

Sex and Social Activists:

Sometimes an abuse of trust



James Langley has done a service by expressing concern about what he calls "sexual treachery" by some social activists (NvT, July/August 1993). He refers to individuals who maintain sexual relationships with more than one person and who lie to one or more of them by denying the existence of the other relationship(s). He argues that activists should be honest. If they cannot be trusted in close personal relationships, he asks, how can they be trusted in agreements among activists?

The issue of sex and trust in social action groups and among social activists generally is quite important, but just by reading activist magazines one would never know it was an issue at all. The concern that James has raised is but one of many that deserve attention.

Consider, for example, the situation where a prominent, experienced, knowledgeable and perhaps charismatic activist is able to have sex with many members in an organisation, especially when new members, who tend to be most vulnerable, are expected to participate. Most, but not all, of the exploiters of such movement status are men.

Another phenomenon is the movement insider who obtains preferential treatment for sexual partners, for example in getting them jobs, valued opportunities (such as speaking or attending conferences) or high-status roles. The other side is the less-than-fair treatment of a

person who refuses sexual advances or who is a former but now rejected sexual partner.

My colleague Rebecca Albury, in response to a first draft of this comment, notes: "in the 'new left' days there was considerable use of sexual relationships to 'recruit' women into mixed groups. When the relationship ended the woman often found her new 'friends' had also disappeared unless she had built an alternative power base. The women's liberation movement was responding to this 'sexual politics' as well as sexism in a more general way." How much have things changed?

The feminist movement popularised the phrase "the personal is political." This means that "personal" behaviours have political dimensions: they both reflect power relationships in the wider society and either reinforce or challenge them. This sort of analysis is not apparent in the responses by Charlie Daniels and Brian Currie (NvT, September/October 1993), who attack James Langley rather than explore the concerns he raised.

Many people enter social movement groups with a great deal of idealism. They expect to find a level of trust and commitment much greater than in other organisations. In groups committed to nonviolence and consensus, this expectation is reinforced by talk of sharing, empowerment and equality. When the trust expected in such groups is violated,

the loss is correspondingly greater. I have seen people drop out of groups and out of activism when their views were not respected. When trust in such groups is seen to be used for sexual purposes, the disillusionment can be intense.

Lessons from formal situations

Some of these issues have parallels in formal work situations, and so it may be worth describing these situations. The following comments are based on my experience on sexual harassment committees at two universities.

Sexual harassment refers to a variety of behaviours, including sexual jokes and posters, requests for sex in exchange for favours (such as grades), touching, grabbing, assault and rape. To count as sexual harassment, behaviours must be unsolicited, unreciprocated and unwelcome. Sexual harassment is one of the ways by which the system of patriarchy is maintained. Undoubtedly, sexual harassment occurs in some activist groups, although in all my reading of sexual harassment articles and books, I have never seen reference to it, possibly because most of these writings deal with government and corporate workplaces. Most nonviolent activists would be well aware that such behaviours are unacceptable.

Two years ago, the Sexual Harassment Sub-committee at the University of Wollongong became interested in problems sometimes arising from "consensual" sex between staff and students or between members of staff. These cases are not sexual harassment in the strict sense, but are related to it.

The first type of problem is conflict of interest. For example, a teacher who has a sexual relationship with a student in his class (or, occasionally, her class) is in a potential conflict-of-interest situation. It is difficult to be objective when marking the work of one's sexual partner and, even if one could be objective, the relationship might cause other students to believe that bias was involved.

Conflicts of interest regularly arise out of the hierarchies in the workplace. For example, teachers have a professional responsibility to treat students fairly.

Close personal relationships between a teacher and particular students clash with this professional requirement. Similarly, in bureaucratic systems, sexual relationships clash with the system of performance evaluation and promotion by merit.

In social movement groups where there are paid staff and an explicit hierarchy, conflicts of interest due to sexual relationships can exist. No doubt they occur regularly in such groups, such as when choices are made about hiring staff, although I have never seen this issue discussed.

In groups where all members are volunteers and where there is no formal hierarchy, sexual relationships are less likely to cause a conflict of interest. But they can occur, at least when using a broad interpretation of "conflict of interest." For example, there may be informal hierarchies of power related to skills, experience or personality. For a person with greater informal power, there may be a conflict between an implicit or explicit commitment to empower others and a special relationship with a particular individual. Another type of conflict of interest arises when special relationships between members disrupt the effectiveness of the group.

The second type of problem is abuse of trust. This arises when the trust implicit in a particular relationship is breached by the introduction of a sexual dimension. For example, university teachers are expected to foster the intellectual development of their students. Students are often quite insecure about their capabilities and need the unselfish support of their teacher to help build both their skills and confidence. When the teacher, in this situation of implicit trust, seeks to turn the relationship into a sexual one, in some cases this is a terrible blow to the student's self-confidence. What she (or, occasionally, he) thought was respect for her intellect, she now perceives as interest in her body.

Some students acquiesce in or even seek a sexual relationship with their teacher, whom they may admire as a person of great accomplishment and erudition. The

problem may only arise later when the trust is destroyed, for example when the teacher breaks off the affair. The student may not realise until afterwards that she is only the latest in a long sequence of partners.

Sexual relationships between people in different roles (teacher-student, boss-subordinate, doctor-patient, etc.) are not automatically a problem. What is a problem is the conflict of interest that may be involved and the abuse of trust that may result. Sometimes the conflict of interest can be avoided by such measures as having someone else mark the student's work, having the patient go to another doctor, and so forth. Abuse of trust is a more difficult issue, since it is only the person with less power and authority who can judge ultimately whether an abuse of trust has occurred.

In social movements, abuse of trust can readily occur. What James Langley calls sexual treachery fits this category, but there are many other ways in which it can happen, as described above.

The first step in challenging conflicts of interest and abuses of trust due to sexual relationships is to discuss the issue openly. Differences in power, knowledge and experience in groups should be acknowledged. Those with less power should be able to say no to relationships that may abuse their trust, and those with more power should be alerted to possible problems.

It does the movement no good to hide these problems in the mistaken belief that the "cause" is more important. The inside damage from conflicts of interest and abuses of trust are far worse than any negative publicity from without.

The sexual harassment committee at the University of Wollongong is producing a leaflet on "Campus sex." It includes a list of further reading. I would be happy to provide copies to any interested person.

I thank Rebecca Albury and Viviane Morrigan for valuable comments on earlier drafts.

Brian Martin

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