

**PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACES IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS' LIVES:
SCHOOL GRAFFITI, SEXUALITIES AND ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

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An intimate relationship is one in which neither party
silences, sacrifices or betrays the self.

(Lerner 1989, p.3)

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Abstract

The thesis investigates a number of girls' writings as they occurred in the form of graffiti in a sixth-form College in Malta. It develops an analysis of these graffiti texts, which are mainly concerned with how their authors try to make sense of their gender identity and involvement in sexual activity and romantic encounters. The analysis examines possible reasons why a number of female students resort to writing graffiti. It highlights the ways through which the acquisition of sexual knowledge occurs informally outside the formal curriculum, through spaces created and struggled over by the informants. The study interrogates the emotional, social, cultural, personal and political worlds as described by them. This includes a discourse analysis, aimed at providing a deeper understanding of ignored emotional and social perspectives. In the absence of sexuality and relationships education in postsecondary education curricula in Malta, this study challenges silences surrounding these matters. The study documents the graffiti as subversive processes of learning, which reproduce and resist dominant discourses. It regards the graffiti as constituting a discourse in itself, understood as possibly promoting agency in some of the informants' lives.

A reflexive approach was adopted to arrive at the research aims. Poststructuralist feminist and queer theory perspectives locate the study's theoretical positionings. Ethnographic observations and informal conversations with nineteen female students were employed to assist the data analysis.

The findings show that some informants question the ways they relate to their gender identity when confronted by hetero, lesbian and bisexual social relationships. Heteronormative dominance and familiarity are actively reproduced, contested, disturbed and resisted. The findings suggest that the informants seek a safe school environment, where they can discuss sexualities and relationships' matters in a context of empathy, caring, understanding and support. They request detailed information about decision-making processes related to conflicting emotions about romantic feelings, relationships and interpersonal communication skills with their partner/s.

The study points to the need for a deeper understanding of the emotional and overall wellbeing of teenagers with respect to romantic and sexual relationships. The study aims to contribute towards academic debates and knowledge about teenage perspectives on sexualities and romantic relationships and towards the planning, discussion and design of future postsecondary sexuality education curricula in Malta.

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And to Ben, who is always with me and guides me in every step.

Introductory Notes

1. The words 'adolescents' and 'teenagers' are used interchangeably. They are meant to be understood as being synonymous and no difference in meaning is intended.
2. All graffiti quotations are numbered sequentially. Nearly all the graffiti numbers are consecutive, except for those that refer to quotations, which are situated next to other quotations in the same photograph and which had already been referred to in the previous couple of paragraphs.
3. An asterisk '*' following these quotations signifies that the text has been either partially or completely translated from Maltese. The enclosed CD contains all the digital photographs of the graffiti referred to in this study. They are numbered according to how they appear in the study.
4. The institution, where the research was conducted, is referred to as 'the College'.
5. The informants are frequently referred to as 'the girls' or 'the graffitists'.

Abbreviations

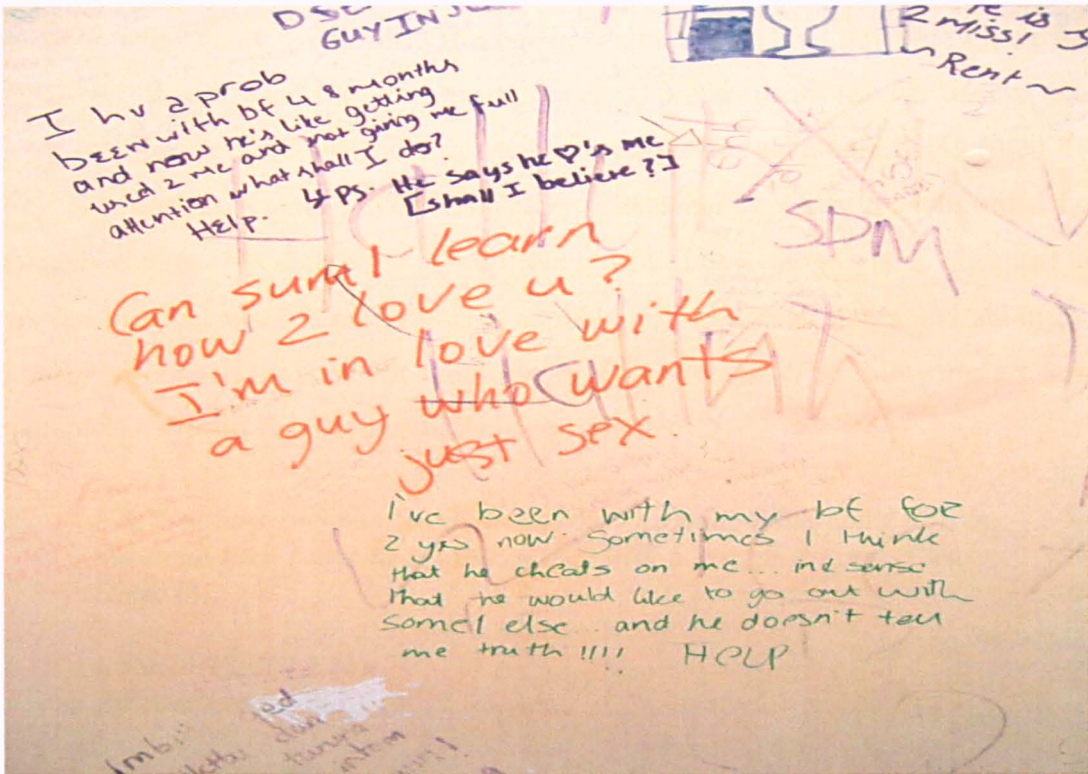
The following are some abbreviations used by the graffitists in their writings:

@	At
1	One
2gether	Together
Bf	Boyfriend
Btw	By the way
Coz	Because
Dw	Don't worry
dnt	Do not
Gals	Girls
Gf	Girlfriend
Gl	Good luck
Im	I am
Imp	Important
l8	Late
Lol	Laugh out loud
Luv	Love
Pls	Please
Ppl	People
R	Are
Right1	Right one
Sry	sorry
U	You
Wnt	Want
Wtf	What the fuck

CHAPTER ONE:

‘Can sum 1 learn how 2 love u?’

Outline of Research Questions and Aims of the Study



Chapter one deals with the following:

- The Issue
- A Discursive Arena
- The Implications and Rationale of the Study
- Research Questions
- Positionality
- Theoretical Positionings And Research Methods
- Summary: Why Are Some Girls Suffering Alone?
- Structure of Thesis

The Issue

*Can sum I learn how 2 love you?
I'm in love with a guy who wants just sex (1).*

*I read that every woman is 20% lesbian and she can love a woman,
if she wants. is this true? (2).*

For the past thirteen years, I have been teaching religious education to 16-18 year old students, who attend a sixth-form College in Malta. Throughout this time I have been using the female students' lavatories, since I prefer them to the unisex ones, designated for staff. During these years, countless graffiti have unfailingly filled each door inside every female students' lavatory. Occasionally whilst queuing up, I hear students comment to each other about these graffiti. I have always been intrigued and concerned about what female students scribble on these toilet doors and about their occasional conversations about them inside the lavatories. The following are some examples of graffiti that have actually been scribbled:

I'm 2 months pregnant from a married husband! What can I do? In the same time I was in a relationship with a guy of my age. Please Help! (3).

*LESBIANS RULE (4).
Bisexuals too! (ibid.).*

Do you think having a bf of a different colour puts a strain on a relationship? Pls help me! (5).

Anyone likes foreign girls here? ☺ (6).

Kevin 4 VANESSA ONLY! (7; Accompanied by a heart shape).

Do you think it's bad to go with someone who has a child? Help!! (8).

Sex is like prinacles once you pop you cont stop! (9).

HEY I'M A BI-SEXUAL! ANYONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO HAVE NEW EXPERIENCES ?? (10).

Dis guy I used to like keeps coming back to me just to get off whenever he wants At a point I really liked him and we did everything 2gether ... even sex!! Den he ignores me and when he wants he comes back I know he used me but I still like him and I always get off wit him wat to do? (11).

*I ♥ her n I want her but im str8 n I av a bf!! (12).
You call yourself straight? (ibid.).*

Girls: Don't fight for Boys They're not worth (13).

*I heard that by having sex under water u cnt get pregnant IT'S
TRUE??? (hpe so lol) (14).*

*The sea would be full of people, if this was true!!!! No you can still
get pregnant dear!!! ☺* (ibid.).*

*Fuck, I like a guy who is not cute. He asked me out but I told him not
cos I didn't like him. But now we send (messages) each other every
day and I started to like him (15).*

Making love is much easier than being in love! (16).

A string of answers to these questions and statements have been written. Female students constantly pour in their own advice and supportive comments. The subject matter of the absolute majority of graffiti deals with sexualities and romantic relationships issues. These girls' queries and difficulties provided the major impetus for this study. My curiosity and concern to find out the possible reasons behind their urgency in wanting to communicate their doubts, questions, fears, longings, joys, pain and wisdom related to sexualities, love and intimate relationships, made me pursue this study. The research questions of this study emerged from these writings. The research questions also emerged from my own doubts, struggles, perplexities and hopes about intimate relationships. Marecek *et al* (1997) claim that good research questions spring from our 'values, passions, and preoccupations' (p.634). I believe that the desire for human connection and sexual expression is compelling and involves an array of human emotions. Sexuality has overwhelming power and for some people, love is one of life's greatest experiences.

The study's aim is to examine the graffiti contents. It focuses on the ways the graffitiists negotiate their shared understandings of the complexities related to romantic love, sexualities and relationships. It explores the creative ways they do this and the constraints they face in doing so. The 'voices' of these 16-18 year old students have central importance in this study. The examination of how the graffitiists represent themselves to one another aids the investigation. I have been informed by research, which critically explores the possible meanings of teenage girls' voices (eg. Currie

1999; Brown LM 1999; Taylor *et al* 1995; Orenstein 1994; Brown and Gilligan 1992) and the tensions and anxieties involved in researching girls (Kehily 2004).

Some girls might have invented the written 'problems' themselves, for one reason or another, and therefore the situations described could be totally fictitious. Chapter 5 discusses this possibility. Nonetheless, these persistent writings manifest the informants' ways of thinking, and describe aspects of their social world. I assume that the graffitists are female students, since the writings are found in female lavatories, in which male students are forbidden entry. There are no specific indications that some graffiti have been written by males. The writings are nearly all anonymous and they are periodically removed by the cleaners who scrub them off; although they start reappearing again soon after and replaced by other questions and comments about the same topics. Every year, during the Christmas, Easter and summer holidays, the doors are given a new coat of paint. Some doors are painted black to discourage scribbling but this has no effect, because the girls use white correcting fluid instead of felt pens. Their eagerness is expressed directly:

I'm glad they paint the door every year so that we can write new stuff (17).

Hey continue writing on doors 3rd Floor this is Full now IMP (18).

Since it is difficult to statistically measure the number of graffiti authors, it is equally impossible to know the percentages of bisexual, lesbian and heterosexual students. Unlike other studies about teenage sexuality, which lack contributions about homosexuality, because the informants were reluctant to speak about it (eg. Measor *et al* 2000), informants who describe themselves as lesbian/bisexual are not under-represented in this study, since they actively contest the heteronormative space inside the lavatories.

A Discursive Arena

The research questions reflect on female teenagers' views and feelings about the dilemmas surrounding adolescent intimate, romantic relationships, expressed in a school setting. The study regards the female toilets as a cultural gendered site and as a space that is socially negotiated and constructed, where femininities and masculinities

are displayed, reproduced, challenged and contested. This study regards the graffiti as being composed of various discourses, operating through the informants' perceptions, emotions and ways of thinking. In adopting a Foucauldian framework (Foucault 1972), I understand discourses as not only encompassing what is written but as implying power practices, which make and shape reality. I consider the formation, understanding and analysis of discourses as complex since they vary according to different cultures and particular moments in history.

The Implications and Rationale of the Study

This study aims at contributing to debates about the wellbeing of teenagers, as they experience sexual feelings and intimacies. Although adolescent romantic relationships are considered 'transitional' (Gallagher *et al* 2004, p.204), they are 'central in adolescents' lives' (Furman 2002, p.177) and therefore merit study. As adolescents move to young adulthood, their romantic relationships become more significant to them (*ibid.*). Not all the graffitiists seem to have had a direct, personal experience of a romantic relationship. Some are considering entering into one and others try to grapple with their feelings and thoughts about persons, towards whom they feel attracted.

Until recently, 'relatively few studies had examined romantic relationships in adolescence' (Furman and Wehner 1997, p.21). There is a general lack of research about Maltese teenagers' feelings and perceptions about romantic interactions, sexual desires and experiences, presumably because this area might not have been considered important. This study aims at producing 'a partially situated text that opens up a previously repressed, ignored, or over interpreted corner of cultural life' (Denzin 1997, p.221), by contributing towards a broader conceptualisation of Maltese female adolescents' voices and a deeper recognition of their needs in their encounters with the sexual. Recently outside Malta however, there has been an increase in research concerning adolescent romantic relationships. The reason:

may partially stem from a recognition that these relationships are not simply trivial flings. As young people move from preadolescence through late adolescence, their romantic relationships become increasingly central in their social world.

(Furman 2002, pp.177-178)

There also seems to be a shift towards the study of adolescent personal issues. The transition in the UK from 'sex education' (understood in the limited sense of biological education) to 'sex and relationship education' implies a deeper understanding of the adolescent intimate, personal, subjective, experiential and emotional self:

In the past quarter century, research on adolescence has expanded from a near exclusive focus on intra individual processes to a concern with individuals in an interpersonal context.

(Collins and Laursen 2004, p.55)

Students' expectations and endeavours to pass their examinations and further their academic education could be affected by their romantic encounters. Emotions generated by such relationships might influence their overall academic learning and outcomes. Sexuality and intimate relationships matters could have an impact on the whole life of persons (Erikson 1968; Sullivan 1953). The type of intimacy with a romantic partner/s during late adolescence influences the course of future relationships (Feiring 1999a), although there is limited empirical data on whether adolescent romantic experiences influence subsequent romantic relationships, including marriages (Furman 2002, p.178).

The graffiti made me question whether the educational agenda is meeting the needs of postsecondary students regarding issues pertaining to sexualities and romantic relationships. The graffiti main themes (chapters 5-6) constitute the kind of knowledge the girls are constantly requesting. I regard this request as legitimate. Every year, as I read the girls' problems on toilet doors, I wonder how much support and knowledge they are being given at school and at home, which meet their emotional needs regarding sexualities and romantic relationships. One of the reasons why this knowledge is being requested inside the female lavatories; a marginalized school setting, might be that students are not provided with any form of sexuality education at their College. Sexuality education as a specific subject does not exist in any of the curricula of postsecondary schools in Malta. Students do not even learn about basic health and biological issues related to sexuality. Some themes related to sexuality, love and intimate relationships may be touched upon in literature classes through poetry, novels and drama. In Religious Knowledge, the topic of sexuality is part of the Advanced level syllabus, which makes it clear that it is to be approached

'from the Christian perspective' (Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate Examinations Board 2003, p.256).

The Maltese, postsecondary National Minimum Curriculum aims at contributing towards the 'education of the 'whole' person' by empowering students with both life and study skills. It invites them to adopt a holistic approach to knowledge, to become reflective, critical and 'self-directed learners'(Ministry of Education 1991). It also seeks to direct students to 'handle emotional responses in a mature manner' and develop their communication skills (ibid.). It does not however mention the sexual development of postsecondary students.

Among 150 male and female Maltese postsecondary students (33% of whom attended the College), 94% agree that the topic about Love Relationships should be included in Personal and Social Development lessons, if this were to be offered (Mamo 2001). This topic is the most requested from all the suggested ones. This is followed by Self Awareness/Esteem (88%), Friendship (88%) and Sexuality/Growing Up (87%). The United Nations' Committee on the Rights of the Child (2000) stated that in Malta there is 'a need for a national sex-education policy' in view of a rise in teenage pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS¹.

The study discusses the politics behind the exclusion of sexuality education in the postsecondary curriculum. The rationale of the study rests on the argument that the educational agenda cannot ignore this aspect in teenagers' lives:

... educators have yet to take seriously the centrality of sexuality in the making of a life and in the having of ideas.

(Britzman 1998, p.70)

The educational focus of the study is positioned on the belief that education is one of the vehicles through which the acquisition of knowledge and skills related to romantic

¹ In Malta there are officially less than 500 Maltese people (0.2%) infected with HIV (UNAIDS/WHO 2004).

intimacies and sexuality issues could be made possible. The study confronts the silences that surround sexualities in school settings:

It is amazing that here, in the beginning of the 21st century, we still don't teach an understanding of male and female relationships in our schools. We prefer to study rats running around mazes or to look at how a monkey will do backflips when conditioned by the reward of bananas. Science is a slow, lumbering discipline and takes years to feed its results into the education system.

(Pease and Pease 2001, p.286)

Acting against this prevailing silence is challenging. Other educational institutions (eg. see Rolston *et al* 2005) also seem to be affected by silence:

... with some exceptions ... there is an official silence about all kinds of sexuality in the vast majority of mainstream schools and universities in anglophone countries.

(Epstein *et al* 2003, p.3)

The study argues that the fact that: 'We are not taught how to heal a broken heart in school' (Gray 1998, p.4) might have dangerous consequences on adolescents' lives. The study aims to offer insights to the debate about the significance of sexuality and relationships education in postsecondary education, with particular reference to Maltese postsecondary school settings. Although the study is situated in a particular context and culture, I believe that it is relevant to wider debates:

How and toward whom love is expressed varies by culture. Yet there are certain fundamental human propensities for connection that find expression in some form universally.

(Josselson 1996, p.8)

Although it is not the purpose of this study to discuss what should or should not be the nature and aims of sexuality education, nor to design postsecondary sexuality education curricula, this study is intended as a possible reference to the discussion about such programmes. Some research has explored adolescent's views on sexuality education (eg. Strange *et al* 2006, 2003; Allen 2005, 2001; Rolston *et al* 2005; Hilton 2003) and peer-led sexuality education (eg. Stephenson *et al* 2003; Forrest *et al* 2002; Strange *et al* 2002). Adolescents' perspectives of sexuality contribute to a more effective and appropriate sexuality education (Allen 2005, 2001; Measor *et al* 2000, Epstein and Johnson 1998). According to Allen:

adopting young people's views of effective education grants them some agency by communicating a legitimisation of their knowledge and positioning them as sexual agents.

(Allen 2005, p.391)

Sexuality education must meet the needs and interests of adolescents as conceptualised by them (Aggleton and Campbell, 2000). There is much controversy and disagreement however about the nature, aims and practice of sexuality education (Atkinson 2002; Measor *et al* 2000). Debates about sexuality education are sensitive and controversial, because of political, ethical and moral connotations (Measor *et al* 2000, p.1). A general overview of sexuality education theories and programmes is outlined and discussed in Bruess and Greenberg (2004) and values related to the principles and practice of sexuality education in Halstead and Reiss (2003). Competing discourses are involved in sex education (Kehily 2002). Sexuality has been regarded 'an unclear field of study' (Mac An Ghail 1994, p.2) and research about sexuality in schools 'a complicated business' (Kehily 2002, p.5). Schools have viewed students' sexuality as an impediment to the academic purpose of schooling and have either tried to regulate or deny its expression through sexuality education (Paechter 2004; Nash 2002; Thorogood 2000). Adolescents are critical of current approaches to school-based sex education (Mayock and Byrne 2004), which are unrelated to their sexual experiences (Sears 1992). These perceived limitations produce a sense of estrangement and alienation in adolescents towards sexuality education received at school:

Many young people prefer to rely on teen magazines, adult pornography magazines, television and their friends to provide them with more useful information and support about sexuality than they receive at school.

(Epstein *et al* 2003, p.51)

Many teenagers report that they don't get adequate information about healthy sexuality and relationships from their parents or school (Kaiser Family Foundation 1999). Sexuality education, as taught in numerous schools at present, does not include information about relationships, love and intimacy and tends to concentrate on strictly biological aspects (Mayock and Byrne 2004; Measor *et al* 2000).

Pressure by parents is put on school curricula to provide a better sexuality and relationships education. They request more detail and depth in the discussion of sexuality issues (Schemo 2000). Specifically, 94% said that sexuality education should teach students how to deal with the pressure to have sexual intercourse and the emotional consequences of sex; 97% stated it should address how students should talk with their parents about sex; and 88% said it should cover how to talk with a partner

about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases (ibid.). There are also studies however, which show that parents overwhelmingly oppose comprehensive sexuality education² and support abstinence education (eg. Zogby International for Focus on the Family 2004).

Research Questions

The research questions that guide this study summarize its aims:

1. What motivations for writing questions and comments on toilet doors are put forward by the graffiti writers?
2. What are they trying to say through their writings and what forms of knowledge are they seeking?
3. What do their writings reveal about their needs and wellbeing?
4. What kind of advice and support are these students given by their female peers, who answer their pleas for help?
5. What discourses are employed in their writings?
6. What discourses do they challenge?
7. How can the graffiti voices inform understandings of adolescents' needs regarding romantic and sexual relationships?

² Comprehensive sexuality education is generally understood as dealing almost exclusively with teaching about contraception and with encouraging teenagers to use it, to prevent the physical problems of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. It neither discourages nor criticizes teenage sexual activity as long as "protection" is used. Generally, it exhibits an acceptance of casual teenage sex and does not encourage them to wait until they are older to initiate sexual activity and therefore does not encourage abstinence until marriage. It does not treat "protected" sex at an early age and sex with many different partners, as problems. Sexuality is treated primarily as a physical phenomenon. Comprehensive sexuality education curricula generally ignore the linkages between sexuality, love, intimacy and commitment.

8. How can the graffiti textual analysis contribute to the development of possible debates about postsecondary sexuality education programmes and policies in Malta?

Positionality

I have considered most of the graffitists as seekers and producers of knowledge. I regard their reflexivity as an important factor in understanding the invisibility, voicelessness and non-representation of sexuality education issues. My positionality challenges the silences, secrecy and taboos that besiege the area of postsecondary sexuality education in Malta and which afford very limited opportunities for adolescents to hear each other's voices and to give and receive support regarding difficulties in dealing with sexuality issues. My positionality gives voice to the viewpoints, which female adolescents bring to the forum about sexualities. In general, this study positions these voices as 'positively and legitimately sexual' (Allen 2005, p.402). My positionality gives prominence to the discourse of 'openness'. The politics I advocate is one of inclusion. My subjectivity as a researcher involves both resistance and accommodation to present power structures operating within the College.

Theoretical Positionings and Research Methods

Researching sexuality issues in an environment supporting a desexualised school policy has been challenging. In answering to Duffield's plea that 'gender issues in schools must not remain invisible' (2000, p.166), I have tried to develop a methodological approach, which renders visible the political policies regarding the silencing of sexuality education. This approach recognises that sexuality issues are present and absent; experienced in private and public settings.

The study's theoretical positioning is located within postmodernist and poststructuralist perspectives. The study employs ethnography, which is intended to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. It also draws upon queer theory. The location of myself within this study reflects feminist epistemological concerns. My reflexive process binds together my ethnographic knowledge and experience with my understanding of queer and feminist theories. The study incorporates a 'reflexivity

that accounts for multiplicity' (Pillow 2003, p.181), whilst acknowledging that reflexivity is both beneficial and problematic.

The study involves a qualitative research method. It is a case study of a group of students studying in a particular College and no generalisations or definitive claims can be derived from it. The graffiti writers' views do not necessarily reflect those of other students who do not write graffiti and neither of those adolescents who do not study at the College. Feelings of individual informants arise in relation to their own unique way of life and cannot be generalized to other adolescents. Since I am constantly engaged with the graffiti in my everyday life, I have used the present tense in my accounts of the graffiti texts.

To investigate the research questions some data were derived from occasional, informal and spontaneous conversations with nineteen female students, whom I have met coincidentally inside the lavatories, and who happened to comment on the graffiti with their friends. I have asked these informants how often they read the graffiti; whether they think that the situations, stories and experiences described through them have really happened in real life, and whether they think that the graffiti issues should be addressed and tackled through the school's official curriculum, by offering the topic Sexuality and Relationships Education to all sixth-form students. I had to limit the presentation of this data to these three questions and not delve deeper into the graffiti contents with these informants, due to word limit constraints. I considered these conversations as additional information, which assists the graffiti textual analysis. Nevertheless the valuable insights of these students still provided me with ways of triangulating the data (Denzin 1970).

Summary: Why are some girls suffering alone?

The study aims at giving prominence to the voices of a number of 16-18 year old Maltese female sixth-form teenagers by examining the views, feelings and experiences as expressed through their graffiti about sexualities and romantic relationships. I regard these views as a way of developing both my knowledge and understanding of these issues. This study examines the merging process, which occurs between aspects of the informants' inside and outside lives brought together by their

writings. It also aims at investigating a number of discourses reflected in their accounts of their public and personal lives through poststructuralist epistemology by drawing on a discourse analysis method. The study is concerned with what teenage romantic and sexual attachments bring along with them. It deals with the following concerns, which are intertwined: the body, sexual expression, erotic desire, love, intimacy, emotions, trust, parents, curriculum, culture, politics, pregnancy, disease and discourses. The thesis investigates how the graffiti reflect the de-sexualization of the official curriculum. The policy, which excludes sexuality education in Maltese postsecondary schools, is regarded as a serious omission, as it ignores discussions about aspects of teenage sexual experiences:

Education's present structure and modes of thought resist ethical actions and can be viewed as criminally negligent in its censorship of safe sex education, in its eschewal of difficult ideas, and in its incapacity to notice its own harm.

(Britzman 2000a, p.35)

The study aims at disturbing the silencing of sexuality education. It contributes towards the deconstruction of the authority and power of a pedagogy, which excludes adolescents' concerns. The research findings aim to throw light on teenagers' needs regarding sexualities and intimate relationships issues, as they emerge through the informants' subdued voices. Education is not concerned merely with the preparation of students for the world of work but is also committed to develop the whole person. In a complex world the parents alone can no longer be the sole providers of an education for life.

Can sum I learn how 2 love u?

I'm in love with a guy who wants just sex (1).

This girl implies that apart from 'just sex' she wants 'love'. The shared spaces on toilet doors give evidence to the opportunities that some girls seek, in order to learn about 'love'. This study investigates possible reasons why the graffiti germinate constantly. School cultures in England are also saturated with sex (Kehily 2002; Epstein and Johnson 1998). According to Epstein *et al* (2003) '... while sexuality is expelled from the space of the school and made taboo it is, at the same time, ever – present, indeed pervasive' (p. 71). It is the pervasiveness of numerous graffiti that this study investigates.

Structure of Thesis

A brief summary of the thesis' plan helps towards a better understanding of how the aims of the research are executed:

Chapter 1 outlines the aims and rationale of the study.

Chapter 2 describes the background and context of the study.

Chapter 3 reviews relevant literature.

Chapter 4 examines the methodological frameworks and research methods employed. Apart from ethnography, these include queer and feminist theories. Their relevance to the study and their critique is examined reflexively. The research methods include a textual analysis of the graffiti, ethnographic observations, and informal conversations with nineteen students.

Chapter 5 introduces the analysis by reflecting on the informants and their possible motivations for writing graffiti.

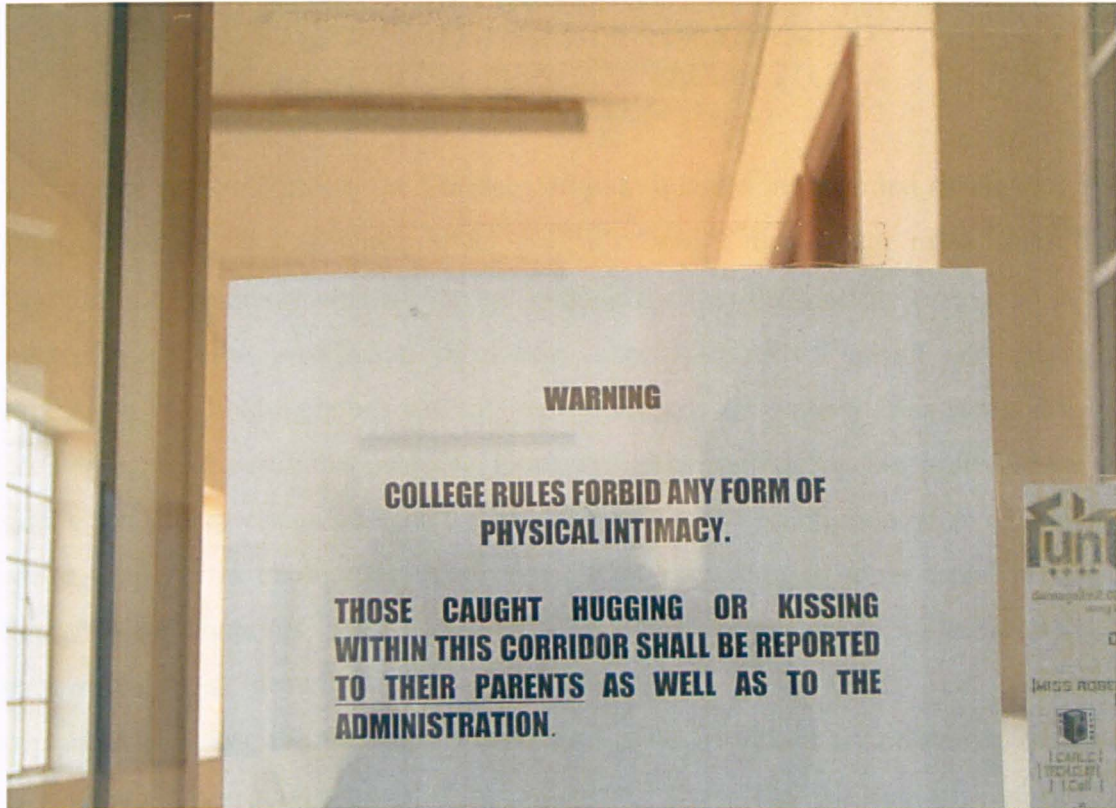
Chapter 6 presents a textual analysis of the dominant graffiti themes.

Chapter 7 discusses conclusions reached and their implications on postsecondary school policies regarding sexuality and relationships education.

CHAPTER TWO:

‘College rules forbid any form of physical intimacy’:

The Context and Background of the Study



Chapter two deals with the following:

- Introduction
- Discourses Operating Around Aspects Of The Informants' Lives
- Subcultures At the College
- The Construction of My Narratory Self
- Summary

Introduction

WARNING

*COLLEGE RULES FORBID ANY FORM OF
PHYSICAL INTIMACY.*

*THOSE CAUGHT HUGGING OR KISSING WITHIN
THIS CORRIDOR SHALL BE REPORTED
TO THEIR PARENTS AS WELL AS TO THE
ADMINISTRATION (19).*

This notice can be seen on the College campus. It could be regarded as the College administration's own official printed 'graffiti'. One of the College rules states that 'No forms of intimacy whatsoever are tolerated within the College precincts'. This rule refers to the prohibition of public manifestations of sexual and physical expression like holding hands and kissing on campus. As outlined, this study aims at deconstructing the rule that prohibits intimacy; understood not in the limited sense of public sexual expression on school campuses, but as the prohibition of an education, which supports the exploration of self and the understanding of adolescents' feelings, thoughts and longings related to sexualities. This chapter deals with the study's background, as described through ethnographic observations and personal perspectives. I describe the study's context in terms of discourses present in Maltese culture, which surround aspects of the informants' lives. The data analysis outlined in chapters 5 and 6 reflects on the discourses, which emerge from the graffiti texts. The inner context of this study presented in this chapter, reflects on the College's official policies and on the network of the informants' cultures and subcultures within this institution. My positioning as a teacher at the College is also outlined. I have employed reflexivity to interrogate power positions, operating both within the official school discourse and within an outer, wider context in Maltese society, which produces, contests and resists sexual knowledge.

Discourses Operating Around Aspects of the Informants' Lives

The social class, upbringing, occupation, gender, nationality and sexual orientation of the researcher and of the persons researched, as well as how these factors interact with each other in a particular location and time, shape the research study. Through

ethnography the researcher is placed within a social context, which connects the personal and the cultural (Reed-Danahay 1997, p.9). The informants' perceptions and feelings about intimate relationships are influenced by the world they inhabit and are derived from knowledge that they have learned formally at school or amongst family members, and from what they have come to know informally through experience, culture and inference: 'The physical act of sex is positioned alongside emotion, desire, gender, culture, time, space ...' (Coffey 1999, p.95). The informants are not only part of the educational institution they learn in, but are also members of a broader social community, which to an extent influences how they adopt knowledge about sexualities to organize their behaviour. The informants' inner world of feelings and thoughts mingles with the external world of cultural norms. The understanding of the connections between the personal and the cultural is complex, because these are constructed and re-constructed constantly:

As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition.

(Ellis and Bochner 2000, p.739).

Public discourses and individual subjectivities form part of the informants' process of acquiring knowledge and norms about sexualities. The use of language, as a form of social practice, places people in different power positions (Foucault 1972). Sex and the body are discursive constructs (Foucault 1978, 1985, 1986; Butler 1993). Discourse and the materiality of bodies are indissoluble and sex is a 'process whereby regulatory norms materialize "sex" and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms' (Butler 1993, p.2).

The following discursive agents describe strategies, which surround the informants' social and cultural worlds. I have focused on specific aspects of Maltese culture, which in some ways relate to the research questions. Since the ways that cultural hegemony is maintained are complex (Guzmán 2003, p.31), these various discourses are understood as operating alongside each other and not as being rigidly separate from each other. In adopting poststructuralist perspectives, I regard these discourses as accommodating complexity.

1. *State politics: A discourse of silence*

The discursive strategy of silence regarding the absence of sexuality education curricula in postsecondary schools is perhaps aimed at policing the students by ignoring the sexual dimension of their life. Epstein *et al* (2003) hold that; ‘... sex and relationship education is always about what a particular government chooses to permit the school to say officially about sexuality and what or whom must remain silent’ (p.51). Silence is a discourse, which occupies space. It encompasses what is not said, what is merely implied or intuited; what is indirect, imprecise or incomplete. The discourse of silence withholds and/or omits knowledge. Discourses, which silence sexuality (Foucault 1978), create mechanisms of power within established structures. The imposed discourse of silence brings about ignorance.

When laying out policy and legislation, even with regards to education, the Maltese government is to a considerable extent, dependent on the teachings of the catholic Church. The United Nations’ Committee on the Rights of the Child (2000) stated that in Malta there is often ‘religious bias’ in sexuality education, where it exists. The secondary school Maltese National Minimum Curriculum outlines the exploration of the relationship between ‘sexuality and religion’ (Ministry of Education 1999, p.55). As I have written;

The institutionalization of Catholic beliefs in Maltese society has a long history. At present, there are still a number of close ties between the laws of this ecclesial institution and those of the civil institution. To a certain extent, civil law is used to sanction ecclesial law, which in turn influences and conditions social norms. The Church and State serve each other, although they might also be in conflict. Politicians might seek the political and ideological support of the ecclesiastical side for their political survival and gain and the religious hierarchy may in turn do the same for its own stability.

(Cassar 2004, p.79).

The Church is granted political power over a number of civil social policies. In 2005 the Maltese government proposed that the illegalization of abortion be entrenched in the Maltese Constitution, to reinforce this law even further. Maltese women go abroad to undergo abortions (Xuereb 2002, p.15) and abortions are performed illegally in Malta. The Phillipines and Malta are the only countries, which have not legalized divorce. The younger Maltese generations are more in favour of the introduction of

the laws of abortion and divorce than adults (Abela 1991, p.206) and they are moving away from the hegemonic control of the state and the Church, regarding these two issues. The entanglement of Church and state is continuously declared openly in the media. The young generations disagree with the close enmeshment between Church and state and hold that the two should be separate entities (Abela 2000, p.201).

2. *The discourse of the catholic Church regarding sexuality*

For centuries, sexual behaviour, even in marriage had been taboo for Christians. It has taken long for the catholic Church to recognize sexuality as 'an intrinsic part of the human personality' (Dominian 2001, p.100). This is because 'the Churches have been slow, afraid, confused and hesitant to explore this rich divine gift' (ibid., p.148). Sexual matters are still regarded as cultural taboo even inside English classrooms (Kehily 2002).

The discourse of the church portrays the heteronormative family as the best channel through which one finds a sense of belonging and love, through sexual expression. Foucault (1978) writes specifically about the dictates and discourses of the Christian pastoral tradition surrounding the body, temptation, sex and desire. In its official catechism, the catholic Church portrays the sexually active, unmarried persons in a bad light, indirectly implying that they are either promiscuous or else dismissing them as failures or abnormal because they do not have a committed relationship. It emphasizes that; 'Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes' (Roman Catholic Church 1992, paragraph 2351). This approach considers casual sex outside marriage as deviant and problematic; involving risk of unplanned pregnancy and exposure to sexually transmitted infections. Moreover, the official teaching of the catholic Church still holds on to the tradition, which has declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered' (ibid., paragraph 2357).

Although not compulsory, the conservative teaching of the catholic Church is an integral part of curricula in Malta and is taught in all primary and secondary public schools. The Church in Malta has traditionally held a monopoly over education and the teaching of sexuality. The Church's continued control in the fields of sexuality

and education could be slowing down the introduction of postsecondary sexuality education.

The European Value Systems Study Group (Abela 1991) found out that Malta is situated at the extreme end of the traditional orientation scale of European values. Malta was identified as a 'fortress convent' for its strict non-permissive sexual morality (ibid.). The predominant traditional Maltese culture is mainly reproduced in the family and through the catholic Church's institutions. The Church's perception and understanding of sexuality is however widely debated and contested not only in Malta but elsewhere (eg. Dominian 2001; Kenan *et al* 2000). The catholic Church's teaching on sexuality and its positioning of women in the Church have been critiqued by feminist thinkers (eg. Beattie 2003, 2005; Cahill 1992, 1996; Daly 1985).

3. *A discourse of secularization*

Power brings along resistance to counteract it (Foucault 1978). People in power are not the only makers of reality (ibid.). Malta is slowly moving away from a traditional, catholic, closed, insular, conservative and protected society and becoming more secular, democratic, liberal, egalitarian, pluralist, racially diverse and cosmopolitan (Cassar 2004; Abela 2000, 1998, 1991). It is changing fast into a modern Euro-Mediterranean country (Abela 2000) despite the hold of Roman Catholicism. Comparative studies of Maltese and European values give evidence of a gradual shift from widespread conformity towards greater individualised values, diversified lifestyles and pluralistic behaviour (ibid.). The catholic Church's view that an enduring, exclusive, committed relationship in marriage is the only framework for having sex is being challenged. Among 417 University of Malta male and female students, 65.8% disagree with the Church's teaching about the prohibition of premarital sex (University of Malta Chaplaincy 2003, p.69). While only 5.4% would choose not to get married either civilly or religiously (p.62), 58.1% find nothing wrong with cohabiting before marriage (p.64) and 85% disagree with the Church's teaching against the use of contraceptives in birth control (p.68). Another study confirms that 'the sexual activity of young people (in Malta) has come under the influence of global and western European culture' (Abela 1998, p.11). There is greater acceptance of the diversity of lifestyles including those related to homosexual

persons and more policies favouring gender equality: 'the strict traditional morality of the Church in Malta is gradually giving way to a more open discourse on sexuality and its ensuing secularisation' (ibid., p. 66).

The process of moving towards secularism and liberalism has on many occasions proven to be a deeply divisive, controversial and disturbing experience in Maltese society. Debate on the morality of issues, such as divorce and abortion are often intense and highly polarized. The use of contraception as a means of avoiding sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy is still debated and there is no consensus between advocates of the abstinence debate and the more liberal faction. Discourses about sexuality and love compete with one another and send out conflicting messages to adolescents. They hear the abstinence discourse simultaneously with messages advocating the legitimacy and normality of being sexually active. At the College students are not allowed to walk hand in hand with their girl/boyfriend but when they go clubbing during weekends they watch strip tease dancers in semi-nudist clubs. Adolescent girls are often told to be virtuous and reserved sexually. Peer cultures and the media however often convey the idea that being sexy is beneficial for the sake of popularity. Some boys are also told to control their sexual desires by their parents, but their peers expect them to be sexually active. Maltese young people are expected to grow up and be responsible for their actions, yet they are also discouraged from behaving in grown up ways when they are not trusted in terms of the choices they make.

4. The formal/informal discourses of the school

The graffiti voices operate within a patriarchal structure, which govern the College. Although there is roughly the same number of female students as males, the majority of lecturers are male and so are the board members, who govern the institution. Since the College's inception the directors and vice-directors have always been male.

Part of the College policy assigns each lecturer with specified times, during which students can individually ask questions related to their studies. On some occasions, instead of academic difficulties, female students have asked me questions related to their personal problems about romantic relationships. None of the male students have

ever asked me such questions. The allocated space in the curriculum for academic difficulties to be resolved might explain why the graffitiists never write questions related to their studies on toilet doors.

The formal discourse of the College is expressed through the official curriculum, policies and rules. It assumes both that some students are sexually deviant and that others are sexually innocent, sexually inactive and in need of protection. Other schools reflect this dichotomy (Kehily 2002, p.37). The school's official discourse regulates sexual expression and disciplines students' bodies on campus. Schools have been regarded as sites, which direct teenagers towards the 'civilizing' of their bodies, rendering them both docile and capable of self-regulation in the process of becoming useful and productive citizens, through the classification of 'bodies' by age, the restriction of movement from one space to another by rigid schedules and rules around deportment and appearance. The College policy employs boundaries, which demarcate the terrain for sexualities by classifying certain behaviour as acceptable and allowing it to be visible, while controlling that which it considers deviant or offensive. Lecturers are expected to go up to hetero/bisexual students and ask them to refrain from their physical and sexual expression on campus. This causes embarrassment to students.

I perceive some of the graffiti as providing ways of transgressing these boundaries. While sixth-formers at the College are taught 'technologies of the self (Foucault 1988), which work towards shaping and disciplining their body in certain ways, in an attempt to 'normalize' it according to assumptions about the ideal body, they are also immersed in a growing libertarian discourse, both inside and outside the College, which stresses the importance of free sexual activity. This official discourse is therefore met with an informal one, which is both overt and hidden and which is created by students and teachers. The graffiti are one example of this type of informal discourse. It assumes an active search for sexual knowledge. Resistance to the official discourse of the school is shown through some of the students' clothes, which are considered 'inappropriate'. Although the official curriculum and College policy try to desexualise the romantic relationships of students, the school culture is full of signs, which constantly reveal that students bring their life outside the school along with

them inside the College. This is also the case in other schools (Epstein and Johnson 1998). The graffiti are not the only signs that romantic relationships are taking place in the lives of students. Empty pregnancy tests' boxes are found occasionally inside the female toilet cubicles. Every year there are pregnant students. Some students wear a half heart silver pendant with the name of their boy/girlfriend engraved on it. Their lover presumably wears the other half of the pendant. Students send valentine cards to each other. Some girl/boyfriends accompany their lover to class just before the lessons start and they usually kiss each other before they part. Others occasionally ask their teachers whether their boy/girlfriend could stay with them for some lessons, even though they are not officially in the same class. These everyday romantic expressions are manifested by hetero/bisexual students. Although homosexual romantic relationships are being experienced amongst students attending the College, I have never witnessed their public signs of affection inside this institution.

5. *The media discourse*

Adolescents spend considerable time interacting with a variety of media commodities. Maltese adolescents are exposed to American and British media through cable, internet and satellite. Teenagers learn about love relationships from these channels. Films and programmes encourage them to fantasize about love, sex and romance: '*THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA Watch It & Let Your Dreams Begin!*' (20). Two other informants agreed: '*... it is really orgasmic ahhhh*'* (ibid.); '*totally agree-fucking amazing!*' (ibid.).

Youth related media has become open about sexuality and its presentation of sexual categories 'have become more diverse and more fluid' (Epstein and Johnson 1998, p.30). Ideas about how to talk to a girl/boyfriend and about sexual issues were picked from television shows and films by 40% of American teenagers (Kunkel *et al* 1999). The media portrays stereotypical concepts of gender differences about sexuality, love and intimacy, like for example the notion that girls want more intimacy and boys want more sex. Gender stereotypes are also reproduced in music videos (Seidman 1999). The media can however, serve as a powerful tool to reduce the representations of stereotypes about sexuality, sexual behaviours and gender roles.

The Maltese political sphere is characterized by an extreme under-representation of women in political key decision-making positions and this is reflected in the media. I believe that this is not so much because women lack opportunities to publicly voice themselves, but more because they feel that they are less competent to speak in public. Just as the graffiti authors' voices are located in a public but marginalized space, the voices of the majority of Maltese women are also not heard as much as the men's.

Media discourses present the idea that a full sex life is an accomplishment. Dominant discourses, which frame sexual desire and practice in much of the developed world, concern 'the sex drive', 'love and romance' and 'permissive' sexual behaviour. To attempt to repress one's sexual desires is understood by these discourses as covering over the 'authentic' self (Hollway 1989). Discourses, which regard sexual fulfilment as the ultimate route to personal satisfaction, possibly infiltrate adolescents' lives.

Some media programmes in Malta present discourses about sexualities in the context of the 'age of epidemic' and therefore medicalize and pathologize sexual contact. These discourses insist on imparting information and scientific facts about HIV/AIDS, combined with the pastoral objective to encourage adolescents to conduct their sexual selves responsibly by retaining a sense of integrity and demonstrating due care for others.

6. *The risk discourse*

While discourses of pleasure and the importance of self-expression through sexuality are relevant, sexual activity has become increasingly linked with risk. A risk reduction discourse has taken hold among adolescents: 'most contemporary sexual discourse is not very sexy, because it operates within a logic and language of 'sexual epidemic' (Singer 1993, p.113). There is a 'new sobriety' evident in sexual discourses (ibid.). Some research demonstrates that teenage sexual activity is on the increase (eg. Wellings 1994), even amongst Maltese adolescents (Ameen 2006, pp.1,5; United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2000), but other studies show that it has declined (eg. Ventura *et al* 1999). Suspicion of one's partners, the need to evaluate their HIV status and past sexual or drug-use history, has led to an ethic of restraint, which is not associated with asceticism or self-denial, but described in the

context of self care in an environment of risk. Sexual liberation is not simply about self-expression, but is articulated as control over one's body boundaries and one's position in sexual exchanges (Singer 1993, pp.122–123).

The epidemic caused by sexually transmitted diseases is a reflection of how people may put themselves at risk in the pursuit of some types of intimacy. Risks 'make us aware of a new reflexive self determination' (Beck 1994, p.8). The risk society becomes reflexive when it is understood as a problem in itself, which necessitates the reflexive monitoring of risk. This involves attempts at assessing, defining and regulating risks by making adolescents scared in order to instil a sense of caution in them. In the risk society:

the recognition of the unpredictability of threats . . . necessitates self-reflection on the foundations of social cohesion and the examination of prevailing conventions and foundations of 'rationality'.

(ibid.).

The understanding of the risk society is a daunting task for some teenagers. As they try to grasp its excitement and dangers, they are seeking separation and independence from adults, including their family members. The risk discourse describes teenagers as partaking in risk-taking behaviours. The pursuit of intimacy can indeed be harmful to health and to life. Their search for closeness with their peers might lead them to smoke, drink and take drugs to fit in with the crowd and maintain the friendships they desperately desire. They might join clubs and religiously obey all their rules at the cost of their individuality and assertiveness. They might even engage in abusive relationships. Such relationships are sites of profound insecurity, anxiety and trauma. Adolescents might seek destructive relationships in the hope of finding some sort of attachment, belonging and affection. Such relationships are characterized by emotional hunger, desperation, and an intense need for fusion and interfere with genuine love, respect and concern for oneself and one's partner.

7. *The colonial discourse*

Although Malta obtained its political independence from Britain in 1964 and in 1974 became a Republic for the first time after centuries of foreign rule, its colonial mentality is still perpetuated in Maltese culture (Wain 1991, p.18). Due to its colonial

past, its small geographical size and limited resources, Malta is still struggling with a sense of identity and despite its long history, is still an 'adolescent' grappling with its sense of inferiority and low self-esteem. The persistent colonial mentality in Malta is for example reflected in the overwhelming reliance on the United Kingdom for educational models, policymaking strategies, textbooks and expertise (Sultana 1997). Nations, which had formerly been colonized, experience a profound identity split and sense of irreparable dislocation and displacement (Bhabha 1994, quoted in MacLure and Stronach 1997, p.59). MacLure and Stronach (1997) understand Bhabha's conceptualisation of postcolonial discourse as a 'discourse of *otherness*' (p.59, emphasis by MacLure and Stronach). According to Bhabha, colonial otherness is not constituted by the 'colonialist Self or the colonized Other but by the *disturbing distance in-between*' (ibid., citation and emphasis by MacLure and Stronach). Even the graffitiists reflect this distance and 'otherness'.

Postcolonial authors tend to engage in ambivalent writing, which is partially visible through 'the secret arts of invisibleness' (Bhabha 1994, quoted in MacLure 2003, p.146). The graffitiists also partake in partial invisible acts of writing. MacLure (ibid.) relates the theme of writers' invisibility, expounded by Bhabha, with Johnson's view that feminist literary theory also involves; 'lies, secrets, silences and deflections of all sorts' and describes it 'routes taken by voices or messages not granted full legitimacy' (ibid.). The hidden graffiti also seem to reflect the colonial submissiveness of Maltese people, whose voice about autonomy and fundamental rights, was not heard enough. Female voices in postcolonial settings are given even less power:

women in postcolonial societies carry the double burden of having
being subordinated by colonialism and native men.

(Barker 2000, pp.257-258).

Poor women living in colonial contexts are not equipped with the conceptual language to communicate within the discourse of colonialism, because there is no space for them to articulate themselves and therefore remain condemned to silence (Spivak 1993). The graffitiists could be described as 'subalterns' (ibid.), since they inscribe their subordinate position.

The legacy of 150 years of British rule (1814-1964) has sustained many English elements in the Maltese way of life. English is taught in all Maltese schools from the

first grade and along with Maltese, the native language, is also an official language. The graffiti texts give evidence to this bilingualism. The absolute majority of graffiti are scribbled in English. It is customary for Maltese people to use English in their writing, even when writing to each other. Among Maltese people there is an estrangement from the written word in the native language. It is habitual for most Maltese people to switch to English when speaking in Maltese and vice versa. English is the language of the televised soap operas, sitcoms, imported teenage magazines and music TV channels. These globalised commodities might provide the graffiti girls with a language, with which to express themselves. They adopt English words, such as 'butch, femme, condom, shag, snog', since there are equivalent words in Maltese. The simultaneous use of Maltese and English in the graffiti texts suggests a heterogeneous, even fragmented identity of their authors. The constant mix and overlapping from Maltese to English reflects the instability of language and creates a sense of 'différance' (Derrida 1976). Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) discuss the absence of a language for adolescents, with which to talk about sexual expression, behaviour and about female sexuality. Available discourses are inadequate as they are either too clinical or regarded as obscene (ibid.). In Malta this situation is even more accentuated, since basic words, such as those referring to the genital organs and to the act of making love, are considered taboo and rude. Due to Malta's colonial past and the contemporary influence of globalisation, Malta's cultural identity is hybrid. The erratic nature of Maltese culture and identity, which reflects the same instability of globalization, demonstrates the complexity and even the richness of contexts in which human relatedness occurs. A critical understanding and examination of such complexities enriches teenage students' learning:

The inclusion of our historical and social locations as they relate to power, oppression and privilege has the potential to be a compelling component in the construction of curriculum.

(Curtis 1998, p.138).

Subcultures at the College

Ethnographic observations reveal the presence of students' subcultures inside the College. A very brief outline of these subcultures supports a better understanding of the graffiti authors and the school environment they are located in. There are definitional problems on what the term 'subculture' means (Macdonald 2001, p.151).

The concept of subculture is no longer appropriate (Redhead 1997), since subcultures are becoming increasingly fragmented and the media cannot sustain the notion of an authentic subculture (Barker 2000, p.336). Nonetheless, I conceive the graffiti texts as being partially a constructive product of influences derived from different subcultures present inside the College. Studies about these subcultures have been carried out, yet they cannot be referenced, as they identify the College.

Youth subcultures are present in Malta (Saliba 1997; Bell 1994) and Maltese youth are identifying themselves with global youth culture (Abela 2001). Although Malta is a very small country with about 400,000 inhabitants, it is not a uniform social entity, but is:

imbued with the existence of a myriad of subordinate, counter-cultures striving to legitimize their own values and lifestyles within the prevalent social environment.

(Bell 1994, p.421)

Youth subcultures express and are dictated by their own discourses, ways of thinking and behaving. The presence of students' subcultures inside the College reveals that the transmission of culture occurs inside this institution. Locating the graffiti texts within the cultural and social realms of Maltese adolescents is however problematic since Maltese culture and society are not uniform but rather orbit in a continuous state of flux. The description of these subcultures is only indicative and has resulted from my daily observations and interactions with students over the last thirteen years. These subcultures may not necessarily be operating subversive practice against the College's official policy. Other subcultures, which I'm not aware of, might be present at the College.

1. The Working Class Culture

Records obtained from the College show that the majority of the school population pertain to this mainstream culture. These students converse in Maltese and some of them have part-time jobs to maintain themselves financially. Sultana (1991) cites research, which shows that the working class is more likely to be underrepresented in postsecondary schools, as the higher the social class background of students the more

likely they are to remain at school and further their studies (p.223). This however does not hold for the majority of the College student population.

2. *The Rockers and Techno Subcultures*

These subcultures are made of students who are passionate about heavy metal and techno music and it is this passion which brings them together. The rockers distinguish themselves by wearing black T-Shirts and trousers. Long hair and body piercing is also another hallmark, although other students who do not belong to this subculture also have body piercing. Graffiti number 21 (see CD) shows some of the influence which the 'rock invasion' (Bell 1994, p.422) is having on some graffiti artists. Rappers and members of the techno subculture compete with the rockers (ibid.).

3. *The Christian Subculture*

These students pertain to different Christian prayer groups existing in Malta. At the College there is one such group, which had been established even before I was a student at this College, and is still active now. Most of the College students, who belong to it, often socialize near the chapel. The appointment of a Chaplain, who has always been a catholic male priest, ensures that this subculture within the College is kept alive, as various religious activities are organised. These students do voluntary work and organise social and charitable activities outside the College.

During one of the lavatory conversations, a student expressed her disappointment and sense of confusion, because a guy, who had wanted to be her boyfriend and whom she had refused, had later found another girlfriend. She told me: *'I like this guy but my spirituality is important in my life and I cannot go out with guys'*. The members of the prayer group she attends regularly all share the same idea. She said that this was not because they were going to become nuns, but because they consider having a relationship at their age as inappropriate. I could understand why she came to hold this rationale, as even I had attended similar prayer meetings for a decade, which pressured us to live 'purity' by not having a boyfriend.

4. *The Artists' Subculture*

The artists are students who take part in the College's cultural events such as festivals, concerts, poetry sharing and theatrical presentations. They spend a great deal of time together, since rehearsals for their performances take up a lot of time.

5. *The Middle Class Culture*

These students are easily identifiable, because they speak in English all the time unlike the working class students. They are generally identified through their English accent and designer clothes. These students have considerable pocket money and more access to the nightlife world of pubs, bars and discotheques. Since their parents can also afford a varied social life, they are familiar with the idea of going out socially. These students afford to buy cigarettes and some eighteen year olds own a car. These commodities probably give them more mobility and therefore more chances of dating.

6. *The Sports Subculture*

Students who adhere to this subculture participate in sports activities. They value physical strength and activity. They strive in a competitive environment and their desire to win sports games generally supersedes their desire to attain academic results.

7. *The 'Study Area' Subculture*

These students are academically ambitious and strive to excel in examinations. They spend most of their time studying hard. Although some of these students are loners, they tend to stick together for the sharing of notes and exchange of schoolwork. Their social life is usually non-existent. I assume that they usually delay sexual and romantic relationships or else they date partners, who belong to the same subculture.

It is difficult to state which of these subcultures is the most dominant, as they all influence each other and they all have their own life. There are students who pertain to more than one subculture, and others who do not pertain to any at all. Boundaries

between the different subcultures are blurred because classroom interaction brings together students from different social classes. In her study about urban graffiti, Macdonald (2001) questions the notion of the dominant culture as different subcultures are interrelated (pp.151-153). Youth cultures are neither 'pure' nor 'authentic' and they are not 'locally bounded' (Barker 2000, p.334). Rather they are:

set within a social space which is the product of relations and interconnections from the very local to the intercontinental.

(Massey 1998, quoted in Barker 2000, p.334).

Some forms of boundaries between the subcultures at the College however, do exist and are maintained through subtle distinctions. Ethnographic observations suggest that acceptance into some of these subcultures necessitates conformity to the principles, which govern them. Membership in these subcultures is signalled through clothing, hairstyles, the spoken language, social class and ways of behaving. These elements confer status and power and are a form of 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995, quoted in Barker 2000, p.340). Some of the graffiti reflect the described cultural capital of their authors (chapters 5-6). The students challenge and negotiate their adolescent self through these subcultures. Some graffitiists defend the values of their subculture and clashes between the writers reflect clashes that exist in Maltese society. Subcultures 'are condemned to and/or enjoy a consciousness of 'otherness' or difference' (ibid., p.322). Whilst ethnographic observations demonstrate that girls are more or less present in the College's subcultures, McRobbie (2000) explored the invisibility of girls in British subcultures.

I assume that the graffiti writers pertain to the different subcultures mentioned and to the 'graffiti subculture' itself. The graffitiists seem to have felt the need to create and belong to their own subculture to explore issues related to intimacies. In studying the development of adolescent girls, Gilligan *et al* (1990) concluded that fifteen/sixteen year olds 'bury their knowledge and parts of themselves in an intricate, repressed underworld' (quoted in Muuss 1996, p.204) and that they are 'in danger of losing their voices and thus their connection with others' (ibid.). The graffiti subculture could be described in terms of an 'underworld', which in some ways seeks to revive and recuperate the girls' voices. Characteristics of youth subcultures outlined by Kehily (2007) seem to be present in the graffiti subculture, which I perceive as holding 'underground or marginal status' and as being 'transgressive or oppositional' (p.24).

On the other hand, whereas subculture members 'do not regard themselves as victims' (ibid.), I interpret some of the graffitists' lamentations as expressions of perceived victimization on their part.

The Construction of My Narratory Self

The research process and its outcomes depend on the characteristics of the persons involved in this process. Research is influenced by the researcher's personality and subjectivity. The 'constructions of our own selves' are 'the ultimate sources of data' (Clough 2002, p.5). Like myself, Clough also acknowledges his difficulties related to love and identifies himself with informants. In giving his account of a miner, whose life history he was researching, he stated:

Poor man; he must himself have been fighting some vestige of memory of love and warmth; and must be damaged so much; and must like me not know who he is when it comes to love.

(Clough 2002, p.24).

The time when I started this study soon after the break-up of my marriage, was very difficult for me and the choice of intimate relationships as the subject matter of my thesis could have been a way of coming to terms with the loss and the bereavement of the happy marriage that I had hoped for. I was brought up in an environment where destructive addictions were sought to escape the pain of a life without enough love. As a 'survivor' of child sexual abuse, I have had to overcome 'sexual problems', and learn how to trust, how not to be afraid of men, how to find meaning in life and overcome depression and love addiction. For many years I had never spoken about my childhood traumas and silence proved to be destructive. I had never heard the words 'sexual abuse' uttered during the hundreds of lessons I had during my entire years of schooling and neither in my family. I feel that the *political* agenda, which excluded sexuality education, when I was a student, had somehow contributed to the suppression of my *personal* traumas, although I don't intend to put all the blame on it or indulge in self-pity. Graffiti questions expounding the girls' doubts, anxieties and longing for love, mingled with their pleas for help, resonate within me, because they are the same questions I ask myself.

When I was the informants' age, about twenty years ago, I had been a student in the same College. We did not write any graffiti. I assume that this was not because we did

not have any queries related to love and sexualities. Perhaps it did not occur to us to be so personal and expose explicit information about our private selves, not even through anonymity. The present generation of graffitists has made the choice to write about the sexual and is slowly 'coming out'.

Whether we choose to talk and write about desire and sex will always be a matter of individual choice. Regardless, the sexual self is part of our being and part of the way we experience our lives. Not reflecting upon that silences the people with whom we forge relationships, engage in sexual encounters with, fall in love with, are sexually intimate with (and indeed intimidated by).

(Coffey 1999, p.96).

I am still surrounded by silences related to my position as a religious education lecturer. Religious education teachers in Malta are expected to adhere to and promote the sexual norms of the catholic Church, even if this leads to self-censorship. I struggle to overcome the silencing of fundamental human rights, such as the right of *all* persons to experience their sexuality in a healthy, meaningful way, which respects oneself and other persons. Sexual expression outside the heterosexual marriage is considered a sin by the official teaching of the catholic Church (Roman Catholic Church 1992, paragraphs 2357, 2359). At the start of a new academic year, one September I attended the first staff meeting during which the following guidelines were given:

Lecturers of religious knowledge are expected to teach and present the teachings of the Catholic Church. They cannot tell students that they are in favour of homosexual marriage or that they are in favour of married priests. We have had complaints from parents about this. You can get yourself into trouble.

I knew that this message was directed at myself and other colleagues. Some of my students might have talked about our classroom discussions about the fundamental rights of homosexual persons. The domain of the sexual is constructed as dangerous (Britzman 1995):

Many kinds of knowledge are dangerous: dangerous because they destabilize established common-sense world-views, dangerous because they pull the veil away from oppression, discrimination and suffering, making for uncomfortable confrontation with these issues.

(Epstein and Sears 1999, p.1).

This was not the first time that such instructions were given. One might probably expect such directives in Church schools, but the College where I work does not

belong and is not run by the Church. My teaching training and studies I undertook at the University of Malta, particularly in critical theory, come into conflict with the everyday realities of my school life. The experience of teachers, who try to adopt a radical pedagogy but are met with resistance by the school's hierarchical structure, is not unique to me (eg. Kehily 2002). Despite being considered a kind and friendly 'misfit' in my department, which sometimes makes my positionality as a teacher, a vulnerable one, teaching gives me tremendous satisfaction and all my students are very special to me. I never found difficulty in establishing a friendly relationship with them. I believe that my liberal, critical thinking provides them with a healthy balance between my approach and the seemingly conservative views of some of my colleagues. Sometimes however, the pressure to subdue and even hide my personal beliefs and values proves strenuous to me, as I feel that my potential is being stifled. I sense the 'desexualised identity' and the perceived image that religious education teachers are 'not normal', which such a position usually carries along with it (Sikes and Everington 2003). I partly share the same feelings of other religious education teachers who feel somewhat marginalized and ridiculed because of their profession (Sikes and Everington 2004). In a study I conducted amongst all religious education teachers in Maltese state secondary schools, I found out however, that the majority do not face the dilemma as to whether they should impart catholic values or not, as 82% stated that their personal views are identical with those of the catholic Church (Coleiro Cassar 1998, p.104). University students in England, studying to become religious education teachers, try to break away from the stereotyped views and image related to their future profession. They show resistance by dyeing their hair in unusual colours, by communicating to their students that they drink alcohol and go to nightclubs to prove that they are 'normal' (Sikes and Everington 2004).

Summary

This chapter has presented different discursive spaces operating around aspects of the informants' lives. These discourses produce sexual identities and act within political, moral, religious, and cultural agendas. I have argued that sexual pleasure is mediated by cultural norms and that the discourses and practices around adolescent sexuality, construct the adolescent sexual body in certain ways. Discourses of sexuality are positioned amidst constructs related to the curriculum, policy and politics operating in

Maltese society. These different discourses question what constitutes 'normal' and demonstrate the contradictory ways love and the sexual could be perceived and understood. The conflicting messages conveyed to adolescents, could interfere with their identity formation and cause confusion in terms of what the transition into adolescence signifies. Alternatively through conflicting messages they can deepen their knowledge and understanding of the complexities related to sexualities and romantic intimacies.

I have outlined a number of students' subcultures present in the College to demonstrate the diversity of the graffitiists' school environment. The graffitiists might have constructed their own subculture to cater for and express their own needs, despite the presence of other different subcultures present at the College. It is perhaps unthinkable or undo-able for them to talk openly about their personal intimacies in settings other than the school lavatories. As Dorothy Smith (1988) argues; 'What women have to say may simply remain unsaid' (p.32).

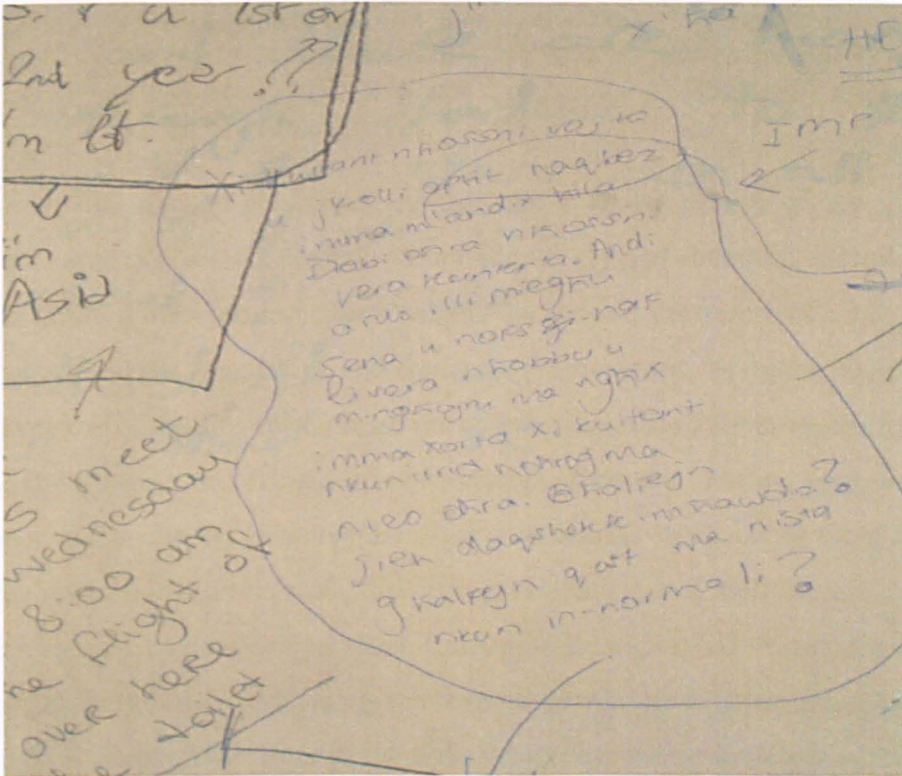
This chapter has also presented brief accounts of my own story, whilst affirming that; 'Knowing the self and knowing about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges' (Richardson 2000, p.929). By drawing on personal constructs, it is my intention to locate briefly where I am coming from, thus validating feminist perspectives, which relate the personal with the political.

The graffiti authors and readers are also positioned according to their social class, abilities and personality traits. Issues related to gender, power, pleasure, pain and a full range of emotions are at play in the formation of adolescent romantic relationships. This is further discussed in the next chapter through a critical review of related literature.

CHAPTER THREE:

‘Why am I so confused? Why can’t I ever be normal?’:

Literature Review



Chapter three deals with the following:

- Introduction
- Adolescence
- A Sense of Self
- Falling in Love
- Intimacies and the Self
- Having Sex
- The social construction of intimacy
- Summary

Introduction

*Sometimes I feel empty inside and would want to kill myself but I'm not capable of doing this. At other times I feel really happy. I have a boyfriend and we have been together for one year and a half. I know that I really love him and that I cannot live without him but sometimes I still feel that I want to go out with other guys. Why am I so confused? Why can't I ever be normal?** (22)

As outlined, the aims of this study address the complex nature of the views and feelings of numerous female students about sexualities and romantic relationships, as expressed through their writings. This chapter focuses on the nature of adolescence as well as on adolescent friendships and romantic relationships, as they emerge through a critical review of the literature. Since the research questions focus on the graffitiists' concerns about issues revolving around meanings of gender identity, love, sexualities and intimacy, this chapter explores the diverse meanings surrounding these concepts. Due to the restrictions of this study, this chapter does not deal with specific aspects of adolescent romantic relationships like for example issues related to jealousy, cheating and age gap between lovers but gives a general outline. I have been personally informed by a body of literature in the field of adolescent perspectives on sexualities and romance (Epstein *et al* 2003; Kehily 2002; Furman 2002; Measor *et al* 2000; Furman *et al* 1999; Furman and Wehner 1997; Connolly and Johnson 1996). I have made references from self-help books (Page 2003; Hendrix 2001; Pease and Pease 2001; Gray 1994), whose authors have drawn from their many years of clinical experience involving relationship difficulties. I have cited them as examples of how they are influencing wide readership towards 'reshaping subjectivity' (Rose 1990, quoted in Stainton Rogers W. and Stainton Rogers R. 2001, pp.168-170). I have also been informed by studies, which have analysed teenagers' writings about romantic relationships and sexualities, like in the form of letters to 'Agony Aunts' in teenage magazines (eg. Currie 1999; Kehily 1999), through essays (eg. Unterhalter *et al* 2004) or letters discussed during sex education letters (Kehily 2002). These findings have demonstrated the complexities of teenagers' perspectives. I have drawn numerous insights from these works, especially from Currie and Kehily, who work through feminist approaches. I have not come across studies about teenage graffiti, which deal specifically with romantic relationships and sexuality issues. Graffiti written by

women, whose voices are restricted in controlled, patriarchal cultures is however not an isolated phenomenon. For example in 2005, numerous graffiti were discovered in the ancient complex named Steri, which housed the Inquisition in Palermo, Sicily. The Inquisition was the catholic Church's judiciary, which was tasked with stamping out heresy. These graffiti were found in the prison cells of women accused of witchcraft more than four centuries ago. Their writings testify to their anguish as they waited to be burned at the stake (Johnston 2005). Graffiti are still being written in prison cells by political women prisoners; for example in Iran (Ebadi 2006, pp. 172 – 174).

Adolescence

The meaning and the age at which adolescence begins and ends vary along socio-cultural and historical lines (Muuss 1996, pp.362-386). Cultural theorists have refused to conceptualise adolescents as a homogenous group on the basis of class, race and gender differences and of how these interact with mainstream culture values (Barker 2000, p.323). Even the term 'youth' has different representations and 'however we seek to define it, youth remains an ambiguous concept' (ibid., p.320). Discourses shape the understanding of youth. Whilst adolescent happiness has been explored (Magen 1998), the concept of youth has been constructed within and across the discourse of 'trouble' and 'fun' (Hebdige 1988). Discourses that emerged at the turn of the century constituted adolescence as a time of turmoil, raging hormones and uncontrollable urges (Aggleton and Campbell 2000).

According to poststructuralist perspectives, generalizations about adolescents are misleading. McRobbie (2000) in fact, argues that Hebdige's use of 'style' in his exploration of youth culture, 'structurally excludes women' (p.34). McRobbie and Garber hold that there is lack of research about girls, who are absent from 'the classic subcultural ethnographic studies, the pop histories, the personal accounts and the journalistic surveys of the field (McRobbie and Garber 1991, quoted in Barker 2000, p.329). Driscoll also argues that:

... feminine adolescence has been excluded from theories of modern subjectivity... the Subject on which modern popular, public, and academic discourses center is never a girl, even for feminists.

(Driscoll 2002, p.9).

Adolescence is a transitional stage of development, during which changes in the physical, sexual, emotional, mental, and social realms in the lives of adolescents take place. Most teenagers begin to adapt to the adult world and its institutions while coming to terms with emerging parts of themselves. They usually discover themselves as having new emotional and sexual needs. They feel more autonomous and experience excitement in their new ventures. Adolescent relationships become more extensive and diverse (Collins and Laursen 1999). Friendships are important during adolescence because they are sources of emotional security and support, contexts for growth in social competence, and prototypes for later relationships (Seiffge-Krenke 1993). Those who don't develop friendships have difficulties being close to anyone later in life and may have poor negotiating skills (Shulman *et al* 1997). Through friendships teens can participate together in exploring and constructing their own selves:

Particularly at adolescence, the need to find oneself in another becomes paramount. ... With the growing (cognitive) recognition of the differences among people and the increasing (emotional) complexity of experience, the young person feels an intense need to feel "like" someone else. Intimate adolescent friendship thus involves deeper and more total confidences than at any other time of life. So much of the developing self is new and frightening; the only reassurance is that someone else is on the same path.

(Josselson 1996, p.161).

Intimate interactions increase between friends during adolescence and provide teenagers with opportunities for self-clarification. The discovery and experience of intimacy can be a vehicle for personal development and for greater personal growth. Relationships become important for adolescents especially for discussing personal, social and philosophical issues, and for establishing intimacy (Parkhurst and Hopmeyer 1999). According to Weiss however, 'successful friendships might depend more on provisions of companionship than on intimacy' (Weiss 1986, quoted in Beinstein Miller and Hoicowitz 2004, p.202). Although many of the friendships, which adolescents have with each other, are not romantic in nature, close peers facilitate and increase the confidence needed to initiate contact with potential romantic partners. Romantic relationships frequently spring from an interpersonal framework created by friends.

A Sense of Self

Intimate, romantic and sexual relationships present a great challenge to teenagers, who are grappling with their sense of self. Perspectives on the 'self' are broad. They derive and draw from biological, cross-cultural, social constructionist, psychological and philosophical perspectives. My understandings of the self reflect feminist, poststructuralist perspectives, which challenge the idea of a stable, coherent self and destabilize unitary accounts of the self. Butler (1990) maintains that there are no answers to the question 'who am I?' and that the self is a discursive construct. Oppressive norms and practices effect the conception of the self. Feminist reconstructions of the notion of self outline the emancipatory potential of women.

Adolescent romantic experiences vary substantially, depending on one's personality, expectations, upbringing and culture. Not all teenagers are interested in romantic relationships in the same way and to the same degree. The formation of such relationships occurs whilst adolescents endeavour to discover more of who they are. Teenagers might seek their identity in the people they date. Romantic involvements are thought to influence crucial psychosocial processes that occur during adolescence, namely intimacy and identity development (Dyk and Adams 1990). Identity is formed through complex processes, involving an inter-play of psychological, social, physical, spiritual and emotional factors. In their search for identity, adolescents therefore confront their multiple selves. This ability requires them to combine their actions, emotions and personality traits.

Some of graffitiists struggle over the implications of their gendered identity (chapter 5). As they try to understand the changes they face, 'adolescents are driven to develop a clear gendered identity and to signal that identity to their social world' (Measor *et al* 2000, p.84). Identity formation is an ongoing process, which occurs throughout life and cannot be contained in any particular moment or place. It is socially constructed and influenced by different factors, such as gender, family upbringing, race, and class. Even sexual desire and sexual identity are subject to change (Kehily 1995, p.29). Adolescents are concerned with developing individuation while still seeking acceptance of those around them as they confront the challenge of moulding an adult identity. In their exploration and experimentation of the world, they seek familiarity

and a sense of continuity. Disclosing their true self to another person in intimate relationships challenges their identity and self-worth.

Falling in Love

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The development of romantic relationships is a hallmark of adolescence (Furman *et al* 1999; Shulman and Collins 1997). The term 'relationship' is problematic since 'it has become a hackneyed word, made to carry so many meanings that it ceases to have much connotative force' (Josselson 1996, p.2). Every intimate, romantic relationship is unique, since the persons who experience it are unique themselves. Romantic relationships are diverse, both across and within cultures (Dion and Dion 1996).

The emotional shift from parents to peers and the adolescents' cognitive ability to think logically and abstractly makes it generally possible for romantic encounters and relations to occur during adolescence. Across adolescence, the time and energy spent in contexts that facilitate the formation of romantic relationships increase (Connolly *et al* 2000). American twelve grade students spend between five and eight hours per week thinking about actual or potential romantic partners (Richards *et al* 1998). What teenagers think and feel about intimate relationships influences their emotional involvement with other teenagers to whom they are sexually attracted. Romantic feelings have been found to constitute a substantial part of American adolescents' emotional lives (Larson *et al* 1999, p.19). Adolescents experience much wider swings of emotions than adults (Larson and Richards 1994a) and a substantial part of these emotional changes are attributable to romantic relationships, including actual and fantasized ones (Larson and Richards 1994b). The 'strong and powerful feelings' romantic relationships generate, 'deserve to be identified as the single largest source of stress for adolescents' (Larson *et al* 1999, p. 35).

The components of romantic relationships are difficult to label and objectify. Adolescents describe them in terms of affiliation, intimacy and passion (Connolly *et al* 1999). Successful romantic relationships in adolescence have been found to depend more heavily on affiliation and sexuality and less on intimacy (Connolly and Goldberg 1999). Although dating becomes more common in mid-adolescence, the romantic attachments that exist between teens are not necessarily intimate ones. The

degree of intimacy in adolescent romantic relationships varies. Adolescent relationships are sustained for a variety of reasons, only some of which are related to intimacy (Brown BB 1999). Adolescent dating is informal. Adolescents get excited even about the possibility of dating (Adler and Adler 1998). Adolescence is generally not a time of complete security in one's romantic relationships, as the graffiti demonstrate (chapter 6). Early adolescent, romantic attachments are brief and more likely to be casual than close (Connolly and Johnson 1996; Feiring 1996). Whilst such relationships could provide context in which adolescents can resolve preoccupations about their individual personality, they can also create new problems for them. Some studies demonstrate a number of troubling, negative effects of early teenage romantic involvement. A study of 8,200 American teens showed that teenagers 'in love' have a higher risk of depression, alcohol problems and delinquency than single teens (Kara and Udry 2000). The more interest adolescents expressed in romance, the larger their increase in depression, compared with their counterparts who showed no or little interest. Moreover, some teenagers experienced significant problems in their relationships with their parents and teachers. For boys, the level of depression was greater if they had a recent break-up. Girls had a more deteriorating relationship with their parents due to arguments about dating (*ibid.*). This study also linked depression in adolescence with a lack of wellbeing in young adulthood, including depression, early marriage and marital dissatisfaction.

Conduct problems and lower academic achievement (Neeman *et al* 1995), lower educational aspirations and depression (Quatman *et al* 2001) and lower self-esteem (McDonald and McKinney 1994) have been associated with teenage dating experiences, although this last finding is not a consistent one (Samet and Kelly 1987).

Intimacies and the Self

The desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man (sic). It is the most fundamental passion; it is the force, which keeps the human race together... Erotic love ... is the craving for complete fusion.

(Fromm 1962, quoted in Schaeffer, 1997, p.34).

The ability to have meaningful intimate relationships generally provides satisfaction in life. Intimacy refers to the capacity to form intimate relationships (Orlofsky 1993).

Intimacy is 'an overarching ideal: people strive for intimacy – for good relationships' (Plummer 2003, p.12). This might explain the graffitiists' urge to learn how to achieve it. Healthy intimacy, companionship and warm relationships are comforting in the face of loneliness, frustration, anxiety and losses. Sullivan's theory propounds that all personal growth, damage, regression and healing comes through our relationships with others. It affirms that intimate relationships are a fundamental need (Sullivan 1953).

In addition to physical expression, intimacy is expressed through love, friendship and bonding, which develop throughout life. The term 'intimacy' means 'many different things' (Plummer 2003, p.12) and it 'has no unitary meaning' (ibid., p.13). Plummer writes about 'intimacies' which are;

our closest relationships with friends, family, children, and lovers, but they are also the deep and important experiences we have with self (which are never entirely solitary): with our feelings, our bodies, our emotions, our identities.

(ibid.).

The way one views oneself influences one's romantic relationships and the experiences of romantic relationships in turn affect one's self-concept, self-esteem and self-image. Adolescent boys' interest in dating is positively correlated with self-esteem (Darling *et al* 1999). Intimacy occurs in different kinds of relationships, between children and parents, brothers and sisters and friends.

Intimacy requires the ability to seek and give care and the ability to negotiate and feel comfortable with an autonomous self (Cassidy 2001). Intimacy is about 'the truth of who a person really is' (ibid., p.144). It requires sharing one's innermost feelings, thoughts, desires, values, fears, joys, strengths and weaknesses. The type of intimacy referred to in this study relates to that between adolescent lovers/friends and involves some form of sexual attraction, sexual expression, affection and bonding.

Adolescents and even adults might play games of pseudo-intimacy. In this case, one or both 'lovers' primarily use their relationship as a means to experience intensity and passion (Page 2003, p.120). Although they might describe themselves as being in a 'love' relationship, they do not love each other but only pretend to, without intending to share who they are (ibid.). They normally do this as a defence mechanism against

fear of rejection or commitment. This 'intimacy gap' has become 'a cultural reality' (ibid., p.165). It is difficult to know up to what extent adolescents are capable of intimacy in their romantic relationships, since they are still in the process of learning who they are. The graffitiists do not use the word 'intimacy' but they refer to the concepts of closeness and sharing (chapters 5-6).

Different models describe the nature and purpose of intimate relationships. Exchange theories for example, focus on the rewards gained from relationships as weighed against the costs (Sprecher 1998). Social exchange/equity theories describe partners as receiving love and trust to a similar extent as they are capable of giving (ibid.). Intimate relationships can originate out of the desire to become a more complete person. Firestone and Catlett (1999) hold that, 'Individuals often select partners with opposite character traits in an attempt to compensate for personality defects' (p.42). Whilst Springett (2003) also affirms that two people are attracted to each other by their differences rather than by similarities, she insists that they need to be compatible in their level of maturity, in the area of 'values, ideals and deep interests' to stay close (p.11).

Sharabany (1994) defines an intimate friendship as being composed of self-disclosure, sensitivity, empathy, trust, openness, attachment and sharing (p.160). Prager (1999) suggests that the basis of intimate behaviours is the ability to share the personal, private self. Communication is therefore intrinsically related to intimate relationships:

What intimacy is about is precisely stripping away your outer, more public ways of being and relating to another person with your inner, more genuine self.

(Page 2003, p.187).

Intimacy is only possible in a context of safety (Hendrix 2001, p.121). Periods of stress could however foster greater intimacy when couples are most honest with their anger. Intimacy also occurs when partners or lovers argue or disagree with each other. Increased intimacy may provide a more stable foundation for coping with and resolving stress. Schaeffer holds that:

In intimacy, relationships are processes, not perfect products.... In true intimacy, we are vulnerable and open to hurt and disappointment, as well as ecstasy.

(Schaeffer 1997, pp.57-58).

Love relationships differ from one another because of the different ways the components of love: intimacy, passion and commitment interrelate with each other (Sternberg 1988). In his triangular theory, Sternberg suggests that when all three components; intimacy, passion, and commitment are present, that relationship, which he calls 'consummate love' is the most enriching (ibid.). Halstead and Reiss (2003) discuss love from different approaches, namely from sociological, psychological, philosophical and socio-biological perspectives. They describe it in terms of sexual enrichment, as moral guidance and spiritual fulfilment.

Having Sex

Numerous graffiti deal with accounts related to sexual experimentation (chapter 6). Sexual feelings and sexual activity arise even in friendships. The distinction between a friendship and a romantic relationship is not necessarily marked by whether sexual activity occurs or not. Romantic experiences may occur even when a romantic relationship has not been established (Furman and Wehner 1997). In a study, 14% of adolescents had engaged in heavy petting, intercourse or oral sex with their so-called friends (Shaffer 1999, quoted in Furman and Shaffer, 1999, p.516). Yet, the same language may be used by different adolescents to describe different kinds of behaviours or relationships at various points in their development (Darling *et al* 1999). Having a girl/boyfriend may mean different things to different adolescents. This point comes across in the graffiti analysis (chapters 5-6). Definitional problems arise also with the term 'lover', since one can have a lover both outside an 'official' relationship or else within it or even two or more lovers in both categories. This study focuses on adolescents' feelings of attraction, as they occur both between friends and lovers. Whether or not these feelings occur inside or outside a romantic relationship, they are still considered important because adolescents are more or less emotionally attached to their official/casual partner/s.

Frequent or steady dating in early to middle adolescence has been found to be associated with early sexual activity (eg. Phinney *et al* 1990; Jones and White 1990). Numerous adolescents experience a great drive to explore their sexuality, express their attraction and sexual feelings and form sexual relationships. The earlier girls begin sexual activity, the greater the number of non-marital sex partners they are

likely to have over their lifespan (National Center for Health Statistics 1995). Early initiation of sexual activity and higher numbers of non-marital sex partners are linked to a wide variety of negative life outcomes, including increased rates of infection with sexually transmitted diseases, increased rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and birth, increased single parenthood, decreased marital stability, increased maternal and child poverty, increased abortion, increased depression and decreased happiness³ (ibid.).

Longitudinal research has established that early sexual involvement, which follows early steady dating, also leads to lower educational aspirations and achievement (Miller and Sneesby 1988). A study involving approximately 6,500 American adolescents found out that the sexual active informants are more likely to be depressed and to attempt suicide. For these teenagers, early sexual activity is a substantial factor in undermining their emotional wellbeing (Center for Health and Well Being 1996). Although such findings are of great concern to adolescents, parents, educators and policymakers, they contribute to the discourse of the pathologization of sex.

On the other hand, adolescents who do not experience intimate friendships could be deprived of meaningful relationships, which help their self-development (Parker and Gottman 1989). Since the need for intimacy intensifies during early adolescence, teenagers who face difficulties in forming intimate friendships may become stressed and frustrated (Buhrmester 1990).

The social construction of intimacy

An essential aspect of sexual identity is the social construction of sexuality, which evolves around attempts to go along with the various rules, expectations, and sanctions present in society (Michener *et al* 1990). Since love is a social construction, it is partly learned behaviour. Young children are frequently given visions of what heterosexual love and 'happily ever after' should look like.

³ This study is based on the National Survey of Family Growth and was conducted to a sample of roughly 10,000 women aged between 15-44.

The social treatment of girls generally differs from that of boys. One of the reasons why society has created the need to gender people is to create structures of power and domination. My positionality is against the accentuation of the binary categories female/male, since I hold that;

focusing on gender differences marginalizes and obscures the interrelatedness of women and men, as well as the restricted opportunities of both. It also obscures institutional sexism and the extent of male authority.

(Hare-Mustin and Marecek 1988, p.462).

My thinking about sexualities has however been informed by studies, which have set out to find differences amongst teenage boys and girls in their behaviour and perceptions related to sexualities and romantic attachments. These studies are briefly outlined in this section. Studies of gender differences permeate educational research and discourse analysis. These have given rise to gender theory (Hare-Mustin and Marecek 1988), which has resulted from constructivism and holds that gender construction stems from social practices. The 'gender differences' discourse is dominant and seems to be regarded important for many people's understanding of self (Cameron 1996, quoted by Sunderland 2004, p.52). The 'universal distinction between the sexes in social roles and cultural perspectives' (Schlegel and Barry 1991, p.12) effects how females and males view and experience intimacy. Gender stereotypes however vary according to geographical locations, race, age and social class, and are influenced by the culture, mentality, history, religion and traditions of a particular society.

A number of self-help books argue that boys express a smaller range of emotions than girls, because of their difficulty in expressing emotions, which are not socially accepted (Pease and Pease 2001, p.151; Gray 1994). Boys are considered more emotionally distant and do not allow intimacy as easily as girls (Pease and Pease 2001, pp.141-143). The positioning, which describes girls as being more caring and emotional, mirrors patriarchal discourse.

There is some evidence, which demonstrates that women tend to approach and communicate about relationship problems more often and more openly than men, as the latter tend to withdraw or avoid such interactions (Cross and Madson 1997;

Acitelli and Young 1996). Females and males have different conversational styles (Tannen 1990). Irigaray (1985a) argues that women cannot 'be expected to speak the same language as man's ...' (p.25), because they have often been defined by what they lack; lack of a penis, lack of logic and lack of power. The different communication skills found between men and women in adulthood emerge earlier during adolescent interactions (Phillipsen 1999). Girls are considered to have more empathy for relationships and they talk more about personal relationships than boys (Dunbar and Duncan 1997). They have larger friendship networks than boys and are more likely to describe romantic attachments in terms of self-disclosure and support (Feiring 1999b). Girls report more knowledge about relationships than boys (Diaz and Berndt 1982) and 'tend to maintain more intimate and supportive friendships than males do' (Beinstein Miller and Hoicowitz 2004, p.194). This might account for the graffiti female authorship.

For late adolescent girls, but not for boys, lack of intimacy in their romantic relationships is associated with a sense of vulnerability and depression (Williams *et al* 2001). Girls, who are involved in romantic relationships but who are not equipped to establish intimate and supportive relationships with their partner, were found to feel inadequate because of this. Their male counterparts, however, although also similarly poorly equipped, were found to be less distressed by the absence of intimacy (*ibid.*). Stress related to peer interpersonal orientations was more disturbing for girls than for boys and it was associated with depressive symptoms (Little and Garber 2004, p.76). These social constructs of intimacy may also arise from biological differences in males and females. The female brain processes emotional data through more senses than the male brain, and girls verbalize emotionally charged data more quickly than boys (Gurian 2001).

The graffiti contents privilege emotional, personal and sexual issues. Problems related directly to studying, examinations, lessons, university courses or careers have never been mentioned. David *et al* (2002) analyzed a group of young people's attitudes and concluded that young working class women continued to associate their lives with bearing and raising young children rather than with building strong aspirations towards new forms of 'work'.

Although gender is a pervasive and organized framework (Epstein 1997; Skelton 1997), embedded in many, if not all social processes and institutions, boys still desire intimacy, friendship and connection (Mac An Ghail 1994). Although 'men are required culturally to mask their feelings' (Firestone and Catlett 1999, p.198), in situations where feelings are accepted, men are 'as feelingful and emotionally expressive as women' (ibid.). Moreover men have:

equally strong desires for a lasting affiliation with another person and are often just as interested in procreation and child-rearing.

(ibid.).

Firestone and Catlett (1999) found out that there are male teenagers who want emotional closeness and girls who don't (p.193). Although the expression of feelings may vary, the need to feel intimacy, passion and commitment goes beyond gender:

men and women share very similar knowledge and understanding of emotion scripts in relationships like anger and love... (They are) equally romantic in relationships, fall in love equally often and have similar experiences (and similar hormonal secretions) in so doing.

(Fletcher 2002, pp.146).

Although Fletcher cites numerous studies which demonstrate that distinct gender cultures exist, he emphasizes that there are more intra-gender differences than differences between genders and that the attachment styles of women and men are virtually identical as both look for the same qualities in a mate, both within Western cultures and across cultures (ibid., pp.146-147). In Maltese society gender specific behaviours are both expected and reinforced by social approval, since 'from childhood (Maltese) women are taught strict rules concerning how they should behave in relation to men' (Abela 1991, p.40). Maltese culture still tends to put the burden of responsibility on women with regards to restraining sexual behaviour (Lafayette 1997).

Summary

This chapter has argued that whilst adolescent romantic relationships can generate problems in the lives of adolescents, they are also a source of 'richness' (Furman and Shaffer 1999, p.513). Although dating experiences can lead to both positive and hurtful feelings, they can serve as a vehicle for healthy development in adolescence (Muuss 1996). This view contradicts the number of studies mentioned, which

demonstrate the contrary. This reflects lack of consensus amongst findings of studies related to the outcomes of adolescent sexual and romantic experiences. I generally prefer to regard adolescent intimate relationships as opportunities for growth than as sources of negative pitfalls, as I see their potential in providing opportunities for development.

Adolescent romantic relationships are 'enormously diverse' (Hartup 1999, p.xiii) and therefore generalizations about them might be flawed. The graffiti present different models of teenage romantic relationships (chapter 6). While most adolescents form social relationships through their peer groups, it is through dating that the more serious, intimate contacts occur (Hazan and Zeifman 1994). Genuine intimacy however, might also occur between two adolescent friends who are not in a romantic relationship with each other.

Sexual and romantic attachments are challenging to teenagers, who are grappling with their sense of self. Through romantic experiences, identity and intimacy could develop (Erikson 1968). The disclosure of the adolescents' self to another person in intimate relationships challenges their self-worth. Concerns with the self and with one's ability to adapt to the social world constitute part of the identity formation process. Gendered identities are constructs, which are constantly being lived out through practices that express a continuous process of becoming. This chapter has argued that girls are taught that talk is the primary vehicle through which intimacy and connectedness are created and maintained, and thus come to value and enact forms of supportive communication that explicitly validate and explore their distressed feelings.

*Why am I so confused? Why can't I ever be normal?** (22).

Returning to the chapter's title, which portrays one of the graffiti writings, I would have wanted to reassure this girl by telling her that it is quite usual for adolescents to feel confused and overwhelmed about possible outcomes related to their relationships. Even adults are confronted by the same perplexities. It is her right to be informed that these mixed feelings during adolescence are likely to occur and that her confusion could lead her towards a deeper level of maturity and growth, because it demands a search for answers. It is the role of education to support and enlighten adolescents

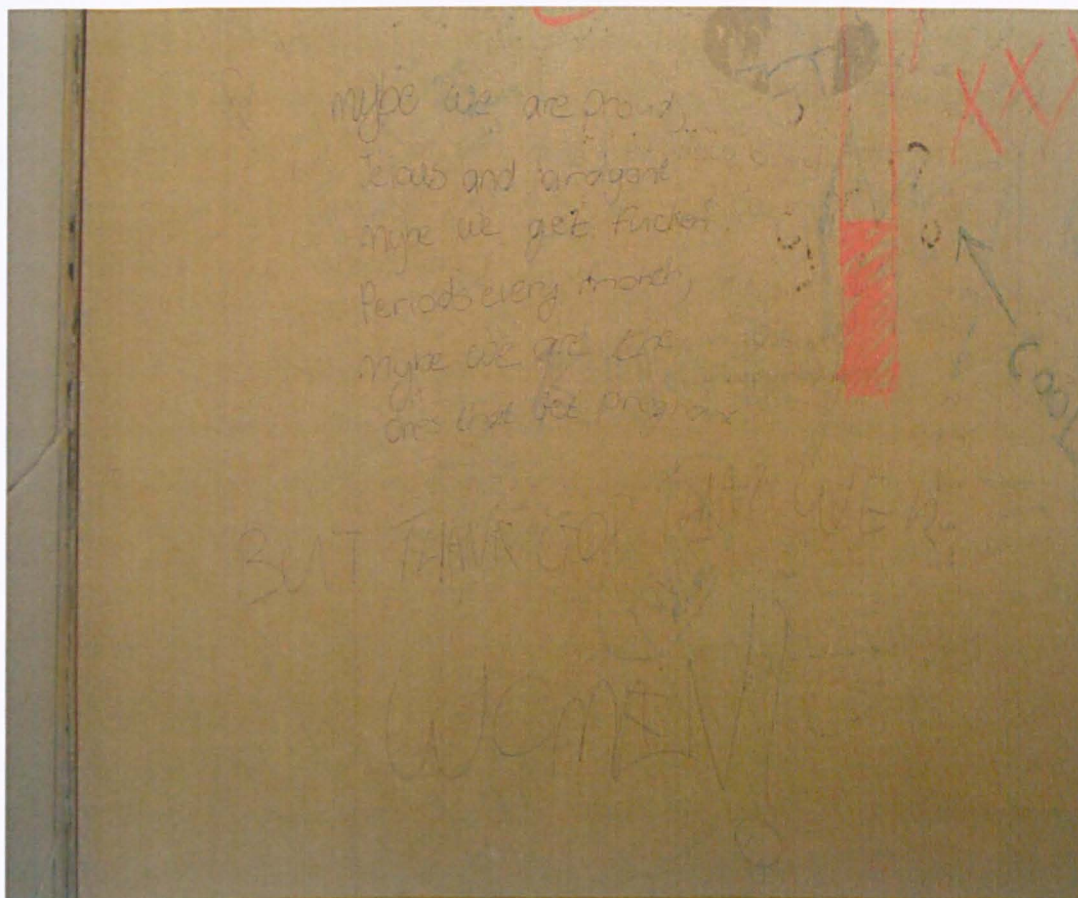
about how to come to grips with their vulnerability, how to acquire a sense of direction and challenge the sense of futility in confronting uncertainties.

Adolescent sexualities and romantic relationships have also been the focus of feminist research, and queer theorists. Together with postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives, I have also drawn from such insights to explore the graffiti subculture and the graffitiists' descriptions of their sexual subjectivities and practices. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR:

'Thank God that we women':

Theoretical Framework and Research Methods



Chapter Four deals with the following:

- Introduction
- Queering My Ethnographic Space
- Feminist Methodologies
- Research Methods
- Summary

Introduction

Mybe we are proud, jelous, aragant, mybe we get fucken Periods every month, mybe we are the ones that get pregnant, BUT THANK GOD THAT WER WOMEN! (23).

The common factor amongst graffiti authors and readers is femininity. How the 'we' (ibid.) is understood and interpreted depends on how the feminine is perceived. This chapter provides an account of the ways I have sought to understand who the graffitiists might be, along with their written feelings and thoughts, through theoretical positionings, which inform the data.

The process of developing a theoretical framework and identifying an appropriate methodology for researching the complexities of adolescent romantic relationships, in the absence of their audible, physical voices has been gradual. Personal experiences have provided the starting point. I gained ethnographic knowledge through my teaching at the College. At the time that I had started this study, I was trying to understand how my childhood and upbringing experiences have influenced the choices that I had made, regarding my intimate relationships later on in my life. In my desperation and pain, I was trying to find the reasons for my failures in establishing a healthy, happy, meaningful, intimate, exclusive relationship with a man. Psychoanalytic theory, explained in a simple manner in self-help books (eg. Hendrix 2001; Gray 1998), seemed to bring together the jigsaw puzzle pieces and slowly a picture began to emerge. I began to understand the consequences, which painful events had brought about in my life. At a later stage, I discovered that I was employing aspects of feminist thinking (Butler 1999, 1993; Ribbens and Edwards 1998; Haraway 1991a, 1991b) and queer theory (Butler 1999, 1993; Sedgwick 1994, 1990; Dollimore 1991). My theoretical framework draws on these diverse sources of knowledge and my approach is therefore psychosocial. My reflexivity is the fulcrum, which merges the two inter-related worlds of sociology and psychology. Walkerdine *et al* (2001) suggest that such an approach is beneficial to cultural studies (p.87). Feminist and queer theories made me review my own reflexivity and critique ethnographic research practices. The graffiti textual analysis is aimed at

deconstructing the girls' writings and takes a poststructuralist stance (Sarup 1993; Derrida 1987, 1982, 1976).

Reflexivity

Since my reflexivity binds together the various methodologies employed, it is important to examine its strengths and weaknesses. I chose reflexivity as a methodological strategy to deal with my subjectivity and biases, as an unavoidable core characteristic of my research. I do not characterize subjectivity in a defensive way and I do not regard it as an epistemological deficiency but rather conceptualise objectivity as a particular form of subjectivity, not as its opposite (Hollway 1989). I regard reflexivity as a mediator of my research process. Although researchers report attempts at integrating reflexive strategies into their work, they frequently cannot clarify how this process is accomplished (Ahern 1999). This suggests an elusive quality to subjectivity that appears to defy simple categorization or identification. A reflexivity of discomfort (Pillow 2003) has its limitations:

a self-reflexivity that is predicated upon the ability of the researcher to know her/his own subjectivity and to make this subjectivity known to the reader through disclosure is limited and limiting because such usages are necessarily dependent on a knowable subject and often collapse into linear tellings that render the researcher and the research subject as more familiar to each other (and thus to the reader).

(*ibid.*, p.184).

Yet the importance of reflexivity in research has gained increased recognition, as researchers acknowledge themselves as co-creators of the knowledge represented in their explorations. Reflexivity is now understood to characterize a range of domains, including the intimate and the personal (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). I chose reflexivity because it seeks to elicit the 'humanistic foundations' of social science research (Plummer 2001, p.1) and because I feel capable of working through it. I acknowledge however that the reflexive approach emphasises that how we think we know is 'neither transparent nor innocent' (Visweswaran 1994, p.80). Reflexive texts are messy. They are:

many sited, intertextual, always open ended, and resistant to theoretical holism, but always committed to cultural criticism.

(Marcus 1998, p.392).

I also used reflexivity to deconstruct my position of power as interpreter of the girls' texts. This is not unusual for researchers:

by most accounts, reflexivity is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself.

(Macbeth 2001, p.35).

Reflexivity has also become an important channel to interrogate the research process. Russell and Bohan (1999) define reflexivity as a process of awareness. Strategies for the implementation of reflexivity often include the examination of personal assumptions and goals (Ahern 1999). The goal of reflexivity is 'to turn the researcher's gaze back upon oneself for the purpose of separation and differentiation' (Hawes 1998, p.100). In terms of reflexivity, informants are characterized not by 'flattening' and 'emptying out' but by a 'deepening' of the self (Lash and Urry 1994, p.31). This 'deepening' is understood in terms of increasing abilities to reflect upon and change the norms and rules of existence; and also in terms of tendencies towards the increasing significance of self-reflection, self-regulation and self-monitoring in the construction of identities (Lash 1994).

Queering My Ethnographic Space

Situating my research in the place in which I work, qualifies me as an ethnographer (Goodley *et al* 2004, p.57). I have employed ethnography since I have focused on the environment and ethos of my workplace and analysed the data from the lens of my experiences at the College. Through my familiarity of the College, I was in a position in which 'the personal informs and becomes part of the fieldwork' (Coffey 1999, p.83) and where I could use whatever knowledge I gained, to arrive at deeper insights into the girls' writings. The direct interaction of the researcher with informants to produce data usually forms the basis of ethnography (Denzin 1997). Although I have identified and actually met only one informant in person (chapter 6), I knew that the rest were around me; in corridors and possibly in my classes.

My methodological approach is concerned with 'representing the actions of the relatively unknown, perhaps oppressed and ignored' (Goodley *et al* 2004, p.57). I employed an ethnographic non-participatory approach (*ibid.*, pp.59-60) because with the exception of one student, I did not meet the informants in person. Through this

approach the researcher declares 'ownership' of the data collection and analysis, as a result of 'intensive involvement with/in specific cultures' (ibid.).

Through the graffiti images I employed visual ethnography (Pink 2001), through which I could analyze the 'photo voice' (Wang 1999) by reflecting on data from descriptive images, which reflect everyday settings, subjective experiences and hybrid identities. Data emanating from photographs can shed light on the 'taken for granted' or the 'unquestioned' (Taylor 2002). Yet, it is not conclusive:

... visual images are always constructed, and visualization is an accomplishment involving perspective and directional gaze, so none of these is directly and straightforwardly 'evidential' and 'representational'.

(Mason 2005, p.108).

Whilst affirming that, 'images have increasingly been seen as significant forms of data in the history of education' (Plummer 2001, pp.59-66) and that they are a powerful means of doing research (ibid.; Walker 1993), I consider my attempt in presenting the graffiti as photographs is problematic. Images are not created passively or objectively (Haraway 1991b). Liz Stanley (1993) reflects on some of her own photographs and finds them unreal. On commenting on one of her photographs, taken when she was two years old, Stanley claims that she does not 'know' the person in it. She feels estranged from the person of the photograph, whose clothes and way of posing reflect all the 'dominant cultural convention of that time' (ibid., p.45). Yet she 'knows' it is herself. Another photograph taken when she was four years old shows 'all the forbidden activities' (ibid., p.47) and in this one she can 'connect this child to the 'me' I know now' (ibid.). In making the familiar strange, I question the realism of the photographs depicting the graffiti and also share Stanley's dual perspective. Whereas I can identify myself with some graffitiists, who for example are scared of getting pregnant, I find it difficult to share the same enthusiasm of those who enjoy having sex in threesomes.

I tried not to focus on the traditional ethnographic notion of the 'other' but on 'our' lives, whilst still acknowledging each informant's inherent uniqueness. The ethnographer however never blends completely with the lives of the people researched, despite the attempts to try to connect the personal life of the observed with their social context and culture. The ethnographer remains an outsider and

challenges what is familiar (Emerson *et al* 1995, pp.2ff). I tried leaving the familiar to challenge my own pre-held views about teenagers' sexualities and romantic relationships and question myself about what it means 'to be in love' as a teenager. Since I identify myself with numerous graffitiists, I am one of them, but at the same time, I am not. I consider myself an insider researcher because I work at the College. I am also an outsider however, since I pertain to a different generation and culture from that of the informants. I interweaved these two states of being an insider/outsider, both in the sense of exploring my own and the graffiti writers' views about sexualities and romantic attachments, and in the sense of studying the known and the unknown. My hybrid insider/outsider status offered me the possibility of having this dual shared understanding of the graffiti. My perspectives were involved with being familiar with the teenagers' emotions and views but feeling estranged from them simultaneously. Doing ethnography sometimes has been 'more like going on a blind-date than going to work' (Ball 1993, p.33). Chapters 5-6 demonstrate how the graffitiists constantly come up with new questions, ideas and advice, which at times surprise me.

Although I regard the graffiti as familiar, they are also strange to me, because they expose me to an unconventional, abnormal and even transgressive way of dealing with personal, sexual issues. In a world, where instant communication has been greatly facilitated by sophisticated technology, I regard it strange to write one's intimacies on toilet doors and beg anonymous and complete strangers for advice. The normal everyday practice of this strangeness makes it familiar. This study seeks to turn 'a critical eye onto practices, dynamics, policies and meaning-making within familiar cultures' (Goodley *et al* 2004, p.57). The familiarity of the graffiti does not soften the huge difficulties, which some informants presumably face. Numerous graffiti reveal the quiet desperation of some students. Applying Haraway's question to the graffiti girls, I ask; 'Is there anything other than a despairing location?' (interviewed by Penley and Ross 1991, p.6). The persistent, uncomfortable presence of the graffiti transmits feelings of uneasiness, sadness and strangeness to me. Yet, this same combination of strange/familiar offers ways of learning new insights:

Making knowledge both strange and familiar is the work of learning and teaching. We must do both in order to live and to learn creatively, in order to elaborate our sexuality, in order to imagine the possibilities of citizenship.

(Britzman 2000a, p.51).

I perceive the graffitiists as trying to 'elaborate' their understanding of sexualities, and explore the ways they challenge presuppositions of what is normal. In making the familiar strange, I acknowledge queer theory (Butler 1999, 1993; Sedgwick 1994, 1990). Queer theory set out to demystify the 'taken-for-grantedness' of gender and heteronormative sexual boundaries (Lorber 2001, p.195). Stein and Plummer (1996) suggest four 'hallmarks' of queer theory: (a) a notion that sexual power runs throughout social life and is enforced through 'boundaries and binary divides'; (b) a 'problematization' of sexual and gender categories; (c) a preference for 'deconstruction, decentering, revisionist readings, and antiassimilationist politics'; (d) a 'willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality' (p.134).

Queer theory continues the postmodernist project of destabilizing the boundaries of 'sacred' binaries of male-female and black-white by deconstructing the heterosexual-homosexual split of sexual identity. I understand the term 'queer' as being unaligned with any specific identity category. The poststructuralist roots of queer theory reveal its claims that sexual and other identities are 'arbitrary, unstable, and exclusionary' (Seidman 1996, pp.11, 13). Queer theory is against any generalisations and suggests that it is meaningless to talk about 'girls' or 'gays' or any other group, as identities consist of many elements. It holds that to assume that people can be categorised on the basis of one shared characteristic is erroneous. It deliberately challenges all notions of fixed identity. I have employed queer theory by problemizing the terms 'boy', 'girl', 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality'.

This study draws on queer theory, since I share its quest for the dismantling of social structures, which disable heteronormativity (Tierney and Dilley 1998). I also share its contempt for the dominant discourses, which hurt the feelings and cause emotional hurt to minorities. Just like queer theory resists the view that heterosexuality is the only stable, institutionalised model of stability, in my data analysis, I also deconstruct the notion of heterosexuality understood in terms of being regarded as 'natural'.

In this study I have been sensitive in using language and employ an epistemology, which asserts power, dignity and respect for all the graffiti authors. Such a perspective

argues for a teaching and learning approach to sexuality education, which goes against the stigmatization of minorities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, disabled, working class students and racially diverse and others who suffer from any form of oppression and discrimination. This study does not analyze the graffiti written by presumed lesbian/bisexual students in a distinct category, to avoid marginalization. These writings are analyzed across the main themes, as with the graffiti written by presumed heterosexual students. I sought to avoid heteronormative research methods and analysis, as I did not wish my epistemology to reproduce the 'closet' (Sedgwick 1990).

In my teaching, I use the same dissident voice, which queer theory uses against homophobia, to foster an environment of trust, support, equality, inclusion, humanness and respect for diversity and for the uniqueness of every human person and in this way empower students. I employ the queer imperative to promote mutual understanding between diverse members of society.

In employing such a methodology, it was my intention to promote an understanding of the diversities and the complexities of the different graffiti authors as they come across through their writings. This study intends to unveil the graffiti artists' concerns, irrespective of their gender identity. Acknowledging difference must be the only technique, through which the possibility for community in pedagogy could be constructed (Britzman 1998). Although sex education has traditionally ignored the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered adolescents and avoided the affirmation of their sexual identities (Vincent and Ballard 1997; Epstein 1994), queer theory has provided a vision for a queer pedagogy, which should attempt:

... to exceed such binary oppositions as the tolerant and the tolerated and the oppressed and oppressor yet still hold onto an analysis of social difference that can account for how dynamics of subordination and subjection work at the level of the historical, the structural, the epistemological, the conceptual, the social, and the psychic.

(Britzman 1998, p.95).

Sexuality education is considered 'queer' at the College, because it is marginalized, excluded and ignored. As a legally separated person living in Malta, I'm also considered 'queer' in my country, since I deviated from the norm of the heterosexual family united through the institutionalized marital ceremony in the catholic Church.

The announcement that my marriage has broken down, for me involved the kind of struggle, which is typical of 'coming out'. A separated person is not expected to form a second union by the catholic Church unless the marriage has been declared invalid by the Church's authorities, let alone a separated religious education teacher. Although in European countries the divorce rates are as high as 50%, in Malta only 2.5% of males and 2.8% of females are legally separated (National Statistics Office 2004, p.3).

Weeks describes the effects of the queer revolution as a worm, which destructs stable norms, causes instability and:

gives rise to sexual and cultural dissidence and a transgressive ethic which constantly works to unsettle binarism and to suggest alternatives.

(Weeks 1998, p.146).

Some graffiti resemble 'worms' squirming on toilet doors, which eat away heterosexual arrogance. Despite Weeks' observation about the invasive power of the queer turn, its success in the political arena has been considered limited (Adam 1998; Edwards 1998). De Lauretis (1994) now represents queer theory as devoid of the political power she once thought it promised. In acknowledging that queer is 'another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual' (De Lauretis 1991, p.iv), I recognize that voiced anxieties still operate around queer issues, which try to muffle their effect on political agendas.

The queer turn however, has not only affected gender and sexuality but even the understanding of the ways these interact with race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality and other discourses, which constitute identity (Sedgwick 1994). The impact of queer theory on various sociological studies has been noted by Gamson and Moon (2004). My understanding of the implications of queer theory extends beyond sexual identity issues. For a discussion about the relevance of queer theory to those who do not identify themselves as gay/lesbian, see Britzman (1998).

Feminist Methodologies

At a certain point during the research process, I realized that I was employing some form of feminist thinking, despite my initial reluctance to acknowledge this. Although

my research involves female students' writings, I conceptualise feminist theory as also providing useful insights about sexualities and relationships to male teenagers. Male students studying at the College are also excluded from sexuality education. Although they do not write graffiti at this institution, they would still like to learn about matters related to romantic and sexual relationships (Mamo 2001). Teenage girls *and* boys, like adults and children, more or less have the same basic needs; to feel loved, love others, be accepted, feel good about themselves and have a meaningful purpose in life. Boys are the object of inquiry of a considerable number of graffitiists and therefore, cannot be excluded from this study.

The majority of graffitiists in urban cities, such as London and New York, are male and in such places the practice of graffiti is demonstrative of masculinity and of male control in public spaces (MacDonald 2001; Wilson 1987). Yet the blank male toilet doors at the College do not necessarily imply that male students do not have any questions about romantic relationships, sexuality and love or that they have resolved all their problems related to these issues.

I employ feminist theory not to create distance and separation, and increase conflict between females and males, but to gain better understandings of sexuality issues. Although conflict and othering is inevitable and even sometimes necessary to overcome structures of discrimination and injustice based on gender and homophobia, I argue against feminist dogma and extremist positions, which manifest aggressiveness and reduce the concept of the 'other' to fundamentalism. I have therefore been reluctant to construct my research analysis on 'the opposition between a unified female self and a male other' (Visweswaran 1994, p.20) and on the rigid, binary, split categories of male-female. I therefore employ poststructuralist feminist ideas.

The many feminisms do not make it possible to talk about a 'feminist analysis' since feminists dispute many issues according to different theoretical positions, which are not necessarily coherent (Stainton Rogers W and Stainton Rogers R 2001, p.120). This fragmentation of feminist voices is however 'the result of a deeper understanding of the sources of gender inequality' (Lorber 2001, p. 4), which can be attributed to the different ways in which feminists have approached their investigation and explanation

of gender inequality. My theoretical framework has benefited from the richness, which the diversity of feminist perspectives provides.

Lorber (2001) divides feminist theories into three types, based on their prescribed solutions to gender inequality. **Gender reform feminisms** focus on equality between men and women 'within the existing structure of the gendered social order' (p.9). **Gender resistance feminisms** confront issues of sexual exploitation and oppression. Radical feminism, lesbian feminism, psychoanalytic feminism and standpoint feminism form part of this category (ibid.). **Gender rebellion feminisms** 'challenge the very structure of the gendered social order by questioning its basis – the division of people into two genders' (ibid., p.10). I have drawn insights from all these three theoretical approaches and analysed the graffiti through them.

Whilst acknowledging that there are different feminist perspectives and methodologies (David 2003; Lorber 2001; DeVault 1999; Tong 1998; Humm 1992; Funow and Cook 1991), this study is located within feminist principles, which emphasise:

1. Postmodernity (Butler 1999; Haraway 1991a, 1991b, 1989; Kristeva 1986, Irigaray 1985a, 1985b; Cixous 1983) which affirms different ways of being female, and which argues that sex and gender are social, cultural and discursive constructs (Weeden 1997; Nicholson 1990; De Lauretis 1987a).
2. Public/private and personal/political divide (David 2003; Landes 1998; Elshtain 1993).
3. Emotion as a research experience (Ellis and Berger 2002; Wolf 1996; Stanley 1993).
4. Telling of personal stories (Ribbens and Edwards 1998; Bola 1995).
5. Reflexivity in situating where the researcher is coming from (Walkerdine *et al* 2001; Truman *et al* 1999; Ribbens and Edwards 1998; Stanley 1990a).

6. The emancipatory character of research (Funow and Cook 1991).

The graffiti analysis reflects on these six related principles. These will be explored now in more detail.

1. *Postmodern Feminism*

The 'postmodern embrace' (Stronach and MacLure 1997) has given rise to postmodernist feminism. From the feminisms, it is this type which more or less matches my own perspectives, because it seeks to deconstruct the term 'woman' into a continuing definition of identity and describes gender as a process based on experiences (De Lauretis 1987a) whilst advocating a multiplicity of meanings, positions and discourses regarding the feminine. Haraway (1991c) argues for the 'situated' positioning of women but locates her understanding of women within poststructuralist feminism:

there is nothing about being female that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as "being" female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices.

(Haraway 1991a, p.155).

The graffiti manifest the different identities of their authors. The girls' differences are negotiated through their different opinions and opposing views. My approach seeks to avoid the universalising 'we' of feminist ethnography, which according to Visweswaran (1994), obliterates issues of power and difference in research. I have drawn on feminist postmodernism since it questions women's internal beliefs. A feminist way of knowing has to do with 'splitting':

The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history. Splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge. 'Splitting' in this context should be about heterogeneous multiplicities that are simultaneously necessary and incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists.

(Haraway 1991b, p.193)

I have adopted Haraway's notion of multiple subjectivities and the split self to analyze the informants' writings. These girls draw considerably on their own personal

experiences of contradiction and multiple positioning (chapters 5-6). From this perspective, the term 'girls', as I use it to refer to the informants, is problematic and sometimes misleading since the girls do not form a homogenous group. Derrida even comes to hold that 'there is no such thing as the essence of woman' and calls woman 'the untruth of truth' (Derrida 1978, p.51).

Although from a postmodernist perspective, I hold that generalisations about women are bound to be flawed, I acknowledge that it is the female voice, which constitutes the graffiti. Although Haraway (1991a) holds that the concept of being a woman is fictitious and commonly shared experiences of womanhood do not exist, I questioned the possibility that underlying the graffiti texts, there might be characteristics, which could be accounted for by what it means to be female. Whilst endorsing Haraway's belief that women cannot be classified into a single entity (sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality and class are some categories, which differentiate women), I acknowledge a number of commonalities pertaining to the graffiti girls' experiences (chapters 5-6). My use of the term 'girls' when referring to the informants, describes some kind of collective perceptions and experiences, which binds them together. I have drawn on De Lauretis (1987b) explanation of the term 'experience', which she explains;

not in the individualistic, idiosyncratic sense of something belonging to one and exclusively her own even though others might have 'similar' experiences; but rather in the general sense of a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceived and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations - material, economic, and interpersonal - which are in fact social, and in a larger perspective, historical.

(De Lauretis 1987b, p.159).

Feminist postmodernism challenges the notion of a feminist standpoint, which can be privileged in epistemological questions. Postmodernism has attempted to deconstruct feminism. This does not necessarily mean the erosion of feminism, but rather an exploration of more issues and questions (Burman 1998, quoted in Stainton Rogers W and Stainton Rogers R 2001, p.144).

There are divergences between feminism and postmodernism (Man Ling Lee 2001; McNay 1992; Sawicki 1991). One of the major aims of feminism is to develop

concrete and political strategies, to achieve equality. Yet postmodernism is reluctant to make political recommendations. While Foucauldian discourse theory has been accused of gender blindness and determinism (see Walby 1990), feminist poststructural workings of it, however, see openings for challenge to oppressive discourses in recognition of the multiplicity of discursive practice and subjectivity, including gender identity (Mama 1995).

Postmodern feminist psychologists have challenged ideas stemming from psychoanalytical theory. Kristeva (1987) for example draws on Lacan and Freud and explores the ways that psychic forces are intertwined with cultural texts by exploring the possibility that women's social conditions are in the inner recesses of their psyche. Butler (1999) also gives an overview of Freud and Lacan (pp.326-327) and accuses them of setting up 'woman' as an eternal abstract universal category. She regards psychoanalysis as a 'grand narrative', which privileges a certain story and a particular pattern of identifications that supposedly produce a coherent and unified gendered self (man, woman, masculine, feminine). She rejects this notion, on the basis of variations, fragmented identities and discontinuous or provisional understandings of gender identities. Mitchell (1974) however argues that psychoanalysis offers a deconstruction of the formation of gendered identity in the psychic and symbolic domains of patriarchal societies.

My ideas and approach have become more supportive of a 'reconstructive' type of postmodernism (Griffin 2000), in contrast to deconstructive postmodernism, associated with the writings of Butler (1999), Haraway (1991a, 1991b), Kristeva (1986), Derrida (1976) and Foucault (1972). Deconstructive postmodernism implies nihilism and seeks to undo all claims towards ultimate knowledge and truth (Griffin 2000). Reconstructive postmodernism, however is optimistic, creative and forward-looking, as it recognizes and values multiple realities and the non-rational influences on reality, experience and action. Seeking to reform postmodernism, Griffin very briefly describes a '*revisionary, constructive, or - perhaps best - reconstructive*' postmodernism (ibid.; p.xi, emphasis in original), that does not attempt to dismantle all worldviews so much as it tries to offer 'a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts' (ibid.). From this perspective, this study argues in favour of schooling environments, which enable postsecondary

students, educators and policymakers to investigate, evaluate and develop options leading towards empowerment:

For now, the challenge in a world that we view as constructed on multiple levels by multiple parties is to seek some sense of voice and agency that enables action.

(Tierney 2000, p.544).

2. *The amalgamation of the public/private and personal/political*

There is a fundamental concern among feminists about the relationship between the personal and the political (Goodley *et al* 2004, p.61). There has been a shift of emphasis within feminist theory; from theories of dominance to those of difference and diversity. I explore the graffiti writers' concerns both in the context of personal differences, pertaining to individual graffiti authors as well as in terms of their eclectic power relations of subordination, dominance and equality with their lovers and in the context of power structures operating in society.

The integration of personal experiences with political analyses, which feminist theory and practice have worked towards, is now in demand, even by students (Ruggiero 1990). Amidst the diversity of critical feminist theories, methodologies and ethnographies, feminists began to theorise the political (Butler and Scott 1992) and the personal (David 2003), not only in the areas of personal education and the work-life balance, but also in issues concerning sexuality. This was not easy (see MacLure 2003, pp.133-148), as changes in the personal and political lives of women have indeed been complex and contradictory (David 2003).

Feminist methodologies in the fields of schooling and sexualities have developed as a reaction to male dominance in educational practice and research, which excluded female concerns. As a result of feminist methodologies and critiques of epistemology related to education, there have been many complex shifts in educational policies and practices of power relations and feminist theories have had considerable influence on higher education (David 2003). The influence of feminism has changed modes of enquiry and the ways that schooling and educational processes are regarded and interpreted. The impact of feminist thinking on educational research is impressive (Weiner and Arnot 1987). A feminist vision of sexuality education has been outlined

(McClain 2006). Gender and education is now a well-developed field of study, which is embedded within public policy discourses. Stanley and Wise (1993, 1990, 1983), Oakley (1993) and Finch (1984) discussed the links between the personal, shared experiences of women and epistemological perspectives.

Work informed by feminist personal perspectives has also highly influenced theories related to psychology; including the psychology of gender and sexuality and social psychology (Stainton Rogers W and Stainton Rogers R 2001, p.122). Despite this considerable influence however, the experiences and desires of young women have been given insufficient attention (Currie 1999, p.8). Walkerdine *et al's* study (2001) among different groups of working and middle class young women, found that women's personal lives have not become easier despite changes in policies. Their educational and work lives were marked with an increasing sense of anxiety, associated with pressures towards academic and educational success.

Feminism is also considered to have had an impact on men's personal lives. Some men researchers involved in education, even consider the impact of feminism in deciding on their own position. Male responses to feminist thinking have varied from those who oppose it strongly to those who declare themselves pro-feminists, because they believe that they can learn from feminism. Lingard and Douglas (1999) for example recognise the complexities involved in supporting feminist claims without diminishing masculinities. They argue that masculinity is under siege and in crisis in the face of the putative success of the feminist reform project. In claiming that their approach is pro-feminist, they admit that this position presents difficulties. They hold that the rise of men's rights manifestations attempt to reassert male privilege and to re-emphasize essentialist masculinity (*ibid.*). Other researchers and sociologists of education, for example Bourdieu (1998) argue that masculine domination however is still influential in social institutions, especially where the maintenance of the social order is considered important. Bourdieu (*ibid.*) and Arnot (2002) pointed particularly to education as a central ideological site for the reproduction of gender inequality.

3. *Emotion as a research experience*

Whilst reflecting on surrounding issues related to the graffiti contents, emphasis is made on the feelings and emotions conveyed by the informants. This is because I regard the emotional wellbeing of teenagers, as they experience feelings of sexual attraction and love, as crucial in their developmental process. I have drawn on feminist perspectives because they attempt:

to understand the parts that, experience, emotion and subjectivity play in the research process, rather than seeing them as weakness to be controlled.

(Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994, p.130).

The articulation of numerous informants is focused on how to handle emotions, such as jealousy, excitement, love, pity, anger, fear and sadness. As demonstrated in the data analysis, these emotions are described as disrupting some of the girls' lives and creating havoc. In presenting some of the sexual and intimate experiences they describe, I have drawn from Ellis and Berger's work, who in their article claim that they:

share a desire to work within a methodological and theoretical orientation that privileges emotional and concrete details of everyday life.

(Ellis and Berger 2002, p.857).

I do not regard the purpose of sexuality education as being limited to strictly biological and physical health issues but as incorporating the understanding of emotions. Whereas some studies have been conducted in relation to teenagers' physical health and set to find out the number of sexually transmitted diseases contracted by adolescents, teenage pregnancies, age of first sexual encounter and frequency of teenage sexual activity (eg. Rolston *et al* 2004; Schubotz *et al* 2002; Graber *et al* 1999), less has been researched on their actual feelings, emotional needs and emotional health whilst experiencing romantic and sexual relationships. This lack of emphasis on the emotional component is also felt in some sexuality education programmes. Studies confirm that students are dissatisfied with the lack of attention given to emotional factors in sexuality education (eg. Measor *et al* 2000, Epstein *et al* 2003).

4. *Telling of personal stories*

Some of the graffitists regard their writings as stories, as they themselves announce: 'OK so here is my story: ...' (24). The graffiti community thrives on stories and could be considered as a fragment of the 'world of sexual stories' (Plummer 1995, p.5), which has increasingly become recognised (ibid.). Through feminist perspectives, I regard the graffitists' stories as having political importance.

My intention and purpose of this study is to locate the graffitists' stories as the main voice. Some graffiti stories are channels of empathy, support and knowledge and facilitate a sense of bonding amongst the graffiti writers and readers, who declare that they feel alone and lost (chapters 5-6). Storytelling creates 'a sense of feel and place' (Sikes 2005, p.79) and has been used for therapeutic use (Nath Dwivedi 1997). Walkerdine has confessed that:

the act of writing about myself has been very important for some women, who have recognised aspects of themselves within the text and found that supportive, helpful.

(Walkerdine 1997, p.75).

In referring to their romantic experiences as stories, some of the graffitists show that a sequence of events has taken place. Their storylines represent different decisions they had taken and others, which they still have to take. The graffiti stories evolve constantly and progress as circumstances change. First-person narratives of women writers are a strategy of communication and self-discovery operating within feminist ethnography (Visweswaran 1994). Stanley regards feminist autobiographical accounts in feminist research as problematising the notion of the self; replacing unity and stability with 'an understanding of self as fragile and continually renewed by acts of memory and writing' (1990b, p.62). Aspects of the domestic, intimate and private lives of women have also been explored to address questions of feminist qualitative methodologies (Ribbens and Edwards 1998).

5. *Reflexivity in situating where the researcher is coming from*

Feminist methodologies often take the form of reflexive practice, which departs from women's personal experiences of discomfort and pain (eg. Woodward 2000). Women challenge mistaken social knowledge from the strength of their personal experiences

(Gross 1992, quoted in Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers 2001, p.133; Smith 1981). Feminist research has mainly been devoted to hearing women speak in their own words about the experiences of being women. I locate the graffiti writers' voices within this framework, by rendering them constructs of knowledge.

In numerous cases, reflexivity leads researchers to write about their self and locate themselves within the purpose of their research (Maynard and Purvis 1994; Stanley and Wise 1990). The insertion of autobiographical information in research is 'seldom irrelevant to (the) understanding of texts' (Berger 1990, p.xvi). There has been an increasing use of autobiographical information by researchers, especially women, whose personal experiences have shaped their research (eg. Cole 2004; Ellis and Berger 2002; Woodward 2000; Sikes 1997).

As the graffitists reflexively share their innermost feelings, they experience intimacy, which I also share each time I read their narratives. Intimacy requires the ability to give care (Cassidy 2001, p.130). Sometimes, as I reflect on their feelings and thoughts, I try to disengage myself emotionally because of the anxiety they arouse within me. The girls' concerns however remain on my mind and in my heart. The female toilets have long become a fascinating, intriguing, and even disturbing place for me and during each working day as I enter a toilet cubicle, I am curious and eager to read the latest contributions. The toilets are the female students' habitus as much as they are mine.

6. *Emancipatory research*

Feminist research is aimed at providing women with some explanations of their lives, which can be used to improve their situation (Funow and Cook 1991). Feminist research is often used as a vehicle to explore the way things are, why they are so, how they might be better and what can be done to effect change. Chodorow (1975) recognized the overarching influence of patriarchy on gender inequality and questioned traditional views of sex, gender and sexual orientation. She advocated a subversion of the existing oppressive patriarchal systems in the form of non-hierarchical, supportive, woman-only organizations, where women can be creative, think and act freely (quoted in Lorber 2001, p.74). The graffiti subculture can be

considered such 'an organisation', which promotes these qualities and challenges social knowledge through the girls' personal experiences.

I have used feminist thinking to explore the concept of space accessibility for sexuality education in postsecondary schools' curricula in Malta, so that students' sexual desires, need for intimacy, romantic relationships and total wellbeing would be acknowledged, discussed and positively integrated within their whole education, thus contributing to their empowerment. One of the presumed reasons why the female students created a space for themselves in the lavatories is because they did not find any other space in the curriculum or elsewhere to discuss personal issues pertaining to sexualities and romantic relationships:

In the absence of fixed, obligatory and traditional norms and certainties people must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves.

(Beck 1994, p.13).

The choice of the school lavatories as the exclusive and restricted place where to write down intimacies could have however been made in view of the fact that it is beyond the reach of the formal curriculum. The girls reserve and occupy their own spaces. They frequently encircle their story/comment/suggestion/problem/advice/answer and create a boundary so that it will not get mixed up with other writings. Occasionally they fight for space. Even the bottom parts of the doors are full of scribbling. This implies that students have to squat, kneel or sit on the floor to write them. They also overwrite on each other's comments.

The idea that women claim their own spaces in different arenas such as in cyberspace (eg. Haraway 1991a), politics, academia, policymaking bodies etc., is a recurring theme in feminist research. Some feminists have employed spatial metaphors (eg. Shands 1999) to explain the 'structuring and orientating force' of space concepts (ibid., p.2). Spatial metaphors 'constitute a shared but shifting ground upon which feminist thought is built' (ibid. p.4). The concept of creating and constructing space for learning in women's lives has been studied with reference to the dominant, normative structures of society (eg. Moss 2004; Spain 1992). In claiming and creating their own spaces, women have had to analyse themselves and examine their standing within the institutions they manage to occupy. They often discover sites of contention,

conflict, inequality and discrimination against them, which urge them to deconstruct the existing structures and struggle to bring changes within them. Their occupation of space is therefore problematic as it does not guarantee inclusion in the hierarchies of power structures.

Most graffiti also reveal the female students' urge to occupy spaces within romantic relationships. Many doubts, uncertainties and questions arise in managing to achieve this. The question '*What should I do?*' is repeated over and over again. The toilets are an ambiguous and ambivalent space where girls display and discuss their values and code of ethics, therefore creating moral spaces. Feminists claim and negotiate moral spaces to address numerous issues and overcome power imbalances and inequality; for example in the fields of bioethics and health care (eg. Sherwin and Baylis 2003) and education (Currie 1992).

This brief overview of feminist thinking employed as part of my methodology demonstrates that feminist researchers move between theory, experience and interpretation of accounts (Hollway 1989, pp.40-42). The six points discussed above collate together. Although I value the monumental contribution which feminist theory has generated in its commitment towards affecting possible change and in empowering women (Oakley 1993), the complexities of the different feminisms overwhelm me. Sandoval (1991) argues that through the acknowledgment and examination of differential consciousness, the different spheres of theory and practice of feminisms can be made clear. Yet I find difficulty in arriving at this examination because feminism is alive and keeps changing and evolving. Drawing on poststructuralist perspectives, I regard feminism as continuously reformulating itself through new understandings of gender:

Women are constantly confronted with the cultural task of finding out what it means to be a woman, of marking out the boundaries between the feminine and the unfeminine.

(Ang 1996, p.94).

Whilst affirming that feminist methodologies in general have informed my thinking in new ways, I 'recognize, acknowledge, and accept the imperfections and the incompleteness of feminist research goals' (Wolf 1996, p.36). Amidst the plurality of feminisms I acknowledge the collective feminist identity, based on its quest to

transform dominant power relations and structures of social inequality and subordination (Smith 1982). I critique feminist theory when it reduces sexuality to just either dependency on women (eg. through childbearing, mothering and care giving) or to danger (eg. sexual subordination and sexual harm/victimization). Feminist theory needs to generate positive accounts of sexuality.

Research Methods

The research methods describe the journey of the graffiti from the toilet doors towards my text. The practical applications detail how the girls' 'documents of life' (Plummer 2001) were collected and how they led me to the analysis. This provides a framework, in which the research findings, found in the next two chapters, can be better understood.

Although 'the central concern of all ethnographic research is to get people to tell their stories' (Halstead and Reiss 2003, p.124), I did not have to 'get people'. I found fragments of stories written already. The data has been produced spontaneously and was not the result of formal responses to specific questions asked to informants. At the moment of writing, the informants did not have their stories shaped and influenced by any researcher's agenda. The informants responded to each other and not to me.

The graffiti analyzed in this study were written and collected from 2003-2006. All the graffiti are written on the inside part of the doors and can be read when one is inside the cubicle of each toilet. There are no graffiti outside the toilet cubicles. I assume that each piece of writing is written by one student, although two or more writers could have collaborated together. Data was collected by taking about 300 digital photographs at random. Once the photographs were downloaded on computer, I categorized them according to dominant themes, which stood out because they were repeated. I had been familiar with these themes through my daily interactions with the graffiti, even prior to the study. Twelve dominant themes were identified (chapter 6). Prior to the study, I did not have a number of issues pertaining to sexualities and romantic relationships in mind, which I set out to search in the graffiti forum. The themes emerged from the data a posteriori.

Apart from the twelve themes concerning aspects of romantic relationships and sexualities (chapter 6) there were also themes related to how the graffitiists describe themselves and the reasons they gave for writing graffiti (chapter 5). I could have chosen only two or three themes and analyse them in greater depth. I however chose to give a general overview of the graffiti texts to be able to indicate which areas need to be addressed by possible future sexuality education curricula.

The theme, which deals with narratives of child sexual abuse and how it is impacting negatively on romantic relationships' issues, has not been selected for analysis. It had proved difficult to me to comment on the abysmal destruction in aspects of the graffitiists' lives as described by their narratives.

Restrictions on the word limit of the study required a selection of graffiti from each theme to be presented and analysed. The graffiti selection involved a subjective exercise and was based on intuitive feelings and sense of good judgment. Some writings immediately stood out and resonated within me for their contents and expression. I chose the ones, which moved me and which I felt would enrich the study. I tried to present a wide spectrum. I was not tied by any particular number of graffiti, which had been decided a priori. Each theme is not presented with the same number of graffiti. In all, 191 graffiti photographs were selected. The repeated graffiti concepts, questions and statements were not included.

I could have analyzed data from focus group discussions about perceptions related to romantic experiences instead of that derived from the graffiti texts. I decided not to include focus groups, in order to give more prominence to the graffiti texts. I was drawn by the power of the girls' written experiences. I could not ignore them or dismiss them as trash. The girls' insistence, spontaneity and persistence mingled with agency and passivity offered fascinating spaces for a journey into the personal feelings, experiences and reflections of girls within that space. The graffiti are restless, demanding, captivating and unquiet. Had I conducted focus groups or had I interviewed the graffiti authors, the informants might not have disclosed such personal and intimate information, as they do through the graffiti. Anonymity gives them the freedom to share sensitive and even distressing experiences.

Focus group discussions with students could have provided additional data and serve as means of triangulation. My reluctance to include focus group discussions resulted from the possibility that the study might lose its focus and deviate from the graffiti phenomenon. Too much data would have been generated if the twelve graffiti themes had to be explored through focus group discussions. Due to the word limit of the study, the inclusion of focus groups would have limited the discussion to less graffiti themes and therefore to fewer aspects of the graffiti artists' perspectives. I preferred to present more graffiti themes to demonstrate a wider and richer view of their contents. Research cannot present everything that could be said. Ethnographic material analysed through personal experiences provided triangulation.

Instead of focus group discussions I have incorporated *very brief* accounts of 'toilet conversations' I have had with nineteen female students. This toilet talk assists the data and is not regarded as the main focus of the study. Like the graffiti, these conversations also occurred spontaneously and are considered part of the study's context. Usually the girl inside the toilet cubicle calls the attention of her friends by saying, '*Listen to this...*' and she reads the writings out loud to them. At this point, if I'm not in a hurry, I join in their conversations. My interactions with these informants have always been informal, brief and unplanned. These conversations did not delve deeply into discussions about the graffiti artists' private and social selves, but I considered them useful nonetheless. I took ethnographic notes after nine conversation sessions I have had from 2003-2006. None of the students, who have participated in these conversations, have identified themselves as graffiti writers and I have never asked them whether they have ever contributed to them; to respect their privacy. Since I derive insights from a poststructuralist framework, my account and analysis of these conversations are not dominated by coherence.

I did not quantify the analysis in terms of statistical data. I use the words 'some informants' without specifying how many. Although I have presented writings from 191 graffiti photographs, I also considered those, which were not selected for representation and those I had encountered prior to the study.

Most of the graffiti writings are comprised of a single sentence or a couple of sentences, which amount to a paragraph. In my data presentation I tried not to

fragment the girls' writings as much as possible. In my use of the vast majority of quotations, I have represented the whole writing, without selecting sections from it, in order not to separate sentences from their context.

I have photographed the graffiti to transcribe and present them as images in a CD; as evidence and in an attempt to make them more 'real' to the readers. Photographs are historical documents. The graffiti photographs do not give a complete picture of each situation described. They cannot capture the whole story of each girl and suggest a much larger context from which they derive. The emotive, turbulent and often poignant aspects of the graffiti photographs capture the vividness of the moment in which they were written but they also reflect past events, which could have changed. In trying to understand the possible relationship between what is framed within and its connection with the outside world, I was conscious of absent presences (Peim 2005, p.70) and of 'the visibility of the invisible' (Derrida 1994, p.125). The graffiti testify to present absences of adequate solutions to the girls' problems. Derrida (1987) has concentrated on the concept of absences in written texts, which emphasizes the 'play of differences' (p.26) that disrupts any notion of presence:

Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present.

(ibid.).

As this study strives to go through this interweaving of meaning, it tries to decipher 'the traces of traces' (ibid.) of meaning in the graffiti texts.

Summary

This chapter has reflected on the values and objectives, which I brought to the study. The diverse methodologies outlined are intertwined and demonstrate the complexities involved in any research project. The different approaches of these methodologies reflect the different approaches the graffiti writers themselves take towards their understanding of sexualities (chapters 5-6). My understanding of the different ways that postmodern, feminist and queer theories perceive sexual issues, suggests a messy approach, yet it is aimed at exploring these issues at a deeper level than if only one approach was adopted.

The purpose of my methodology is not solely intended as a tool to reveal the nature of adolescents' views and feelings regarding sexuality issues, but rather it is *for them* to have curriculum structures, which enable them to speak out and listen to one another outside the lavatories. Concepts of queer theory and feminist perspectives together with the adolescents' personal experiences and voice provide valuable insights to sexuality education curricula.

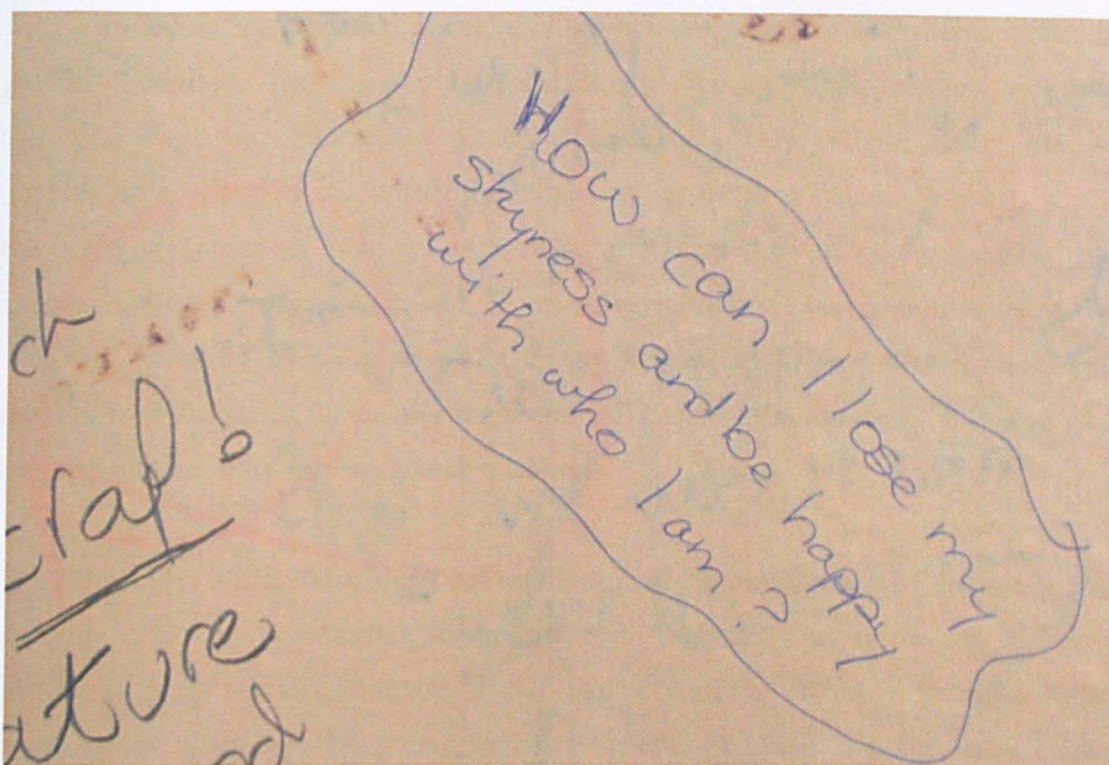
Mybe we are proud, jelous, aragant, mybe we get fucken Periods every month, mybe we are the ones that get pregnant, BUT THANK GOD THAT WER WOMEN! (23).

In deconstructing this writing through the theoretical frameworks discussed in this chapter, I recognize that possible meanings could be derived about the constraints related to being female. In asserting femininity, the author replicates feminists, who celebrate and honour womanhood. Despite the number of difficulties that being female entails, the beauty and positive side of womanhood is emphasized. The use of the word 'we' signals attachment to the other anonymous girls. The repetitive use of the word '*mybe*' reveals a postmodern uncertainty and allows for the possibility that there could be other alternatives of being 'women'. This could perhaps include the desire to question and 'make queer' the limitations related to women, which are mentioned. The next chapter highlights more difficulties and strengths related to being 'women' as unveiled by the graffitists' own voices.

CHAPTER FIVE:

‘How can I lose my shyness...?’:

Findings and Analysis – Part 1



Chapter five deals with the following:

- Introduction
- Ethical Concerns
- Deconstructing the Graffiti Texts
- The Problem of Representation: The Missing Text
- The Graffiti Language
- Toilet Talk
- The Silent Phenomenon. Why Graffiti?
- Summary

Introduction

How can I lose my shyness

and be happy with who I am? (25).

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the first part of the analysis, which deals with a reflexive interrogation about possible reasons why the informants resort to graffiti. Feminist, queer and poststructuralist perspectives are adopted to study different ways the informants present themselves. This chapter also aims at developing a reflexive account of the dynamics involved in the attachments, which the graffitiists construct amongst each other, as indicated by them. This part of the analysis includes a discussion about issues surrounding the presentation of the girls' writings, including ethical concerns. The second part, which is found in chapter 6, focuses more specifically on the main graffiti themes. The analyses of these two chapters address the study's research questions.

The data analysis had started long before the formal commencement of this study and occurred each time I reflected on the writings. This study considers the students' graffiti as being socially constructed and their writings as social texts and cultural artefacts. In analysing the social from the textual, I adopt the approach which problematises the graffiti writings since their construction is understood as being the result of a complex interplay of emotional, social, spiritual, mental and cultural forces. This study explores the graffiti as an expression of social power and domination, which mediate the making of gender. It engages in controversies surrounding girls' everyday gender practice. The study does not resolve such controversies since the formation of gendered identities is complex and cannot be separated from the many facets of global culture. The task of understanding the social world of the adolescent girls, apart from their graffiti texts, is a difficult one, partly because the social world itself is pluralistic, complex and keeps changing and partly because the girls themselves change as does their process of grasping what their world is about.

In my analysis I was conscious of the risk of making my voice more central than that of the informants (Wolf 1996). Since romantic relationships have been problematic for me, I am aware that my interpretation of the graffiti texts could be viewed primarily from a lens of emotional hurt. I have tried to keep a balance in my

perspectives and regard them as expressions of both joy and pain. Most girls have however used the graffiti more as a forum to share their sorrow and anguish than their happiness. Most writings point to the difficulties of being a girl and of becoming a woman.

Ethical Concerns

The study's subject matter is considered a sensitive issue, since it touches upon intimate areas of the human personality and is concerned with deviancy. Sensitive issues are usually complex and controversial in nature. The definition of a sensitive research topic is dependent on the informants' cultural norms and values. Lee (1993) suggests that sexuality issues are considered private, stressful and sacred and create a concern about sensitivity. He suggests that sensitive research '... poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved' (p.4). Ethical precautions related to the investigation of sensitive topics are necessary.

In discussing confidentiality, honesty, deception, exploitation, consent and harm, Plummer (2001) presents the complexities of ethical research procedures. He argues that researchers should proceed within the framework of five ethical principles, which emphasise (i) respect, recognition and tolerance for persons and their differences; (ii) caring of others; (iii) fairness and justice; (iv) autonomy, freedom and choice; and (v) minimization of harm (p.228).

I have tried to adopt these ethical guidelines. At all stages of the research process, I treated each piece of writing with respect, care and confidentiality. I held responsibility for whom I speak, even though I did not know who the informants were. I chose not to identify the College. In my data presentation, I have excluded all phone numbers and names written in the graffiti. I have asked the head of the College permission to be able to carry out this research and it was granted. The day after this request however, the cleaners were ordered to scrub off every single piece of graffiti. This was done since graffiti are prohibited at the College. My position as a researcher/teacher is difficult since I validate the girls' choice to write about their intimacies in a secretive, reserved, secluded, intimate, but public environment,

knowing that this goes against the College rules. In researching deviancy, I tried not to comply with it, but this was not always possible.

During my conversations with the nineteen girls inside the lavatories, I told them about my research concerns and asked their permission and consent to be able to represent their perceptions, opinions and beliefs. This was granted. Balancing my dual roles; that of arguing for students' voices and holding a power position simultaneously, proved difficult during the conversations with these informants. I was aware that as a teacher, I had the duty to tell them that graffiti writing is prohibited. Yet, I felt that conveying this message would somehow reinforce the silences surrounding sexualities and consequently I did not tell them this.

I deliberated upon whether to ask the graffiti authors' consent, through a notice on toilet doors, to study and represent their writings. I felt that were I to do this, I would in some way be showing my approval of graffiti writing and consequently defy the College rules, which ban graffiti. To employ ethical criteria towards the institution and respect my professional status integrity, I had therefore decided not to ask the girls' consent to study their writings. Although I believed that this was the best thing to do, I did not feel totally comfortable with this decision. Although the absolute majority of writings are anonymous, and they are written in a public place, there is the possibility that some writers might feel uneasy or irritated, were they to get to know about the exposure of their writings, through my research. Moreover, this decision did not make it possible to explore the relationship between the informants and their writings, because 'research is embedded in institutional contexts which shape and limit research agendas' (Lee 1993, p.20).

In her analysis of letters, written by women survivors of child sexual abuse, Woodward (2000, 1998) also decided that it was best not to ask the consent of these informants. In their discussion about 'informed consent' in relation to research with children and teenagers in educational settings, David *et al* concluded:

We are left with difficult questions about whether consent should, or can, be 'informed' or 'educated'.

(David *et al* 2001, p.364).

I have never contacted any of the informants, who have written their mobile phone number. It would have been particularly unethical to contact those girls who have written their contact number primarily requesting for lesbian/bisexual sex. Phoning the informants would have necessitated the permission of the College's directors, and consequently these girls would be identified as having broken the College's rules and presumably be punished for this. I have therefore not told the directors of the institution about these phone numbers. Access to the public domain of the female lavatories is not restricted to them. The ethical guidelines employed by the University of Sheffield state that:

Researchers have a responsibility to protect participants from any harm arising from research... people participating in research should not be exposed to risks that are greater than or additional to those they encounter in their normal lifestyles.

(University of Sheffield 2005, p.8).

In order to abide by this policy, and minimize harm as much as possible, I did not want to compromise the girls' position. Hypothetically, were the directors of the institution to grant me permission to ask the girls' consent to use and analyse their writings for my study, I assume that not all the graffitists would have answered. The ones, who would answer me, would have to indicate which writings they had written. To do this, I would be encouraging more graffiti and take up 'their' spaces unless they indicate by means of papers stuck to toilet doors. This would however create a mess. There is the possibility that some girls, who have never written any writings, give/deny me permission, without being asked for it, since they are not graffitists. Problems related with consent would therefore have still remained.

I was concerned that by not meeting the informants in person, I was perpetrating their own invisibility, secrecy and anonymity. I felt that I might be alienating myself from them. Woodward (2000) also shares these feelings, which resulted from not meeting her informants in person and from not talking to them. It was difficult for me to balance the informants' private/public boundaries. It was equally difficult to compromise my dual, contradictory roles: that to respect and encourage the girls' voices and that to respect the institution, of which I am a part. This situation caused me a sense of 'splitting' regarding my positionality (Haraway 1991b). My reflexive attempts at making myself visible, which reflect my desire for the visibility of

sexuality education, came into conflict with making myself invisible to the informants, thus reflecting the same secrecies surrounding the graffiti.

Although I have only identified one graffiti author and talked to her, issues of power differences between me, as a researcher and the informants, were still at play. The informants had control over whatever they had written. I assume that their writings were the result of their free will, as nobody urged them to write anything or dictated what to write. I also held the power of interpreting their words.

Ethical concerns also intervene with how the graffiti writings have been represented. I was concerned that by taking photos and presenting them in my study, I was in some way disturbing the girls' protected secrecy and intrude on their private selves, since they hold the ownership of their writings. I chose to include the graffiti photographs so that readers experience 'being there' (Creswell 1998, p.21), thus offering space for a journey into the personal views and reflections of teenagers. There is the possibility that some or all the graffitists would object to having photographs of their writings taken and to having their voices exposed outside their lavatories. I was aware of the possibility that some girls might feel angry and betrayed if they got to know about my interpretation of their writings in this study. I would feel sorry and disturbed by this and would want to emphasize that my intention in presenting their writings was definitely not to cause them distress but to place their voice in the foreground. In employing a deconstructive approach, my intention is to do justice to the girls, by voicing their concerns. Derrida (1992) holds that 'if such a thing as deconstruction exists, it is justice' (quoted in Stronach and MacLure, 1997, p.33). The girls' awareness of this study on the contrary might make them feel 'important'. Creating ethical parameters within subversive research is messy. Lee states that:

the sensitive character of a piece of research seemingly inheres less in the specific topic and more in the relationship between that topic and the social context... within which the research is conducted...

(Lee 1993, p.5).

Sexuality matters are frequently regarded as being outside the purveyance of schools. They are treated as private matters, which should not disturb the everyday life of schools. The erotic is hardly allowed in formal school curricula (Fine and McClelland

2006; Tolman 2002; Walkerdine 1990; Fine 1988). When sexuality issues are raised, images of deviant sexualities are often evoked. However:

... schools are places where sex talk, sexual behaviour, sexual relationships, sexual abuse and harassment, sexual identity, sexual divisions and sexual politics are threaded through the warp and waft of interactions between students, staff and students and staff.

(Kelly 1992, p.27).

For these reasons, ethical issues surrounding the research of sexual matters related to schooling are of great concern and necessitate responsibility in conducting research.

Deconstructing the Graffiti Texts

The graffiti are real in the sense that they exist and can be seen. Whether their contents correspond to reality however, is problematic. A discrepancy might exist between the informants' descriptive writings and the real persons; the world they described and the real world they inhabit. In grappling with the difficulties of deciphering what is hypothetical, imagined or real, I claim that there are no absolute, scientifically truthful statements, which I can make about the informants' presumed perceptions, feelings and experiences of romantic relationships. Part of the deconstruction of the graffiti texts is done through the asking of questions about the possible meanings and implications of the girls' writings. The study however, does not provide answers to all these questions and to all the informants' queries.

I partially endorse the postmodernist claim that there are no facts, but interpretations (Foucault 1972). I regard the distinction between fact and fiction as blurred. A postmodernist reading of the graffiti texts destabilizes and disrupts established meanings and notions of truth and rejects absolute answers. My handling of my ethnographic material has been influenced by the perspectives of Derrida (1976), who argued that meanings of words cannot be fixed in single texts since they refer to other texts and contexts; therefore creating a web of intertextuality in meaning. This generates a proliferation of interpretations and no single interpretation can be claimed to be the final one. Derrida's (1976) theory of *différance* contends that words only have meaning in relation to other words and that there is no absolute meaning of any word but rather meaning is always in flux and cannot be fixed in language. I have regarded the graffiti as being in process. I have adopted this approach, acknowledging

that: 'Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters' (Haraway 1991a, p.155).

The girls' writings only describe succinct snippets from their lives. The graffitists could have been susceptible to reactivity and only gave a partial view of their perceptions and experiences. It is therefore problematic to determine the extent of which the texts are representative of their authors. The separation between the writings and their writers reflects the separation between the public/private, between the unique world of feelings inside each female student and the outside life of the school crowds. Each piece of graffiti text is a fragmented part of a wider debate about sexuality and intimate relationships issues. This fragmentation reflects the postmodern eschewing of grand narratives. In adopting Derrida's (1982) concept of gaps or spacing to my understanding of the graffiti texts, I acknowledge the disruptions that this causes to a coherent analysis. I acknowledge that:

There can be no esoteric 'truth' of sex to be discovered by diligent research; only perspectives on contending 'truths' ...

(Weeks 1985, p.251).

The analysis moves away from the idea of having fixed and grounded contexts. This presents a challenge, which is also articulated by Derrida (1996), who argues that deconstruction is neither a method, nor a set of rules or tools and that it demands one to 'perform something new', in one's own language, one's singular situation and signature 'to invent the impossible and to break with the application ...' (pp.217-218).

A number of events could have led to the girls' writings. Language is dependent on something that came before it (Derrida 1976). The girls' voices are mediated by the family dynamics they experience daily, their school culture and by the politics administered in Maltese society. Such factors played an important role in the constitution of their texts. Although I do not know the real situation of the girls, I get the impression that some of them are suffering far beyond what they have written and that they are hiding more pain than they can describe. Some girls might be exaggerating and over-inflating their anxiety. Sexuality and romantic relationships issues might have been written on the toilet doors, before they were talked about outside the lavatories. Derrida (ibid.) claims that writing precedes speech (p.238).

Some written graffiti biographies issues might 'precede speech' (ibid.) and might never emerge outside the toilets but remain hidden inside the authors' psyche.

The Problem of Representation: The Missing Text

My analysis reflects moments when I could have 'fabricated' (Sikes 2005, p.88; MacLure 2003, pp.80-104). I have drawn on Derrida's method of deconstructive reading which 'attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight' (1976, p.163). This method reveals the inconsistent usage of conceptual distinctions in the text. It is possible that I might have derived meanings from the graffiti texts that were unintended by their authors. In participating in the 'enigmatic relationship' of 'an inside to an outside' (ibid., p.70), I might have made unrealistic assumptions:

the risk of failing to be clear- or to be 'serious', to communicate 'effectively'- haunts *all* acts of speaking or writing. In Derrida's (1982) words, meaning always has to pass through 'the detour of the sign'. There is *always* the possibility of the message going astray.

(MacLure 2003, p.117, emphasis in original)

Like the graffiti writers, I have taken this risk too. In the graffiti forum the messages do 'go astray' sometimes. Some feel misunderstood and clarify themselves: '*NO!!! who the hell told u guys that I got pregnant from another guy, the baby is of my bf! ...*' (26). Goodley *et al* (2004) acknowledge that 'the relationship between women and words has not always been an easy one' (p.103). Some of the graffiti authors themselves acknowledge that they are unsure of what they were thinking and feeling, when they wrote their problems. They state that they are confused and it is for this reason that they write their queries. They frequently resort to the graffiti to resolve their perplexities and not always to state their certainties and convictions. Consequently, my subjective interpretation of their uncertainties might be incomplete and flawed:

Our knowings, our understandings are often multifaceted, multidimensional and sometimes chaotic. And yet we are required to explain ourselves in one dimension; there is no room for the multitude of voices, thoughts and feelings that occur in the meaning-making in our bodies.

(Horsfall 2001, p.88)

In this study I often refer to the community of graffiti authors. This community however could be imaginary both to my mind and to that of the informants. This

'community' of unknown, invisible persons could be a constructed fantasy, which emerged as a result of the girls' need for attachment and/or belonging, in their eagerness to solve their problems or share their pain. Walkerdine *et al* point out that:

... when attempting to take account of unconscious processes that are set in motion by all kinds of anxieties and fantasies, any notion of what constitutes the 'real' is seriously challenged.

(Walkerdine *et al* 2001, p.85).

They further hold that the researcher's voice does not fill all the gaps in the construction and portrayal of the ethnographic picture (*ibid.*). Like Kehily (2004), I also 'wanted to believe in the power of the female friendship group to hold girls together, providing security and warmth in the less than cosy environment of the school classroom' (p.368). The writings keep the 'graffiti community' alive:

For narratives to flourish, there must be a community to hear; ... for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics.

(Plummer 1995, p.87)

Working within the broad poststructuralist notion that there is no truth to be discovered and that ethnographic accounts are fiction, generates mixed feelings in me. Whereas I feel 'safe' and 'free' to interpret the graffiti texts, as I understand them, I also find it difficult to dismiss the graffiti authors' preoccupations and anguish as being totally unfounded or imaginary. There are many uncertainties surrounding the meaning of these texts, but this does not totally eliminate the girls' credibility. I feel uneasy with the idea that the graffiti's intertextuality diminishes and avoids the possibility of truth. This contradictory nature of my understanding and analysis of the graffiti reflects the same contradictions present in these writings.

The overall appeal and insistence of the graffitists to derive help, support and understanding transmit an intuitive feeling that their writings are generally based more on facts than on fiction. Plummer (1995) suggests that 'stories gather people around them' (p.174), dialectically connecting people. I have also drawn on Stanley (1986), who refers to the building rather than the shedding of layers in search of understanding and interpretation. The representation of the graffiti texts merits to be taken seriously, because they constitute voices of female students who exist and who are real. As Stanley claims; 'representation may not be all, but it is certainly

something' (1993, p.51). MacLure (2003) suggests that rather than aspire for clarity, a more appropriate approach towards discourse-oriented and deconstructive writings 'would be to seek to engage readers - in the sense of catching them up in the movement of the text' (p.118). I regard the data analysis as providing insights about teenage girls' perceptions and feelings about sexualities and intimate relationships. Despite uncertainties revolving around a deconstructive approach, I still regard deconstruction as useful. Deconstruction 'ought to be a central concern of educational research and theory. After all, Derrida defines it as 'a critical culture, a kind of education' (Stronach and MacLure 1997, p.32).

Although I have assumed that the majority of graffiti address real-life problems and situations, in which their authors are immersed in their everyday lives, I acknowledge that the issue of representation in research and its relations with the search for the truth in complex social practices, has not been settled or resolved (Peim 2005, p.67). The understanding of what the graffitists intended involves a messy, incomplete and ongoing process. My intention of employing a deconstructive approach is aimed at being:

politically useful in helping to read new personal and political situations in terms of hybridity and shifting meaning, rather than in universalistic and totalizing expressions of essential identity and certain truth.

(Stronach and MacLure 1997, p.32).

The Graffiti Language

Graffiti constitute a particular literary style and artistic expression. Although graffiti in urban cities transmit a sense of fear and are considered contributors to vandalism and to an unsafe environment (Grant 1996), very few informants try to ban graffiti. One writer made the point: '*Imp! Pls do not write on doors when lots of ppl r waiting to use toilets Thanks!*' (27). She did not write on the doors herself, to comply with what she had written, but on the toilet paper holder. Some graffitists specifically encourage toilet graffiti.

The absolute majority of the writings are written in the first person and the word 'I' is prominent. Some writers sign with a pseudonym. The graffiti language is diverse and informal. Most of the graffitists write in the same way as they speak; in the 'language

of the everyday world' (Smith 1988, p.156), which 'is rooted in social relations' (ibid.). The informants frequently use abbreviations typical of text messaging language, which is used mostly when writing mobile phones messages or when chatting over the internet. They seem to want to save time and to take up less space. Most of the graffiti seem to be written in a hurry and words are usually pared down to essentials. Very few graffiti are illegible. Some girls correct the grammatical mistakes and spellings and seem to take on the role of teachers, even in this regard: '*We say: stupid idiot go and learn english*' (28). The word '*shying*' was encircled and corrected (29). Some writers make a literal translation from Maltese when writing in English: '*tell me to my face Loser*' (28), is one example. Some writings are accompanied by drawings, to illustrate their point. Heart shapes and kisses next to the name of their lover, are a common feature. Smilies are also used as a way to show that the writer is joking and as a sign of friendliness. They are associated with feelings of care, support and empathy. Arrows are used frequently to indicate which question they are answering or commenting about. The use of exclamation marks and capital letters is widely used; possibly as means of emphasis.

The questions and answers technique marks the perceived distinction between those who have a certain amount of knowledge about sexualities and romantic relationships, and those who have less. Those who ask for help, position themselves as needing more information, thus seeking mediation through more sexually experienced girls. The informants' perceptions and experiences and my interpretation of them are clouded and limited by the structure of language itself. The instability of language disrupts the meanings of texts (Derrida 1976). Words carry their contexts with them and the fullness, completeness and the presence ascribed to them is never fully realized (ibid.).

Toilet Talk

When the girls in the toilets are in a group and read the written situations, they usually burst out laughing. This is their most common reaction. They view the writings as a source of amusement. Although there are indeed humorous graffiti, this reaction might express their embarrassment. Nearly all the nineteen girls I talked to said that the graffitists are wasting time and energy on '*stupid*' issues and they are not to be

taken seriously. These reactions comply with the school policies, which prioritizes the academic learning of 'A' levels. Nearly half of the nineteen girls viewed the writings as containing exaggerated and unrealistic information, like for example when sexual experiences with multiple lovers are mentioned. Five informants indicated that they wanted to dissociate themselves from the graffiti. They transmitted this othering through their scepticism. They made it clear that they are not graffiti writers. Their perception of me as a teacher in an authoritative position could have invoked their apparent disapproval of the graffiti, to signal to me that they are not deviant or that they do not have problems similar to those described by the graffitiists. *All* the girls I talked to however have told me that they *always* read the graffiti. Their interest in them is obvious. The girls, who have not policed themselves and the graffiti authors demonstrate that some readers take the writings seriously, and believe that the problems mentioned are *'real'**. Their comments were:

*'I wish I could help some of those girls, but I don't know how.'**

*'I look forward to reading how the stories unfold.'**

*'I had a similar problem, which I read about in the toilet.'**

*'I am always eager to see what the new additions would be about.'**

*'I don't like it when lesbians and gays write about personal things.'**

*'I agree that boys are not worth worrying about.'**

Due to the limitations of this study, I have not delved into matters related to the graffiti contents with these students. The one time that a discussion ensued was with five girls. Three of them made the point that their male peers *'joke'** rather than *'talk seriously'** about romantic relationships. They expressed dissatisfaction at the inability of boys their age to *'communicate'**, *'open up'** and discuss sexuality. They emphasized that the main problem with boys was their inability to negotiate and bond on a basis of mutual trust and recognition. They stated that most of their male peers view talk as a mechanism for conveying *'silly'** information and avoid discussing feelings but tend to direct attention away from problems in relationships. These girls find more supportive communication in their female peers. The other two girls however disagreed and stated that they find it easier to talk with boys than with girls about *'intimate and personal matters'** and othered female *'friends'*, who were

described as jealous, manipulative and as *'bitches'*. These different perspectives reproduce and deconstruct a gender differences discourse. *All* the nineteen girls agreed that sexuality and relationships education should be introduced in their curriculum and that it should not be assessed through examinations.

The Silent Phenomenon. Why Graffiti?

The insistence on writing graffiti is evident. When spaces on toilet doors get full, suggestions to *'Start writing on d walls ...!'* (29), are made. The graffiti's appeal possibly stems from their relevance to the girls' lives. The graffiti are part of the College. Since they are considered deviant they are not part of the formal institution:

Teens and youth learn how to define themselves outside of the traditional sites of instruction, such as the home and the school... Learning in the postmodern age is located elsewhere – in popular spheres that shape their identities, through forms of knowledge and desires that appear absent from what is taught in schools.

(Giroux 1997a, p.49).

Although Plummer (1995) describes many examples of *'... situations where the most personal and private narratives have become the most public property'* the graffiti are shrouded by confinement. Their secrecy is typical of secretcies surrounding girls' sexuality (Lamb 2004) and might be related to cultural suppression:

Secrecy around girlhood sexual feelings may also derive from internalizing cultural anxieties about the media's *'oversexualizing'* of girls and objectification of women.

(*ibid.*, p.378).

There are differing views amongst the graffiti authors about the rationale for writing graffiti and this causes debate:

You are all so lame writing your problems on the door of a God damn toilet! In my opinion you should get a life. No one here cares about whats going on in your life! (30).

The word *'lame'* suggests impairment in mobility. This girl implies that it is useless to write on toilet doors and remain stuck with one's problems as solutions are not found through graffiti writing. Not everyone agrees that there are no *'caring'* readers and writers:

That's not true! If noone cares how come ppl answer bk & give advice? If you don't want to write don't but I don't disagree bcoz there r ppl who find it the only way 2 express themselves! GD LUCK EVERYONE! MWA (ibid.).

I agree 100% with u! If we didn't care for each other what type of world do we have?! Remember no one is alone, there's always someone who cares! (ibid.).

The doors are also however used for hate statements:

Shut up! Youre such an idiot. If it wasn't for these doors I wouldn't have written all d bitches I fuckin hate from dis school! (31).

Substituting talking to friends with writing on toilet doors is considered weird by some girls: *'Wtf is it wid dis school?! PPL: speak 2 ur God damn friendz dey help more then sum1 tryin 2 piss!'* (32).

These opposite attitudes regarding the purpose of writing graffiti reflect the contradictions of their contents, which sometimes occur within one text by a single author. For example, Graffiti 33 shows a mixture of emotions. In defence of a girl, who has been called names, the following reaction ensued: *'IT'S NOT TRUE SHE'S A SWEET PERSON so go and fuck yourself YOU WHORE From the depths of gzira 10Q ☺*'* (33; Gzira is a Maltese village renowned for prostitution). Politeness and friendliness through a smiley are implied amidst insulting words. The different ways that the graffiti texts are comprehended by the girls and the different reactions they instil reflect what Britzman has called 'reading practices':

Reading practices...are socially performative. And part of the performance might well be the production of normalcy - itself a hegemonic sociality - if techniques of reading begin from a standpoint of refusing the unassimilability of difference and the otherness of the reader.

(Britzman 1998, p.84).

Drawing on Butler's perceptions of performativity, I understand the act of graffiti writing as a 'ritual'. Performativity is inextricably linked with institutional practices, which is reinforced through repeated performances:

performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration

(Butler 1999, p.xv).

The following related motives for writing graffiti are now outlined. They are placed according to the most frequent contributions made by the informants.

1. Unlearning Silence: The search for understanding and knowledge

Women have historically employed a discourse of silence. Cixous (1983) holds that 'woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement' (p.279). By putting themselves into the graffiti texts, the girls express their need to become authors of their lives. For centuries the authors of society were male. The graffiti function as a vehicle for self-expression, which reveal both individual and social identity. They could also be regarded as representations of females' 'historic hegemony over talk' (McRobbie 2000, p.135). The analysis and production of lives (Stanley 1993) is undertaken by the informants as they write about and represent their social world.

The main emphasis of a considerable number of the girls' writings is on how to obtain practical information about themselves and their intimate relationships with friends and lovers. 'People talk a lot about relationships' (Fletcher 2002, p.27) and talk about personal relationships dominates conversations (Dunbar and Duncan 1997). Human beings have a natural urge to grow (Maslow 1968) and the informants seem to be drawn to the graffiti texts in search of knowledge needed to further their development. They make various attempts to articulate their desires, problems, doubts and confessions. Foucault (1978) stated that 'western man (sic.) has become a confessing animal' (p.59) and that:

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface ...
(ibid. p.60).

The incitement to share sexuality problems can be seen as constitutive of a sexualized subjectivity or 'technology' (Foucault 1988), which brings into being a discursively produced self that can be situated within fields of social regulation. Foucault (ibid.) viewed the self as a project, which individuals seek to establish through self-knowledge. This involves the internalisation of norms governing appropriate behaviour.

Most of the girls strive to have a clearer sense of self. The graffiti space is a medium of self-learning. The informants teach themselves and each other and in a way the lavatories are transformed into a 'classroom'. The pedagogical spaces they construct expose and challenge their self-knowledge and serve as means of acquiring new forms of awareness. People, who talk through their problems and embark on self-inquiry, increase their self-awareness (Babad *et al* 1983). Some graffitiists seek to unlearn silence because their parents/caregivers might not provide reliable knowledge or provide little or none at all.

The graffiti readers and writers learn the likes, dislikes, preferences and cultures of their schoolmates. Their narratives provide points of convergence between the different ways the girls perceive youth sexual cultures. Some girls show that they engage critically in what they read. Their writings display experiential knowledge, which they bring to their reading of the texts. This feminine knowledge is also mingled with self-doubt and a sense of instability.

A considerable number of their questions end with the words, '*Please help*'. These pleas could be interpreted as signs of powerlessness, dependency and subordination or else as signs of empowerment. My interpretation is that they signal both dependency and empowerment. The girls' request for knowledge often takes the form of advice seeking. Those who give advice become the 'surrogate teachers' and take some form of control. Some girls are referred to as councillors:

... we should start writing our numbers down girls, so that we get to know who the gr8 advisers & councillors are, then we'll cover our numbers in permanent markers, so the principle won't kick us out! wanna try? (34).

The power of the school's principal is resisted and defied. Advice is also given in the form of questions aimed at making readers think about different alternatives. One question often triggers a series of other questions and clustered answers, as this situation resonates within other readers and addresses their perplexities. New questions about romantic relationships and desires are therefore generated, creating a snowball effect. Sometimes, the advice replicates the same forces, which gave rise to the problems in the first place and solutions do not seem to be found. In some cases

conflicting advice is given and students disagree about what should be done. Whilst they 'triangulate' their answers, through the different methods they seek out information, some even end up calling each other names.

Generally, the girls do not write about whether they heeded the advice or not. Some questions might be introspectively directed towards themselves. The graffiti could be an initial step towards talking about their problems. Detailed accounts about how the advice effected the situations of the problems described are limited. The girls give little feedback about what happened to them after having received it. Some girls show their gratitude: '*Btw 10X 4 D advise! even if He aint the one ... it was a good try* (35).

Some graffiti advice employs a religious discourse: '*Jesus Christ is the only one who can make your life worth living*' (36). Suggestions for advice from adults, however is totally absent. This could either be interpreted as a sign of autonomy or else as distrust in grown ups. The graffitists might believe that their teachers, parents or other adults don't understand their questions and situations. The girls have never written: 'What should the curriculum do to help me or how could my parents help me?' The absence of adult mention might indicate that some girls may not feel the need for formal sexuality education at the College. Whilst I do not attempt to pathologize the girls, I point out that not one single advice or recommendation to visit the College's counsellors or to go to any other counselling agency, has ever been given through the graffiti channel. Although the therapeutic potential of the graffiti is recognised and the advice to '*talk to someone*' (37) is given, they never identify who this '*someone*' is. Teachers have been found to be the least persons to have credibility amongst youth, regarding sexuality matters (Measor *et al* 2000). Some parents feel uncomfortable talking with their children about sexuality (Milton 2001).

The graffiti advice generally does not answer the girls' questions in depth. Sometimes advice is not given at all or else it is not immediate. Some authors protest when they are ignored. A girl who initially received no replies about her problems with her ex-girlfriend asked: '*Does anyone give a fuck about how I feel?*' (38). Advice was given some days after this appeal (*ibid.*). Some informants request immediate advice, as the need for a decision would be pressing them: '*Urgent as I am to leave him today 20th March...*' (39).

I have seen some kind of resemblance between the problem pages of teenage magazines and the graffiti texts of my study. Studies by McRobbie (2000), Kehily (1999) and Currie (1999) have confirmed that female teenagers are fascinated by the problem pages of these magazines. McRobbie (2000) and Currie (1999) draw attention to the major appeal, which the advice pages have on girls. In some instances the girls found the problems more interesting than the advice given (Kehily 1999). From all the magazine pages, the problem columns define teenage femininity the most (McRobbie 2000). The advice columns substitute conventional therapy, whose access seems to be lacking to teenagers (ibid.). Advice columns take a distinctively feminine form because they not only emphasize women's personal unhappiness and suffering, but also encourage them to try to alleviate the unhappiness of other women (ibid.). In the case of the graffiti, the advice is generated by the teenagers themselves and not by an adult or 'professional expert'. The graffiti authors are creating their own 'magazine' with their own problem pages. They might have borrowed and transferred the problem page concept from popular teenage magazines, available in Malta (eg. *Just Seventeen*), onto the toilet doors to convey their problems in the context of Maltese culture. Writing their own problems to *Just Seventeen* would probably not occur to them due to the distance and different British cultural context. The toilet doors seem more convenient as problems are shared in a faster and cheaper way. Teenage magazines produced in Malta do not exist.

McRobbie (2000) and Winship (1987) claim that however appealing the problem pages are, they do not contribute to women's interest, because they reinforce the notion that women's painful experiences are more personal than social. Both argue that problem pages are anti-feminist since they demarcate boundaries between the private/public. The graffiti occur in a much more privatised environment than the problem pages of teenage magazines. The latter are printed in thousands; they are part of the mass media and circulated amongst a larger audience than the female students of the College. From this perspective, the graffitiists seem to be more marginalized than the teenagers who write their problems in agony columns of teenage magazines.

In one very disturbing writing, in which the author stated that she is being sexually abused by her father, the advice received was: *'Tell ur mum n read Cosmopolitan pg 107 maybe it'll help U better 2 speak up N don't suffer anymore as it may lead to serious psychological problems!! Good luck'* (40).

2. *The search for compassion*

The graffitists share their thoughts and feelings with those who are experiencing similar situations. Some graffiti reveal the isolation of some girls. Historically women have been isolated and kept away from public life:

Society does not offer adolescent girls a sense of belonging through a provision of a specific social 'place'. In the absence of positive definitions of adolescence, many girls feel that they exist in a state of limbo, 'between' childhood and adulthood, with few guidelines or clear boundaries. The absence of positive definitions and sense of social place can make it difficult for girls to find a voice to name their experiences of adolescence.

(Currie 1999, p.247).

From this perspective, the lavatories resemble this 'limbo', or ghetto, which seem to fill a 'discursive void' (ibid.). The graffiti allow writers to record greetings to each other, talk in silence and perhaps write what is unspeakable for them. The graffiti welcome, allow and stimulate interaction and active viewing without physical contact. They elicit response and this factor contributes to their popularity. The graffiti texts are layered and complex and the writers are not just the narrators who share their viewpoints but they also 'act within the scene' (Mitchell and Charmaz 1996, p.153). The female lavatories could be considered sites of social cooperation, connectedness and nurture, through which some of the girls' anxieties and self-doubt could be dispelled. A discourse of reciprocity acts as a support system and coping strategy for some and instils hope that better times could come. Most graffiti authors give encouragement and their advice transmits a positive outlook towards life. They are humane and their humanity comes through, even in a few short sentences. These same qualities, which are fostered through the graffiti, have historically also been associated with women. Through the graffiti forum, values associated with femininity such as caring, nurturing and empathy are instilled and assigned to readers. They share their discomforts, which being a girl causes them: *'Don't you just hate it when your period sneaks up on you out of the blue?'* (41). Reassurance about the normality

of their everyday situations is given: *'Oh yes, I really, really, do! It's so yak'* (ibid.). Relief is experienced: *'I'm glad I'm not the only one! Good luck!'* (42). The sense of solidarity provides a feeling of surprise for some: *'WOW How COOL LOTS OF BISEXAUL I thought I am alone in this world'* (43). After the Christmas holidays of 2005, one girl wrote:

Hello ppl!! Welcome bk to school. I'm having a gr8 day, my teachers suck, my timetable sucks & this is the worst week of my life! Aahh damn it feels good to get it all out. Thanks 4 listening 2ya all!! ☺
(44).

As they externalise their emotions, they describe that they feel consoled. Some of the other graffitiists' problems might be perceived as being worse than their own. Women have historically been associated with excelling in their ability to share feelings with each other, and empathise with one another in the distress of everyday life in patriarchal cultures. Women are centred on an 'ethics of care' (Gilligan 1982) towards each other and others.

The existence of this constructed female community suggests that the lavatories are a locus for emotional relief and for unburdening romantic problems. After the graffitiists lock the toilet door, they unlock their hearts. Within the boundaries of the toilets they seem to feel a sense of protection and refuge from the outside world of the school. The caring discourse emerges in nearly all those graffiti, which do not employ an aggressive tone. The graffiti facilitate an invisible and anonymous kind of socialization, through the construction of psychic spaces. The graffitiists scribble their intimate feelings and thoughts because they probably feel comfortable doing so. Finch (1984) argues that more women than men accept intrusions into their personal lives. The graffiti community might transmit a sense of feeling at home. The graffitiists however maintain the disjuncture of public/private and perpetuate the spatial fixation that has historically pinned women to silent spaces.

I have shared empathic feelings towards the girls. Being female might have provided the basis for this 'bonding', although 'issues of over-identifying with respondents could be a problem' (Woodward 2000, p.42). The capacity of female researchers to understand and empathise with the experiences of researched women is a central feature of feminist research practice (DeVault 1990; Oakley 1981). The assumption

that gender similarity provides a basis for identification and empathy has however been problematised and 'attention to the scope for confusion between self and other in the context of these exchanges' (Bondi 2003, p.64) has been drawn. The sense of empathy is diminished by power-laden differences, based on race, class, age, sexuality and dis/ablement, as these have the potential to disrupt any possibility of identification between the researcher and informants (England 1994).

3. *The Search for Gender Identity*

The graffitists explore who they are through anonymity and through writings addressed to 'Dear Anyone' (42). Anonymity reinforces secrecy. Self-disclosure involves a degree of vulnerability. The informants' articulations are subject to possible acceptance, critique, rejection or praise by others. Their preference for anonymity is a statement, which demonstrates their reluctance to identify themselves. Their hiding in the lavatories and the hiding of their names is a manifestation of the hidden curriculum they are creating. Their hiding also replicates the hiding and invisibility of sexuality education. Anonymity gives them a sense of freedom and safety but it also reflects their fear of publicly asserting who they are. Historically most women have felt afraid and inadequate in asserting themselves in patriarchal cultures. Only a small number of informants, who identified themselves as bisexual, have included either a name/surname or mobile phone number to be contacted for dates or for sexual encounters. Although the graffitists share the same gender, they do not constitute a homogeneous group but demonstrate that there are different ways of being human and of being female. Despite their anonymity, their written contributions reflect diverse gendered identities and 'the multiplicity of female expressions and preoccupations' (Kristeva, 1986, p.193). At a deeper level, the question about who the graffitists are, touches upon identity. The data demonstrates the dilemmas of some girls as they strive to understand their conflicting sexual desires and preferences:

*Does any1 know what one should do when your mind body & soul is divided into 2 1 part for ur bf and d other 4 a girl who makes ur mind body & soul turn upside down when you meet her!! ????? I'm fucked up * (45).*

Anyway it's me again!! Still in d same shit after a week! It's not shit actually It's fuckin brilliant she is! More fucked up!! (ibid.).

*HI I HAVE A BIG PROBLEM I WISH I HAVE A GF I HAVE A BF X MISERABLE * (ibid.).*

Help! I am bisexual! I have a bf and I'm very confused in my Life. I'm feeling sick but I love my bf (46).

The graffiti forum is sought to understand gender identity and how to make decisions about how to respond to feelings of sexual attraction. A sense of hopelessness and confusion often arise: *'There's nothing you can do'* (45)*. Kristeva (1986) suggests that each individual struggles over sexual identity. Not having sexual feelings for males, might clarify the situation for lesbians, but some informants agonize over how to confront the lovers involved, once the realization of an erotic preference for males and females is made. The sense of shock and disbelief is evident:

HELP WANTED HEY! I have a bf but I'm having feelings for 1 of my girl best friends! What the hell am I gonna do? I never thought that I was bi-sexual and shy 2 tell my girl-friend. Should I tell them or carry on with my misreble life! GOD HELP ME! (47).

The use of the dash in both words *'bi-sexual'* and *'girl-friend'* demarcate a split self. The prayer appealing to God's help further indicates the need for support. Another girl identifies with this feeling of confusion and mirrors her feelings: *'God damn! We are all miserable. very confused'* (ibid.). The term *'we'* promotes a sense of community. Another answer is more optimistic:

Hey! You're still young to know whether you're bi or not! So don't tell her, you get normal attraction, we sometime in life all feel so just relax and wait, for time will give you the best answer! gl! (ibid.).

Although this writer does not define what *'normal attraction'* is, she implies that being bisexual could be a temporary phase, which *'we'* all pass through sometime in life. She might also be suggesting that bisexuality could be a transitional stage, during which lesbians slowly start coming to terms with their feelings of attraction towards girls, whilst holding onto their boyfriend to reassure themselves that they are conforming with heteronormativity. Whilst starting to acknowledge aspects of their lesbian identity they might cling to heteronormative behaviour for safety. The internal struggle to understand whether their bisexual feelings are just temporary or whether they would persist still goes on however. Bisexuality offers a *'non-specificity'* (Jagose 1996, p.76), which implies outsider or outlaw status. It also avoids the *'exclusionist*

tendencies' of gay/lesbian discourse. Bisexuality as an identity term implies difference and deviance (ibid.). Some graffitiists seem more certain about the solidification of their bisexual identity:

I'm 17, and bisexual. It took me 6 months ... to realize be sure of my feelings ... then I talked about it ... Be sure and then talk about it ... it's also a good idea to talk about it with some1 who's bi ... it helps. There's noting wrong in being bi! If it's what u feel don't cover it, or hide it. But I'st be sure ... then iF they r realy your friends they will exept u 4 who u r! (48).

Although she does not specify with whom she has 'talked', she shows that support is of utmost importance in the process of becoming assertive. There are girls who might be using the graffiti subculture as an initial step to come out, gain confidence and seek assurance. In articulating their lesbian/bisexual identity they show courage in striving to break free from the stereotyped, discriminatory, heteronormative world. They claim their autonomy and freedom to experience their sexuality and act out their feelings, despite having to go against external forces. As they become stronger, they acquire more self-confidence, which they try to pass on:

It took me nearly 2yrs to accept myself for being lesbian. It's ok to be so. Just talk about it with a close friend... (49).

These writings suggest that the consolidation of the bisexual/lesbian identity takes time. The girls show that they are at different levels on their way towards self-acceptance. Some girls have reached the stage where they could state: '*16 F LES AND PROUD!! You can be jealous as much as you like! I have 2 choose*'* (50). This writing implies that she gets to choose her identity and her way of life and that this is her own choice and nobody else's. Through their narratives they explore and analyse identities in the context of past and present experiences:

... self-narration can be seen as an important activity in the process of identity construction and as a way of exploring how versions and reconstructions of the past shape and construct the present in that key area of identity construction, the interrelationship of past and present.
(Kehily 1995, p.31).

Within the walls of the toilet cubicles, gender becomes 'performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect that very subject it appears to express' (Butler 1991, p.24). Support towards lesbian/bisexual graffitiists also comes from girls who identify themselves as 'not bisexual':

'You're right. I'm not by but I respect them coz they're humans as well so don't be shy about it. See ya' (51). Such writings support girls to be comfortable with their gender identity.

There are girls, who whilst declaring that they are heterosexual, express their desire for broadening their gender boundaries. What they are and what they might become mingle together, therefore allowing for possibilities of discontinuity in their identity: 'Yes it's true! I've been 2 yrs with my bf and I still want an experience with a woman! And I love my bf more than I love myself!' (52). As the overall love for the boyfriend is emphasised, the need for experimentation and for widening knowledge is demonstrated. Postmodern feminism affirms that the development of a sense of self involves an ongoing process:

The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there, and original; it is also always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.

(Haraway 1991b, p.193).

The graffiti combat feelings of loneliness, associated with perceptions related to being a lesbian: 'So ... like is any1 in dis skull a lezi? coz I feel alone (53). Supportive answers to this appeal create a sense of solidarity: 'Yes I am lezi though I am I am FEMME AND SEXY...' (ibid.; Repetition of 'I am' in original) and; 'Hey I'm a bi too.. don't feel lonely!! Btw I'm also femme' (ibid.). The insistence on being femme and sexy, which manifests itself frequently in the graffiti biographies, is an affirmation of femininity. The word 'though' (ibid.) seems to imply that she does not want to be associated with the butch masculine identity. These lesbian writers draw boundaries not only between them and heterosexual girls but also between themselves by identifying themselves through the binary criteria of Butch/Femme: 'Cool 10x! Btw me Femm 2! CYA XXX' (54). They do not specify what distinguishes the femme from the butch personality, but seem to take it for granted that graffiti readers know the difference. Although none of the graffitists presented themselves as 'butch', they point to their need to reproduce and reinforce accepted norms related to lesbian dress codes and appearances. Their acceptance of these norms indicates that they are affected by dictates present in lesbian communities.

The seemingly fragmented sense of self of some girls makes them seek the approval of the other graffiti writers and readers. Haraway (1991a) argues that connection between women should be based on the concept of alliance, not on shared identity. In acknowledging and accepting their mixed feelings related to their sexual self, the graffitists fight self-alienation. Their journey into their private, inner self takes them towards taboo realms related to sexualities. As they reflexively ask why they are as they are, they dig out their inner knowledge. Melucci (1996) suggests that 'identity is in the process of being redefined as a pure self-reflexive capacity or self-awareness' (p.36). Self-identity is constituted by a reflexive ordering of self-narratives, which contributes to the achievement of relationships involving emotional equality and intimacy (Giddens 1992).

4. *The search for empowerment: Expressing resistance*

Some of the graffitists feel the need to make a statement that; '*I was here TRUE*' (55). They seem to say; 'I matter. Listen to me'. Some girls do not seem impressed by such comments when they answer back '*so what*'* (ibid.). A common remark about the graffiti authors, which arose during my toilet conversations with female students, was: '*Some girls are just looking for attention*'. These informants therefore implied that the writings are not to be taken seriously. Self-doubt emerges as one of the graffiti's main themes. Through their writings some girls explore possible ways out of their shyness, low self-esteem, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority complex. In seeking approval from their toilet mates, some girls empower themselves to speak out. The demonstration of their feelings and doubts on toilet doors could however further reinforce their shyness and inhibitions. The graffiti biographies could be perceived as an escape from reality, which occur in a context that fosters a sense of isolation, individualism and disembodiment from face to face dialogue. I conceptualise most of the girls' attempts at writing however, as offering them spaces to learn about how to reach self-acceptance and form successful attachments with persons they are sexually attracted to. I believe in their desire to learn more about romance and love and be empowered through this knowledge. Some messages specifically encourage autonomy and empowerment:

Ladies all I can tell you (which will get/help you out of any situation) is this: Look inside yourselves if you're unsure about something. And remember! You are no1, no 2, no 3- then, everything/one else, comes after (56).

This girl recognizes that the source of moral strength lies in the voice within. She reveals and articulates inner power. The wisdom mentioned seems to be hidden for some of the other girls. She encourages self-exploration and self-love. This form of reflexive awareness could be a counter-reaction to the demands of a globalised and sometimes indifferent world. Patriarchy is challenged by encouraging the 'ladies' to put their own needs ahead of those of others, including those of one's lover/s.

Although the graffiti are constructed within the hierarchical structure of the College, which in some ways creates relations of domination and subordination for the girls, the study shows that in their search for knowledge about the sexual, some informants construct channels through which they can creatively rework power. Inside the lavatories, the girls cannot be fully assessed or monitored. Power and control are established and confirmed by writing about lover/s, parents, classmates and friends, and by exposing them to judgment:

... the most political act perhaps in any woman's life – they make friends. When women talk to women anything can happen: all the emperors' nakedness can be revealed.

(Cain 1989, p.16).

The graffiti's empowering force also takes the form of resistance. I have drawn on the Foucauldian notion that within repressive discourses are the seeds of counter-discourses that can subvert dominant views (Foucault 1977). Although Barker (2000) states that; 'it is unclear what 'resistance' means in a postmodern, post-authentic world' (p.342), my understanding of resistance combines both passivity and agency. Whilst regarding resistance as a possible initial step towards empowerment, it is also 'an essentially defensive relationship to cultural power' (Bennett 1998, p.171).

Some of the graffitists could be unconsciously resisting the school hierarchy, which reflects the prevalence of male dominance in Maltese society. The fact that for centuries women have been subjugated by a patriarchal society, compels them to find coping ways. Psychoanalyst Miller (1976) argues that as a subordinate group, women resort to 'disguised and indirect ways of acting and reacting', which whilst serving to

'accommodate and please the dominant group, they often, in fact, contain hidden defiance' (p.10). I regard the graffiti as 'disguised and indirect ways' through which their authors are trying to assert themselves by employing these defiant mechanisms. The toilets could be regarded as segregated locations from which the graffiti authors consciously/unconsciously write to protest against their social positioning.

Willis *et al* (1990) believe that 'young people seem to turn deliberately to the informal and to resist administered symbols' (p.15). They hold that adolescents create their own symbolic language through their behaviour, not only to attract new friends and lovers and win peer acceptance, but also to challenge the hegemony of institutions (ibid.). I perceive the graffiti as constituting a symbolic language, which they employ to address issues, which need to be settled. Their interactive, provocative and intrusive writings might be an expression of their indirect resistance to the overloaded 'A' levels syllabi and competitive examinations:

School's freakin me out!! (57).

*You're kidding!!! It's driving me nuts I can really understand u!**
(ibid.).

Some graffitiists seem to have mixed feelings about their school and are at odds with their own motivations related to their goals. They know that they depend on the school, to pass their examinations and gain access to university but they might not feel happy at their institution.

The act of writing graffiti itself demonstrates that some students do not conform to the College rules, which ban graffiti. They undermine its authoritative hierarchies of power. The school's values embedded in its organization, policy and curriculum are resisted. The graffiti are unknown to the male students and male teachers. Through them the girls might be competing with the patriarchal institutionalized and authoritative discourses of the school. The prohibition to write graffiti heightens the excitement, risk and recognition that some writers seem to be seeking. They resist the status quo and challenge the power of the school's policymaking bodies, which prioritises the mental and academic achievements of students, over their emotional wellbeing. The graffitiists use the same method of silence, distance and marginalization, which the dominant culture is using. It is unknown whether or to

what extent the graffitists are conscious of their resistance to the school's official rules. Yet I do not consider the graffiti as being merely an expression of typical teenage rebellion.

I consider the use of rude words by the girls as another form of resistance. Some of the colloquialisms they write are considered rude by the official rules of the College and taboo in Maltese society. The Maltese words 'sperm' (liba), 'penis' (zobb), 'vagina' (oxx) and 'make love' (naħxi) are considered vulgar and insulting when used as accusing words. The constant use of such 'unacceptable' words justifies, confirms and fulfils the girls' need to be 'open' and free from restrictions. They might find the use of these words thrilling. Through their choice of language, they demystify cultural taboos around sexuality. The girls exploit the privacy of the toilets to use sexually explicit language, by asserting themselves and violate institutionalized norms imposed on them. The use of sexually explicit terms could be considered dirty talk. When men talk dirty and share dirty jokes, they attempt to master women through discourse (Easthope 1990, p.126). By talking dirty too, the informants could also be attempting to conquer boys and reframe their feminine culture by evoking liberation from rigid and formal aspects of their school culture. The graffiti produce the culture, which the school policy seeks to undermine. Discourses of prohibition and censorship aimed at restricting sexuality often produce the opposite effect (Foucault 1978). Young women use sexuality to disrupt educational establishment and patriarchal authority (Skeggs 1991). In their hidden/public defiance the girls act in conformity with traditional femininity, which often avoids open confrontation. This collective defiance could generate a sense of community.

5. *The pressure to be attractive*

Some girls occupy the graffiti territory to denote their frustrations about not looking good enough. They declare that their physical attractiveness impacts on choices of potential/actual dating partners. The slim, fit and sexy body is perceived as privileged and as attracting more popularity and power. Some girls assign credibility to claims such as looking good wins friends/lovers easily and being slim makes one more desirable:

...I don't think I'm good looking. Others tell me I am but I think they only tell me to make me feel better ☹ If it's true that I'm good looking than why does it seem that only ugly guys like me! Pfff... my freinds are always dating and all I ever got were 2 ugly dates! I was never happy with either relationship! Life sucks!! (58).

The pressure to be attractive produces overwhelming stress. The girls' subscription to the strictures of femininity, which demands their bodies to be objectified, contributes to low self-esteem and depression. They manifest their vulnerability against the power of the commercial media and social order, which determine beauty standards. They hardly ever question the social origin of their image related preoccupations but seek to construct a self, which conforms to traditional femininity. The awareness of living in a culture of image is only accentuated indirectly. The College Prom's official adverts (Graffiti 59) dictate what the girls should wear and how to style their hair. Instructions for the boys are not given. The graffiti arena serves as a beauty school, as advice on make-up, fashion, dieting and how to look good is asked for:

S.O.S Any Ideas how to lose weight pls? I've been struggling with it all my life and I can't lose my excess kilos! Pls Help!!! I'm sick of it now. I want to be slim & trendy HELP! (60).

The tension between what they are supposed to look like and their self-perception is more articulated by heterosexual girls. The pressure to be attractive is partially self-inflicted and its intensity varies according to the girls' self-esteem. Some girls report that they have reached self-acceptance and have given up the struggle to reduce their body weight: *'I've been trying for a long time also. Now I'm just happy with how I look, even though I'm not skinny'* (61).

These writings reflect the mandate, which for centuries western cultures have imposed on the definition of femininity; that of engaging more in the pursuit of physical beauty in opposition to intellectual development. Some girls seem to have internalised this gender script as their preoccupations with external appearance demonstrate. Obsession about their physical image could deflect their attention from the goals of self-actualisation and overall development. Feminism has raised the issue of appearance in the context of patriarchy, in which women are often and only valued for their appearance (eg. Bordo 1993). Not all girls succumb to the pressure to be attractive however, and some writings partially defy feminine norms:

*BURN UR BRAS NATUR*L RULES!!*

I agree! Natural=the best. An exception is when you're playing sports (62).

This idea was met with some resistance: *'when you become old you become like those women in the jungle with drooping boobs Yuuuk! Bleble'** (ibid., Includes drawing of drooping breasts.).

6. *Problematizing homophobia*

In problematising homophobia, some graffitists make its familiarity strange. They object to it as they identify and uphold values related to respect for diversity, autonomy and individuality. These writers reflect the principles of queer theory as they dissect homophobic graffiti and expose imbalances underlying the use of language in relation to sexual identities:

Girl 2 girl love is not an alternative for anyone! it is the way some people love. it is as good as girl 2 boy love, not an Alternative! its not for u! sucker (63).

Being a lesbian is no sin, I am straight but I respect gays & lesbians as long as they don't try with me. It's a free world (64).

Both these writings demonstrate the need to maintain boundaries. The first excludes homophobic persons and the second emphasizes the need for keeping a certain distance away from persons the author is not sexually attracted to. Respect for diversity is perceived as being part of our *'free world'*.

Some girls challenge homophobic ideas by advocating the transformation of mentalities, which reject non-heterosexual students. These reactions reflect postmodern influences and challenge taken-for-granted notions about the sexual and love. Postmodernism legitimises popular culture and everyday experiences (Giroux 1997b, p.193). Bisexual/lesbian/heterosexual writers deconstruct the normative power and the universality of heterosexual desire. They contest the catholic church's teaching: *'I've heard the Pope saying that homosexuality is a great sin. But. girls. Do you agree with this?'* (65). They point out that heterosexuality is not compulsory for all girls and expose its weaknesses. Next to an advert about the College Prom,

written on the toilet ceramic tiles, a girl wrote: '*LESBIANS RULE*' (66). Schools not only serve as central sites for the reproduction and circulation of culture, but also for its transformation (Giroux 1994). Whilst some graffitists write in favour of this transformation, the acceptance of gender identities, other than the heterosexual one, causes anxiety for some heterosexual girls, who struggle to defend heterosexuality, and who associate being lesbian with sickness: '*Fuck the Biy they make me sick*'* (67). The homophobic comments are outnumbered by remarks, which support homo/bi sexuality, but they are present nonetheless. The response repeated the same accusation: '*U make me sick*' (ibid.). An answer to the question; '*Any good looking bisexuals in the school???*' (68) was; '*sooo incredibly disgusting what are you? Do you want sex that much?*'* (ibid.).

The statement '*We hate lesbians*' (69), labels lesbians as enemies, who are neither seen nor spoken to in person. The term 'we' suggests 'an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time' (Butler 1993, p.226). Yet 'it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts 'queer'' (ibid.). In her examination of the politics of homophobic 'hate speech', Butler (1997) argues for the need to find workable strategies, which reverse linguistic abuse by productively citing hate speech against itself and by promoting agency, assertiveness and identity through the hate word 'queer'. Butler (1993) argues that this term 'derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult' (p.226). Although the word 'queer' is never used by the graffitists, some struggle to dismantle homophobic comments. Graffiti 70 shows an example of an attempt at deconstructing the hegemony of the homosexuality 'grand narrative'. To demonstrate '*Gay PR!De*', a girl drew a rainbow and the sun, which are usually synonymous with peace, warmth, life and light. The sun has the form of a smiling face, which implies that it is sympathetic to gay people. Yet the words 'gay pride' are enclosed in a cloud, and still confined within boundaries. One reaction to this drawing was: '*You are great Cheers for tolerance and difference*' (71). Graffiti 72 invites lesbian/bisexual students to participate in an online chat room through a chat line called MIRC, which is popular amongst Maltese people. This girl has written this same 'advert' in *all* the female toilet doors of *all* the floors of the College. All these 'adverts' have a boundary outline and indicate the reserved, exclusive space of the

lesbian/bisexual community, which is slowly coming out of the lavatories into the internet but using the toilet community to do so.

In resisting heteronormativity some lesbian/bisexual graffitiists might have derived strength from the numerous narratives, which convey the vulnerability and pain heterosexuality causes many girls. The heterosexual discursive spaces on toilet doors reveal that being in love with boys provides much anguish and pain (chapter 6).

7. *Venting anger*

The sense of collaborative learning and solidarity prevalent amongst the graffitiists is shattered when they vent out their anger and call each other names. Typical adolescent tantrums are exposed through this written bashing. Compared with the number of graffiti messages, which give support and demonstrate empathy, the number of graffiti, which convey harassment, rivalry and cruelty is much less. Different ways of perceiving femininity, gender, sexualities and romantic relationship issues create a sense of otherness amongst some of the graffitiists. The dialogical nature involving the Other brings together the complexities surrounding the girls' lives.

The graffiti are a release of bottled up emotions. Anonymity makes it possible and safe for the girls to demonstrate their anger. The expression of their anger could be a cry for help or an expression of vulnerability and insecurity. It could also be a sign that they are asserting their rights and claiming respect. Their writings give them the power to insult those who have hurt their feelings. Some graffitiists may not know how to articulate their pain in positive ways and therefore resort to antagonistic vocabulary. In their study of young women, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) found that in handling attacks on one's character, all the energy was channelled into self-defence. There was no challenging of the discourses involved (p.116). Othering between women has been discussed through feminist perspectives (Beckwith 1999).

Girls often get the stereotypical message from society that they should avoid getting angry and being loud, to be more pleasing and accommodating, since being nice brings them praise and protection. Boys have been found to get more easily angered

than girls (Howard 2000). Girls are told to avoid conflict and confrontation. The graffiti might serve as means to counteract the expected suppression of anger. Yet anger is still let out in a hidden, safe, secretive and anonymous environment. The graffitiists express their anger and seek the sympathy and approval of the readers, as they indulge in insults. Some of their threatening words are a medium through which they attain some sense of solidarity. Some girls might be scared of face-to-face confrontation. They might feel awkward, shy, jealous or inferior towards other girls or else they lack the skills of constructive dialogue. The graffitiists allow themselves to be judged from an anonymous Other. Some girls bicker, argue, harass and vent out their frustration and ill feelings towards each other; even without knowing who the 'real' person is. In some cases, the attacks are addressed to specific girls they know:

Fuck Angelica! (73).

List of girls that suck... (74; Names have been cancelled by someone else).

'You are the girls who suck, because you are full of jealousy' (ibid.). This response alludes to a group or gang of students, who have written the accusations. One writing describes a particular girl as a 'Ninja without a chin' and as a 'huge sperm'* (75).*

Anger is not only expressed in the form of name-calling but also in the way answers are given: *'Well I don't know who the hell fucked you but you don't know what the fuck you are talking about' (76).* Such articulations attempt to close down spaces opened up for dialogue, by shutting up or distorting messages. Unkind and biting comments signal an uncaring environment and reflect ill feelings present in society. Verbal aggression might have been learnt during childhood and might reproduce some of the anguish some girls experience in their everyday life.

The words 'bitch', 'slut' and 'whore' appear frequently. They have sexual connotations and are used in negative ways to degrade and demean. They also carry with them a sense of powerlessness as aggressive words often do. The term 'bitch' is used to describe a variety of situations and behaviours. It usually refers to girls who flirt or take someone else's lover. Strong accusations are made against such girls:

FUCK Bitches WHO RUIN OTHER GIRLS' RELATIONSHIPS (77).

*I wish to all of you bitches ten times the pain YOU cause to others
HAPPY CHRISTMAS!! (78).*

The lover in the relationship is not blamed for the pain these girls are feeling, but the 'bitches' are. There are girls who seem proud to be 'bitches' and seem to instigate an argument: '*Hi Bitches... How u doin ?? BTW HAPPY NY!! Love Baby G. xxx mwa mwa*' (79; NY probably means 'New Year' as this was written at the start of 2006). The word 'we' indicates that a 'bitches' subculture might exist. Bitches seem to be here to stay and there is nothing one can do to change their nature: '*... if she's a bitch she can't help it, can't she?*' (80). This was written with reference to a lesbian 'bitch'. The knowledge that there are 'decent' girls, unlike the bitches, provides relief:

*THANK GOD THERE ARE STILL GIRLS WHO ARE DECENT
ENOUGH NOT TO FUCK AROUND WITH GUYS WHO ALREADY
HV A STORY WITH SOMEONE ELSE FUCK BITCHES!! (81).*

Another meaning ascribed to the word 'bitch' refers to 'so called friends' who deceitfully betray friendships:

*I hate all of those bitches who pretend to be your friends in order to
invent things about you, with which to turn all of your friends
against you! The amazing fact is that the so called 'friends' believe
these lies! Bleqq, what a sucking life (82).*

The announcement of this hate statement was followed by:

I simply agree!

ITS TRUE (written with white correcting fluid).

It's true. I wonder if friends exist. You can't trust anyone (ibid.).

The concept of the 'mean girl' has been represented in best-selling fiction books and has caused a phenomenon (Gonick 2004). The discourse, which emerged from it, 'signals a particular crisis of the social' (ibid. p.398). Representations of girls' frameworks, which portray their 'aggression and competition within their friendships, are premised on privatized solutions to social and political problems' (ibid.). Power relations in a group however, do not necessarily have to be marked by tension and competition. Heenan (1999) describes and discusses how empowering a group of

women, who meet to share their writings, are to each other. Here, power is lived out and shared *for* and not *against* each other. Whereas the word 'bitch' has been used to refer to teachers (Kehily 2002, pp.25-26), none of the graffitists ever describe their teachers as such.

8. *Othering Boys*

In some texts, masculinity functions as the Other. Some graffitists judge, scrutinise and assess boys. In being critical of masculinity, they seem to claim some form of female power. Yet their concealed judgements of masculinity could be considered an expression of powerlessness and dependence, since frustrations and past hurts about boys are reiterated behind their back. The main criticism against boys is that they cause emotional pain. Some informants reproduce a 'gender differences' discourse (Cameron 1996, quoted by Sunderland 2004, p.52) to explain that boys inevitably hurt girls. This discourse fuels fear of trusting boys and possibly estranges some girls from positive perceptions about romantic attachments with them:

Fuck Boys → all they do is break ur heart (83).

Do not give your heart to any guy Ever! Cause the least he would do is BREAK IT!! (84).

Yeah 4get guys they will only fuck you up & throw you away! Live life with your friends! xxx (85).

Hi I'm a foreigner the maltese are really ok, nice people, but I can't support the boys, they're horrible. am I wrong? Love you xxxxxx (86).

Throw rocks At them (ibid., Includes drawing of a girl throwing 'rocks').

The preference for remaining single because of perceived complexities related to gender differences in romantic and sexual relationships is put forward. Fear of being dominated by males consumes some informants, who repeatedly write that love rarely lasts. Most of the graffiti male bashing is directed towards all boys but some girls minimize generalizations:

*Yes there are a lot of stupid boys but there are sweet ones as well
Depends who you get to know Don't pay attention to the stupid guys
you'll meet Ok guys in time ☺ (ibid.).*

Boys are presented as an enigma: *'Wish I could understand boys!'* (87). As to the question: *'Why r guys so difficult 2 handle?'* (88), one given reason was *'because they are egoistic and immature!'* (ibid.). The *'list of girls that suck'* (74) has its matching *'BOYS THAT SUCK IN THE COLLEGE'* (89; College name digitally deleted by myself), which also includes names and surnames of boys. These boys' names have been cancelled by someone, who might have wanted to protect the reputation of boys they knew. In defence of these boys some girls asserted: *'No not true!'* (ibid.). This was however counteracted by comments like: *'He's shit! Don't go out with him because he's not worth it!'* (ibid.; Two rude words in Maltese were additionally used in the original). To my knowledge, graffiti which other boys written specifically by lesbian/bisexual girls, are absent.

9. *Killing Boredom*

I also conceive the graffiti as offering possible means of alienation from the routine of timetabled schooldays. The feeling of boredom is frequent in adolescence (Larson and Richards 1991) and a 'recurring theme in girls' accounts of what they do' (Currie 1999, pp.237-238). The informants' scribbling could be a form of entertainment and distraction.

The engagement of some of the graffitists with their writings could be a sign that they are momentarily neglecting their academic studies. Some graffiti comments and questions are based on topics, which for Maltese adolescents are considered sensational or controversial, such as abortion, threesome sex and HIV transmission. The choice of these topics could be aimed at creating interest and generating responses.

Some of the graffiti girls utilize sexualized themes as vehicles for humour. The lavatories are transformed into sites of enjoyment, since humour is used to ridicule or make fun of what is written. Some girls demonstrate that they are innocent, naïve and childish, as they try to minimise and discount the tension, which the serious, written

problems generate. They also employ humour as a technique for negotiating gender-sexual hierarchies within pupil cultures, as has been found in Kehily and Nayak's study (1997).

The graffiti texts are a form of romance reading. This form of reading has been associated with women and considered an escape from the domesticity of their everyday life and a form of nurturing compensation for housework (Radway 1992). Radway (ibid.) draws on Chodorow (1978) and suggests that romantic fantasy and romance reading regress women readers into a time where they were deeply nurtured by a primary figure. The graffiti might also provide fantasy elements, which place the girls at the centre of a lover's life and serve as a temporary escape from everyday preoccupations. They could also serve as a release from normative mechanisms of girls' social control.

Summary

Whilst affirming that in research 'representation is always in crisis' (Britzman 2000b, p.30) this chapter has explored some of the complexities related to the graffiti writings' presentation. Through poststructuralist, feminist, and queer theories, this chapter has asked, '*What benefits does telling one's intimacies have for the graffitists?*' and outlined nine possible motivations behind their writings. The data shows that being female means different things to different girls. Some informants are grappling with their gender identity and are trying to find out whether to relate as lesbian/heterosexual/bisexual and how to seek ways of feeling secure about their femininity. Yet even some of those who seem clear about their gender identity still strive to understand and make sense of who they are and what they want. In carving spaces for their subjectivities, some graffiti writers try to change the norms for how gender can be lived out by reframing the morality surrounding identity. Although some of these writings recognize multiple subjectivities, they also regulate the self. The graffitists' desire to make public remarks demonstrates their need to explore their femme/butch/lesbian/bisexual/heterosexual self and grow more in self-understanding. Some seem to regard the graffiti subculture as a significant site for identity construction. As the graffiti girls engage in dialogue with themselves, their inner

voice brings out joy, pain and anguish. They demonstrate that they regard themselves as persons who feel, think and reflect. Inside the toilets some might recover contact with themselves and confront some of their problems.

This chapter has focused on making the familiarity of the graffiti strange, by investigating possible reasons for the girls' articulations. The graffiti forum functions as a sort of solution to some girls who might feel isolated, bored, powerless, worried and lost:

'How can I lose my shyness and be happy with who I am?' (25).

The encircled boundary, which this girl drew around her writing, represents the bubble of shyness, she perceives to be engulfed in. In demonstrating their desire to bond and form significant attachments with themselves and with others, some girls resort to their writings to proclaim themselves. Their writings function as personal testimonies of their existence and by leaving their marks, the authors try to assert themselves and emphasize that they qualify for support, understanding, knowledge and recognition. Despite the counselling services available at the College, the girls' writings demonstrate that some girls are begging for help, advice and care and that they are yearning to develop a positive self-concept. The female lavatories might function as 'orphanages' for some.

The graffiti facilitate learning from the experiences of others and promote experiential knowledge. The girls form inclusive communities of learning. They replace the official patriarchal, dominant voices of the school with their own feminine culture by organising and surrounding themselves with elements of romance, love, sexuality, tips on physical beauty, cinema and music; therefore asserting their femininity. The graffiti also function as a forum within which the inner worlds of students come into confrontation with each other and with the dictates of the outer world. The graffiti serve as channels which direct anger towards other graffiti writers and readers and those who have hurt them. Attachments formed between some graffiti artists are described in negative terms. The graffiti are an expression of passive resistance. Some girls possibly resort to the graffiti community to escape oppressive homophobic discourses, which drown their voice in the wider culture outside the school, only to encounter the same reproduced discourses through 'other' graffiti artists. Reflexivity is however used to

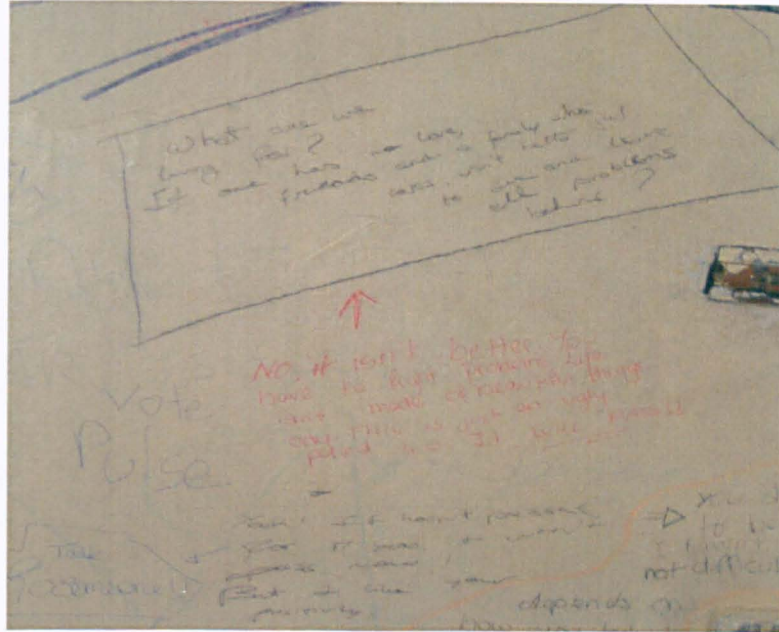
dismantle heteronormative concepts related to social norms, traditions and structures. Graffiti texts which resist, accommodate, reproduce, safeguard and deconstruct homophobia and heteronormativity can be described as constructing sites of 'conflicting forms of subjectivity, of political strategy waged mainly through language' (Humphries *et al* 2000, p.11).

The next chapter focuses on specific accounts, which constitute the graffiti discourse in terms of graffiti narratives about sexualities and romantic relationships.

CHAPTER SIX:

‘What are we living for?’:

Findings and Analysis – Part 2



Chapter six deals with the following:

- Introduction
- The Concept of Love
- Knowing Who's the Right One
- Waiting to be asked out
- Unavailable Lovers
- The Parents/Caregivers
- Juggling Friends and Lovers
- Erotic Pleasure: Masturbation and Pornography
- More Sex Talk
- Love Triangles
- Commitment
- Contraception, Pregnancy and Abortion
- Ending Relationships
- Summary

Introduction

What are we living for? If one has no love, friends and a family who love, isn't better just to die and leave all problems behind? (90).

One of the graffitists asked whether a life without love is worth living. The 'discussion', which followed, concerned the meaning and purpose of life. This chapter deals with the girls' conceptualisations of love and how these are reflected in descriptions of their positionings in romantic relationships and sexual encounters. Specifically, it consists of a thematic and textual analysis of selected graffiti texts. The most pertinent themes are related to the girls' search for love and deal with the ways in which they construct understandings of their sexual selves amidst their described problems surrounding their relationships. The data incorporates discussions about the relationship of the sexual with the informants' perceptions of pleasure, friendship, parents/caregivers, love, care, intimacy, identity, birth control and abortion. I have categorized the data according to twelve dominant themes, which reflect repeated, salient concerns. Despite this grouping, I have regarded each piece of writing as unique. Some writings could envelop more than one theme. The categorizations therefore should not be considered as rigid classifications of data but as indicators of main themes.

In constructing a place for my voice within the girls' own analysis of each other's stories, I was aware of the danger of 'peppering' my writing with the 'fumbling' words of the informants, thus attempting to speak for them and othering them (Goodley *et al* 2004, p.167). I do not attempt to own the girls' voices but to make them more visible. In representing the graffiti stories, I acknowledge that:

I am telling *my* versions of stories which I have created as a result of *my own* interactions and intuitions, remembering Richardson's warning that ... 'desires to speak 'for' others are suspect'.

(Clough 2002, p.9, emphasis in original).

This chapter allows the girls' words to speak for themselves. They are presented in the form of descriptive data. My findings are suggestive and my analytical approach is explorative, since '... all texts metaphorically speak with many voices' (Manning and Cullum-Swan 1994, p.469). Ambivalence and incongruity surface constantly as the

graffiti authors frequently express their dissonance as well as their agreement with each other's views.

This chapter explores the discursive spaces, enacted and created by the informants. Since the girls' thinking is partially visible through their writings, the discourses operating within their perspectives can be inspected, reviewed and discussed. Discourse analysis does more than analyze formal features of language. It attempts to link discourse with power by showing how specific forms of language lead to particular political and ideological interests (Parker 1997). This study examines 'the content and organization of discourse and what it is used to *do*' (Gill 1995, p.167, emphasis in original), according to the informants' fragmentary accounts. The study regards the graffiti as a form of discourse in itself, which could be considered part of the postmodern 'discursive explosion' about sexuality (Foucault 1978). The theoretical approaches outlined in chapter 4 provided a starting point for my analysis. Feminists employ discourse analysis to 'explore a range of questions concerning the reproduction of gender power relations' (Gill 1995, p.167). The informants demonstrate different attachment systems. I might have sifted the analysis through the lens of some form of psychoanalytical discourse. In outlining the following twelve graffiti themes, I confirm that:

Often, during a research project, different concerns may mean that there is no logical link between a given epistemology and a different resultant approach to analysis.

(Goodley *et al* 2004, p.113).

1. The concept of love

Some graffiti writings demonstrate the search for the understanding and implications of love. Some girls grapple with defining its concept:

Love is but an illusion of grandeur that none own, and none receive
(91).

Love is like the wind, You can't see it, But you can feel it (92).

The split between the girls' private sense of ideal love and their actual experience of it is described. This gap and the perceived ephemeral quality of love could be a source

of existential distress for them: *'I wish love was something easy to get and difficult to loose' (91).*

The distinction between what love 'should be' and what it 'is'; between how it appears to be and how it really feels could be described in terms of Derrida's concept of spacing or 'différance' (1976). 'Spacing' makes the articulation of desires possible: 'Without the possibility of différance, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space' (p.143). Some girls insist that love has to do with feelings rather than with cognitive thinking: *'LOVE is something from the heart & not from the mind'* (93). The mind/heart split could also be considered as 'différance' (ibid.) and as an expression of the split self (Haraway 1991b). Love is described as transcending gender: *'I like girls but I don't think I'm gay I just want 2 feel loved wish I knew some1 who feels d same way Phone: ~~XXXX~~'* (94; Phone number cancelled by someone.). In the graffiti forum, the meaning of love is generally shadowed by obscurity and confusion: *'Dear Anyone Sometimes i feel i'm in love and sometimes i'm in doubt! But deep inside i really love him Help Love Doubt ☹'* (95). Reassurance was given: *'Don't worry you'll get over it in time it feels you're not feeling secure enough try to imagine life without him.... For more advice text me I'll be willing to help ~~XXXXXX~~'* (ibid., Phone number digitally cancelled by myself). Uncertainties about what love means and entails are reflected in decision-making processes:

So I was going out with a guy and after we got to know each other we had doubts about whether I'm pregnant (I still don't know) we were talking about what we would do in this case and 2 days after he sent me a text message and told me that we'd better remain just friends for now because he doesn't want to commit himself just now and once he had told me that he loves me and I believed him and when I mentioned this he told me "I know but I don't know what love is". I started quarreling with him and he came over to my house. After some time that he had left he sent me a message and he wrote "I love you and you?" And from that day onwards two days ago, he continued phoning me to ask me whether I want to resume going out with him... What am I supposed to do?? (btw I really want him but I don't want to give in to him) (96).*

Confusion arising from doubts about pregnancy, the meaning of love and commitment construct the description of this relationship as fluid, instable, temporary and in

process. The main question does not regard issues surrounding the possibility of pregnancy, but is concerned with whether the relationship should be continued or not. The girl would like to claim ownership of the relationship but first she seems to want to understand and know whether this boy 'loves' her or not. The boy's doubts about his previous declaration that he 'loves' her could have resulted from his fear related to the possibility of pregnancy. By keeping the boy hooked onto her and telling him off simultaneously, this girl is possibly exerting the need to feel powerful in this heterosexual relationship. This could also be a way of paying him back for having broken the relationship in the first place. Games of pseudo-intimacy (Page 2003, p.120) might be operating, as a way to meddle with indecision. One piece of advice stated that she should not risk the possibility of losing 'Mr. Right':

I think u should make up with him (be a couple again) he was probably terrified of you being pregnant that's all. If he does really love u you should give him another chance use protection while making love. I think you should be his gf again coz he might be Mr RIGHT & could be walking away from him (ibid.).

The advice to give the relationship 'another chance' is repeated many times and encourages the girls to be patient and understanding of the limitations and uncertainties of their lover. It also conveys the message that they should accept some sort of quarrelling in relationships. Some graffitiists expect that day to day interactions in romantic relationships involve disagreements. They try to find ways of how to rationalise 'love' and come to terms with differences by justifying having arguments:

Being in love does not mean u agree on everything. fighting is good, it shows comunication. But excessive fightin is bad. Knowing that u r both write is a good start. Maybe u should find a new way to talk about things and/or find compromises. It also depends on how long u have been with him. maybe u still have to get used to each other. look at old ppl coupls, they fight a lot, But there love is strong. And they r happy! GL mwa (97).

The concepts of having 'strong love' and of 'fighting' at the same time are reconciled and are not seen as contradictory but as complementary to each other. This encourages the girls to tolerate moderate fighting by normalising it. This type of permissible fighting is not defined and the distinctive characteristics between it and 'excessive' fighting are not stated.

2. Knowing who's the right one

Even though adolescence is generally not the time to determine the choice of a long-term partner, some of the graffitiists ask about strategies needed to learn the qualities of the 'right one'. Relationships that turn romantic are possible lifelong relationships and are formed because of the need for attachment (Hazan and Shaver 1987). Firestone and Catlett (1999) hold that; 'the personal qualities of one's partner determine the course of one's life in many unforeseen ways (p.79).

How do you know that he's the right1? (98).

He has to respect your opinions and love you for who you are not for what you are' (ibid.; The word 'opinions' was probably intended instead of 'onions').

This answer implies that 'the right1' must regard people as persons and not as objects and respect the lover's individuality, boundaries, priorities and goals. The 'right one' is a popular character in the graffiti debates amongst heterosexual informants, who often describe their burning desire of meeting him one day. In her interviews with teenagers, Thompson (1984) found that the process involving the search for a custom-made partner 'may as well be ascribed to magic' (p.355).

For some informants, physical appearance and chemistry are an issue in choosing whom to date:

I always look @ the appearance of a guy first but I'm a real perfectionist so it's really difficult for me to go out with guys that are not good looking enough for me, my friends say I should loosen a bit and give them a try even though they're not so good looking! What should I do!! HELP!! (99).

In this situation, concerns with the body image seem to override other characteristics, such as personality traits. Boyfriends' suitability for dating is measured by how good they look. This writer subjects males to cultural norms that females are often subjected to, as the physical attributes of prospective boyfriends are assessed and graded. The graffitiists do not specify many other characteristics of the ideal romantic partner. Mental, emotional, social and spiritual compatibility are not mentioned and neither traits such as honesty and integrity. They do not claim that the partner should

not manifest controlling, manipulative and threatening behaviour. One informant gave the advice to '*...GET A MATURE ONE FIRST NOT THESE BOYS WHO JUST WANT U 4 THEIR OWN PLEASURE!*' (100), yet does not specify what 'mature' implies. Perceived problems related to the age of potential/present lovers do however cause concern and create doubts about whether the lover is suitable or not:

I'm 18 & I'm with a guy who's younger than me. This bothers me sometimes coz he can be a bit immature. But aside from that im very happy with him. But this thing keeps coming up & it buggs me. I haven't told him anything coz I dnt wnt 2 offend him. Wat should I do? HELP!! (101).

The stereotyped notion that boys should be older than girls in a relationship prevails amongst some informants. Choosing to reveal personal information to the graffiti readers and not to one's lover occurs frequently in toilet talk. Confronting her lover with her honest feelings of inadequacy is considered an 'offence'. This attitude goes against the belief that 'talking things over' is vitally important to achieving and maintaining a 'good' relationship (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, pp.90–92). Some advice encouraged this girl to remain in the relationship as '*even 18 yr olds are immature!!*' (ibid.). Another suggested that she could start '*liking*' his immaturity (ibid.). One girl however, asked how she could be happy with an immature guy (ibid.). An eight-year difference between two lesbians also created doubts as to whether this would be detrimental to their romantic attachment:

OK ... Bisex .. and lesbs ... Pls help ... Me 17 ... her 25 ... Will it work? Me no experience at all ... her plenty... Will it work? HELP! (102).

*OF COURSE I am 17 she is 26!! You gain experience fast. I really like doing sex. It is so cool!! I am Femme she too** (103).

Stereotypes related to age difference between lovers are disrupted. The girls encourage agency in trying out new experiences and dispel insecurities, which stem from the deviation of social norms. They suggest that a sense of wellbeing in relationships does not depend on age or experience but on accepting each other. In my understanding of the phrase '*I am Femme she too*' (ibid.), the implication seems to be that one's outlook on life is far more important to consider than one's age.

3. Waiting to be asked out

One of the main dominant themes of the feminine cult dating to the pre-feminist period was the importance of having a man (Ferguson 1983). Some informants show that the same preoccupation still exists. Despite social changes towards women's self-determination, emancipation and autonomy; 'these new values are overshadowed by the ever-present goal of getting and keeping a man' (Currie 1999, p.25). For some girls, the state of being single is presented as an urgent problem: '*help! I want a boyfriend!!!*' (104). Six mobile phone numbers '*of guys*' (ibid.; Digitally cancelled by myself.) were provided. Watching other teenagers date might cause discontentment with being single and this might impact on self-esteem. Weiss (1989) argues that adolescents need romantic relationships to gain the sense of confidence and self-worth that enables them to use their creative talents to the fullest. Some adolescents experience loneliness when they have a missing attachment figure (ibid.). Single teenagers might consider themselves failures and incomplete for not being in a romantic relationship. This kind of dependency is however counteracted by other informants, who describe that they are happy to be single:

You don't need boys to be happy!!! I'm like you but i still enjoy life. When a guy who's worth it comes along I'll go out with him but in the meantime I have fun with my friends! And I won't settle for a guy who's 2nd best! And btw be confident. Anyone who takes care of himself can be beautiful (105).

This girl's articulation of her caring self transmits a sense of assurance and self-confidence. Although she addressed females, she still used the word 'himself' instead of 'herself'. Her incisive comment emphasized the freedom, which being single offers. She seems to know the qualities of guys 'who are worth it'. She implies that she is against an unhealthy dependency on a lover/lovers and counts on her friends to enjoy the single life. She does not rely on any lover for affirmation. Through her sense of autonomy and separate self she seems certain that those who are capable of looking after themselves can become 'beautiful'. The potential to be beautiful is regarded as inherent but needs to be worked at and 'performed' (Butler 1999).

Informants, who describe themselves as lesbian/bisexual, demonstrate their yearning for a lover, specifically by stating so and by writing their telephone number to be

contacted. The question: 'Any good looking bisexuals in the school???' (68), was understood as an invitation to meet up, as the response was: 'Ye always willin to try new things hehe if ur interested my number is ~~xxxx~~' (106). Other replies requested sexual encounters: 'ME TOO CALL ~~XXXX~~ I can provide toys too' (ibid.) and '~~xxxxx~~ call me or text me Love xxx' (ibid.; Phone numbers and names digitally cancelled by myself.). These girls use the graffiti forum to weave new networks between them, possibly to break their isolation. They describe their need for connection and some are direct and open about their requests for sex. I have not come across informants, who describe themselves as heterosexuals, who have written their phone number to request access to male partners through the graffiti readers. This is possibly because they have more networks than lesbian/bisexual girls to find dating partners. I have not seen any graffiti, which describe other details of the dynamics of lesbian/bisexual informants regarding pre-dating experiences. The informants do not generally state other reasons for their desire to enter into romantic relationships.

Some informants describe a sense of confusion regarding their sexual feelings. Some deny their attraction, by not responding to it, because of their fears. Yet they still use the graffiti forum to learn how to handle mixed emotions with respect to a lover/lovers. The graffitists are also consulted to facilitate understanding over what action should be taken when the realization is made that another teenager is attracted to them in a special way and these same feelings are mutual:

I like a guy and he knows that. He always flirts with me. Actually he is playing the 'hard to get'. Pls I need an advice cause he's driving me crazy. HELP!! (107).

play it hard to get as well! a guy likes to know that someone likes him (as much as we like the feeling) so he's reacting that way (by flirting). Return his flirts by flirts – you'll see results what do you think ladies? good luck (ibid.).

Difficulties in handling sexual attraction towards other teenagers are shared. Amidst their intense desire to connect, some girls are cautious not to act in such a way as to make a bad impression on those they are attracted to. Some graffitists mention that the person, who might be showing them attraction, might equally feel perplexed:

I like this guy and he also shows interest in me but I think he is shy to ask me out. His buddies make a lot remarks when I pass in front of them. Does he really fancy me? Or am I losing my time? HELP! (108).

Having feelings for a guy, who does not reciprocate the same feelings, is considered waste of time. One of the answers assured her that: '*He fancies you, try to be his friend first*' (ibid.). Another girl understood the buddies' remarks to mean criticism: '*Do what u think is best. Ignore what the friends say! Remember! Follow your mind and not your heart!**' (ibid.). The buddies' remarks could have emphasised their friend's attraction for the girl and not criticism. The advice imploring her not to allow emotions to take over challenges patriarchal discourse, which attributes reason to males and emotions to females.

The difficulties in confronting the person they are attracted to and discuss their feelings with, replicates the silences they are surrounded with. Initiating a conversation with teenagers they have feelings for, is an emotional ordeal, which for some creates tension and frustration. The one-sidedness in getting attracted to another person creates uncertainty and feelings of inadequacy, which they try to resolve: '*I like this guy and I really need to know whether he likes me how can I find out without showing him that I like him and want to go out with him???? HELP!!!! Pls*'(109). Advice concerning these situations encourages the girls to be calm and let things take their own course. None of the advice suggests direct dialogue with the person they are attracted to. Until 'lesbians' are sure of their gender identity the advice is: '*...don't tell the one you fancy that its her- not for now. Goodluck xxx*' (110).

Other girls turn to the graffiti to strategize plans of how to conquer the person they are attracted to. They conceptualize the initiation of romantic experiences as requiring playing games, which revolve around secrecy.

I want a guy to date me, without showing him I like him too much Any hints??? Pls help!!! (111).

I wish my best (guy) friend would STOP BEING SO SWEET AND CHARMING ... & ASK ME OUT ALREADY! (112).

These heterosexual girls assume a passive role and employ a stereotyped discourse of ladies in waiting, who expect to be asked out. They ask for hints about how to be

successful in winning a guy over, without making their attraction obvious and without taking direct initiative. Contradictory advice of letting go and holding on is received:

You know what? DO NOT CARE about boys! Just enjoy your life with friends and then he will come to you 1day! Believe me! Good Luck Girls!! (113).

Although this advises the girl not to care about boys, it encourages a passive role fuelled by the belief that 'he will come to you', thus further reinforcing the attitude to wait patiently and be dependent on the boys' moves and initiatives. Some girls however deliberate over whether they should ask a guy out and make the first step:

Hi girls! I've snogged this guy for 2 Saturdays in a row. I didn't know him b4. I think i'm falling 4 him & he seems very interested but he's very shy! Should I ask him out? Pls help 10Q! (114).

The 'guy' is described as needing support due to his shyness and does not fit the description of a macho. Consequently this girl contemplates whether she should take the initiative, perhaps to establish some form of consistency. This contrasts with graffiti scripts described earlier, which reveal passivity. Some form of sexual expression ('snogging') is described as occurring with persons, whom they did not consider as lovers in an established relationship. The graffiti not only serve as a way of defining, and contesting gender identities but provide a site for the discussion and contestation of gender roles in dating experiences. Some graffitists go against the socialization patterns of their parents' generation in Maltese society, which restricted women from taking the initiative in dating and from initiating sex.

4. Unavailable lovers

Some informants set themselves up to get hurt by attaching themselves emotionally and/or sexually to 'lovers', who do not fully reciprocate their feelings:

I have a problem because all the guys I get attracted to are already in a steady relationship and I don't want to hurt anyone but I'm really desperate (115).*

You're not alone dear, console yourself (ibid.).*

DW you will find the right one someday to! GL (ibid.).

Understanding feelings of attraction proves to be a daunting and enigmatic task for some:

I seem to fancy any Good-looking guy who's NOT single. And when he's single, I don't like him any more. Why is that?? (116).

You just want something you can't have (ibid.).

That's because you are jealous of seeing good-looking guys with other girls and not with you yourself. That's why you don't like them when they are single, because you never liked them in the 1st place you just think they are cute. It's all jealousy. Find your own guy (ibid.).

You may like going after things that are impossible to reach. That is you may like the challenge these guys have of you trying to look and be better than the girl friend they currently hold Once they are single you have no challenge (117).

Avoidance of close intimate relationships could arise from the fear of getting hurt. Firestone and Catlett (1999) proposed that adult problems in intimacy arise from disturbances in forming attachments due to internalized self-representations. The quest for unavailable lovers produces a sense of confusion:

Every guy I seem to like doesn't like me while the one's I don't like me?! I'm not ugly so I don't know what d reason is! (118).

Equating physical beauty with an advantageous position of being liked more by guys conforms with stereotypes related to women's appearances. Some girls however contest this notion and imply that there is more to just looking good and that beauty is not only skin deep:

I don't know maybe it could be because u don't have a nice character dear just not being ugly isn't everything (ibid.).*

Traditional strictures of femininity are deconstructed. This answer was perceived as somewhat unfriendly: 'By d looks of it u don't seem really nice actually LOL' (ibid.).

Whilst possible reasons and accusations are expressed with reference to mixed feelings of attraction for unavailable partners, practical solutions are not given. For some informants the possibility of having romantic attachments seems elusive to them, despite their strong need to experience them. Difficulties in initiating romantic

relationships could arise from a negative self-image, conflicting or unrealistic expectations, fear of intimacy, fear of rejection, fear of losing control, aggressiveness, self-centeredness, selfishness, lack of empathy and depression. Graffiti accounts by lesbian/bisexual informants about attachments with unavailable lovers are very few.

5. The Parents/Caregivers

A human being's first intimate relationship very often occurs with parents/caregivers. People often learn how to be in relationships in the family of origin. Although the graffitiists' main concerns focus on their lovers/potential lovers and not on their parents, some informants show their preoccupations with parental interferences in their dating experiences. Some informants seek ways of how to deal with their parents' control over them. As children move through the adolescent years, the attachment to parents usually becomes less central and the confirmation of identity shifts to peers and sexual relationships, as adolescents relinquish their parents as their primary attachment figure (Weiss 1989). During early adolescence, the amount of time that North American teenagers spend with their family drops roughly in half (Weston 1996, p.547). Adolescents search for a romantic partner to form an attachment with instead of their parents (Weiss 1989).

Some graffiti, referred to in this section, might have been written by bisexual/lesbian informants. Yet I have never encountered any graffiti, addressed specifically by lesbian/bisexual students about their parents. If these students have not come out fully, they might not have experienced clashes about dating with their parents yet.

Some informants describe that they are faced with the paradox of seeking autonomy and of separating from their parents and at the same time they are connected to them and feel constrained by them. They try to get the grips of such complicated and conflicting situations:

I'm depressed. And it's because of my mother. She's bitchy, she doesn't understand me and all she cares for are men and friends. And I'm left babysitting my brother. I mean I know it's stupid to be sad because of her but I live with her and see her constantly. She's ruining my life, what should I do ??? Pls. help (119).

The mother, seen as the Other, is described as being socially active at her daughter's cost and as causing her 'depression'. Depressed adolescents feel less social support, have lower self-esteem than their peers and are less intimate with both parents (Lasko *et al* 1996). Some informants describe the mother–daughter relationship as structurally hierarchical. This relationship is traditionally constructed within converging discourses of nurturing, protective femininity. Some informants disrupt these dominant constructions of motherhood: '*If u think I'm a bitch u should meet my mother*' (120). Some parents are described as controlling the choice of their daughters' lovers and hinder the formation of their possible relationships:

I love a guy whom, due to family problems I can't love. I really want him with all my heart and soul but if my mum got to know about us she would kill me for sure because even when she got to know that we'r friends she got hell on earth. SHit! Help me (121).

Some girls give power to their mother to condition and control their romantic attachments. This girl feels dependent on her mother, whose strong hold on her seems to be suffocating her. She sought help from readers, as she struggled to forge her way through self-independence. Advice to negotiate and talk with her mother was given. Another girl felt intimidated by the aunt of the guy she was attracted to, whom she described as hating her. She was indecisive about whether to go out with him or not, because of this situation. The advice received questioned the authority of adults and suggestions to defy it were given: '*u shouldn't care about what other ppl think if u really like him just go out with him and screw the aunt!*' (122). Some parents are described as regulators of their daughters' sexual behaviour:

HELP! I was at home with my bf & we were fucking on my bed & my parents walked in! They don't let me go out wit him no more! What shudI do! I love him a lot! (123).*

Some of the informants discuss the implications of the abstinence discourse on their lives, which their parents try to reinforce on them. Numerous informants describe their parents as constantly giving them the message that it is acceptable to date but unacceptable to get sexually close. Some girls appeal for support as they struggle to detach themselves from their parents' sexual morality. The graffiti narratives promoting sexual activity clash with the dictates of the informants' domestic environments, which reiterate that sexual behaviour is inappropriate at their

age. Some girls realize that in order to be responsible for themselves, they need to distance themselves from their caregivers/parents. They describe the tension that this struggle creates. They try to transfer some of their reliance on parents/caregivers to the other graffitiists. Parental relations are;

treated by many adolescents more like ties that restrain, than like ties that anchor and secure, and a key task of adolescence is to develop autonomy so as no longer to need to rely (as much) on parents' support when making one's way through the world.

(Allen and Land 1999, p.319).

Thériault (2003) found out that late adolescent girls who assert themselves and express differences between themselves and their mothers are less fearful of sexual intimacy and non-sexual intimacy with their romantic partner than their peers who are less assertive with their mothers. These findings extend previous research, which shows that for females, separateness in family interactions is associated with general commitment in dating relationships (Feldman *et al* 1998; Cooper and Grotevant 1987).

Breaking the news to parents about being pregnant is presented as a very difficult ordeal. Feelings of fear, shame, anxiety and embarrassment are described as they deliberate on how to introduce their pregnant self:

ok Guys I need help! Hmm, I have a bf we've been together for like a year (give and take) and now I'm preagnant. It's not my bf I'm affraid to tell it's my mum! with my bf I know i'm safe coz i know 4 a fact that (he) loves me. But how the hell am I going (to) tell my parents? PLS help (124).

Some parents are not perceived as a source of support and comfort in such difficult situations, but as contributors of more tension and are described as demanding, critical and uncaring. Feelings of safety, protection and understanding are associated with the boyfriend and not with parents. Related to teenage pregnancy, '*there's always an explanation for this socalled ... PHENOMENA*' (ibid.). The '*explanation*' was however not given. Some girls are blamed for getting pregnant: '*Why did you fuck a guy?**' (ibid.). Supportive advice is however embodied:

You live. You learn. Take it as a challenge when something bad happens to me that's what I do. Your parents will understand it, don't worry. it's normal they get angry but they love you after all you're their child. It's normal to feel lost and confused. Tell your bf about this, you'll support each other through this prob ... if there's love (ibid.).

The concept of learning from experiences emerges as common advice. Empathy, acceptance and support are regarded as the result of love and as the solution to problems. This advice implies that true love is not selfish and does not only seek self-fulfilment, but also the good of the partner. From this perspective, pregnant girls are encouraged to draw support from those who love them. Love is described as being strengthened by crisis.

The informants' attachment to their parents is disrupted when they deviate from their cultural norms and beliefs. A racist discourse is described in one informant's narrative:

My family is against black people and I'm going out with an Arab. We had sex many times .. in fact my period is overdue and I think I'm pregnant. What the fuck am I going to do? How can I tell my parents that I had an intimate relationship with a person they dislike? Help me please (125).*

Some informants are faced with their parents' limitations and learn the flaws of the adult world. Crises in the parents' own relationship or marriage and how these affect their children are described as causing serious ramifications:

MY MUM & Dad R splitting up. Dad is such a creep, I can't stand him. He has no respect whatsoever for women, and calls me all kinds of names, starting from 'whore' to 'go kill urself'. I think its because of him I have trouble dating guys. I don't trust them, and my longest relationship was 2 wks long. Seriously, what should I do?? It feels lonely not being able to be with some(one) else. Any advice? (126).

This poignant and painful situation describes the presumed imminent break up of a girl's parents' relationship and how this is affecting her life. It is also about her difficulty in establishing intimate relationships with boys. The girl makes the connection between her abusive father and her difficulty in trusting boys. She describes her fear in exploring new romantic ties, and yet desires some kind of

affection and connection: *'It feels lonely not being able to be with some (one) else'* (ibid.). She is confused as she is finding it difficult to transform her attachment behaviour from her parents to a romantic partner. She is dismayed that her parents are not protective of her, but are causing her considerable worry and pain. By refusing to get close to guys, she is forming a desexualized self, as a defence mechanism to protect herself from getting hurt. She seems to confirm that 'adolescents' expectations and experiences in romantic relationships are related to their relationships with their peers as well as their parents' (Furman 2002, p.177). The quality of parental relationships influences romantic attachments and expectations in adolescence and in later years (Seiffge-Krenke *et al* 2001). Evidence suggests that, 'high levels of conflict between parents are linked with psychological difficulties and antisocial behaviour in children and adolescents' (Kirby and Fraser 1997, p.22).

This girl in some way acknowledges the discourse, which holds the belief that a child needs to be brought up in a loving environment to grow healthily. The way she describes the connection between her father's relationship with her and her own way of dealing with boys also shows that for her, psychoanalytic theory is a familiar discourse. Psychoanalysis could be regarded as a discursive practice (Kehily 2002, p.36), which amongst other things, tries to study and understand what makes intimate relationships meaningful and fulfilling and also why they fail. Like other discourses, psychoanalysis shapes self-knowledge. Studies demonstrate that salient parent-child experiences are internalised and carried forward into adolescent and adult relationships (eg. Roisman *et al* 2001).

This girl's sense of vulnerability was felt by some students, who answered her: *'I think @ the moment you should find a best friend in yourself. Bad people pick on good people, so fight spiritually'* (127). Warnings about the dangers of becoming involved with people, who might be 'bad' just like her dad ensue. In giving advice to 'fight spiritually', a religious discourse is employed, aimed at encouraging the distraught girl to overcome her fears, anguish, insecurity and lack of self-esteem. The advice might have been aimed to imply that God could be regarded as a surrogate parent. Another student wrote:

Just because your dad is a creep it doesn't mean that all guys are like that!! Learn to trust guys, you can find some really nice ones!! To be honest some guy friends are nicer than girls coz girls can be bitches! If you have a chance with a guy, don't turn him down Just go for it and see how it goes! You could be surprised how sweet and caring some guys are!! (128).

Learning is regarded as the key, which challenges destructive but familiar attachment styles and which brings change. The girl is encouraged to '*learn to trust guys*' and not remain stuck and conditioned by her father's verbal abuse. The advice did not state *how* the girl can learn how to trust effectively but suggests that she risks and '*just go for it*', thus implying uncertainty. The girl, whose dad is a '*creep*' might have already been at risk many times, since she probably forms part of a dysfunctional family. The advice to discover '*how sweet and caring some guys are*' (ibid.), strives to promote mutual understanding between the gendered divide. The affirmation that '*girls can be bitches*' (ibid.), might be an attempt towards consoling the girl by showing her that generalizations and categorizations are misleading. The '*bitches*' theme surfaces again. The statement '*He has no respect whatsoever for women*' (126) signals a familiar theme in classical feminist analysis; that of male aggression in the confrontation of women. Studies about women-women relationships however reveal that violence also occurs (eg. Girshick 2002).

This girl recognises that she has a problem, articulates it and seeks a form of solution through the toilets' forum. Yet her personal issues would remain isolated unless she seeks some kind of professional help, even through the school's councillors. For this girl, the personal still seems to be dislocated from professional form of support, provided by public policy. Her difficulties in balancing autonomy and attachment needs, present a great challenge. She demonstrates little confidence that her romantic attachments would last. Adolescent romantic relationships develop in a context of parental attachments (Beinstein Miller and Hoicowitz 2004, p.191). Adolescents who exhibit autonomy seeking behaviour usually have positive parental attachments and feel comfortable exploring new relationships because they know their parents will support them (Weiss 1982). Secure attachment to parents has been found to be important for the quality of romantic relationships in late adolescence (Furman and Wehner 1997). Secure attachment is presumed to contribute to the normative development of autonomy in adolescence (Ryan and Lynch 1989). Lack of parental

warmth and support may put adolescents, especially girls, more at risk of depression in response to difficulties in romantic relationships (Ge *et al* 1996). Relationship competencies are associated with positive parental attachment (Parke and O'Neil 1999).

Whilst acknowledging that attachment styles between parents and their children formed in childhood should not be ignored, adolescents learn how to behave and connect, from many other people in different social groups. Although the roles learnt during infancy become familiar and comfortable, even if they cause considerable emotional pain, a change in a person's style of loving is possible. I have learnt that this change however requires a very challenging and difficult process and adolescents embarking on this daunting task need assistance and support.

6. Juggling Friends and Lovers

It is a challenge for some graffitists to create a comfortable balance between friendships and romantic couplehood. They describe the possibility that dating could isolate them from significant relationships with friends. Graffiti written specifically about lesbian friends/lovers concerning this issue are absent.

From their research about the length and quality of high school friendships and romantic relationships, as a function of multiple attachments beliefs, Beinstein Miller and Hoicowitz (2004) found out that 'friendships do not depend much on intimacy and support as romantic relationships do' (p.202). Yet some graffiti texts contradict these findings, as their authors perceive friends as being irreplaceable, unlike lovers. They hold that the bond of friendships is stronger than that of romantic attachments. They repeatedly state that relationships with friends outlast dating relationships:

Never sacrifice a friendship 4 a guy. After all he is just another guy!!
(129).

I agree good advise! (ibid.).

Some graffitists point out that emotional closeness between two adolescent female friends is deeper than that between two adolescents in a romantic relationship. Same-sex friendships continue to hold a strong position in adolescents' social networks

when intimate relationships are established (Bukowski *et al* 1993). Giving up friends for a lover is perceived as worth doing by some and not advisable by others. Some writings advise on balancing the two. Some girls demonstrate that they are sensitive to disrupting the closeness already established with friends. They feel guilty of neglecting their friends for their lover. Other informants question the significance of female friendships, which do not support their new romantic heterosexual relationships: *'If a female friend stops speaking to you, because of your new boyfriend, do you think that she is a sham?'* * (130). Differing views are expressed:

Jealousy is the main cause. It is obvious enough that you will give more attention to your guy rather than ur mate !! Gluck (ibid).

I tell you that what she is doing to you is right, because you are ignoring her. Therefore break off with him!! (ibid.).*

You are a really good expert in giving advice! It is evident that you have never been out with a guy. If you have a steady boyfriend, it is obvious that you will give him more attention than you give your friends (if you really love him). If she no longer speaks to you, it means that she is not a genuine friend and if you are happy with him, don't even think of breaking up with him (ibid.).*

The reason for her reaction might be that she is a bit lonely, because you have a steady boyfriend. If she is a real friend however, she would be happy that you found a guy whom you like (ibid.).

Some girls contemplate the consequences of losing established friendships for the sake of new romantic attachments, which could possibly generate a sense of rivalry, otherness, competition and jealousy:

I like this boy but my friend likes him too. If I go out with him, I am afraid she wown't talk to me. HELP!! (129).

Such statements reveal the perceived risks on established friendships associated with new romantic attachments. In consistence with some feminists (Jackson and Scott 2004, p.155) a number of informants fear that considerable emotional investment into a 'love' relationship impoverishes their social lives. Furman and Wehner (1994) emphasized the role of the 'affiliative system' at the early stages of dating. They (1997) hold that when adolescents begin to date, their expectations regarding romantic social behaviours are shaped directly by experiences in peer relationships and that

prior to late adolescence romantic relationships are thought to serve affiliative rather than attachment functions.

7. Erotic Pleasure: Masturbation and Pornography

Within the toilet walls, sex is perceived as a function that should be hidden. The girls' articulation of the sexualisation of themselves deals with questions related to practical information surrounding sexual behaviour. As the girls bring forward their perceived complexities and their adherence to existing moral codes, they simultaneously question and deconstruct these same codes. The following question about the morality of masturbation was possibly framed within the Church's discourse of 'masturbation is a sin':

Is it right or wrong to masturbate? Do you masturbate often???
(131).

*Yes a lot HEHE!! ** (ibid.).

*No, even I masturbate a lot it is normal but embarassed to show that's why finger fuck is fantastic** (ibid.).

its something natural, yes I do masturbate often!☺ Don't worry
(ibid.).

I don't know how to can some I help?!? (ibid.)

These messages can be regarded as a pleasure-seeking mechanism and construct a discourse of the erotic. As the girls acquire, exchange and discuss their sexual knowledge; they engage in the construction of pleasure. They imply that sexual pleasure is an important component of their liberation, self-determination and autonomy. The question of what constitutes 'normal' however surfaces constantly: '*is it normal that girls hate to masturbate???*' (132). I have never read any graffiti, which stated that masturbation is wrong. The 'slut' concept has not been employed to girls who stated that they masturbate. Irigaray confirms that woman:

finds pleasure almost anywhere. . . . the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined - in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness.

(Irigaray 1985b, p.28).

Advice extended to how to masturbate a lover:

HELP Look, i have a problem ... I don't know how to mustarbate a guy's penis .. any suggestions!! Thank you! (133).

Once again, this advice suggested that one has to experiment, let go and learn through experience: '*Go wit d flow*' (ibid.). Some girls connected the discussion about masturbation with pornography issues: '*I masturbate, I only watch porn if i happen to go on a channle where there is. I don't mind it it's nice, but i don't look 4 it*' (134). Mainstream pornography is not contested, as I have never come across any graffiti, which stated that pornography offers demeaning portrayals of women, as the objects of male desire. The free availability of pornography through the internet however, is a cause for concern:

I've been with my bf for 2 years. Sometimes I've found porn on his PC but he says its his brother's (who has been single). He says he's never watched porn + he loves me too much to do that to me He promises he's not lying & that he likes me the way I am. Should I believe him? Thanks (133).

it's v. normal 4 guys 2 watch porn so don't worry! (ibid.).

Almost three quarters of young men in Allen's study consulted pornographic magazines and rated this information 'very useful' (Allen 2004, p.157):

... in the absence of a discourse of erotics in sexuality education many young men may seek such information in other contexts and find it most overtly available within pornography.

(ibid.).

Even the girls refer to pornography as a source of learning about sexual pleasure: '*Lol go watch some porn and you'll know*' (135). Pornography is regarded as a way through which sexual consciousness is promoted and sexual fantasies encouraged. They suggest that ideas derived from watching pornography could be reproduced. Their narratives however do not acknowledge how the pornographic industry constructs perspectives on sexual pleasure.

8. More Sex Talk

Whether, when and how to have sex emerged as common concerns. In analyzing these related themes, my initial approach was to avoid generalizations and a 'rigid determinism' (Butler 1994, p.7) by disengaging from the perspective, which regards the positions of boys and girls in sexual experiences to be those of domination and subordination respectively. Some graffiti texts demonstrate however, that the claim about dominant males and subordinate females still holds. Some lesbian/bisexual informants also describe how they seek self-sacrificing ways of relating towards potential or present lovers. Some girls however, warn their graffiti mates against subordination and give advice on how to protect themselves from it, as the data will demonstrate.

Whether to have sex

Some graffiti statements written mostly in heterosexual contexts demonstrate that the doing it/not doing it debate is one of concern. Some girls show that they are curious to know what others think about this issue. A chart was drawn and readers were asked to tick whether they are virgins or not (136). The chart showed 6 ticks in the 'not' virgin column and 3 ticks under the 'virgin' heading. One person could have ticked more than once. In both segregations, there were affirmations that they were 'proud' to be/not to be a virgin. One reader was not willing to participate in this exercise and declared that her sexual status is '*not anybody's business*'* and that she did not want anyone intruding on her private self (ibid.). This chart raised debate amongst some girls. Whereas some girls implied that they gain confidence through sex, others associate sex with feeling used or with degrading oneself. Next to the 'not virgin' ticks one girl asked '*where is your dignity guys!?*' (ibid.). Such writings indicate that '*... girls may have been taught that sex is shameful and dirty, their shame encouraging them to police their sexuality*' (Lamb 2004, p.378).

Another girl, who ticked the 'virgin' column, gave the following reason: '*and proud cause it is all most of the boys want from you but not all*' (ibid.). This answer was considered as '*sooo nonsense*' by one girl, who asked '*Who cares what a man looks for?*' and continued her argument as follows:

So it's right for a man to shag incessantly for a decade or more and than we (when) he feels it's the right time to settle down all he wants is a pure cutie virginette! Oh come on give me a break, do you want a man that loves you only because you still got all your strings attached?!?!? (ibid.).

The counter argument was that the commencement of sexual activity requires a personal choice:

Very much proud, its my body, and my pleasure and above all an expression of love towards my loving boyfriend who accepts me the way I am and so should all the rest of you look for in a man (ibid.).

Being a virgin is considered 'an expression of love'. This answer draws on catholic sexual morality discourse. Some girls are happy to wait until they feel ready. They argue in favour of being free to choose whether to have sexual experiences or be sexually inactive. Within this schema, some girls transmit the discourse, which dictates that legitimate and fulfilling coupling postpones sexual intercourse until marriage. In a study amongst American teenagers which asked; 'If you have had sexual intercourse, do you wish you had waited longer?' (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy 2000), nearly two-thirds stated that they wished they had waited longer before becoming sexually active.

The comparisons of differences in this chart reflect different social attitudes and norms. Issues related to the transition between being a virgin and not remaining one, are contemplated as some girls reveal their fears and/or their desire to have sex for the first time. The loss of virginity is considered a special occasion by some informants. Some consider it a right and others a loss or a rite of passage. Some feel scared, just by thinking about it. For some graffitiists, there is no doubt as to whether they should be sexually active. Their narratives contain positive ways of thinking about active sexual desire and expression. The enjoyment of sexual experiences is emphasized:

Sex is Fun enjoy PPL (137).

making love is even more fun (ibid.).

In the graffiti forum, the point is often made that love is not necessarily equated with sex and vice versa. Some claim that a sexual relationship without love is fuelled by selfishness. They describe their need to be loved as being greater than the need to

have sex. As the relationship between sex and love is explored, they do not specify what 'making love' means. Adolescents use the word 'love' to express what is really sexual desire (Lees 1989, p.27). The girls describe their uncertainty about whether or not they are in love. They also discuss the meanings related to the word 'love':

Can someone explain to me the meaning of love! Everyone speaks of it but no1 ever told me what it means Sometime my bf asks me if I love him and I'm sry to say that i don't know. We've been together for 9 months now. He says we make love to each other I'm not sure if it's just sex and fun of experimenting? Can some1 help me?! (138).

The word love has really become meaningless. I think many confuse the word infatuation or caring for someone with love when you are in love you recognize it and not say it's sort of love u just do! Tcare+ G.L. (ibid.).*

For some informants the decision about whether to initiate sex or not depends on whether there is enough 'love' between the couple. They ask about how to know whether this level has been reached. Their statements imply that 'love' involves much more than physical connection, but do not specifically point out to the concept of bonding on intellectual, social and spiritual levels. Emotional bonding in terms of affection and reciprocity is however demanded:

I am 16 and I'm with a guy 16 years too. I love him but sometimes he doesn't show the same affection I give to him and I'll be terribly upset. He is a very moody person. Shall I stay with him or no? Am I committing a mistake? Help!! (139).

This girl describes that lack of affection is causing her particular distress. She perceives her partner to be reluctant to get as emotionally close as she would like. Some girls indicate that they need more emotional closeness and care than they are receiving from their lover. Being in a heterosexual relationship where sex is given overwhelming predominance is considered problematic:

I'm going out with a guy but he always wants sex and is always hot .. like animals. I hate this and I sometimes (ask) myself if the problem is that he doesn't like me enough .. please tell me your opinion ppl!!! (140).

Differences related to male/female sex drive are discussed. This girl seems to doubt whether her boyfriend is only dating her for sex. She might be feeling used or else

undeserving of love. She does not perceive his eagerness to have sex, as an expression of how much he likes her, but on the contrary as an indication that he does not like her enough. She might be feeling controlled sexually. Boys' genetic predisposition controls the sexuality of women (Fletcher 2002, p.270). This girl seems to be anxious about her perceived possibility concerning her partner's lack of 'love'.

These girls' feelings of inadequacy might be partially formed by dominant discourses of hetero sexuality, which constitute girls as having greater investment in the emotional benefits of relationships than boys, who are perceived to be more concerned with physical aspects (Duncombe and Marsden 1993, quoted in Allen 2004, p.162). Some research however, suggests that more young men than women indicated they found 'emotional intimacy' as being a pleasurable aspect of sexual activity (Allen 2004, p.163). Girls give more importance to attachment and care in their romantic relationships than boys (Shulman and Scharf 2000). Chodorow explains why women may lack satisfaction in their relationships with men:

given the masculine personality which women's mothering produces, the emotional secondariness of men to women, and the social organization of gender and gender roles, a woman's relationship to a man is unlikely to provide satisfaction for the particular relational needs which women's mothering and the concomitant social organization of gender have produced in women.

(Chodorow 1975, quoted in Lorber 2001, p.118).

Learning how 'satisfaction' (ibid.) in hetero relationships can be achieved is a priority for numerous graffiti subculture members. To my knowledge, graffiti questions about how 'satisfaction' in lesbian relationships is achieved are absent. Attention of lesbians/bisexuals is generally more focused on self-acceptance and on coming out issues. The more developed one's sense of identity, the greater one's potential for intimacy (Firestone and Catlett 1999, p.86).

When to have sex

Some consider the 16-18 age bracket as the right time to start engaging in sexual activity:

@ our age HAVE 😊 SEX! (141).

I've been with my bf now for 5 months. I love him and I know he loves me too. I think he wants to have sex. But I want to wait another 7 months until Im 18 although I think Im ready. Do you think Im doing right ????????... Help !!!!!!! (142).

If u think u're ready DO IT!!! I wasn't ready still felt good! (ibid.).

The graffitists consult each other regarding normal/abnormal and proper/improper norms, which regulate the timing of sexual behaviour. In asking whether sexual activity is appropriate at their age, the girls reproduce themselves as self-regulating subjects (Walkerline 1987). They seek to find out each other's attitudes and in this way assess the morality and normality of sexual experiences and beliefs: *'Is it slutty to have sex after a few times you been together or?? ☺ (143)*. Answers were in the affirmative: *'yes → yes ← yes'* (ibid.)

Having sex too soon, is generally perceived as creating a weak foundation for satisfying, long-term relationships that stand a good chance of avoiding the pain of break-ups. Having sex straight after getting to know a lover is regarded as skipping the friendship stage and bypassing emotional closeness. Sexual contact without friendship is regarded as superficial.

In the graffiti forum the word 'slut' is used to label and judge girls who have sex outside a relationship. It encapsulates the boundaries between what is perceived as permissible, decent and appropriate and what is not:

Displaying too much interest in the physical pleasures of relationships (without emotional investment) puts young women in danger of being a 'slut' and gaining a negative sexual reputation.

(Allen 2004, p.162).

The graffitists generally also use the term 'slut' to refer to girls who have more than one sexual lover simultaneously, and therefore use it to favour and protect the discourse of monogamy. Within this framework, the graffiti take on the role as a regulative and controlling mechanism, which operates along the girls' provision of knowledge.

How to have sex

The informants reveal details of their sex lives as they probably feel less inhibited because of the comfort that anonymity gives them. They know that the discourse of explicit sex is forbidden inside classrooms and if it is referred to during literature lectures, it is only in relation to the characters of their textbooks and not to them personally. For numerous graffitists, writing about sex enables them to express their imagination and desires. Their writings portray sexually adventurous girls, who seek detailed and practical information about the organisation and implementation of sexual desire:

I'm planing of having sex 4 d 1st time.. how should I be prepared?
(144).

Hey listen anybody knows of some good places of where you can go & have sex? Cause me & boyfriend are getting bored of the usual places! (145).

ANY HINTS ON WHAT TURNS ON BOYS??? PRACTICAL ANSWERS PLS! (135).

Hints about what turns *her* on are not asked for. Advice centres on how to pleasure the boyfriend. Such texts could be understood as being 'phallogentric' (Irigaray 1985b) since they describe possibilities of sexual practices in terms of the exclusion of feminine sexual pleasure. One advice however suggests a way for how both can enjoy the experience: '*Definitely 'Blow Jobs' and you'll like it 2!*' (ibid.). A number of graffiti are literally phallogentric: '*I ♥Penises*' (146). Penis size is an issue and the 'bigger is better' discourse is implied:

I'm dating this guy & his dick is small & not given me orgasm. What should I do!? (147).

When me & my boyfriend have sex, he comes rly quick His penis is barely in my vagina. And ders no time for me to orgasm too! You know of anything we can try out? (148).

try to have more foreplay before intercourse (ibid.).

These girls point out that they are entitled to sexual pleasure. This data challenges gender stereotypes, which consider females as being passive in their responses to

sexual desires and which describe males as expressing their interest in sex more openly. With reference to female sexual pleasure, Allen holds that;

... it is not that women's bodies are in some way essentially less easily pleased than young men's, but that language constitutes our experience of them as such.

(Allen 2004, p.157).

The data indicates that those who identify themselves as lesbians/bisexuals generally do not delve into questions about sexual pleasure, as frequent as those who identify themselves as heterosexual. The majority of the former might still be grappling with coming out issues and therefore might not have arrived at the stage, in which they have established romantic attachments, although they can do both simultaneously. There are some texts however, which demonstrate interest in same-gender sex: '*The ones who experienced sex with other girls (I mean girl with girl) how did you find it?*' (149). Nobody gave a detailed answer to this question. For some girls, lesbian sex is beyond comprehension: '*I'm sorry but I don't get the point of being lesbian I have a bf and i don't imagine what fun lesbians can have having sex!*' (150). The construction and maintenance of hetero sexual behaviour is ignored as one respondent did not take this writing seriously: '*lol don't speak before you've tried it...*' (151). Explicit descriptions of lesbian sexual relations have been put forward in the context of '*a problem*':

HEY fellow lesbians we have a problem which is rly bad Me & my best friends r lesbians I tink we can't get our hands off each other and during lessons we feel rly desperate and horny! We love 2 finger and lick each others pussy! How do you think we should relax a bit from all our horniness? All we think of is sex!!! LUV U GALSS!" (152).

Some girls seem to be swept away by their sexual experiences and declare that they are obsessed and consumed by their lover/s. Their sense of euphoria is mingled with guilt, as they feel that they have no control over their sexual passion. They try to regulate themselves through a discourse of the erotic.

Some graffiti employ a discourse of sexual desire and eroticism, which is not necessarily linked to love, caring and affection. Some girls reproduce a typical male discourse, as they compete with one another as regards to who '*snogged*' the most:

I snogged Andrew on Sat! haha (153).

I snogged tysin, Ron and Kim yesterday haha beat that baby! (ibid.).

Not all girls were impressed and not all believed this statement: ‘... *as if*’ (ibid.). Such statements reveal that some graffitiists might be trying to prove and assert themselves or else shock readers. The girls are requested to reflect on the consequences of their actions:

WHAT MATTERS IS NOT HOW MUCH YOU FUCK BUT WITH WHOM AND HOW YOU FUCK. IF YOU COMPETE ABOUT HOW MUCH YOU FUCK BE READY TO COMPETE WITH REGARDS TO THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN YOU BEAR. POOR THEM (154).*

The graffiti debates demand that readers think about possible future situations they might find themselves in and therefore serve as a warning. The graffiti discourse draws attention to risk factors surrounding sexualities:

Is HIV carried by oral Sex? I am so afraid I never had real sex, and never had any HIV symptoms. It was just a thought. Pls help! (155).

No... only intercours (ibid.).

No certainlyly Not (ibid.).

I consider this misleading and incorrect information as dangerous. Other serious risks are described in conjunction with their involvement in having sex: ‘*Does Any One of You Know the Feeling when You Fuck On Cocaine I’ll tell You, It feels Great. You should try it out*’ (156). Although the burden, blame and responsibility should not all be put on the lack or kind of sexuality education, the case might be that some adolescents ‘are dying for good conversation about sexuality, and are dying without it’ (Fine and McClelland 2006, p.328).

9. Love Triangles

The theme of having attraction for another person, whilst in a relationship, is a common one. Dilemmas surrounding a plethora of mixed feelings are expounded:

I have this problem i'm with this guy and 'to a certain extent' i'm happy but i can't stop looking at other guys this is buggin' me it's like i'm fed up with each and every guy i fancy once I go out with him can some1 EXPLAIN THE MEANING OF THIS. I WANT TO FIND A GUY I REALLY LIKE AND END THIS CRISIS AS HE COMES ALONG!! (157).

Once again advice revolves around the idea that love is the measure, indicator and reflector of a sound relationship: '*This may be because you're not really in love If you were you'd lose interest in all other guys!*' (ibid.).

Bisexual/lesbian/heterosexual students are involved in love triangles. Bisexual informants, who describe themselves as having simultaneous sexual attraction towards numerous males and females, portray the same message of some heterosexual girls who agonize over the meaning of their feelings of attraction for one, two or more boys, who are not their boyfriend. Although the latter do not describe doubts over their heterosexual identity, their conflicting feelings are perceived as causing them confusion and dilemmas about how they should act: '*There's this guy I like in my class i already have a boyfriend and love him what am I to do? And I've been ages with my bf*' (158). The 'long' and 'established' relationship is put to the test, when special feelings for another guy arise. Haraway (1991a) describes the dilemma of the self-other dualism: 'One is too few, but two are too many' (p.177). The most common advice favours remaining in the relationship:

Stay with your bf because that's just a little crush you have on the guy in your class that does not mean as much as your bf. I think you're just in a period that you're finding your relationship a bit 4 granted cause you were with your bf for a very long time. It will pass!! If you leave him u will regret it! Good luck in your choice ☺ (ibid.).

Some graffiti demonstrate that monogamy in romantic relationships is desired by lesbians, who are disturbed by its absence:

I am a lesbian going out with another girl for these last 3 yrs however My girlfriend had a trisom without me few weeks ago with another friend (girl) of ours and a guy we have known for quite a while. Now I'm feeling Jealous of her. Any help on what I can do. This thing is Driving me mad Pls Pls Pls help me! (159).

Most gay/lesbian youth report that they had dated and had sexual experiences with other-sex peers during adolescence (Savin-Williams 1996). Experiences with the other sex may help clarify gay/lesbian/bisexual youths' sexual orientation and can provide a cover for their sexual identity (Diamond *et al* 1999). Some girls entangle themselves in desires or sexual liaisons with persons, who are already in a relationship:

Help Pls!!! I've been going out with a 24yr old guy but just for sex for 6mths now & he's with another girl for 4 years. Now she's pregnant. Should I stop seeing him?! (160).

For some girls there seems to be no doubt about ending such a relationship. Regarding this situation, a girl answered: '*stupid questions get no answer*' (ibid.). This recognition of 'stupidity', which contrasts with the doubts of the author of writing (160), might be partly attributed to childhood experiences and attachments, which impact on adolescent behaviour. By becoming sexually involved in non-monogamous relationships some girls might be experimenting or aiming to gain some knowledge about relationships. They could also be setting themselves up to get hurt and entangle themselves in jealousy, excitement, risk, manipulation, deceit, lying and confusion:

Right now, I feel like I'm crazy. My boyfriend has been cheating on me for 2 and a half months, with a girl who he's been with 4 a year. He left me but now we're seeing each other again and I really want him back but I need him to dump her. I don't think he's in 2 her character cos he always prefers me 2 d fun activities WHAT SHOULD I DO PLEASE HELP xxx (161).

'*I need him to dump her*' (ibid.) implies an unhealthy dependency. The state of being in and out of the relationship: '*He left me but now we're seeing each other again*' (ibid.), causes stress and instability. She writes that she does not take any initiative but patiently waits and hopes that he would 'dump' the other girl. She makes excuses for him and seems to be trying to convince herself that '*he's not in 2 her character*' (ibid.). She does not specify what she means by '*fun activities*' (ibid.).

Heterosexual monogamy has been critiqued by a number of feminists (eg. Jackson and Scott 2004), who partly regard it as a political issue. Its critique is not concerned only with sexual exclusivity, but with its relationship to the institutionalization of marriage, which for a number of feminists is regarded as a patriarchal institution that

grants men rights to the sexual, reproductive and domestic services of a wife, therefore presuming her ownership (ibid., p.151). Some girls reproduce the discourse of gender difference as they try to search for ways of how to direct their attention away from what they perceive as compulsive heterosexual monogamy:

Guys are diff from Girls. They wn't fight over the one they like ... I would dump the one I'm dating now and go out with my ex if I were you After all, iff we can't do these things now, when can we do them? After we're married??? (162).

The heterosexual marriage is regarded as a restriction of freedom. Marriage is however rarely mentioned by the informants. One statement implies its detestation: '*..fuck marriage too- bitch*' (163). This could have been written by a lesbian author, who might regard the institutionalization of the heteronormative marriage as offensive.

10. Commitment

For some girls, dating experiences originally intended to be casual, were described as having caused hurt when later on they remained devoid of a degree of commitment and monogamy. As dating proceeded and they got more emotionally and sexually involved, their perceived need for exclusivity pressured them:

*Do you think it's normal to date a guy for 9 months? And we'r still not together? We make love to each other and we both enjoy it. I know it's not a matter of sex because we don't do it so often. Lately he has been searching for many girls on msn this situation is disturbing me a lot and during the night I always end up crying so much. what am I to do when I told him that this situation is distressing me he ignored me he just told me that I'm very special to him and they're only friends.... Uff I don't now. I love him I really do Help!!** (164).

tell him, if we don't get 2geter, then it's over. Don't waist ur time giving ur self to him, if he's not ready to be only urs (ibid.).

The data indicates that whereas some girls experience a great drive to express their attraction and sexual feelings and form relationships, they also experience conflicts as to whether to choose to have a string of brief relationships or else remain in a 'steady' one. They describe collisions between their need for freedom and their need to

explore their sexuality in the context of a secure relationship. This common graffiti theme exposes the girls' doubts about whether adolescence is the time to get committed in a romantic attachment or not. Sexual expression without some form of commitment generates confusing feelings, which some girls struggle over:

Im dating a guy, for already a month. But we r'nt 2gether. He told me I can date others, he can do so too, but we both know we would get a bit jealous. We decided to end datin since we're starting to love each other (and don't want relations since we both broke with our ex's 2 months ago!! We're supposed to act as friends now but we cant manage! we kiss etc etc! What should I do?! Confused (165).

The fear of breaking up hinders them from wanting to grant each other exclusivity. Whilst strongly feeling their need for some form of closeness, they want to free themselves from the perceived pain, hurt and confusion that an established 'love' relationship would grant them. 'Love' is forbidden, since it is perceived as causing hurt. Yet the agreement to act or 'perform' (Butler 1999) as just friends, is being violated. Confusion arises about how to establish and keep boundaries. A romantic relationship is perceived as a threat to friendship: '*I Love a Guy and he loves me but I don't want 2 go out with him cause I'm afraid of losing his friendship*' (166). Some graffitiists describe that they would feel suffocated if they were to 'settle down' and tie themselves up in a long-term relationship. Others contemplate the gains and risks related to the options of either being single or of establishing a 'serious' relationship:

Me and my FRND have D Same prob! We're both in serious relationships with amazing guys! we both ♥ them and everythings going gr8! But we're like 16... 1z 20 the other 21! Dnt you tink it's a bit 2 early 2 like start settlin down? I really Love my guy and I can't pic myself without him but I still wanna enjoy myself while I'm still yung! Wat should I do? Just go wit D flo or?? (167).

Within the heterosexual context of 'going steady', advice on strategies about how to keep a balance between their autonomous self and the needs of the relationship is unclear: '*you're gonna have 2 follow your heart on this one, love! If you dont want 2 leave him- don't! you still have loads of time 2 hav fun ☺*' (ibid.).

The security of commitment is generally described as producing satisfaction, whereas short-term relationships are considered 'waste of time'. The girls' narratives however reveal the tension between their intense need and desire to fuse themselves intimately

and passionately with another person within the context of a romantic relationship and their fear of being dominated by the relationship itself or by their lover. Issues related to commitment, might mean subordination or 'engulfment' (Kehily 2002, pp.151-153) for some. Some informants convey feelings of resentment towards relationships, in which they feel locked into a pattern of interaction that doesn't allow them to make choices. Some describe that they feel pressured by their friends to spend more time with them instead of with their lover/s. Yet, whereas some girls agonize over the implications of long-term relationships, others do not seem to take this issue too seriously: '*... I don't like boys who have a gf I like playboys! ☺*' (168). Yet the girls are reminded that '*... flirting is not love!*' (169). Lesbian/bisexual informants do not seem to be preoccupied with the pressures of commitment, since graffiti about this matter are absent. Whether adolescents, who have just started experiencing romantic relationships, are capable of a committed relationship with their lover/s and whether they should get committed, are complicated issues, which even adults face:

The enigmas remain: How do we hold without suffocating? ... How do we bring our passion to others without overwhelming them? How do we touch, how do we participate fully with another tenderly, without doing harm?

(Josselson 1996, p.222).

11. Contraception, Pregnancy and Abortion

Some graffiti advice encourages girls to manage sexual desire by sensibly protecting themselves against unwanted sexual experiences, sexually transmissible diseases and pregnancy. Very few writings however mention contraception and the ones, which do, generally revolve more on the use of condoms than on other types. On one occasion, I have seen an empty packet of condoms lying around inside one toilet. In Malta there are no specific birth-control clinics. The dilemmas surrounding the risks of getting pregnant are outlined:

I have a BF and we've been 2gether for a year and a half now. We really love each other and we wish to stay together forever. We never had real sex although we experiment other things. Now we both wish to have sex and show how much we really love each other but we're both virgins and we're scared of me getting pregnant. We were going to plan to use condoms but I'm still scared because they're not 100% safe. What should we do?? (170).

In their attempts to take the relationship on a higher level and seek more sexual closeness, some girls demonstrate responsibility as they try to balance risk reduction with their desire to 'show their love'. Some advice directed at this situation is motivated by the idea that one should not commence a sexual relationship before marriage: '*Wait a min No Sex Before Marrage*' (ibid.). The Church's discourse against the use of contraception is questioned: '*Do you agree that the Church should interfere with one's personal choice of whether to use contraceptives or not?*' (171). Other advice advocates contraceptive use:

Use a condom and when he is about to come stop so that he would not be able to ejaculate inside you so that you'll be safer. But DNT WRY TOO MUCH you don't have to. BTW if you worry you'll take longer to get it (menstruation). GOODLUCK (170).*

Don't have sex during the most dangerous time or else start taking the pill. Everyone is a little bit afraid at first. But once you pop u can't stop!! (The most important thing is that you love each other right) xxx. Gdlu (ibid).*

As the girls share tips on how to avoid pregnancy they empathize with each other. They share their fears of getting pregnant, which accompanies sexual experimentation and the exploration of desire amidst their expression of 'love'. Those who stated that they got pregnant however, do not generally advise other girls, to be careful. Events that led to getting pregnant are rarely ever related.

Numerous graffiti testify to the anguish, which some students describe, as they try to cope with the possibility of pregnancy. Some girls present themselves as time bombs, which are ready to go off any minute. Their narratives reveal a sense of bewilderment mingled with a sense of terrifying fear, vulnerability and confusion. Occasionally I see empty boxes of pregnancy tests in the toilet bins and wonder what goes on in the mind and in the life of sixteen year old girls, as they test for pregnancy in the isolated toilet cubicles. Described fears fuelled by belated menstruation constitute a predominant theme amongst the informants. Concerns over this issue demonstrate how some girls try to convince themselves that their menstruation always arrives late:

Hi, PPL I have a problem because my period always comes 1 week l8 & it's been 5 days. I didn't have sex but my bf did me & it got close! Should I wry? HELP! (172).*

No dw it happened to me I don't know why but by coincidence this is what happens but DW dear ☺ (ibid.).*

Not all the girls know the signs, which indicate pregnancy. The following 'sex education' explanation was given:

*Symptoms ex. vomiting may start after the 1st 4-6 wks of pregnancy
→ dnt b shy 2 take a test GL ☺ (ibid.).*

Getting pregnant from a guy who is not 'an official' boyfriend, despite having one, does not elicit much support: *'I'm in a relationship, and I've been with him 2 years, now I think I'm pregnant but from another guy what can I do? Pls help me!!! Tell me what can I do pls HERE'* (173, By means of an arrow, this girl indicated the place where she would like to receive answers. She numbered the answers and drew straight, horizontal lines on which readers could write). The following answers were jotted down:

1) (Illegible)

2) You're a tart my love

You should be ashamed of yourself WHORE!

3) So what! BUT IT'S NOT FAIR TO DUMP THE CHILD ON HIM IF HE IS NOT HIS* (ibid.).

I have never read any graffiti concerning childbirth, single motherhood or children's upbringing. It is not known what happens once the graffiti's babies are born. Thoughts about the possibility of being pregnant trigger the need to contemplate abortion: *'I think I'm pregnant. I'm only 16!! What do I have to do to get rid of the baby?? help me please!!'* (174). Some advice induces guilt and acts as a corrective to the girl's question:

Think hard about this its not fair on the child. Adoption is an option. You should have thought about this before you had sex. If you made a mistake then, don't make another one now (ibid.).

Advice against abortion is entrenched within discourses, which portray emotionally resonant values produced in some families and secondary schools: *'Buy a small pregnancy test from a pharmacy to be certain first. Abortion is not the solution. Remorse will haunt you in case you kill a new life'* (ibid.).* Some girls however, offer

alternative advice: *'Drink a whole bottle of vodka at one go → it works!'** (ibid., Some days later someone wrote over this sentence in an attempt to try to cancel it, presumably so that this advice will not spread.).

The aftermath of abortion brings up mixed feelings. A girl searches for God's forgiveness, as a possible means of healing. She faces her guilt feelings in what she hopes, is a compassionate environment. As she deals with her loss, she defends herself against accusations of being considered a bitch:

I got pregnant and I did an abortion, coz I was too young. Will God ever forgive me? I'm sorry for what I did P.S. Please don't call me a bitch cause I'm not (175).

One answer suggested that one does not have to conform to guilt stricken feelings and dictated what God should do: *'If it was 4 a good reson God SHOULD understand'* (ibid.). Some girls struggle hard to let go of the guilt discourses surrounding abortion and arrive at self-acceptance. The experience of abortion has led some girls to describe their search for freedom from constraints related to what other people say. It is doubtful whether this process will be ever completed: *'The self is the One who is not dominated... To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; but to be One is to be an illusion...'* (Haraway 1991a, p.177).

12. Ending Relationships

The girls recount feelings associated with the end of their relationships. The graffitists describe experiences of loss with regards to their romantic attachments. Some girls sense that something is going wrong in their relationship and seek help on how to save their relationship:

WHOT DO YOU IF SUDDENLY THE GUY YOU ARE GOING OUT WITH STARTS TO AVOID YOU ALL D TIME & YOU DNT KNOW WHOT TO DO? I'M MAD BOUT HIM & I TRIED EVERYTHIN TO GET 2 KNOW Y he's ACTIN LIKE THIS.. HELP (176).

Very few informants mention the reasons why their relationship has broken up. Numerous girls report that they got hurt from dating relationships that they originally intended to be 'just for fun'. They demonstrate that the experiences of falling in love

can be very intense and overwhelming but they can easily burn out after a few weeks or months. However short-lived they turn out to be, some recount that experiences of passion make them discover new emotional feelings and physical desires.

Episodes about being dumped and rejected are relatively few. This indicates that the girls might not brood over their past relationship for a very long time but possibly move on to the next one. Some girls nonetheless write that they were devastated when their relationships ended. They describe their sorrow as unbearable. Their fear, rage, confusion, bitterness, rejection and also their passion seem to overflow. Some of these girls seem to be living lives of quiet desperation: *'My bf dumped me. I luv him. im going mad please Help me'* (177). Adolescent romantic break-ups are one of the strongest predictors of depression (Joyner and Udry 2000). One answer gave the advice to try and learn to find contentment elsewhere: *'There r better things in life'* (ibid.). The girl replied back by asking for examples of *'better things'* (ibid.), but none were given. Feelings for ex-lovers involve both love and hate and they linger on during the detachment process:

So ok let me tell you my story... This summer I was goin out with a girl which I thought I was madly in love with ...the prob was she was a fuckin bitch and she treated me badly! She's even younger than me she's only 15 ... Now I'm not talking to her coz I hate her ... and I love her at the same time... I'm confused I dunno what to do now she's goin out with another girl which btw is a bitch coz she's gone out with half m'xlokk (name of a Maltese village)... What will I ever do?? Pls help me!! (178).*

A number of answers are emancipatory, as they encourage the girls to move on and not accept cheating, betrayal and hurt. Some girls describe that they have learnt from their mistakes and heartache and recount their wisdom, which follows their emotionally painful experiences. They give the advice to think of possible, future relationships, instead of focusing on past partners and waste time whining about them. This emancipatory space is created by a sense of solidarity:

Mm big prob, I had your prob Now I left her, try to find another I who cares (ibid.).

What you should do is find a non-bitch to spend your valuable time with. GL! (ibid.).

Emancipation has been a long time ideal for women's rights activators (Lather 1992, p.127). Some girls are aware of their own empowerment: '*I'M proud 2 say that i escaped from my violent BF!*' (179). Such girls can deploy their own power as persons with significant levels of agency. The graffitists however do not offer analysis of how power operates in sexualized ways. Most graffiti do not ask *why* some girls choose certain paths, which are creating emotional pain, and which seem to shrink their self-esteem and are self-destructive. Some girls deliberate over whether to take back a lover, who has betrayed them. They consider forgiving and trusting those, who did not prove trustworthy in the past and risk getting hurt all over again:

During the 'O' levels I was dating this guy for 2 months. Just dates but we never dated other ppl. Den one saturday i didn't go out and he went and had sex with another girl he didnt even know. Just to use her. I found out from my cousin. Then he didnt talk 2 me for 2 months as if I did something wrong. Lately we started talking again like we used to and i cant stop thinking about him and he is being really nice to me. I still love him i always did and i know that at one point he felt the same way too! I just dont know how he could have done this to me. Anyway what shall I do now?? I really like him!! A week ago he was there and another guy I used 2 date tried to get off with me I didn't want to infront of the other but i did to shut his mouth I felt so uncomfortable and wonder wot the other one thought?? Help! (180).

Advice on how *not* to remain emotionally attached to a past lover however, is sought:

I had been regularly dating a guy, who is a bit wild, he takes smoke and his ex-girlfriend the bitch gave him fucking cocaine.. Now he was going out with a girl, who is a drug user and who had just come out of the ditox and he gave her smac (like cocaine). BTW, I'm crazy about him and I'm trying to get over him. Any help pls!! i'm desperate!! (181, 'ditox' refers to detoxification center).*

I am very much concerned about these girls, who put themselves in '*crazy*' and '*desperate*' situations by becoming involved with romantic partners, who need professional help out of their drug addiction.

Rejection seems to be difficult to handle both when the girls are the ones who reject a lover and when they are the ones who are rejected. Some girls narrate that they resumed dating the one they had previously rejected to relieve their guilt, which emanated from their perceived hurt and embarrassment their rejection has caused their

lover. Uncertainties surrounding mixed feeling brought by their decision to reject a lover are displayed:

I left my ex, but love him still, he does too, but lots of others wanna date me too, and I want to. what should I do? Btw I have been with my ex 2 years! ☹ Desperate (182).

Do what you feel is best but before you resume your relationship with your ex, remember the reason why you have left him try not to hurt anyone (ibid.).*

Warnings to ex-girlfriends are common and stern:

*Fuck all the girls who broke with their Boyfriends and after sometime when he settles with another girl they want to rearrange!
→ It won't last long I assure You! (183).*

Some graffitists use harsh vocabulary to try to settle unresolved issues amongst themselves in the aftermath of their romantic attachment. One day during 2005 a girl was referred to as 'fucking lesbo' (184; Name digitally cancelled by myself). I understood this accusing comment as a homophobic bash against a lesbian student, presumably by a heterosexual student. From descriptive details about this girl and from the written first name, I knew who she was, although her surname was not mentioned. She had been my student the previous year. I felt very sorry for the way she was being personally insulted in the lavatory's public space. One afternoon, I happened to see her alone in one of the corridors at the College. Instinctively I felt that it was the right time to somehow show her my solidarity and support. In our conversation, I mentioned how damaging homophobia is. She answered that it was her ex-girlfriend who, through anonymity, had accused her of being a 'fuckin lesbo' and 'bitch' on the toilet doors. Her ex-girlfriend was now dating a guy and probably wanted to wipe out their past relationship, in an attempt to prove that she was heterosexual. I realised that the graffiti display ill feelings both among heterosexual and lesbian students, who both use the term 'bitch' to insult each other. I thought that maybe 'fuckin lesbo' was not only addressed to my past student but unconsciously to the author herself, who was releasing all the anguish that being/acting as lesbian has caused/was causing her. Underlying her anger, there might have been the fear that her ex-girlfriend would tell of their lesbian relationship and possibly be stigmatised because of this. She wrote to my student that she needs 'to get a life' (ibid.). It is the

author herself who probably feels the need to do so. She might have been projecting her own needs onto her ex-girlfriend, whom I know to be self-assured and comfortable with being lesbian. People accuse their partner of the same things they are fighting in themselves and resist their attitudes and behaviour, which they are resisting within themselves (Gray 2002, p.128). Behind these graffiti insults there was a lot of turmoil. Her anger might also have been the result of her jealousy towards her ex-girlfriend, who has come out. Or else, the student who wrote '*fuckin lesbo*' could be heterosexual, who only wanted to experience a girl/girl relationship temporarily. My student's answer challenged her to make accusations in person: '*tell me to my face Loser!*' (ibid.) and not hide behind graffiti.

This episode shows the struggles that operate in relationships and how estrangement and accusations arise after a romantic relationship had occurred. It also shows how the graffiti are used as a way of avoiding direct communication in person. My student called her '*a loser*', which might imply that her ex-girlfriend stands to lose by denying her lesbian identity. In our conversation, my student had mentioned that although '*homophobia is a social disease*', she has heterosexual male and female friends, who have given her much support and shown genuine understanding with regards to the graffiti allegations.

I have told this girl about this study and asked her permission to report her story and she had agreed. In this case, I did not deem it appropriate to tell her that she should not have written graffiti to abide by the College rules. I did not want her to be punished even more. I was more concerned about her preoccupations in handling the dynamics of her relations with her ex-girlfriend, than of using my power to silence her.

Although both girls seemed to be each other's rivals, both refrained from mentioning each other's full name and surname, thus complying with the secrecyes constitutive of the graffiti community. This was the only time that I actually talked with a student, who was directly involved with the graffiti. It is otherwise very difficult to identify the authors from their writings, as they give little or no clues.

This episode made me realize that behind each graffiti writing there might be a whole story, a saga, a tragedy, a trauma, an achievement, a new beginning, a lesson learnt or one to be learnt, a need to forgive and be forgiven, an uncertainty to be clarified or a weakness to be faced. The need for some students to settle personal issues is evident. I also realized that this study covers only the tip of the iceberg. My conversation with this girl confirmed that the validity of research 'is more or less impossible' (Plummer 2001, p.166) and uncovered the 'lie of chronological research' (ibid.), as my first impressions of the text concerning her, had been inaccurate.

Summary

This chapter has presented and ascribed possible meanings to the main graffiti themes. Underlying the informants' conceptions of these issues, there is an existential search for meaning and purpose in life, which some connect with 'love'. The data consolidates McRobbie's view that;

Girls are encouraged from all directions to interpret their sexuality in terms of romance, to give priority to notions of love, feeling, commitment, and the moment of bliss.

(McRobbie 2000, p.146).

The data confirms other findings about adolescents, who spend time thinking about romantic involvement long before they actually spend time with romantic partners (Richards *et al* 1998) and that negative feelings brought about by worry, disappointment, rejection and jealousy are often associated with these thoughts (ibid.). The data implies that some girls are breaking silences related to feelings, thoughts, joys and preoccupations about having a love life. The toilet talk about bisexual/heterosexual/lesbian femininity demonstrates a common thread weaved through most of the girls' stories; namely their discovery of parts of themselves through their romantic interactions and desires. The data indicates that the girls are at different stages of sexual development. Some are exploring how to respond to their own sexual desires and others are exploring their perceptions of their lover/partners' sexual preferences. The exploration of sexual experimentation within friendships is also considered important for some informants. Some girls demonstrate how the integration of sexual feelings into their forming identity is a complex process, because it entails regulating themselves, whilst handling the dynamics of their romantic/sexual attachments.

For some informants, the transitions between being single to being in a relationship and between being a virgin and not remaining one, are described as exciting but difficult. Girls, who are in the process of becoming fully sexually active, ask for practical advice about how best to be prepared, but they are repeatedly told that experience provides the best way to learn. Whereas some girls know where the line must be drawn regarding whether, when and how to have sex, others are not so sure. Some girls describe that they know what they want and how to achieve it, but others seem unclear. They make strange what is familiar to their peers as they question what constitutes 'normal'.

Some girls demonstrate that they are yearning for healthy, safe and caring romantic attachments. As they outline their uncertainties, they demonstrate that the origin, formation and development of romantic relationships require a complex interplay of forces. The transient nature of adolescent romantic relationships emerges through their narratives. The informants indicate that they pass through different emotions simultaneously; such as fear, excitement, jealousy, guilt and anger and that sometimes they have difficulty in handling the conflicts, which arise as a result. They experience emotions related to doubts about finding and being accepted by the 'right' lover and about difficulties in feeling cared for. This data is consistent with findings, which indicate that most adolescents are aware of conflicting emotions, which they experience simultaneously during romantic experiences (Harter and Buddin 1987). The data however shows that some informants still describe their confusion despite their emotional reasoning. For some informants this confusion arises from not having clear boundaries about what does/does not feel right and between what is/is not permissible. They are still experimenting with what works/does not work for them. These boundaries are dictated by a host of discourses, which some informants put to the test. Some of the informants' parents/caregivers are described as unsupportive in this process, since they hinder them from exploring new dating and sexual experiences. Some graffitists describe their parents as not recognising and validating their behaviour in the context of sexual relationships. Some parents/caregivers vehemently feed them the discourse that sexual desire involves personal but dangerous choices and that it needs to be harnessed, controlled and scrutinized.

The data indicates that aspects of romantic relationships can be harmful to some adolescents' overall health, as some of the reviewed literature shows. The data shows that dealing with sexual feelings might be a stressful experience for some teenage girls and romantic and sexual attachments could have far-reaching repercussions on their lives. None of the informants however specifically state that they experienced a reduction in self-esteem through their romantic attachments, which produced undesirable outcomes. They might not be aware of this or else they do not know how to articulate themselves regarding this matter.

The graffiti discursive arena presents the informants' subjectivities as complex and contradictory; including both agency and passivity. Some informants embody a reflexive individualism (Beck *et al* 1994) and emphasize freedom and self-determination in terms of seeking out romantic partners and expressing sexuality. The way some of their perceptions of sexuality are shaped however involves some of them to submit to male desire and act in conformity with traditional gender role models. The graffiti discourse gives evidence to opposing views regarding sexuality, love and the erotic. It reveals the diversity of opinion and practice of sexuality. It testifies to the different ways the authors perceive what turns them on/off and what is right/wrong. The girls' notion of sexual pleasure is not homogenous. The contradictions present in the texts seem to be a source of interest and a motivating drive towards the contribution of more graffiti debates. The data shows that 'the erotic does sneak into schools' (Bettis and Adams, 2006, p.124). The graffiti provide access to knowledge about new possibilities for erotic pleasure and suggest ways to encounter desires. The explicit descriptions of sex could be a counter reaction to sexual taboos revolving around the girls' lives, as lived in their families and surroundings. Some girls demand regulations regarding sexual activity. The girls actively police each other's sexuality, as has been found in other studies (eg. Kehily 2002). Some informants experience collisions between their need for sexual intimacy and their need for safety from pregnancy and diseases. Some seek advice on how to shape and direct their sexuality in safe ways, whilst simultaneously attempting to facilitate their sexual development and satisfaction.

Through their writings the girls participate in the social construction of pleasure (Ballaster *et al* 1991, p.162). Some graffiti claim the right to experience sexual

pleasure and defy the socially constituted notion that females possess lower levels of sexual desire than men (Allen 2003). These graffiti imply that their authors are not passive recipients of sexual activity initiated and expressed only by their lover. They take the initiative and ask the other graffiti readers for support. Sexual activity is sometimes described as being separated from emotional intimacy.

The data shows that some adolescents look for positive aspects of human relatedness. Their writings reflect their enthusiasm, idealism, dynamism, hope and adventurous spirit in their exploration of dating experiences. Others are pessimistic and their writings are characterised by pain and anguish:

What are we living for? If one has no love, friends and a family who love, isn't better just to die and leave all problems behind? (90).

No, it isn't better. You have to fight problems Life isn't made of beautiful things only. This is just an ugly period 4 u. It WILL PASS!! (ibid.).

Yeah! It hasn't passed for 17 years, & wont pass now! But I like your positivity (ibid.).

A life devoid of love is perceived as not worth living. Powell believes that human life is based on a constant search for love:

The success or failure of this search is the essential success or failure of a human life. To be human is to love and be loved. The basic cause of all mental and emotional illness is the inability to form deep and lasting human relationships of love.

(Powell 1974, p. 49).

This kind of 'deep and lasting' human bonding might not necessarily be taken to refer to a love relationship between two lovers involved sexually. It could also be experienced between any family members or friends. This chapter has shown that the graffiti world explores both the big, existential questions, such as '*What are we living for?*' (91), but at the same time, it is also narrowly defined in terms of common and typical teenage experiences, like for example, how to be accepted by friends, how to look good, whether to have sex and how to derive more erotic pleasure from sexual experiences:

Ordinary descriptions, ordinary talk, trail along with them as a property of the meaning of their terms, the extended social relations they name as phenomena.

(Smith 1988, p.157).

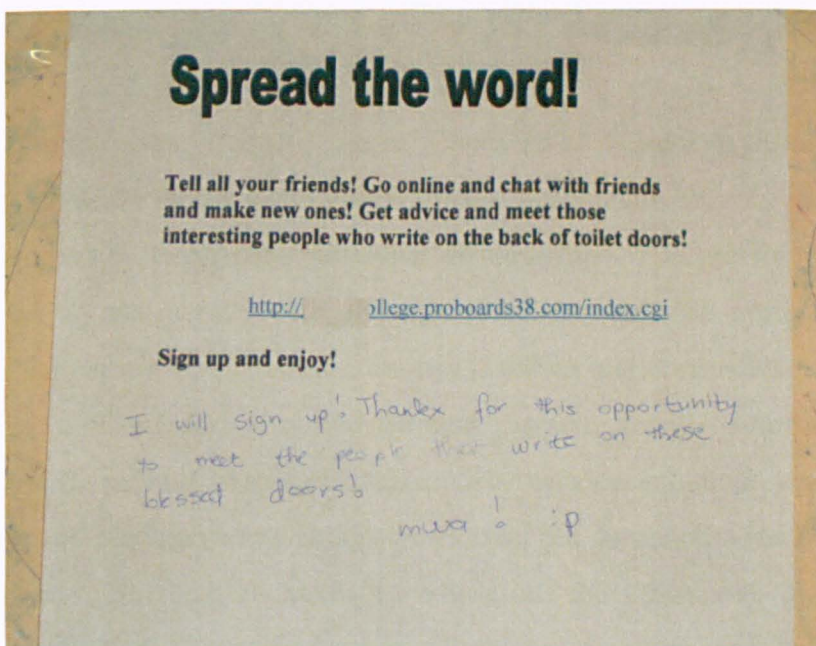
CHAPTER SEVEN:

'Spread the Word':

Conclusions and Recommendations



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Appendix

The Research Findings

The study aimed at finding out (i) possible reasons why a number of female sixth form students resort to writing graffiti at their College; (ii) the subject matter of their writings; (iii) the prevalent discourses, which reflect the social and cultural worlds the informants inhabit and which are employed and challenged by them. The following are the findings of (i) and (ii) in brief, which are followed by an outline of the graffiti discourse (iii). These findings are related to each other. A discussion about their relevance to possible debates about postsecondary sexuality and relationships education in Malta concludes the chapter:

(i) *Motivations*

1. The most common cause for writing graffiti stems from the need of advice, expressed in terms of specific pleas for help. Most informants framed their attempts at 'self-governance' (Goodley *et al* 2004, p.127) by positioning themselves as being in need of assistance from their schoolmates in a constructed environment of shared compassion and empathy. Help is asked on how to cope with sexual attraction, parental interference, jealousy, the pressure to look good and sexy, birth regulation, pregnancy and rejection by lovers. Advice is sought on how to regulate anxieties and survive emotional turmoil regarding these issues. As the girls seek some form of reassurance, they forge alliances across the boundaries of class, gender and national divides.

2. The second most frequent scope is structured within requests for further information related to strategies on how romantic attachments can survive and about the skills required to experience satisfying relationships. The graffiti forum offers psychic, reflexive and moral spaces, through which the girls can explore sources of happiness in the context of their wants, desires, passions and dreams related to matters of love and sex. The informants also demand explicit, detailed information about genital sex and about what to do in particular circumstances related to sexual activity. Attempts at de-eroticizing these writings are evident but do not occur as frequently. In trying to claim some form of 'sexuality education' the informants illuminate and designate sexual desire as a space through which they explore new possibilities. The

pressure to have sex by friends/lovers/partners has not been put forward by them as an object of inquiry.

3. Other motivations are concerned with the need to vent out anger against parents, 'bitches' and lovers, who have hurt or betrayed them. The girls learn how to other those who have caused them pain. They demonstrate the limitations of parents, boys and lesbian lovers. Some informants describe their (heterosexual) parents' own crisis in intimate relationships and how this impacts on their own perspectives. Described resistance of some parental regulative discourses is evident.

4. The writings demonstrate attempts at resisting the school's policy of silenced sexualities. The informants' narratives substantiate Fine's repeated claim that school curricula have rejected the task of sexual dialogue and critique (Fine and McClelland 2006; Fine 1988). The graffiti language of explicit sexual desire and passion defies the rigid, official language of the curriculum, which restricts the sexual domain. The graffitists produce a counterculture, although they do not specifically state this. Homophobia and heteronormative hegemony are also interrogated and resisted but also reproduced.

(ii) The graffiti subject matter

1. The understanding of gender identity and gender roles is sought. Gender is presented as a process, which could be exciting but also painful and rough. The existence of multiple femininities within the graffiti subculture is demonstrated. The informants perform their bisexual/lesbian/heterosexual/single/virgin/sexually active/pregnant self. They enquire about their personal/public self and experiment with different constructions of sexual and gendered identities.

2. The girls' toilet talk is gendered. Different sexual cultures operate within the College. The lesbian/bisexual informants generally address their questions to '*fellow lesbians*' (152) and not to the heterosexual girls. Yet some of the problems outlined are the same, irrespective of gender identity.

3. Different kinds of intimate relationships are described. Some informants struggle to differentiate themselves from partners they are sexually attracted to or involved with. The struggle to be their own person is evident and consequently they seek possibilities for autonomy. In their developmental process towards autonomy, they strive to acquire a clearer sense of self through the graffiti subculture.

4. The girls express their interest in sex and share their sexual feelings. Some girls attempt to grasp their own conceptualizations of their sexual knowledge. The graffiti reflect the differences between the adherents of a liberal practice of sexuality, fuelled by the media and the more conservative perspectives, which restrict sexual expression. Relationship sex and casual sex are distinguished and sexual partners are classified as either steady lovers or else as casual partners, or friends of one-night stands.

(iii) The prevalent discourses employed and challenged: The graffiti discourse

I have treated the graffiti texts as '*discursive clusters*' (Kehily 2002, p.7; emphasis in original). The girls' voices provide a discourse for them, through which they confront their existential questions and problems. The graffiti discourse refers to the ways the graffiti language works to organise fields of knowledge and practice. It offers means of negotiating and resolving tensions, which arise in romantic encounters. The discursive formations present in the graffiti texts indicate how sexualities are produced in school settings.

My study of discourses draws attention to the power dynamics in language by examining whose voice is being heard, who is silenced, who is objectified and who is marginalized. I perceive the graffiti discourse as being made up of a conglomeration of various discourses about the body, gender, love, sexualities, intimacy, romance and relationships. These discourses are shared and struggled over by the girls, through recognition of the need to work things out through writing about them. I have adopted Threadgold's (2000) advice that 'we should not 'burrow' into discourse looking for meanings', but rather 'look for the external conditions of its existence, its appearance and its regularity' and 'explore the conditions of its possibility' (p.49).

The girls employ a discourse of silence, which screams out an articulation of resistance and accommodation to phallogocentric order (Irigaray 1985b) and to the dominant discourses presented in chapter 2. Silence 'is the mark of hysteria' (Cixous 1981, p.49). Irigaray (1985a) suggests that 'hysteria is silent and at the same time it mimes'; it 'caricatures and deforms' (p.137). The girls reproduce and challenge the dominant discourse of silence regarding sexualities. Within the graffiti texts, attempts to break silences occur through advice seeking. Advice emerges as a discourse, which aims at transmitting assertiveness to girls who demonstrate self-doubt. The advice discourse is comprised mainly of the preoccupation with feelings of sexual attraction, love, romantic relationships, gender identity and sexual expression. Discourses of reciprocity and compassion are entwined with discourses of self-governance and self-improvement projects and enmeshed with discourses of restricted sexual practices and their counterparts. The graffiti discourse embodies advice, which partly reiterates typical parental responses in the form of societal dictates that convey approval or disapproval of established cultural norms. The graffiti discourse presumes sexual desire as foundational to ethics. Discourses, which link girls' respectability and dignity with sexual conduct, are reproduced. The graffiti discourse brings together the worlds of the 'psy complex' (Rose 1990, quoted in Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, p.168-170); that of the conservative catholic sexual morality and the more liberal sex world, which thrives in hard-core sex brought by satellite television. The discourses emanating from these spheres are not brought together in the graffiti world in a coherent manner but in a jumbled way. The graffiti discourse counteracts the 'missing discourse of desire' in the school curriculum (Fine and McClelland 2006; Allen 2004; Fine 1988). The girls contest discourses of heteronormativity but also show strictures in their conceptualisations about sexuality.

The informants employ the discourse of gender difference to explain how they construct barriers to defend and protect themselves from boys, who are perceived as the cause of their disillusionment and hurt in love. A considerable number of graffitiists manifest their binary thinking of male/female to warn each other about relationship problems. Consequently they position themselves as the subordinate and weak losers. Lesbian/bisexual graffitiists do not distinguish between the femme/butch lesbian personality, when expressing their disappointments with lovers. Discourses about the meaning of love adopted by the informants generally convey ambivalence.

The 'love hurts' discourse is repeatedly reproduced. Within heterosexual contexts, the girls give warnings about the pains and dangers of love. This discourse perpetuates the heterosexual notion of male weakness in emotional matters. Some girls present their convictions that boys will inevitably betray the girl who loves them because it is their nature to do so. The 'love hurts' discourse reminds girls that, '*After all, he's just another guy!!*' (129). Although some informants contest this knowledge, it is doubtful to what extent they regard it as a cultural construct. Some writings present the 'love hurts' notion as an accurate description of hetero relations and they perpetrate the idea that boys are untrustworthy. Some girls allude to the risk of losing themselves in a relationship. They perceive falling in love as dangerous and threatening to their own individuality and to being in control. Consequently they employ a discourse, which prioritises their girlfriends over male lovers. Adolescent girls juggle with these preoccupations even before they enter a relationship and some postpone romantic relationships altogether (Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg 2000).

While the 'love hurts' discourse produces fear of boys fuelled by an expectation of hurt, the 'love conquers all' discourse counteracts it and insists that despite their disappointments, girls must believe in true love. This discourse encourages heterosexual girls to remain attached to the hope that they will meet the exception to the rule, even if this is difficult. These two discourses are complementary. The first reminds girls that it is their destiny to suffer for love. The second promises that all their suffering and waiting will someday be worthwhile when the 'right one will come' (eg. Graffiti 113,115). This produces the 'true love waits' discourse. These three discourses produce a 'discourse network' (Sunderland 2004, p.45) and demonstrate how discourses 'crucially exist in constellations' (ibid.). Although some accounts of lesbian/bisexual experiences portray hurt and betrayal by lovers, they are not tinged with these three discourses.

The risk discourse is employed mostly by heterosexual girls as a warning against pregnancy and not so much about sexually transmitted diseases. The girls also warn each other about the 'bitches', who ruin 'established' relationships. When a 'bitch' attempts to 'steal' the lover, that relationship is described as 'at risk'. In heterosexual cheating the blame is very often put on the 'bitches' and not on the male lovers.

Some lesbian/bisexual informants are influenced by the same discourses, which shape the heterosexual girls' ways of thinking, in issues related to age difference and monogamy in relationships. Through their intimate disclosures some lesbian/bisexual graffitiists have created the possibility of trying to establish new forms of friendships and sexual relationships amongst themselves outside the lavatories and into the 'real' world. Through the graffiti discourse they experiment with inside/outside and private/public spatial boundaries.

The graffiti discourse is constituted by contradictions, which deal with the sexual realm. There are discourses, which promote female teenage virginity and the abstinence discourse and others, which acknowledge that adolescent full blown sexual expression is occurring inevitably. The discourse of abstinence is reproduced, challenged and resisted. The discourse of the erotic is highlighted but restrained since 'all discourses have regulatory effects' (Allen 2004, p.159). The graffiti texts embody messages of powerlessness and power, dependence and independence, commonality and segregation, liberation and conditioning, solidarity and loneliness, empathy and name-calling, reassurance and insecurity, self-assurance and homophobia. They offer a huge variety of visual statements, spanning from extreme to moderate and profound to meaningless. The graffiti discourse points towards attempts at emancipation, resistance and empowerment, but also towards subordination and victimization. The graffiti are conspicuous but hidden; they are both visible and invisible. They reveal both the narrowness of the girls' world as well as the infinity of their desire to love and be loved. Some contradictions are subtle; others are overt. According to postmodernist thinkers:

contradictions are discursive 'leaks' in the hegemonic discourse of femininity. They are analytically important because they are a point at which the reader can be alerted to the constructed nature of social texts.

(Currie 1999, p.255).

These contradictions reveal the same contradictions inherent in human nature and resonate with the contradictory experiences of lived femininity within patriarchal cultures. The toilet talk reflects the dilemmas and struggles present within the paradoxes and ironies inherent in the discourses associated with school policies and practices. For example, sixth form students are fed the discourse that they are the most academically gifted youth in Malta and that they are the holders of future

advantageous social positions, were they to access tertiary education. This contrasts with the implications of a school system, which denies them permission to express even the simplest acts of physical affection, such as holding their girl/boyfriends' hand on campus.

The girls' contradictory messages are a form of brainstorming, of searching for knowledge, of learning different ways of thinking and behaving. They demonstrate the multiple voices of pluralism. Some graffiti writers employ a deconstructionist approach in their analysis of each other's silent eloquence. They invite other readers to participate in the investigation of their thoughts. The graffiti contradictions could be confusing but they could also lead to the acquisition of new insights, which result from questioning ambiguities:

... a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription. This breaking force (*force de rupture*) is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text...

(Derrida 1982, p.317).

The graffiti discourse can be regarded as embodying some elements of this breaking force, especially when some girls advocate a 'feminist' and 'queer turn' discourse, which could provide moments of breakthrough for some. Its power lies in its persistency in addressing issues pertaining to meaning and fulfilment related to 'love', gender identities and sexualities. The girls adopt social and peer discourses to resist or undermine the discourses of schooling, but they also reproduce institutional discourses to communicate the familiar. The effectiveness of their resistance is questioned, since it is not being addressed directly to the policymakers involved, but is constrained to the lavatories. Not all oppositional behaviours effectively challenge an oppressive status quo (Giroux 1983). Most of the graffiti artists seem to have little insight about their own voicelessness, about the nature of domination and marginalization. They reinforce notions like pleasing boys and of complying with female roles associated with being patient and passive. Rather than disrupt the power of gender stereotypes, some graffiti highlight it and the discourse of subordination remains unexamined. For the girls, the subject matter of most of the graffiti messages, do not seem to deal overtly with politics. Effective resistance has a revealing function that fosters a critique of power and opportunities for self-reflection and struggle for emancipation (*ibid.*, pp.107-111). Most graffiti artists do not seem to be operating this

kind of resistance, described by Giroux. Some girls describe the very act of writing graffiti as stupid and urge the writers to take concrete action and not just whine about their problems:

REALLY, Am I the only one who finds these fuckin' advice on the toilet door extremely stupid?? Everybody's got problems but COME ON: GET ALIFE!! (187).

*Lighten up for God's sake!** (ibid.).

Not all acts of resistance against school authority have revolutionary effects (Walkerdine 1990). Some graffitiists seem to be craving voice, understanding, empathy, affection, belonging and knowledge, but they seem to lack an understanding of the roots of these needs or the actions needed to fulfil them. I conceive the graffiti discourse as an initial stage, which mingles resistance with the reproduction of submission:

... resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge or where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power.

(Weeden 1987, p.111).

Discussion of Findings

The graffitiists exert power over each other but also contest and realign their own values. Some question their own responses to the graffiti images. Their strengths lie in their confrontation of their feelings and conflicts, which I myself had avoided at their age, but instead buried myself in studying for academic examinations. They show concerns in searching for who they are. Some recognise that this search is lifelong. Their weakness lies in the limitations surrounding their written confrontations particularly when they disseminate unreliable, incorrect and misleading advice, such as that related to HIV transmission (155).

Secrecies surrounding the informants' feelings, perspectives and beliefs suggest that some girls lack the skills to confront their lovers or persons concerned with their romantic life but hide behind anonymity. Their voices are not developed well enough to direct their problems to persons involved in their life:

... girls, or some girls, develop circuitous strategies for salvaging autonomy, they develop a cynical, often amused distance from male society or respectable society, however they see it.

(Cain 1989, p.16).

Some informants detail their experimentation with sexual and emotional intimacy. They seek paths of learning about how to direct their sexual feelings to increase closeness and enrich their relationship (eg. 170). Some informants declare their desire to get to know and understand their lover/s in a deeper way and not remain on a superficial level. Episodes recounting pseudo-intimacy are debated. Pseudo-intimacy develops in the absence of a stable sense of self, presumably due to the fear of losing ego boundaries (Orlofsky 1993).

The graffiti education functions paradoxically as both a status quo as well as an emancipatory, even transgressive movement. The underlying questions of most of the graffiti corpus are: 'I am not happy in this situation. What do I want? Do I have any other alternatives? How can I overcome the obstacles, which are hindering me to reach what I want?'. Yet the introspective question: '*Why* am I in this situation?' is rarely ever written. Generally the girls' evaluation of their behaviour is limited, as their advice does not deal with the issues in depth. Although the advice discourse occurs within a collaborative practice, it is generally not conclusive, as it lays out opposing views of what is acceptable/unacceptable and what should/should not be done to solve the described problems. Yet advice might provide experiences of self-discovery for both writers and readers. Personal problems and accounts of crisis put the graffiti readers' own worries or dilemmas into perspective. Those who are not passing through such difficult problems seem to derive a sense of relief from such accounts. They might heed the warnings of the graffiti mates about potential problems they might encounter. The graffitists position themselves as both learners and teachers. Advice continuously constructs and keeps the graffiti subculture alive.

The graffiti signal some of the ways through which the transformation process from girl into woman might occur. Haraway (1991a) believes that while the concept of being a woman lacks innocence and is unfit to be the basis of women's freedom, the acquisition of liberation is possible through increasing consciousness by asking questions, mapping mechanisms of power and seeing new alternatives and

possibilities. Most of the graffiti girls are at the initial stage of the journey towards emancipation and 'liberation'. They perceive the graffiti messages as scripts of femininity, which emphasise the cultural and biological dictates of girlhood. Some of their writings confirm other data, which holds that student cultures reproduce gender stereotypes (Epstein *et al* 2003; Mac An Ghail 1994). With the exception of described situations, which detail dating violence, cheating or the lover's involvement in drug addiction, most advice directs the homosexual girls not to break up with the present lover, but encourages them towards giving the heterosexual relationship more chance to develop, thus consolidating the overarching imperative of having a man (Ferguson 1983). Pipher (1994) maintains that in real life, girls can respond to the cultural mandate of traditional femininity in one of four ways: they can conform, withdraw, be depressed or get angry. Depression is more likely to occur in those who blame themselves for failure, whilst anger often results when they blame others. The graffiti reveal these four attitudes.

The presence of the graffiti subculture within the College attempts subversive practice but also acts in conformity with its hegemonic control. Graffiti conversations do not generally inquire the broader political assumptions underlying the issues tackled. This study however recognises '*moments*' (Kehily 2002, p.7; emphasis in original) when I sense possible attempts by the informants to break the personal/political divide. Political underpinnings of my research inquiry suggest that there is a gap between the personal/political. '*Différance*' (Derrida 1976) is present between the policymakers and students, and between myself, as teacher/researcher and the informants/co-creators of knowledge.

Academic studies never emerge as a concern for the informants. They do not state that their romantic relationships difficulties are impacting on their academic performance at school. They do not state whether or not their emotional problems are distracting them from their studies. Described situations, such as the break up of a dating relationship, discord with parents or the realization that they got pregnant cause turmoil in girls' lives. Such problems might turn their attention away from academic studies, unless books and examinations serve as means of escapism.

The absent mention of supportive systems coming from adults reinforces the informants' isolation and need for advice. Some of the described parents' attitudes towards their adolescents' romantic experiences seem incongruent with the perceived needs of their adolescent children. For some informants this has created the need to depart from parental attachments. Despite this however, they claim that they still continue to be dictated and controlled by them; much to their frustration.

If only students get to know about the impact of discourses ...

Discourses that limit the debate over the representation of sexual minorities, women, and/or people of color contribute to redefinitions of the imagined nation that affirm their absence.

(Guzmán 2003, p.46)

So do discourses that neglect postsecondary sexuality education curricula. The data points to the need for the recognition of the impact, which discourses have on adolescents' lives regarding sexualities, love and intimate relationships, in order for them to become more autonomous in making independent choices; including the choice of whether to be in romantic, sexual relationships or not. This implies facilitating the challenge for them in being their own person and taking ownership of their lives. This process is crucial in their development. The achievement of autonomy and independence from adults however does not mean that adolescents are capable of self-medicating and self-parenting themselves when confronted with serious problems, such as drug addiction, abortion, suicide and pregnancy. In the face of abuse and trauma, professional support is necessary. They need to know whom to reach for help. The seeking of social support by adolescents is associated with decreasing aggressive behaviour (Little and Garber 2004).

From a poststructuralist perspective I recognise that an overall strategy for sexuality education faces challenges, which deal with working out possibilities that challenge various discourses. Becoming aware of the effects of discourses is only part of the learning process. Irigaray (1985b) insists that one cannot simply leap outside 'phallographic discourse' but rather move 'continuously from the inside to the outside' (p.122). This study argues in favour of a democratisation of discourses. This necessitates a sexuality education, which addresses the complexities of discourses and

encourages students to critically examine the diversity and contradictions regarding sexuality and relationships issues.

Implications for sexuality education curricula

When research is carried out, there seems to be an audience consisting of significant people, whose lives the researcher unconsciously or consciously aims at making a contribution to. I have constantly asked myself: 'Who benefits?' (Bohan and Russell 1999) from the research study. Maltese postsecondary students and policymakers, as the targeted audience, demand a revision of policies regarding the absence of sexuality education. This study argues in favour of learning and teaching approaches in sexuality education, which validate students' voice and sexual cultures as other researchers have suggested (Kehily 2002; Allen 2001; Measor 2000; Epstein and Johnson 1998).

Chapter 1 has asked: *Can sum I learn how 2 love you? (1)*. The girls demonstrate that they themselves are willing to learn and teach about 'love'. My answer is also in the affirmative. People *can* learn to love. It is one of education's main purposes to teach how. Having the opportunity to learn about how to love is a human right. The graffitiists have *never* directly expressed the need to have sexuality education. It is their right to acquire 'emotional and social capital' (borrowing Bourdieu's concept of capital, 1986). I regard education as the vehicle through which this acquisition of knowledge and acquirement of critical skills related to human emotions and relatedness could be made possible. This investment is worthwhile, because through the establishment of happy, meaningful relationships, adolescents, future adults and society in general would benefit. Capital is not only generated through money and material assets but also through positive emotions like happiness and serenity, which translate themselves into better human relations and in turn even more economic wealth.

Adults' descriptions of their parents' behaviour towards them in early childhood have been found to be predictors of the nature of their most important adult love relationship (Hazan and Shaver 1987). Consequently, it is necessary for postsecondary sexuality and relationships education to be engaged with supporting

adolescents to learn the impact, which their childhood attachments are having and which might continue to have on their lives and present the notion of relationships and love as a process, which could encompass dynamic experiences that could change over time. Although intimate interactions from early life tend to influence relationships, which are formed later on, they do not necessarily have to serve as the basis upon which they are constructed and lived. Adolescents have the potential to recognize that their development involves changes as they experience new attachment relationships and that they are the authors of their lives.

In terms of a reconstructive postmodernism (Griffin 2000), sexuality education is conceptualized as seeking ways of how to listen to students' voices. From this perspective, *what* the female students are writing on toilet doors needs to be regarded as more problematic, than the fact that they are breaking the College rules through their scribbling. The girls' concerns with 'love' imply that the curriculum needs to address love concepts, understood not in the limited sense within romance and sex, but on a wider level. Halpin (2003) spells out the need to 'remoralise' educational practice and place an understanding of the good and an orientation to love at its centre. The informants' questions regarding issues related to identity, power, love, dynamics, sexual knowledge and the erotic demand attention. Critical engagement with these issues constitutes an important role in schooled sexuality education. An education divorced from reality and from what happens outside the school premises is very limited. I conceptualise one of the purposes of sexuality education as engaging students in a critique of the ways feelings and experiences of sexuality and love are constructed through cultural and political underpinnings. This view is also propounded by Epstein *et al* (2003). Girls, more than boys, complain that the exploration of emotions is neglected in sexuality and relationships education (Buchanan and Ten Brinke 1996, quoted in Measor *et al* 2000, p.123). I regard sexuality education as a medium, which gives students the opportunity to develop analytic abilities and critically explore the richness and mystery of sexual expression by enabling them to explore and develop their own assumptions and value systems regarding sexual activity, heterosexuality, birth control, identity, homophobia and related issues.

The study implicates that the task of education is to support adolescents to become individuated so that they can make independent choices. The informants' stories demonstrate their need to learn about 'openness', self-disclosure and the development of mutual trust. This study also argues that it is beneficial for adolescents to learn about the complexity of human attachment and understand the influence of relational trauma and the impact it has on families, adolescents, children and society. At the risk of medicalizing and pathologizing romantic relationships, I argue that students need to know what causes the pervasive breakdown of interpersonal connectedness in society. They need to know about possible negative outcomes, which result from dysfunctional relationships and which could set the stage for violence, abuse of substances and of sex. Although it is not the role of classroom curricula to provide psychotherapy, were students to have timetable space allocated for the exploration of the effects of childhood traumas and parental conflict on adolescent behaviour and relationships, they would be more aware of ways of how to overcome distrust, fear of intimacy and pain caused by low self-esteem. Early indicators through sexuality education of problems in romantic adolescent relationships, such as victimization or abuse, may prove to be important targets for intervention.

Education is recognized both as a site for struggle and as a tool for change by feminists (Briskin and Coulter 1992; Hooks 1989). Through sexuality education students can deconstruct the disabling 'love hurts' discourse of victimization, especially when they listen to different girls' and boys' own positionings in experiences of love, hurt, trust and betrayal. This implies a sexuality education which takes ownership of a positive outlook towards sexuality and romantic relationships and which acknowledges students as active interpreters of adolescent experiences whilst supporting them to review their personal stories according to their particular circumstances and needs.

The discourse of the erotic employed by the informants suggests that debates about experiences of sexual desire and pleasure are to be integrated in sexuality education programmes, not only because it constitutes an area of interest but also because it impacts on adolescents' overall wellbeing. Sexuality education generally equates young people's sexual health with the absence of sexually transmitted infections and the avoidance of unintended pregnancies (Aggleton and Campbell 2000) and this is

limiting (Fine and McClelland 2006; Allen 2004; Fine 1988). As the informants try to fill the existing gaps in their curriculum, they indicate that they want to learn about sexual desire and the dynamics of romantic relationships. I propose a balance between educating for an enriching sexual life and educating for risk reduction: ‘... it is naïve to educate for pleasure without attending to risk; but more perverse to imagine that teaching only about risk will transform human behaviour’ (Fine and McClelland 2006, p.326).

A number of guidelines in relation to the study’s findings are aimed at informing policy debate about the provision of postsecondary sexuality and relationships education. A summary of these practical guidelines recommend that sexuality education curricula:

- Uncover the invisibility of dialogue on sexual subjectivities and desire.
- Support students in acquiring self-esteem, a positive body image and self-care.
- Acknowledge the multiplicity of sexual desire in relation to adolescent experiences and provide adequate, detailed information about sexual expression.
- Discuss adolescents’ narratives about sexualities and romantic relationships.
- Assist students in exploring their own values about sexuality in an environment that is ethical, caring, supportive and non-threatening.
- Encourage dialogue with and respect for people of differing beliefs and practices regarding sexualities in the context of multicultural pedagogies.
- Explore how sexuality is constitutive of gender identities.
- Discuss how sexual desire informs agency and responsibility and how experiences of romantic relationships involve dynamics, which affect one’s life and those of others.
- Frame sexuality in positive ways and not as an aspect of life, which has to be feared and repressed.
- Challenge discursive spaces which frame erotic desire and sexual expression as necessarily dangerous and in need of resistance.
- Discuss different ways of knowing who ‘the right one’ is and debate various understandings of the concepts of love and sexual intimacy.

- Impart communication skills in view of interpersonal dialogue with a partner/s about feelings and perspectives related to meaning in romantic relationships; degree of commitment; whether, when and how to have sex; sexual exclusivity, non-monogamy and birth regulation.
- Promote skills of dialogue with friends, parents/caregivers and educators about sexual activity.
- Interrogate the effects of power relations related to sexualities and gender identities both within interpersonal relationships and in society.
- Engage students in discussion about the social elements of desire and sexualities.
- Aim at teaching students how to clarify their thoughts, articulate themselves and develop agency in situations of ambiguity related to confused feelings of sexual attraction, 'unavailable lovers' and 'love triangles'.
- Promote a critical understanding and negotiation of contradictory discourses about sexualities emanating from lived realities, educational institutions, popular culture, friends and family.
- Interrogate childhood attachments with caregivers as a site, which could potentially affect present and future ways of relating with partners/lovers.
- Enable students to reflect on the root causes of damaging romantic relationships.
- Examine why some adolescents are especially vulnerable to victimization and susceptible to becoming attached to partners who are violent/abusive and/or who are involved with drugs.
- Direct these students towards counselling services.
- Offer access to a language of empowerment, through simplified perspectives about sexualities and gender emanating from feminist and queer perspectives.
- Provide spaces of resistance to 'hate speech' by preventing harassment of minority youth not simply by advocating 'tolerance' but by deconstructing heteronormative dominance and empowering adolescents, who are at risk of marginalization.
- Investigate why homophobia is prevalent and what it means for some adolescents to be part of sexual minorities.
- Encourage a sense of entitlement to romantic relationships and sexual experiences without pressuring those students who wish to delay these.

- Address ways of how to care for the self in the aftermath of romantic relationships and present different ways of how to deal with feelings caused by the rejection of friends/lovers/partners.
- Support students to progress from passive recipients of knowledge, who perceive dominant discourses as sources of truth, to active thinkers engaged in the construction of knowledge through reason, intuition and collaboration.

Policymakers have the task to examine structural problems that prevent these recommendations from reaching their potential by challenging institutional barriers and by interrogating the resounding silences that surround sexuality education curricula.

Further Research

I identify the role of Maltese students' views on sexuality and romantic attachments as an area for further research. The complexities related to romantic relationships demand further attention:

the basic problem of the coherence of behaviour across relationships is rooted in a series of very complex questions whose ultimate answers cumulatively lie in the interpretation of a large body of research yet to be completed.

(Roisman *et al* 2001, p.168).

Since I work at the University of Malta, I often use the female students' toilets on campus there. Over the last decade, I have never found one single word written on any of the immaculately clean toilet doors. Most of the students of my College go on to study at this university, which is the only one in Malta. This has led me to ask about what could have happened to the graffitists and why and where has their urge to pour out problem after problem disappeared. I wonder sometimes whether they have resolved their intimate relationship problems or whether they have other opportunities to deal with these issues. Some might be too busy to give any importance to their intimate relationships. The rite of passage from postsecondary to tertiary education could be signalled through the end of graffiti writings on toilet doors. This could be the focus of further research.

I have always been concerned about some of my colleagues lecturing at the College and University, who despite their academic excellence and brilliance in their field, lack basic emotional intelligence and have been or still are in destructive relationships. Whereas they have fully developed different aspects of themselves, they have neglected their emotional development with regards to intimate, romantic relationships. My concern spills over university students, who might endure the same pain during their adult life.

Concluding Comments: The Power of the Text

The research journey is not complete, since my engagement with the graffiti continues everyday. This study has alerted me to feminist and queer theory perspectives, which had not been familiar to me before. Feminist scholars (eg. Crawford 2004; Anderson and Accomando 2002; Potts 1998; Faludi 1991) also influenced my perceptions of self-help books, which often promote a submissive type of female sexuality as part of the advice for achieving a successful (very often heterosexual) relationship, and which position women in need of self-improvement projects (Worell 1988). I have become critical of self-help books together with some women's magazines and women's television programmes, which sustain the 'psy complex' (Rose 1990, quoted in Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, p.168-171) and produce a dominant discourse that locates women as powerless and lacking assertiveness (ibid.). Just as some of the graffitiists have written that they have moved on, so have I. I have now passed the self-help literature phase and I am engaging in literature, which exposes the personal/political dichotomy. I still acknowledge however that I have benefited from self-help books. Survivors of child sexual abuse have generally found self-help literature to be of tremendous value (Gonzalez 1993). I have also been informed by feminist researchers, who have questioned the manner in which women, who have experienced child sexual abuse are pathologized and seen as emotionally disabled. This has resulted in a conceptual shift that stresses strengths rather than weaknesses (Middleton-Moz 1992; Sanford 1991). As a 'feminist' teacher now my involvement with students requires more than before the leading out of students' voices:

In terms of feminist pedagogy, the authority of the feminist teacher as intellectual and theorist finds expression in the goal of making students themselves theorists of their own lives by interrogating and analyzing their own experience.

(Weiler 1991, p.462).

The research has generated new questions in me, which ask about possible pedagogical practices, which could move policymakers and educators into action. Some of the data has challenged my pre-held assumptions on bisexuality. From the graffitiists I learnt that articulating rather than ignoring pain is beneficial even if anonymous assistance in secretive, deviant and segregated settings is not ideal. By addressing their needs and not remain in denial, they demonstrate their desire to be empowered and overcome barriers. Embedded within the toilet talk there is a struggle to develop and improve one's self-image, make decisions and take actions such as determining means of participating in relationships in ways, which are relevant and meaningful to them.

Returning to Haraway's question, 'Is there anything other than a despairing location?' (Penley and Ross 1991, p.6), the graffiti suggest that yes, there is and that this something 'other' is hope:

COME ON GO 4 it! 2 bad experiences don't mean you're doomed for life! Don't b afraid it'll turn out bad Go with the flow and c what happens. And even if it doesn't work out still try again in other relationships. Honey you've got to Risk in life otherwise it'll be boring And you'd never learn anything (188).

The risk discourse fused with notions of self-learning and learning by discovery is employed to assure the girls that things might turn out fine and that if they try, they are bound to succeed one day. They teach hope by accentuating possible positive outcomes. Halpin (2002) discusses hope as a relational construct, which in an educational context develops the 'Good' in students (p.30). To counteract expressions of despair some informants manifest their care towards writers of pessimistic feelings. This implies that they desire the presence of an ethics of care and of love in their curriculum. The postsecondary national minimum curriculum itself promotes 'a caring attitude towards others' (Ministry of Education 1991).

Through the graffiti, sexuality issues are slowly 'coming out'. The closet they are coming out of is the hidden curriculum. Discussions about sexualities are emerging from the students' humanness, which encompass their feelings, anxieties, hopes and

which stem from their everyday interactions, experiences and lives. The agents who are bringing about this displacement are the female students themselves. The toilet doors are opening 'doors' for these girls: *'hey girls, if you have a prob. don't write it on a door and hope for an answer, e-mail me at ~~XXXXX~~ Helpful reply guaranteed! xxx'* (189, E-mail address digitally cancelled by myself. The words 'bathroom door' were part of the email address). The toilet doors are a starting point for new adventures, experiences and learning: *'... we wish to help cause we know how it feels... but we don't know how to help... meet or something like that... any ideas??'* (190). This request was taken up and concrete details were given: *'Ok dear... we meet at outside near the skip outside canteen next Friday at 10.00! love you cya xxxxxx'* (ibid.). An internet chat room was created by the graffiti girls to invite wider participation in the debates (see Appendix). The informants' attempts at re-creating themselves are mediated through new acquaintances, which journey from spaces on the toilet doors to the meeting place near the skip, onto the internet (186) and from there towards who knows how many other new destinations. The authors pass on the graffiti concept from one generation to the next. At the start of the academic year in October the new first year students are welcomed and introduced to the graffiti world (191). This intergenerational link identifies the graffiti as historical practices. As the domains of public/private are crumbling (Plummer 1995, p.9), I ask: Will the legacy of graffiti writing end and be replaced by a more effective and humane sexuality education? Yet the graffiti's death is doubtful, even if sexuality education were to be instated in the curriculum. The girls' own space and adult free zone on toilet doors is regenerated as their search for knowledge continues.



Welcome Guest. Please Login or Register.
May 1st, 2005, 1:30pm

« Home »

[Home](#) [Help](#) [Search](#) [Login](#) [Register](#)

user: pass: login

News

Welcome to the Boards!

Forum Name	Topics	Posts	Last Post
General			
General Board You can talk about anything here <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	1	1	Mar 16 th , 2005, 10:58am by Fable
Ideas and suggestions Any ideas for improvement, or suggestions for more stuff? <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	0	0	N/A by N/A
The toilets!			
Little boys' room For all those lovely lads! <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	0	0	N/A by N/A
Little Girls' Room Talk to the advisers, or give advice yourself! <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	1	1	Apr 17 th , 2005, 1:28pm by Fable
Students' Council			
Pulse board All you Pulse supporters out there <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	0	0	N/A by N/A
SDM Board All SDM supporters! <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	0	0	N/A by N/A
Sports			
Sports at JC Talk about all sporting activites at the JC <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	0	0	N/A by N/A
Other sports! For all sports discussions not realted to school, such as international football and F1 <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	0	0	N/A by N/A
Fashion			
Fashion Chat For all those fashion disasters as well as tips from other members <i>Moderator: Fable</i>	0	0	N/A by N/A

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