliefs or role models to imagine it with.

The 1998 and 2004 reports were used to inform a range of initiatives around Australia, including funding applications, curriculum materials, health promotion resources and social support groups and much was done nationally to train service providers, including teachers. The research has also
informed education and Government policy as part of social change. In 2011, much has changed since the first Writing Themselves In report from 1998. However, the research trends are in two opposite directions - the first, an increase in homophobic abuse and the related negative health outcomes and the second, a trend to young people being more likely to be out, refusing to bow down, getting support, feeling better about their sexuality and resisting negative discourse.

There have also been societal shifts over the last 12 years in the direction of equity, visibility and support for sexual difference. The increased development of a human rights agenda relating to sexual health (Gruskin, 2006; WHO, 2006) has meant that same-sex attracted young people are now regarded as having the right to good health and wellbeing including up to date sexual health information and the right to an education devoid of discrimination and abuse. While various relationships bills were sporadically introduced in most Australian states by 2004, the Same-Sex Relationships Equal Treatment General Law Reform Bill passed through the Australian Senate in 2008, reforming 58 federal laws in order to promote equity for same-sex couples. Visibility in the media now normalises same-sex attraction and provides positive images of a gay life. There has been an increase in positive media visibility of alternate sexualities (for example, The L Word, True Blood, Glee, Modern Family and Ellen), and also in Australian television shows specifically (for example, openly gay contestants on Australian Master Chef, same-sex kisses on Neighbours and Home and Away and Aurora’s Australian Queer TV program on Foxtel).

It might then be assumed that queer young people now live in safe, inclusive environments at school, at home and in the community. Unfortunately this is not the case. The 2010 Writing Themselves In 3 clearly demonstrates an increase in reported rates of homophobic verbal and physical abuse, with severe impacts on young people’s mental health and wellbeing. Moreover, the same-sex marriage debate continues and there have been growing campaigns for and against the rights of queer people to marry.

To understand this contradiction in the 2010 study, between apparent improvements and deteriorations in these young people’s lives, one needs to reflect on the origins and entrenched nature of homophobic beliefs. Homophobia is an edifice that has taken many centuries to construct. It has been the ‘brainchild’ of our most powerful institutions - the law, medicine, psychiatry and psychology and organised religion. Homophobic abuse is fuelled by five main clusters of beliefs which have remained consistent over the three studies. They are listed below with young people voicing their lived experience:
1. *Same sex love is a sin.* This belief was created by the church and young people mentioned it often:

I spoke to the priest because I was really scared that I would be committing a sin by being gay. I was informed that to be gay was OK. I just couldn’t have sex with someone of the same sex ‘cos that was a sin (Rebecca, 21 years)

2. *Same sex love is a mental illness.* This belief was created in the past by Medicine, Psychiatry and Psychology.

Stupid sick poof. You are worthless to society. You are better off killing yourself (Noah, 15 years)

3. *Same sex love is unnatural and abnormal.* Young people were constantly told that they were weird, freaks and that there was something wrong with them:

It was a huge rollercoaster ride of emotions for me not knowing if I were normal, acceptable etc. Growing up in a small rural community where homosexuality was seen and is still seen as ‘abnormal’ hurts. (Daniel, 17 years)

4. *Same sex love is a phase.* Perhaps created by Freud but used to deny or belittle those feelings.

My father dismissed it as a ‘phase’ and encouraged me to keep it to myself. (Goodness knows what the neighbours would think!) (Alisa, 17 years)

5. *People who love people of the same sex will live miserable lonely lives, never having children, families or lasting relationships.*

I probably could adopt kids when I’m an adult but of course there would be a lot of adversity to overcome and I wouldn’t be able to have kids of my own flesh and blood. In reality – unfortunately – I see myself becoming a lonely old man (Jared, 15 years)

As well, in Australia in the not too distant past, same sex love was a crime punished by jail and the figuration of the ‘homosexual as criminal’ was a strong and pervasive construction. In many countries it remains a crime today that is punishable by death. However, in all westernised countries these laws have been rescinded; some, for example, Tasmania as recently as 1997.

In regard to the main homophobic beliefs mentioned above, most of these institutions, including our legal system, psychology and psychiatry and many parts of the church, have recanted their homophobic beliefs. However, we should never assume that we can remove lingering homophobic
discourse entirely in a decade and much of it remains in force today. On a positive note, while there has been no change in the content of homophobic beliefs meted out to young people over the 12 years that we have been conducting this research, we have observed marked changes in the ways that young people manage and resist homophobic discourse. Exciting new ways to think about, to reproduce, reform and sideline homophobic beliefs have emerged and this has produced powerful new ways of dealing with homophobia. More and more as the years go by, young people resist all types of homophobic belief; however, the focus of this chapter is on only one—the denial of children and marriage, how these young people manage it, and how this has changed over the three studies.

In 1998, young people were told, and believed, that they would be childless, and marriage rarely came into the picture. Only one young woman, Jill, mentioned wanting a child while still accepting without resistance that she would never be able to marry:

When I told my mum we both cried; she was disappointed, she was worried about me not being able to get married and have a family. I told her I still wanted to have a child. (Jill, 21 years).

In 1998, the dominant belief of the young people was that misery, loneliness and childlessness were the price they would have to pay for their sexual attractions. Dean was typical:

What do you say to your parents when you are an only child and know that they aren't going to have any grandchildren as such? I tell you what, I'm shitting myself over that one. I think I'll wait a while—like after I've moved out of home (Dean 21 yrs).

In 2004, only six years later, young people were beginning to talk about having children and they had many ideas about how they would manage it. Marriage was not mentioned often, though some did include thoughts of marriage in their narratives. Donna and Ryan are two examples:

I'm proud of being gay and I do want to get married to a woman and raise two beautiful children with the help of my best friend Sam and his sperm. (Donna, 18 years)

I plan to get married, whether it is allowed by law or not. I will still have a ceremony, I plan to have children, a family and a wonderful life with my husband until the day we both die (Ryan, 18 years)

Many people responded with the ‘lonely miserable life’ image when young people disclosed their same-sex attractions to them, but no one used it more than parents. Parents punished their children by promising them a miserable life as a same-sex attracted person and they emotionally blackmailed them by describing the unhappiness they were bringing to the family in terms of family honour and, more particularly, the loss of future grandchildren. In 2004, Andre was typical:
My parents said I’d never find someone, that I’d always be alone and unhappy and that by
telling them that I was gay I’d made them depressed. Sometimes I worry about being
completely alone later in life because I am gay (Andre, 17 years)

In 2010, despite having this belief about misery and loneliness thrust on them, it was becoming clear
that same-sex attracted young people were refusing to submit. They mentioned marriage and
children often and had worked out many new creative ways to see themselves in the future with
husbands, wives and children.

Of the 3134 young people who filled out the survey in 2010, around twenty percent mentioned
marriage and/or children. There had been no reference to marriage and children in the survey and
these responses were unsolicited. Marriage came up for these young people in a variety of ways.
There were some examples of negative impacts of the discourse of marriage exclusion at which
young people expressed anger or sadness. But there were also many examples of more direct
resistance from young people, which saw them threaten to reject the nation of their birth, reject the
inaction of their government and reject notions of ‘equality’ that do not include equal marriage
rights. A further response to marriage exclusion has been the reinvigoration of a discourse of direct
activism and protest amongst young people who demand change. Finally, many young people
expressed the desire to be like everyone else and have the ‘Australian dream with all the trimmings’.
These different themes in the responses are explored below.

*I can’t fall asleep because I dream of things I can’t have*

Many young people wrote about the harmful impacts of being excluded from marriage, including
feelings of rage, insomnia and a complete lack of hope. Some expressed anger at their exclusion, like
Jonas (16 years) who wrote:

  I hate it that in Australia I cannot get married. It makes me very angry that I cannot get
  married, I cannot have a wedding. I don’t want a ‘civil partnership’, I want a wedding.

Others expressed sadness around the lack of inclusivity. Joni (19 years) and her girlfriend wanted to
have kids and have a life together, but reflected *...it’s hard to think I can’t have that huge girly
marriage that I wanted and that my kids might have a hard time at school*. Joni was sad thinking
about all the little things they will miss out on that other couples will not. Ron (19 years) also
expressed sadness: *I am saddened, however, by the state of politics. In Australia (especially
Queensland) same-sex relationships are barely being considered as an issue worthy of discussion.*

There were also comments like Victor’s (15 years), which showed how exclusion impacted on day-to-
day experience: *I can’t fall to sleep, for doing so brings dreams of things I can’t have due to laws
being put up. I really want this wedding in the future.. with my one and only.*
Angelo (20 years) explained that being excluded from having marriage and kids meant that his entire vision for himself and hope for his future had been shattered:

The main thing I still struggle with is purpose. Coming from a Catholic Italian family, having children is the ultimate goal. I still have that feeling. I often struggle with my life's purpose. Why do I bother waking up in the morning? If my own society won't acknowledge my relationship, disallow me from having kids and subconsciously view me as a second-class citizen, then why am I bothering with it all?

It is important to note that the young people in the study overall, through all three reports, had significantly higher rates of suicide, self-harm and negative health impacts than heterosexual youth and this was significantly associated with having homophobic beliefs thrust on them. The way that homophobia can impact on a young person’s desire to live was aptly described by Tracey who wrote:

There’s not really much to say aside from 6 years of depression. I feel that being treated like dirt re my sexuality added to my lack of self esteem, depression and definitely contributed to self harm and thought of suicide. (20 years)

And for Stefan, the deep sorrow that he felt over his family’s reaction to his sexuality was enough for him to lose his desire to live:

My existence seemed to be a burden on my family growing up and when I came out to them it just seemed to create such an emotional strain. I thought maybe if I just went away that things might be alright for them again (19 years) We will never know the full extent of the impact on young people who have chosen to end their lives rather than speak out about the exclusions they suffered. However, for those who made it through, it was not uncommon for young people to reflect on reminders of darker times:

It gets me down when people don’t accept me for who I am. Now I’m learning to deal with it but as a result of this I now how many scars that I have to live with. (Patricia, 16 years)

Despite rising levels of homophobia, young people are demanding more than ever before. They want equal rights and they want marriage and children and they have much to say about it.

It makes me want to leave this country

Some young people rejected the culture of exclusion in Australia by rejecting Australia itself. Several of them fantasised about, or committed to definite plans, of leaving the country for a place where they can legally marry. Rolf (male, 18 years) explained that whilst he really wanted Australia to legalise same-sex marriage and adoption, he also wanted these things to happen all over the world, and wouldn’t mind moving to a country where these things are offered (if the government still
doesn’t care about me in the future). Katherine (15 years) was one of the young people who had more solid plans of leaving:

I have plans in the future to move to Canada, a more gay-friendly country (plus it has snow!) and I reaaaaally hope to get married and have children one day, I dream I have kept since childhood. I love kids and can’t wait to be a mother :) I won’t let my sexuality prevent me from doing that.

We were saddened to note that so many of the young people in this study – whose witty comments, humour and openness moved us greatly – did not see this country as supporting the kind of future they dreamed of, to the extent that they would leave the nation of their birth.

**The government needs to move now**

Some young people rejected marriage exclusion in Australia by placing responsibility fairly and squarely with federal and state governments. Karl (16 years) accused the government of homophobia: *i will not be able to experience things straight Australians enjoy because of the homophobic government*. Nicki (21 years) saw marriage as something the government was not allowing: *My hope for the future is that I find someone who I want to spend the rest of my life with and that we can get married and have children. I hope the government allows that.* Similarly, Felicity (18 years) saw it as a decision for government officials: *I LOVE BEING GAY. I hope that the future is full of rainbows in Australia, and the government decides to give us equal rights and opportunity. I want children. I want to marry. I want to be equal.*

Howard (18 years), like many in the study, had a strong belief in the onus on Australian governments to act on behalf of voters:

My hope in the future is that the federal government will stop watering down the ACT’s rights to legislate for its own people; who have voted in those people knowing full well their policies for AT LEAST civil unions to create some kind of equality.

Others like Peta (18 years) were surprised marriage equality was still even an issue:

Same sex marriage and equal rights for everyone should have been worked out years ago, and I hope it is something we can look back at and realise we did the right thing by letting everyone be happy.

These SSAGQ young people all saw governments as standing in the way of them having to right to marriage.

**Equality equals marriage rights**
Many young people argued that a denial of marriage was a denial of equal rights which must necessarily constitute the right to marry the partner of their choice. There was the sense that equal marriage rights was a pivotal issue that would signpost true equality. Natalie (21 years) believed that the change in marriage laws would bring a lot of other changes with it:

I, along with my friends from the gay community, look forward to the day where we have equal rights as heterosexual couples, can get married if we choose, and adopt children as well. I also hope that the Australian community as a whole becomes more tolerant and accepting of us and people from any other minority group.

Penelope (19 years) and Marcus (18 years), like many others, were not prepared to compromise: *Gay marriage. Not this civil union bullshit—the real deal. I want equality. I want equal rights. I want there to be no stigma for who I am.* Marcus argued that the Australian Government’s approval of same-sex marriages is a vital step that needs to be taken if we (the homosexual community) are to be accepted and considered as equals.

We found that young people were quite sophisticated in their understandings of the issue, with Howard (18 years) differentiating ‘gay marriage’ from equal marriage, which was less exclusionary of gender diverse young people:

I feel that, even if i am never married to a member of the same sex, it is an important step for maintaining and promoting rights. This extends to EQUAL marriage; not gay marriage, which may leave out other gender diverse peoples.

The vocabulary of rights, equality and freedom came across in both the young people’s hopes for themselves as individuals and for their communities more broadly.

*I want my voice and the voice of my peers to be heard:*

Every six years, with the advent of the new research, we have seen trends in the ways young people see their worlds and 2010 was no different. In this third study we were inspired by the spirit of activism and determination in these young people, something that was missing in 1998 and to a lesser extent in 2004. The gay-lib style discourse of direct activism and protest that had been popular in the late sixties and seventies has re-emerged amongst young people who now demand change, but with a different flavour. With changes in the law and in societal attitudes, the protestors are more likely to have police protection than to be arrested or abused by police, and there is a pleasure in sociality with peers and family rather than in anti-social behaviour. Young people are now more visible and more outspoken—they want to be heard.

In regard to marriage, Penelope (19 years), said: *I want to speak up. I want my voice and the voices of my peers to be heard.* Likewise, Lola (15 years) was committed to marriage activism: *I’m*
continuing to attend all the gay marriage rights and equal rights rallies and events that we have in Sydney. Young people were protesting with, and without, their families’ knowledge. Marisa (21 years) was lucky enough to have her mother with her on the march: One of the best time this year was marching with my mum in the equal love protests. On the street, in the press, on online forums, social networking sites and YouTube, there is a strong and highly sociable youth culture of activism on this issue. A third of all young people in the 2010 research discussed engaging in internet activism.

Just like everyone else: I want that huge girly marriage

The wish to be treated just like everyone else was repeated over and over by these young people. Where gay liberationists in the activism of the past had called for an end to violence and discrimination by coming out in public and asserting pride in their difference, one of the most striking aspects of the youth backlash against Australian marriage exclusion is their assertion of sameness. However, this is not the sameness asserted by the politically conservative homophile activism that preceded gay-lib, where homosexuals made a point of downplaying their sexuality and representing themselves as discreet and virtuous. The sameness is more around sharing a wish for the clichés of the Australian dream of a happy marriage with all its trimmings and a banal but pleasant lifestyle. Adam (19 years) hoped for acceptance in the future, arguing that this included the hope:

for gay marriage to be legalised, for gay adoption to be legalised and for social equality between all different types of minorities. I think i will be waiting at least another 5 - 10 years for this to happen but then even that, i think, is optimistic but i do have hope one day that sexuality will be like coffee, some people like it this way some people like it that way and no one could care less what way you like it just as long as they get it the way they want.

Alissa (19 years) wanted a conventional proposal —but from her girlfriend: I want my partner to be able to get down upon bended knee and slide a ring on my finger. Monty (17 years) wanted a traditional wedding, but with a twist: I would like to have 1 child and have a traditional style wedding. I plan on living my homosexual lifestyle to the fullest and proudest everyday :-). Joni was particularly disappointed that on my 50 year anniversary I don’t get a letter from the queen.

Young people had clear ideas about their ideal mate. Charles, (19 years) wanted to marry a successful and driven, educated, tall, hot blonde – except that his blonde would be male. His white picket-fence dream included the classic middle-class travel ideal: I want to see the world but not below 3.5 stars, and a son named Preston. Colin (19 years) looked forward to meeting Mr Right – a phrase previously depicting heterosexual clichés. Beth (17 years), like anyone raised in a Jewish family, looked forward to finding that nice Jewish girl and hoped that their kids will be accepted by
others for having two mums. Dean (17 years) wanted to finish school, go to uni, become a plastic surgeon, get married to a man, buy a house and settle down, have a child or two. Jenna (17 years) elaborated a plan that included love, a commitment, IVF or adoption, a baby, a family, a nice little family home and going to work every day like everyone else.

Bernard (17 years) had a similar dream for himself and a future, would-be husband:

I've already told people that it is my aim to settle down with someone in a committed and monogamous relationship and raise a family. I understand that there will be many issues in relation to adoption of children as well the legal recognition of our love and relationship, but I believe that as the Australian society changes and becomes more accepting of homosexuality, the law will also change to reflect this.

Toni (16 years) envisaged a world in which gender diversity won’t limit the possibility of achieving a happy, safe, family-oriented lifestyle:

I hope in future, I'll find a beautiful woman to share the rest of my life with, and when the time comes, we can marry with ALL my family there and start a family of our own and our family can live in safety and in happiness. If my child is straight, okay, if my child is homosexual, okay! If my child is gender queer, okay!

These young people have a vision of sameness, but with a twist.

Some conclusions

Overall, it is clear that young Australian SSAGQ people are not sitting on the fence of the marriage debate. They are unapologetic about their existence and happy to take a stand. But unlike previous generations of gay liberationists and lesbian feminist radicals who fiercely and proudly asserted their differences from heterosexuals and bitingly critiqued the marriage construct, these young people do not espouse dreams of hanging out in inner-city gay ghettos, or dancing under the moonlight in segregated communities.

These young people want their chance at marriage and children and a letter from the queen on their golden anniversary. They believe their individual differences such as their sexual preference or gender diversity are just part of the norm. They want the same opportunity other Australians have: to do ‘the marriage thing’, but to do it differently this time around – enjoying some of the more harmless traditions, but casting aside those that are exclusionary or not to their tastes.

And while some of them are certainly struggling with the fact that some members of their societies and governments do not share this vision, others are taking a stand by threatening to leave Australia, making demands, speaking out, or even making plans for future possibilities they consider
likely. Today, the main message from young people is that children, family and marriage are incredibly important to them. They believe they have a right to them, they see them in their futures, and they will not be denied them.

I want to fall in love.
I want to be able to curl up in a warm bed with the woman I love and who loves me, and to forget all those horrible discriminitive people in the outside world.
I want to be able to go out to dinner with my partner and not feel like the whole world is watching.
I want my partner to be able to get down upon bended knee and slide a ring on my finger.
I want marriage, or a legal commitment ceremony.
I want to grow old with the woman I love without being labeled a freak.
I want to be able to feel all full of butterflies when I go on that first date,
I want to be seduced and fall in love with a lovely woman. (Sally 17 years)

References

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