

TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK INTO SPACES OF SOCIAL ACTION: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF PROJECT INTERACTION, THE GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND TWO-SPIRIT INITIATIVE OF MCGILL UNIVERSITY'S SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the question of how universities can be encouraged to address the mental health concerns of GLBT-SQ people and communities from a perspective of solidarity. In so doing, the authors take a case study approach, using Project Interaction: The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Two-Spirit Initiative of McGill University's School of Social Work, to critically reflect upon the challenges arising from the development of an alternative organization within academia. The purpose of this reflection is to highlight how normal operations at work on university campuses, and within health and allied health curriculum, can be disrupted with the goal of providing momentum for the creation of affirmative space, the advancement of educational initiatives, and the building of opportunities for social change.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health issues facing gay, lesbian, bisexual and Two-Spirit¹/queer (GLBT-SQ) people have long been misrepresented and neglected in universities across Canada. Health and allied health disciplines have an abysmal track record with respect to both the quality and quantity of educational initiatives focused on the realities and needs of GLBT-SQ people and communities. To date, the question of how universities can transform both space and curriculum in order to address the mental health concerns of GLBT-SQ people and communities from a perspective of solidarity rarely has been addressed. This article maps out the context of such a question on the Canadian landscape and responds to it by critically reflecting on the challenges arising from one recent initiative, Project Interaction: The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Two-Spirit Initiative of McGill University's School of Social Work. The purpose of this reflection is to offer Project Interaction as an example of how normal operations at work on university campuses, and within health and allied health curriculum, can be disrupted with the intent of creating affirmative space, advancing educational initiatives on the health and mental health issues facing GLBT-SQ people, and building opportunities for social change. We hope that the lessons learned in creating Project Interaction will be useful to others in Canada, both inside and outside academia, in their efforts to transform the education and practice of health professionals, including those in the field of mental health.

Reflexivity and Authorship

The question of how to encourage Canadian schools of social work to take the mental health of GLBT-SQ people seriously is neither neutral nor, in the conventional sense, merely academic. Rather, as four co-authors,² we pose the question and examine it from our interests in advancing both academic knowledge and practical action within the academy. We are each, however, located differently from the perspective of personal, social, and professional identity, and this has led to important and necessary tensions in the development of this article. We have written a piece which attempts to reflect critically on our initiative while striving to be conscious of our varied narratives: as gay, as lesbian, and as heterosexual; as men and as women; as social workers and as community organizers; as educators and as mental health professionals. We have struggled in the writing to represent the Project in its entirety while respecting our unique and varied positions within the Project. The connection between identity and social change has been central to the development of the current project. Indeed, those of us who came together to make change at the School of Social Work were driven by personal, social, and political yearnings. The current representation is but a fragment—our own take on what happened and continues to happen and on the lessons we feel we learned and can be engaged by those of other contexts. This piece focuses on consensus areas agreed upon by all co-authors. However, it is missing many voices—most notably those of past and current field students, as well as of Two-Spirit people on the organizing committee. While the issue of personal location and the impact of the project on our own lives cannot be explicitly addressed in the current article because of space limitations, they are ever-present in the formulation of themes and ideas.

CONTEXTUALIZING PROJECT INTERACTION

The Wider Context

The queering of schools of social work is both recent and takes place within a specific historical context. Past reigning discourses within schools of social work in Canada have constructed and inscribed GLBT-SQ sexualities as pathologies. The schools functioned as part of a wider network of professional and state apparatuses to regulate the application and enforcement of these sexualities as mental illnesses. Until 1973, the influential American Psychiatric Association classified these sexualities as a mental disorder, and Canadian schools of social work followed suit. Therefore, until quite recently, schools of social work, alongside other health and allied health departments, have contributed significantly to discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, Two-Spirit people, transgendered people, transsexuals, and other queer³ people in Canada (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Mallon 1998; Mullaly, 2002).

In the recent past, particularly since the declassification by the American Psychiatric Association of GLBT-SQ people as bearers of mental illness, the predominant discourse within schools of social work in Canada has been one of ambivalence (Mallon, 1998), often manifesting in a reluctant acknowledgement of the population while, at the same time, shrugging off the validity of their issues as distinct (Aronson, 1995; Cain, 1996; O'Neil, 1995; Mule, 2002; Newman, 1989; Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2001). No longer—officially at least—an illness to either cure or from which to protect others, this more recent predominant discourse is an educational variant of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” (Brotman, Ryan, Jalbert, & Rowe, 2002), guided by the logic that GLBT-SQ sexualities don’t or shouldn’t make any difference

to the dynamics of social work. Stated differently, people should be seen and treated equally and, therefore, the same. In very practical terms, this heterosexist discourse enforces the premise that GLBT-SQ people should be seen and treated as heterosexuals or, at the very least, as clients whose sexual orientation should not be broached unless they are explicitly heterosexual. Hence, GLBT-SQ people are rendered, or rather remain, invisible and/or silenced (Aronson, 1995; Warner, 1999; Williams, 1997). It also has resulted in a lack of resources allocated to addressing their health and mental health issues (Mallon, 1998). This discourse, whether well-intended or not, has significantly perpetuated and consolidated heterosexism, as well as abetted homophobia, bi-phobia, and transphobia within Canadian schools of social work (Aronson, 1995; Cain, 1996; O'Neil, 1995).

Social service agencies intervene at some of the most crucial moments in GLBT-SQ persons' lives, often at times of crisis and conflict. Research has identified that GLBT-SQ youth and adults are at a higher risk for suicidal ideation and depression as a result of living in hostile environments (Ryan & Chervin, 2000). These are areas of mental health practice in which social workers are often involved. Aging lesbians, gays, and other queer people are particularly vulnerable and dependent within the decision-making and brokering powers of social workers and social work agencies, as their environments and futures are decided through hetero-normative relations of power and practices (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Brotman, Ryan, & Cormier, 2003; Clermont & Sioui-Durand, 1997; Mallon, 1998; Swan, 1998).

Training that instructs intervention in ways that ignore and disrespect people of GLBT-SQ identities has had a devastating impact not only on the populations served by social workers, but also—and this is significant—on GLBT-SQ students of social work, their GLBT-SQ professors and supervisors, and GLBT-SQ social workers once they graduate (Appleby, 1998; Aronson, 1995; Cain, 1996; Ryan, Brotman, & Malowaniec, 2002; Van Soest, 1996). The lack of safety felt by GLBT-SQ social work students and faculty across the country has been palpable, if not adequately documented. This situation is compounded by the discrimination many students and faculty have encountered upon proposing GLBT-SQ areas of interest or topics of research. Indeed there has been a pervasive absence of affirmation of GLBT-SQ issues by social work professors, accreditation bodies, and professional associations in most provinces. When the contrary is the case, it is almost always only a very recent or rare development. Within research bodies, there is an absence or dearth of openings to conduct research related to GLBT-SQ issues (Mule, 2002; Newman, 1989; Ryan, Brotman, & Malowaniec, 2002; Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2001). It is only more recently that there has been emerging recognition of the importance of acknowledging sexual orientation and gender identity as aspects of a person and her/his situation that stand to be addressed, rather than erased, for ensuring health and well being. Those parts of social work curricula that relate to GLBT-SQ people or issues are predominantly framed by HIV or AIDS (relating to men who have sex with other men, including gay and bisexual men) and rarely address bisexual women, lesbians, or transsexuals (Mule, 2002; Newman, 1989; Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2001). Reference to gay, bisexual, and queer men is thus almost always carried out within the formal contexts of illness and of addressing or trying to prevent a public health threat. While arguably relevant and responsive, the contexts of disease and public threat providing motivation and sense-making to the inclusion of GLBT-SQ people and issues nonetheless hold a familiar ring, perpetuating a homophobic and heterosexist historical discourse that has yet to be superseded.

A unique focus on disease prevention also tends to ignore or marginalize the significant legal and social changes related to sexual orientation issues across Canada and the effects of such changes for both policy and practice. While schools of social work have taken further steps than many other professional schools, this lack of recognition of legal and social advances has the very practical consequence of negating those advances and perpetuating the oppression of the very people they pretend to include and serve. This slow emergence of recognition can be seen as integral to wider attempts of queering the curriculum and research within Canadian universities.⁴

As GLBT-SQ people are present within all communities of Canada, schools of social work that ignore GLBT-SQ people in effect multiply that oppression and exclusion experienced by racialized and minority ethnic and religious groups of Canada, as well as by First Peoples' communities and nations (Waiters, 1998). As well, given that GLBT-SQ people span all age groups, significant numbers of youth and the elderly, who already have significantly less access to resources and less autonomy, are further marginalized by the effects of the very training institutions which view themselves as champions and defenders of "those in need" (Appleby & Anastas, 1998; Mallon, 1998).

The thread travelling throughout the various discourses on sexual orientation and gender identity constructed and successively contested over time within schools of social work is the tension between the mandate of social work as one of social change and the everyday job of social workers as, more often than not, one of social control. This contradiction—as experienced by faculty, administrators, curriculum developers, practicum supervisors, and students in schools of social work across Canada—must be made explicit for all to constructively engage and deliberate toward making informed, conscious choices. To date, the social work profession has, at most, only tentatively promoted equity and encouraged social change with respect to sexual orientation and gender identity.

The Specific Contexts

McGill University and its School of Social Work. Project Interaction's specific context, McGill University, is complex and contradictory. On the one hand, McGill, like most universities, is a site of conservatism, a continuing and, for some, cherished legacy of its elitist beginnings. It is no accident of history that James McGill, its benefactor, was a slave-holder; the university was initiated to perpetuate the privilege of upper-class white Christian heterosexual men in those professions most becoming to them. Simultaneous to this living legacy, politically progressive organizations and individuals have made their presence felt and have advocated for important changes to curriculum, representation, and decision-making at the university. Despite its conservative roots and realities, today's McGill does reflect a range of debate, values, and viewpoints which create a space—albeit a small space—to advocate for inclusion of GLBT-SQ issues on campus. Several student organizations have made this possible, most notably Queer McGill and the Women's Union. While the general institutional context is indeed politically conservative, with curriculum change within disciplines often perceived as slow or non-existent, interruptions through activism are many and continuous. Individual professors, rather than departments as whole units, are often partners and allies to student-initiated contestation of ruling discourses. Sporadic small groups of like-minded professors certainly have created scholarly spaces—research, professional, pedagogical, or otherwise—yet these are often isolated. More recent developments within the university's long history, such as the creation of

women's studies and cultural studies programs, have expanded the potential for radical discourses at the university. Still, momentum for the creation of a uniquely queer space within these discourses has not yet been achieved.

The above context informs that of the School of Social Work of McGill and certainly that of Project Interaction. The School of Social Work is an academic body that leads its students to professional certification, with criteria and norms according to professional associations. This positioning, in conjunction with historic and current discrimination felt within the wider university, has had an impact upon the perceived level of safety felt by GLBT-SQ students as they grapple with coming out and acting politically on campus and in their classrooms. Many GLBT-SQ students worry about appearing too radical and thus risking employment upon graduating. This fear extends to GLBT-SQ students of racialized and minority ethnic or religious groups hoping to work as social workers with organizations serving their own communities, who may feel that raising queer issues or identifying at the School of Social Work as queer would jeopardize their chances of employment within those spaces.

Institutionally, McGill's School of Social Work has had an ambivalent record with respect to GLBT-SQ education and practice over the last fifteen years. In its recent history, the School has employed several GLBT-SQ or GLBT-SQ-positive faculty and practicum supervisors, who are working on HIV- and AIDS-related issues in Canada and addressing homophobia as an integral, and often necessary, part of their research, conference talks, and academic writing. During the late 1980s, a few people tried to build support and energy for gay and lesbian issues, particularly as they related to HIV and AIDS issues within social work, by creating a small Sexual Orientation Clinic. That initiative, while a bold precedent, was not sustained and, in just a few years, was effectively moribund.

In the late 1990s, momentum again grew as a result of the coming together of a critical mass of GLBT-SQ and GLBT-SQ-positive students in the Bachelor's program. They identified several key problems in the program, including a lack of support for their attempts to queer their studies. They particularly wanted to put something in place that would structurally support them in doing their practica within GLBT-SQ settings or with GLBT-SQ clients. On the advice of the Director of the School, the students brought together faculty and community activists to initiate discussion about how to make this possible. The initial vision by students, and their practical aspirations of appropriate field placements, resulted in the formation of a Steering Committee for an as-yet-unnamed and undefined "something," the future Project Interaction.

Montreal's Queer Communities. To sketch, even with a few brief strokes, the specificity of Quebec's GLBT-SQ communities of Montreal is essential, given that Project Interaction both grew out of this context and, without hesitation, committed itself to being responsive to it.

Montreal is a unique centre in North America on many levels. The largest French-speaking city outside of France, Montreal includes a relatively large Anglophone minority, as well as large populations of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants from around the world. It also sits next to two large Mohawk reserves, Kanataake and Kahnawake, and attracts large numbers of Aboriginal youth and adults from throughout Canada. Montreal is also a city that attracts, because of its progressive legal and social environment, a large GLBT-SQ population, primarily from Quebec, but with significant numbers from other Canadian provinces and other parts of the world. With respect to sexual orientation, many live a freedom that, to

most, only Montreal can offer.

Within this microcosm, McGill University often is perceived as an English bastion in a French city with very little contact with the people of its majority. This often is not true—but it is true enough for it to be felt still today. GLBT-SQ Montrealers cross over the multi-faceted divides of the city, perhaps better than most populations, but also live within the two major linguistic solitudes. In the last thirty years, most of the organizations in the gay community, and to a larger extent in the lesbian community, have become primarily francophone in their relations within their networks and with the broader community. This places an added challenge in front of Project Interaction which, while situated at English McGill, is seeking to “interact” in Montreal. Many students, particularly those from outside Quebec, integrate with much difficulty into the broader French-speaking Montreal.

PROJECT INTERACTION

Queering Conventional Relations for Social Change

The development of Project Interaction can be loosely categorized into two separate stages: creating and doing. It is important to emphasize, however, that these activities of visioning and acting are fluid and simultaneous. For the purpose of this current article, we are focusing on the creating component only, to provide insight into how the Project got off the ground and what values make it unique.

At the heart of Project Interaction has been the continual pulse of vision of and practical efforts to effect social change by queering or transforming conventional relations between actors (between students, professors, and people of the wider communities) and also between contexts (between McGill School of Social Work, McGill University, and wider communities).

Drawing on their own community-based or student association experience, as well as on a wellspring of anti-oppressive social work theorizing and practice (Dominielli, 1998; Mullaly, 2002), students approached their situation with a comprehensive understanding of social work and, in particular, of mental health difficulties and how to address them. Rather than reducing the challenge to that of a technical question of how to provide appropriate counselling for GLBT-SQ people (including through structuring themselves practicum opportunities to try to do just that), students sought to interrupt and restructure dominant relationships, both interpersonal and institutional, through practical means.

First, GLBT-SQ students of social work took themselves and their own mental health seriously enough to address, in a practical way, the limit-situation they felt was diminishing them and their health and well-being. Through their informal discussions and preliminary proposals, they affirmed a stance of relating to one another as initiators of institutional change and, hopefully, of institutional transformation, beyond the conventional individual relation of student to the university as one of consumer of educational services. This goal echoed their commitment to transform the broader conventional relationship of GLBT-SQ people of McGill and of wider GLBT-SQ communities to their mental health issues. This meant surpassing the conventional exclusive positioning of GLBT-SQ people as clients (the downtrodden with the problems) in need of services by professionals (the experts with the solutions)—*even if those professionals were GLBT-SQ themselves, and equipped with, or in the process of developing, anti-oppressive clinical expertise*. Taking the mental health and well-being of GLBT-SQ people seriously meant re-thinking the very model

of mental health care that historically had constructed them as pathologies and that continues to marginalize them. This re-thinking did not have the effect of doing away with the provision by practicum students of professionally supervised counselling services within the framework of Project Interaction. Far from it. Instead, the practical result situated those services within a broader context of activities, actions, and collective decision-making.

Second, the students embarked on changing their relation to professors. The students approached some professors as allies in view of a very practical project that, in part, would be able to build a mechanism to hold all professors of the School of Social Work accountable to the health and well-being of GLBT-SQ students and populations.

Third, the students chose to bring GLBT-SQ people involved in community-based networks from outside of McGill University, both social workers and non-professionals, into the process. They accomplished this inclusivity by forming a Steering Committee in January 1999. This choice went against the grain of the university's business-as-usual us/them relation to people of the wider community. The students refused to guide the emerging centre (or whatever it was soon to be) without direct guidance and decision-making input from GLBT-SQ people involved in various types of community-based informal networks or more formal organizations from outside of the university. Students already knew, or quickly found, valuable, skilled people—social workers, psychologists, educators, community group workers, and so on—who were quick to share their vision and ready to offer their resources. This decision reflected questions of responsibility to wider communities and of accountability to them.

Fourth, queering relations between the McGill School of Social Work, via Project Interaction, and the wider university meant stepping beyond the conventional void between the lives of the two. At the start of Project Interaction, the most practical new relationship was between Queer McGill and Project Interaction, and hence between students of McGill across faculties and students of the School of Social Work. This queering of the relation between the School of Social Work and the rest of the university expanded, extended, and catalyzed Project Interaction's most noteworthy and newsworthy decisions and actions.

Fifth, queering relations between the McGill School of Social Work and its wider communities for social change in a practical way meant, for us, first defining Project Interaction with people of the wider GLBT-SQ communities, rather than institutionally. This prioritization came to mean, for example, undertaking an extensive community needs assessment as a pretext for engaging in conversations with people of the wider community related to direction-setting for the project. It was decided early on that, while twelve people—eleven of whom were GLBT-SQ—meeting around the table as a Steering Committee initiating a new project could decide, in fine institutional fashion, on direction and priorities of the project, we would not do it thoroughly without first seeking out people of the wider communities and engaging them in conversations about the project. With people of the wider community brought in by students, the project quickly became community-driven. Indeed, the very practical preoccupation of students to obtain GLBT-SQ-oriented practicum placements soon all but fell by the wayside, what with people of the wider community feeling that further community outreach and consultation was necessary in order to determine the priorities and focus of the initiative. People of the wider community deemed that the whole process had to be slowed down, so as to engage

more participation and input from the wider community in determining what the initiative would or should be. While GLBT-SQ-focused practica were indeed identified for the upcoming year, including two practicum positions within the new initiative itself, students quickly sensed that they were no longer the driving force.

The Steering Committee was seen as a way to ensure wider participation in definition and guidance of the initiative, as well as a mechanism of accountability to one another and to wider GLBT-SQ networks or communities. It grappled with who and which people and communities it was to address: queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, transvestite, and/or Two-Spirit. The term queer just didn't wash with some of the older Steering Committee members or those from rural areas for whom queer reminded them of the homophobia they had experienced growing up. Students and younger urban members of the Committee felt more comfortable with queer as an inclusive, radical term. The discussion that ensued over terminology reflected important identity issues and conflicts that are represented in GLBT-SQ communities at large and continue to reverberate as areas of tension within our group.

After much discussion, we agreed that taking seriously transgendered, transsexual, and transvestite people, issues, and networks meant, for us, that the initiative should not pretend to either represent them nor to be able to well-serve their interests—good intentions notwithstanding. We simultaneously agreed to be a trans-positive initiative. We also agreed that so doing required educating ourselves on the issues collectively as a Steering Committee and creating meaningful links with transgender, transsexual, and transvestite people, issues, and networks. We saw it as also requiring that the Project's practices, including all counselling, be accountable to the commitment of the Project being trans-positive. As well, we agreed to be completely open to where such learning, knowledge, and relationships may lead the initiative.

Our commitment to Project Interaction's formal inclusion of Two-Spirit people, issues, and networks blurred the edges between sexual orientation and gender difference, as did a feminist and queer analysis of gender issues that many of us, though not all, brought. Notably, the decision by the Steering Committee to be Two-Spirit inclusive was made with conviction, yet without any representation by Two-Spirit people. One month following that decision, three Two-Spirit women (of Mohawk, Ojibwa, and Inuit ancestry) joined the Steering Committee, welcoming the first initiative of this nature to explicitly include Two-Spirit issues.

More Steering Committee members were to join the initiative in its start-up period, mostly people active within the wider community. As Project Interaction concerned itself with the health and well-being of GLBT-SQ people, rather than with an isolated or abstract notion of sexual orientation, we affirmed that "social workers must become adept at identifying and responding to psycho-social and policy issues of GLBT-SQ persons including those that are the direct or indirect result of homophobia, racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression and the intersection of these" (CASSW, 2000). This commitment prompted us to expand the range of expertise within the Steering Committee to include, among other areas, refugee and immigration policy questions.

Deciding, as a Steering Committee, that we needed more conversations with people of the wider community spawned the creation of a tutorial course, to take place during Project Interaction's first year and which would be co-taught without remuneration by its two co-ordinators. The tutorial would have as its goal the definition, methodological development, and implementation of the community needs assessment as an action-research project.

The initiative's two co-ordinators, the two professors of social work on the Steering Committee, presented Project Interaction to the Assembly of McGill's School of Social Work for formal recognition of the Project and for the School's support, and received them both. Through the Assembly's decision, the wider School of Social Work was becoming an active ally of the Project. During this start-up period, Project Interaction received monetary and in-kind support from the School of Social Work which enabled us to move forward on the developmental tasks of writing our mission and mandate and setting out goals and objectives for the first several years.⁵

While we do not have the space here to document the trajectory of organizing which ensued, we would like to highlight a few of the activities with which we have been involved from the time of initial development from year one to today. Over three years, and going on four, Project Interaction has been involved in activities representing the scope and nature of the social work profession. These include the unique and specialized dimensions of clinical counselling (individual and group), community activism, research, and education. One of the most important results of the existence of Project Interaction is that its presence has built momentum for engaging GLBT-SQ issues, both inside and outside the School. For example, those of us working on GLBT-SQ mental health issues found a space to discuss ideas, share support, and engage in change efforts. We publicly launched the Project with a photo exhibit and had 100 people from inside and outside academia present to celebrate our success. We have held educational workshops and seminars for students and practicing social workers on GLBT-SQ health and mental health issues. We drafted an introductory guide for students on GLBT-SQ issues which was then distributed to schools of social work across Canada. We offered free counselling services to GLBT-SQ people in Montreal. We were actively involved in launching a petition against the positions of two McGill professors who were acting as paid expert witnesses on behalf of the federal government against the legalization of same-sex marriage. We provided support to faculty at the School to encourage their inclusion of GLBT-SQ content within their own courses by developing a specialized reference list of available articles on a variety of subjects relevant to social work. We developed the first GLBT-SQ allied health course at the university, which is now on the permanent offerings at the School. We helped organize a GLBT-SQ committee whose mandate is to address homophobia, bi-phobia, and transphobia across the wider university campus and to begin organizing an interdisciplinary sexual- and gender-diversity minor program. We augmented the capacity of researchers to attract funding for GLBT-SQ projects. We started a lunch bag series for graduate students working on GLBT-SQ issues across campus. We participated in Divers/Cite (Montreal's Pride festivities), and we ran a bi-weekly radio show on the university-community radio station. In just over three years, Project Interaction has built a strong record of service and activism on and off campus.

Troubling the Unity: Unraveling the Threads of Strength/Tension

The story of Project Interaction is not seamless. The greatest strengths and passions of the Project were, at the same time, sources of the greatest tensions, dilemmas, and challenges. That which brought people together—such as vision, values, and commitments—also threatened to pull us apart, as we tended to take those things especially seriously and to engage them rigorously. Commitments to values and analyses brought the hard work of collectively creating coherence with our practice. In this light, our greatest tensions, challenges, or limits reflect our determination and strength to continuously reach further toward significant values, analyses, and prac-

tices. As such, the threads of tension within Project Interaction are necessary to its strength, much like bridges which may hold their span from the tension of wired lengths.

These strengths and accompanying tensions troubling the unity can be organized as: (a) addressing relations of power intersecting sexual orientation; (b) challenging conventional relations within academia, as well as between academia and marginalized people or communities; and (c) seeking to develop organizationally and to sustain the momentum over the years. Each of these three themes will be unpacked and explored for the critical lessons, paradoxes, or questions they generated or continue to spark toward transforming schools of social work into spaces of social action.

Addressing Relations of Power Intersecting Sexual Orientation. In addressing the mental health of GLBT-SQ people, the Project Interaction Steering Committee saw it as key to start from the experiences of a diverse range of people's lives and their thinking about those experiences. The need to understand those diverse experiences was one motivation driving the community needs assessment. We saw a need to approach sexual orientation as integral to people's lives, rather than as an abstract category from which preoccupations and priorities would be defined. The latter approach might emerge more easily from the experience of those people positioned with relative privilege beyond sexual orientation, given that sexual orientation might be the only aspect of their lives tangibly felt as being limited by society. Striving for the health and well being of GLBT-SQ people meant taking those lives seriously in their multi-dimensionality.

At the same time, drawing on the strengths of social work's comprehensive approach pushed us to go beyond addressing the symptoms of what is felt as a limit to addressing root causes (often social, economic, or environmental) to sustain change and effect transformation that can take change beyond the individual to the lives of a wide range of people. This combination of starting from people's lives and from their analyses of their experiences, on the one hand, and drawing on social work's comprehensive analyses and practices, on the other, brought Project Interaction directly into the realm of addressing relations of unequal social power that intersect with homophobia, bi-phobia, and heterosexism. It also brought the Project to interconnect a range of issues and struggles, rather than sifting them out to select one for exclusive focus. Engaging the presence and participation of non-White, non-Christian, non-middle-class, non-male, non-professional, non-homosexual (for example, bisexual, queer, transsexual), non-middle-aged, and non-English-speaking people was both a cause and an effect of this combination. It was a cause, for example, because this combination often attracted interest by such people in participating in the Project. It also was an effect, for example, because it was sustained and brought further by a diverse range of people bringing their expertise to bear on the Project's work. At various points in the Steering Committee's short history, it has been comprised of people of Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious or cultural backgrounds, and of people of East Asian, South Asian, African/Caribbean, Arab, Aboriginal, and European backgrounds.

Questions of immigration and refugee laws, policies, and procedures took a predominant place in Steering Committee discussions and deliberations, for example, as did educational work on Two-Spirit traditions and their implications for social work practice. Education on transgender and transsexual issues within Steering Committee meetings started out with momentum and was guided by a Trans Working Circle;⁶ however, this education was recognized as insufficient. At the initiative of a

Black Steering Committee member who took a leadership role in addressing GLBT-SQ issues at the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, in Durban, South Africa, an Intersections Working Circle was formed, drawing on Steering Committee members.

However, engaging the participation of people of a diverse range of backgrounds was easier than sustaining it. In a city such as Montreal with a high unemployment rate, people often are leaving the city for other large urban centers with more vibrant economies, and where functionality in French is not a requisite for the vast majority of jobs. While the Steering Committee included francophones, it was rare for meetings to take place in French, thus the possibility remained that francophone members would be alienated. The extent to which bisexual issues came to the fore of preoccupations was questioned and questionable within the project. It came to be difficult to consistently sustain in practice a queer critique of the dualist discursive framework of heterosexual/homosexual re-inscribing heterosexual dominance. As well, interests regarding the health and well-being of aging or elderly GLBT-SQ people came to the fore, but not enough support emerged within the Steering Committee to initiate a Working Circle to forge ahead.

The commitment of the Project to be transgender-positive, including specifically transsexual positive, rather than explicitly transgender-inclusive in its name and mission, was a strength that simultaneously brought with it much tension. The decision resulted from the seriousness with which people took the issues. Steering Committee members were concerned that the expertise wasn't within the realm of the Project, and did not want to pretend to such expertise without having it. All were well familiar with organizations that touted the "T" but with no drive or action to move issues ahead. We wanted to go beyond the discourse of political correctness, particularly because we came into contact with activists on transgender issues, and specifically transsexual issues, who were trying to establish grounds of institutional recognition and legitimacy for their health issues. We came to see that such emerging grounds might actually be eroded by formal inclusion of those issues within the Project's realm of expertise or action, because to do so might, for example, entitle the Project to funds that ethically and politically should be going to strengthen those initiatives. Strategically, acting as an effective ally came to mean, for us, not becoming trans-inclusive in title or mission, but rather trans-positive, something that we came to take just as seriously for its implications for social work analysis, participation, and practice.

Having an explicit commitment to being transgender-positive brought to the fore in Project Interaction tensions that were organizational, as well as those that were more fundamental in nature. Organizationally, creating a Trans Working Circle was seen as necessary for doing essential outreach and development work that the Steering Committee as a whole wasn't able to do. As well, a Trans Working Circle was seen as desirable for creating a safer place for transgendered or transsexual people to get actively involved in the Project. Nonetheless, Steering Committee members expressed significant fear that, once a Working Circle was in place, transgender issues, including transsexual issues, would fall off the table as priority among the larger group. A fundamental tension was also that, as an explicitly Two-Spirit initiative, transgender issues were already explicitly integral to Project Interaction, for Two-Spirit refers not simply to sexual orientation in the conventional Western sense, but rather to integrating perspectives, roles, and identities of two genders in a unique way that is valuable to communities. This contradiction, and the tension it entailed, was experienced within the Steering Committee as a whole and within the

Two-Spirit Working Circle. The Trans Working Circle believed gender and sexism, as a social relation of unequal power, to be fundamental to sustaining homophobia, bi-phobia, and heterosexism, and accomplished education with the Steering Committee opening up such questions and their implications for the Project and its evolving definition. Reaching to address relations of power intersecting with sexual orientation both brought together and unraveled unity, most often simultaneously.

Transforming Conventional Relations Within Academia, as Well as Between Academia and Marginalized People or Communities. Certainly conventional relations within academia, as well as between universities and marginalized people or communities, have contributed, and continue to contribute, immensely to sustaining homophobia, bi-phobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. It was imperative to those involved within the Project that we challenge “the way things are done” within academia and by academia in relationship with the wider community, and that we experiment with alternatives. However, while striving to challenge history and oppressive hierarchical relations, a major tension within the Project was that, despite our best intentions, we would often simultaneously reproduce history.

Within academia, conventional roles and relations between faculty and students were troubled by the students initiating the Project, by the faculty who took leadership within the Project as co-ordinators, as well as by community-based people who were less subject to the everyday subtle and non-so-subtle disciplining or policing within the University regarding role maintenance. Tensions resulting from contradictions between everyday practices and aspired-to alternatives were, at times, great between practicum students and professors, as well as between practicum students and the Steering Committee.

Project Interaction’s attempts to queer relations within McGill University also included challenging the positions of fellow academics in a manner not conventionally seen as “collegial.” Certainly, putting into action social work’s strength in community organization *within* academia caused considerable tension university-wide, as in the case of contesting the positions of two McGill professors with regard to their opposition to same-sex marriage.

Trust-building was initiated between the School and GLBT-SQ people and communities as a result of Project Interaction, yet tension existed within this process because our efforts were slow and uneven. The community needs assessment initiated by the Steering Committee attempted to seed this process of building trust by going out to people and seeking their perspectives, experiences, and suggestions. Included in the conversations held with people within that action-research process were attempts to offer another view of what social work could be. Integral to building trust was returning the knowledge people provided to us by inviting everyone into our space to get a collective sense of the practical impact of their contribution, as well as by distributing paper copies of the executive summary⁷ to those who participated in the action research. However, even the trust on the part of English-speaking people to come to the School of Social Work for free counselling is something built step by step. For those unfamiliar with McGill, the School of Social Work can be easily blurred with other parts of the university, including with the university’s hospital-based psychiatric clinics. Stepping into a university without having ever been to one can be a daunting venture. As well, the trust of predominantly French-speaking GLBT-SQ organizations was put to test with communication regarding the variable availability of French-speaking counselling services through Project Interaction.

Developing Organizationally and Sustaining the Momentum. As we begin our fourth year, one of the most pressing tensions lies within the goal of sustainability in an environment of scarcity. Two issues emerge most predominantly within this tension, one regarding funding and the other regarding sustaining volunteers and the Project's momentum. First and foremost, Project Interaction has been working with little or no funding. Most of the financial and in-kind support we have received to date has come from the School of Social Work itself. We have not managed to attract outside funding. As with other organizations serving marginal communities, public funding has been reduced drastically over the past decade with resulting erosion in access to care. GLBT-SQ people, who have a history of exclusion within health care services, feel these cutbacks deeply. Project Interaction provides the only free social work services in the city, and these are limited in scope. The lack of funding has created great unevenness in what we are able to accomplish. Activities stop when students graduate and there is little continuity from one year to the next. Our practicum supervisors are extremely underpaid, given the scope and nature of the work, and we haven't managed to retain our supervisors from one year to the next. We worry about running out of options for clinical supervision in years to come if this financial situation doesn't change. We also risk burning out our volunteers and co-ordinators, particularly those who manage the project on a more frequent basis. Financial support would allow us to hire a part-time co-ordinator to help sustain the project, not only from year to year but also from day to day.

The second issue concerns sustaining our volunteers and maintaining momentum. After several years of work, our members are running out of steam. As community activists, educators, and professionals, our interests are pulled in a multitude of areas. Thus, we find ourselves continuously prioritizing and re-prioritizing the time allotted to our involvement within various organizations, including within Project Interaction. The Steering Committee's vitality see-saws. For example, given that the Steering Committee's role excludes micro-management and rather focuses on vision-setting, priority-making, and strategy-defining, it is a group that tends toward reflection and collective self-education on issues. We thus often lose the dynamism and cohesion that can result from a more action-oriented role, or even from a primary focus on accomplishing specific tasks—even though most Steering Committee members also have been active within Working Circles, which are more action- or task-oriented. Given that the Steering Committee as a whole was involved in developing strategy and tactics for Project Interaction's protest of the two McGill professors' positions against the legalization of same-sex marriage, volunteers found an energy that had been lacking for a while. However, this energy was relatively short-lived. It can become easy from within to simply focus on what does not get done rather than to celebrate our unique achievements.

There is a danger in institutionalizing radical initiatives for social change, even when those people involved in the process consciously mediate this danger. The institutionalization of Project Interaction is responsible, in some part, for our growing inertia. While we attempt to radicalize the university, we fall under the constraints of professionalization. Indeed, one of the problems we face is the growing expectation by many that the Steering Committee members *think* while the practicum students, the practicum supervisor, and the co-ordinator (who compose our staff) *do*, even though they too are on the Steering Committee. This expectation creates unique tensions, hierarchies, and isolation which facilitate a reduction of commitment to the Project's ongoing work.

We have tried to address realities of sustainability by remaining fluid and flexible. We recently have renamed our Steering Committee as a Circle of Reference People, which will meet only once a term and, supporting the initiative taken by staff, aim to provide insight on coherence of vision and practice and on long-term issues. In this manner, we hope to avoid further burnout. In recognition that one organization doesn't have to do everything at once, we also have decided to downsize our efforts and to prioritize fewer goals. By spreading out activities of a comprehensive approach to social work (including individual and group counselling, community activism, policy advocacy, education, and research) over a longer timeline, we hopefully can strengthen our effectiveness in contributing to social change.

CONCLUSION

Project Interaction is a unique initiative in Canada. It is designed to bridge the gap between community and academia in order to transform the very nature of the relations between marginalized people and universities. In effect, aiming for the health and well-being of GLBT-SQ people, it necessarily functions to disrupt the status quo operations of knowledge production, professional practice, and professional training with respect to such health and well-being. The most comprehensive program of education and action on GLBT-SQ issues within a school of social work in Canada, Project Interaction can serve as a situated reference for the development of like initiatives. Project Interaction's sustained presence at the School of Social Work has created momentum for wide changes in attitude and curriculum, not only within the School itself but across the entire campus. Our presence has been felt in a variety of arenas—intellectual, political, and social.

But Project Interaction has a long way to go. The Project's strengths in addressing relations of power intersected with sexual orientation, in challenging conventional relations within academia as well as among academic and marginalized people or communities, and in seeking to develop organizationally and to sustain its momentum over the years are all simultaneously experienced as very real challenges. The tensions inherent in institutionalizing such a project within the confines and contradictions of academia have made manifest several areas of concern, most notably those related to power, participation, and sustainability. A related paradox is the need for processes, mechanisms, and decisions that contribute to our own mental health at the same time as we work on transforming our context's discourses and other practices to promote the mental health of GLBT-SQ people and our allies more widely. Addressing this paradox is integral to reaching our goal of queering or transforming schools of social work into spaces of social action.

NOTES

1. Evidence indicates that some First Nations, "prior to colonization and contact with European cultures, believed in the existence of three genders: the male, the female and the male-female gender, or what we now call the Two-Spirit person. . . . The concept of Two-Spirited related to today's designation of gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender persons of Native origins . . . Two-Spirited people . . . were treated with the greatest respect, and held important spiritual and ceremonial responsibilities. The arrival of the Europeans was marked by the imposition of foreign views and values on spirituality, family life and traditions. The missionary churches' views on sexuality, for example, created many new taboos. Many traditions, including that of the Two-Spirited, were eradicated or at least driven underground from many (but not all) tribes of North America" (Meyer, Goodleaf, & Labelle, 2000).
2. We are: Heather Mullin, the present student practicum supervisor of Project Interaction, its

past chairperson and a founding social work student member; Michael Chervin, its founding chairperson, and active within various community groups in Montreal; Shari Brotman, its present co-ordinator and assistant professor at McGill's School of Social Work; and Bill Ryan, the project's past co-ordinator and adjunct professor at McGill's School of Social Work.

3. A relatively recent and fluid identity, queer incorporates ambiguity into definitions of gender identity and sexual orientation. It is a re-appropriation of a traditional put-down and explores new combinations of identities and pluralistic forms of sexual expression. At the same time, the term queer is meant to gather resistance to all forms of heterosexist oppression.
4. See, for example, Ristock & Taylor, 1998, for various analyses of queering the university curriculum, including pedagogy and research.
5. Mission Statement: Project Interaction is committed to the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and Two-Spirit (glbt-s) people, their families, communities, and allies. To this end, the Project is engaged in a collaborative effort to transform the design and delivery of social services and to contribute to the elimination of oppression. In doing so, Project Interaction strives to recognize, affirm, and address the linguistic, cultural, and gender diversity of glbt-s people in and around Montreal, as well as their dynamic interaction.
6. Working Circles are Project Interaction's sub-committees of the Steering Committee. They work on various issues and tasks, and are developed through the interests of committee members. Working Circles develop their own priorities and objectives annually, coherent with Project Interaction's mission. Membership on Working Circles includes both people of the Steering Committee as well as people beyond it.
7. The executive summary of the community needs assessment is available in English and in French at Project Interaction's web site: www.mcgill.ca/interaction.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine une problématique importante, soit, comment encourager les universités à aborder, dans une perspective de solidarité, les questions d'ordre de santé mentale qui préoccupent les personnes gaies, lesbiennes, bisexuelles et bispirituelles ainsi que leurs communautés. Pour y parvenir, les auteurs et auteures empruntent une approche d'étude de cas, utilisant l'exemple du Projet/Project Interaction—l'initiative gaie, lesbienne, bisexuelle et bispirituelle de l'École de service social de l'Université McGill—pour jeter un regard critique sur les défis qui se présentent lors du développement d'une organisation alternative au sein du milieu de l'enseignement. L'intention de cet étude est de souligner comment les opérations normales qui s'effectuent sur les campus universitaires, et au sein du curriculum de santé et des sciences paramédicaux, peuvent être bouleversées dans le but de faciliter la création d'un milieu promouvant l'affirmation, d'initiatives éducatives et d'occasions favorisant le changement social.

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