Abstract

I teach an elective course called “Social Work and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Two-Spirit Peoples” in the Bachelor of Social Work programme at St. Thomas University. As course material challenges embedded heterosexism, we flounder and struggle with deeply rooted beliefs that conflict with our desires to respect difference and human rights. I discuss an in-class exercise used to stimulate reflection on the connections between gender, gender expression, sexual identity, and normative social expectations in our lives. I reflect on the learning generated by this exercise as well as its usefulness in revealing how heterosexism marks us emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually, often without our even knowing. I also evaluate the extent to which this exercise, paired with a written self-reflection on gender and sexual identity, helps us to take up our responsibility to challenge heterosexism within ourselves and in the world.

Introduction

As a feminist social worker concerned about heterosexism in social work education and practice, I developed and teach an elective three credit hour course called “Social Work and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two-Spirit Peoples” in the Bachelor of Social Work programme at St. Thomas University. Indeed, students in the course have often reported that classmates question their need or desire to engage with material about and by people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and two-spirit. Such comments suggest that the course is somehow irrelevant to social work practice and that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and two-spirit people are never recipients of social work services. Despite the risk that this course offering could further objectify or remarginalize this social group, I believe that such a course is warranted until such time that a non-heterosexist framework is fully integrated into the social work curriculum.

“Social Work and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two-Spirit Peoples,” an elective offered every second year, situates the lived experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and two-spirit people (glbt-s) in the context of heterosexism as a social structure and system of beliefs and practices that affect us all, with differential effects on sexual minorities. The course explores salient realities and issues in the lives of glbt-s people including joys and struggles, and how we, as social workers, can practice affirmative social work with, and in the service of, this social group. Content covered in this thirteen week course includes the gay liberation movement, community and culture, heterosexism and its effects, theoretical concepts and definitions, the coming out process, youth, family life, health and mental health, hate crimes, mid-life and older adulthood, affirmative practice, and community resources.
In this paper I discuss an in-class guided journey exercise I used with students to generate connections between normative social expectations and gender and sexual identity formation. I reflect on the learning attained through this exercise and its usefulness in illuminating how heterosexism shapes us, privileging some while penalizing others. I also consider the extent to which this exercise, paired with a written self-reflection assignment on gender and sexual identity, encouraged a more critical analysis that challenges embedded heterosexism\(^1\). Finally, I suggest how I could improve this exercise for future use.

**The Guided Journey on Gender and Sexual Identity Exercise**

In teaching this course I assume that the material and discussions will challenge all of us to examine values and beliefs about relationships, family and community, religion and spirituality, personal and professional ethics, gender and sexual identity, and gender and sexual expression. I also assume that as a collective, students will bring a variety of values, experiences, identifications, non-identifications, and questions to the course. Given these assumptions, I expect that as course content challenges embedded heterosexism and fixed notions of gender and sexual identity, students will wrestle with deeply rooted beliefs that conflict with their desires to respect difference and human rights. Such struggles are well described by educators who teach about oppression and social justice (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Goodman, 2001; Newton et al., 2001). A responsibility behooves us as instructors to ensure a learning environment for everyone and to stop heterosexism while encouraging discussion that does not undermine the self-esteem of others and cross into the realm of preaching, harassing, or insulting others (Green, 2001).

Following the second class on history and the gay liberation movement, we explore concepts and definitions that I consider useful in creating a theoretical framework for understanding heterosexism and the oppression of sexual minorities. These include, for example, heterosexism and heteronormativity, gender, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and transgender. To enrich this exploration I assign one or two concepts to teams of students to research prior to this session and then bring thoughts and questions about the meaning and applicability of these concepts to class discussion. In the fourth class, I then introduce the *Guided Journey on Gender and Sexual Identity Exercise* (see Appendix A) as a way of tracing our own lived experiences growing up as a female, male, girl, boy, woman and man, our emotional and sexual attractions, and the messages that we received about who we were and with whom we could form intimate and sexual relationships. The purpose of this exercise is to make links between gender and sexual identity and normative social expectations experienced in socialization processes in our communities, families, friendships, and schools.

\(^1\) Thanks to Sarah MacKinnon, a student in the course, for the phrase embedded heterosexism that captures so well how heterosexism works.
As I guide students through a chronological revisiting of their socialization processes, I ask such questions as “Remember when you were having fun playing with other children? What kinds of play did you like? How were you dressed? Did you like the clothes that you were wearing?”; “In middle school do you remember having a crush on a male or female teacher? What was that like?”; “As a young woman what messages did you receive about sexuality? What affirming messages were there about loving a woman?” Since a pillar of heterosexism in dominant culture is the sex-gender system and its fixed notions of femininity and masculinity, woman and man, such questions tease out implicit assumptions about sex and gender and connections between sex-gender and heterosexism and other “isms” such as racism, colonialism, and imperialism.

When introducing this exercise I recognize that some students might recall painful experiences of exclusion and violence and I discuss some strategies available should that occur. I also explain that after the guided journey I will ask students to take the images and experiences that arose for them and to draw or represent some of them on a large piece of paper. Then, as we sit around the table and share these representations, we will pull out the connections we make between heterosexism, the sex-gender system, and gender and sexual identity.

**Discussion and Learnings from the Exercise**

The majority of the nineteen female students enrolled in this course were young adults in the professional years of the Bachelor of Social Work programme (the third and fourth years of their undergraduate degree). Some of the images and experiences presented by students include: “girl loves boy” scrawled over school books; girly posters for guys and guy posters for girls; husky female equals abnormal; uncles teasing young girls with a sexual overtone; little girls don’t fight but boys do; girls were made to wear frilly dresses and patent shoes and told to cross their legs and not get dirty, limiting their freedom; girls’ desires to wear boy’s clothes and play with boy’s toys; girls liked dresses and fire trucks; comments such as “what a cute little girl—you are going to drive all the boys crazy”; men’s sexual urges are uncontrollable; pretty girls are more sexual than plain girls; young women were expected to have sex after the third date whether they wanted to or not; one woman was labelled a slut by young men at school because she came from a low income neighbourhood.

Students expressed strong emotions as they shared their contributions. One woman went to a boarding school for girls where a girl was suspected to be lesbian and she always felt guilty for having failed to defend her against ostracism by the other students. Anger at injustice was present in an account of nuns treating boys more favourably than girls and punishing difference of any kind. Some students reported feeling that they were “never good enough” in the wake of messages that there was something wrong with both their female body and person. Some felt internal conflict around religious teachings, their experience, and sorting out what they believed. Students were exposed to devaluations and degradations of sexual minorities such as “fags are feminine” and “queer is sick”; if you have lesbian friends that makes you a lesbian, too; single women are suspect and must be lesbians; and men are turned on by women kissing and having sex. Some
students felt constrained by fear from exploring and having relationships with both sexes/genders. Of these, one student made a decision not to pursue same sex relationships because of loss of status and fear of social rejection, and another felt pressure to define herself as “something” even though she felt herself attracted to both women and men. She connected her possible bisexuality to her parents’ relationship of equality in which there was no “real” woman and no “real” man.

The group made explicit connections between heterosexism as a system of power and their experiences: what it means to be a “woman” and “man” and how these are tied to what are considered appropriate gender expressions of femininity and masculinity and appropriate choices of partners; how heterosexism represses the freedom to explore same sex/gender relationships; and how the richness of experience and desire is denied and repressed, creating gender and sexual expectations that don’t fit the reality of our lives. Queer people and their relationships and sexualities are devalued with material consequences and ongoing everyday policing is required to keep everyone in line. Students noted how each of us contributes to perpetuating heterosexism and thus, as citizens and as social workers committed to a Code of Ethics, we must sort out the ways in which we hold heterosexist beliefs and engage in everyday heterosexist practices even as we want to believe that we are open minded.

**Written Self-Reflection on Gender and Sexual Identity**

The follow-up assignment to the *Guided Journey on Gender and Sexual Identity Exercise* consisted of a reflection paper that asked students to consider previous course material and write about the social messages and practices that shaped them in terms of gender identity, gender expression, sexual identity, and sexual orientation. I asked them if and how they thought that these intersected with culture, class, ability, and “race.” In much feminist writing “race” is often put in single quotes to call attention to the fact that it signifies a social construct with no biological basis, however, it is used as a social category to dominate and oppress certain “races” and if previous classes had prompted them to reconsider any aspect of their experience or way of thinking. I also requested that they identify their learning so far, apply them to social work practice, and describe their challenges and curiosities for future growth.

In the limited safety of the reflection paper, students analyzed the connections they made in previous classes and contemplated more personal aspects of identity. Most students reported that they had not thought much about their own gender and sexual identity formation, neither how they came to be where they were nor the social arrangements that had shaped them. Some spoke of reinterpreting past experiences in a different light, for example, their attachment to queer relatives and their distress that they had been cast out of family and community for being queer. Others spoke of now having permission to acknowledge as valid and valuable previous intimate and sexual experiences and relationships outside the heterosexual norm and to positively regard their own feelings and desires. Some students spoke about a greater commitment to determining to what extent they believed the teachings of their family and church, and to learning more about affirmative social work practice, human rights, and ethical social work practice.
Evaluation of the Guided Journey Exercise and the Written Self-Reflection on Gender and Sexual Identity

Reflecting on the usefulness of these assignments for educating students about heterosexism and affirmative social work practice with glbt-s people, I think that the guided journey exercise created a space for students’ to explore their own experiences in a heterosexist society. The process of situating their experience in a social context allowed some room to examine how heterosexism shapes us all, thus allowing an engagement with the material in a more fruitful way than would a lecture on heterosexism. A lecture format might have reinforced the dichotomy of “heterosexist and homophobic” versus “enlightened” people, thus hindering critical reflection on heterosexism as a system of power. Perhaps this beginning theoretical framework enabled students to acknowledge previous thoughts and experiences and analyze them more critically.

Both assignments provided an arena to normalize students’ processes of growth, change, and action, for example, grappling with familial and religious teachings, learning about heterosexual privilege, feeling more confident to speak out against heterosexism as a heterosexual woman, and dealing with the shame and guilt associated with remaining silent when harm had been done to glbt-s people. Indeed the course itself acknowledged this process of unlearning as a legitimate part of social work and social justice education, one that has consequences for ourselves as citizens and as social workers.

In my view, the assignments encouraged students to consider sex-gender on a continuum, breaking down the dichotomies of female-male, woman-man, feminine-masculine, and attracted to men—attracted to women. Thinking about how these categories are constructed and operate as part of a system of oppression opened up more possibilities for understanding and living, and encouraged an appreciation of the richness and complexity of our lives. Learnings from these assignments were underlined by guest speakers from the glbt-s community and by social workers, lesbian and heterosexual, who practice affirmatively with queer clients.

Suggestions for Future Use of Assignments

In thinking about using these assignments again, I need to consider the following concerns. One student commented that she felt uncomfortable writing about her sexual identity in the reflection paper. I surmised that this student found the assignment an invasion of privacy or feared the consequences of disclosure or both. Many students clearly identified in their papers as heterosexual, exploring, undefined, or bisexual, and indeed it would be difficult to reflect on your formation without some degree of disclosure. Even though I located myself in class as part of the queer community, this would not necessarily lessen students’ feelings of discomfort or fear; in fact, it could increase them. One way of addressing this concern might be to discuss this assignment more fully in the first class so that those who feel uncomfortable with it can have their fears addressed or choose not to take the course. However, how fair is this when students...
want and need to learn about heterosexism and social work practice with GLBT-s people? How does the demand for disclosure differentially impact heterosexual, queer, and undefined students? Is resistance to disclosure related to heterosexual privilege? A second alternative would be to structure the assignment to allow students to choose the extent of their disclosure while still requiring critical reflection on the factors shaping identity formation.

In terms of improving the *Guided Journey Exercise*, I would follow the group discussion with a presentation on the notion of a sex-gender continuum in order to highlight and conceptualize the connections made by students. At that time it would be constructive to also underscore the differential effects of heterosexism in terms of power, privilege, and penalty. If students are or assume a heterosexual majority in the class, queer students may not feel comfortable or able to speak about the impacts of heterosexism at this juncture in the course.

For some students the distance that they had to cover in terms of de-othering queer folk was substantial. In fact, a number of students declared that they had not personally known anyone who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or two-spirit. A student commented that while viewing the video *The Matthew Sheppard Story*, she had come to see queer folk as people who had feelings and lives; in other words, she came to see them as human beings. How would these assignments have unfolded if there had been a different mix of students, for example, more out queer students? I suspect that class dynamics would have changed significantly and that the challenges to heterosexist beliefs and practices would have been more direct. Some students might have felt a challenge or threat to their identities, leading to tenser relationships in the classroom, and power, privilege, and penalty (not mutually exclusive) might have become more central in our discussions. Some students might have been offended by statements like the one mentioned above. This raises another question for me: how fair is it to again subject queer folk to such statements even if students are engaging in unlearning heterosexism? Given that the learning process in social justice education is “inherently an emotion-laden process” (Goodman, 2001, p. 39), I must weigh these considerations and devise more strategies to counter and deconstruct the objectification of GLBT-s people.

**Conclusion**

In summary, I believe that the *Guided Journey on Gender and Sexual Identity Exercise* and the consequent written self-reflection assignment were useful in encouraging social work students to “un-know,” and “to grapple with that which they don’t know and can’t yet think” (Noble, 2004, pp. 376-377). Attempting to teach with sensitivity and attend to the diverse needs of students is a task that requires continuous critical reflection in order to examine the politically consequential effects on all students. Particular attention must be paid to the resurfacing of oppressive relations in the classroom and their effects on those who already come to the classroom with experiences of multiple oppressions and exclusions.
Appendix A: Guided Journey on Gender and Sexual Identity

Introduction

Your imagination and experience are the key instruments in this guided journey. Through your mind’s eye you will be taking a chronological journey of the development of your gender and sexual identity. A variety of images, memories, and feelings may arise in this process of doing this exercise. Allow them to be there in your mind’s eye. The purpose of this journey is to reflect on how you have become who you are: the gender identity that you have—the sense of yourself as female, male, woman, man, androgynous, or undefined; and the sexual identity that you have claimed for yourself—the understanding you have about with whom you have intimate and sexual relationships, including emotional attachment, sexual attraction and behaviour, and identification with heterosexual, lesbian, gay, and other cultures.

In this guided journey we will touch upon our experience growing up as female, male, girl, boy, woman, man; our emotional and sexual attractions; the messages that have shaped who we were and are and our ideas about whom we could have intimate and sexual relationships; and the consequences of stepping outside heterosexist and gendered expectations around sexuality, femininity, and masculinity.

As you undertake this journey through the chronological age periods that we will cover, jot down the images, memories, and experiences that are particularly powerful or sharp and a few relevant details. This will help you describe to others your reflections about gender and sexual identity formation. At the end of the exercise, you will be asked to draw some of the images, memories, and experiences that came up for you on a collective piece of paper. In sharing them with others, we will draw out connections between heterosexism and your reflections on your socialization. Share what you feel comfortable in sharing.

1. Let’s go back to your early childhood.

Choose an age at which you have your earliest consistent memories. Perhaps you’ll be four or five or six. Remember when you were playing with other children and having fun. When you were a child, how did your parents or guardians dress you? Like a girl, like a boy? Were you happy with the clothes you were wearing? Think about yourself romping outside on the grass, in the woods or the snow. Were you considered a “tomboy”? What messages were you given about being a girl? Being a boy? What did you learn about yourself and about what you could or could not do or go as a girl, as a boy? How did you know that you were a girl or a boy?

2. You are now eleven years old and in grade school.

Imagine yourself in grade school. Remember your school and classroom, the things that you used to do. What messages did you hear about with whom you could form romantic relationships? Can you remember receiving messages or permission to be able to love
someone of your own sex-gender? Did you feel comfortable with all the talk about the girl-boy scene? Can you recall having a crush on a teacher or student of the same sex-gender? What did you do with these feelings?

3. You are now fourteen or fifteen.

You are in high school and having friends is so important. You remember that as an adolescent you felt emotional and sexual attractions toward ____ and you felt ____. What conversations did you have with friends in terms of sexual attractions toward others? What conversations did you have with friends in terms of what it meant to be a man or a woman; feminine or masculine; straight, gay, or bisexual?

As a young woman/young man, what were you told about what goals were appropriate for you in terms of relationships, education, life dreams? What were you taught about sexuality? How were you to behave as a young woman, as a young man? What did you learn about how you should dress/look?

What did you hear about people who didn’t fit, classmates who weren’t attracted to the opposite sex? Perhaps you heard some students being called names such as fag, queer, dyke, lesbo. You might have heard about how weird gay people are from your parents, your friends, or religious leaders in the community. Perhaps you were afraid that others might have thought that you were one of them. Perhaps you did not know what you were but were afraid that you might be gay or lesbian or maybe it was just a phase and you’d grow out of it. Perhaps you were called names such as queer from someone who thought that you were a fag or dyke or perhaps you were part of a group of students who could support each other in not fitting in, whether around sexual orientation or gender norms.

4. You are now eighteen.

You have been waiting to be grown up and be an adult on your own terms. You might have thought about getting married or about having children. Perhaps you have already had boyfriends, children, or girlfriends. Remember your attraction to people of the opposite sex-gender. What was that like? What did you think and feel? Remember your attraction to people of the same sex-gender. What was that like? What did you think and feel? Perhaps you saw people of the same sex-gender to whom you were attracted but did not act on that attraction, or you felt curiosity or fear or denied your feelings thinking that you were sick.

Remember your environment and family and church and friends of that time. What affirming messages were there for you about belonging in a heterosexual relationship? What affirming messages were there for you about belonging to a gay, lesbian, or same sex-gender relationship? If you had a relationship with a person of the same sex-gender, were you able to openly live your relationship? If you knew or saw friends or others who expressed their emotional and sexual attractions to others of the same sex-gender, what was this like for you?
How would you have defined your sexual identity when you were eighteen? Were there moments when you questioned your sense of yourself as a woman, as a man, as a heterosexual, as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or two-spirit person?

5. You are anywhere from 20 to an older adult today.

Consider these scenarios:

Someone who is very close to you invites you to dinner to celebrate your birthday. The dinner was wonderful, the food was great, the atmosphere was comfortable, and you both did some reminiscing about the past. You laughed a lot and you realize how much you value this friendship. Your friend tells you that s/he is gay, lesbian, two-spirit, transgendered and wants you to know, to no longer keep that part of his/her life secret from you. How do you respond?

You identify yourself as heterosexual and are happy with that. When you see people who do not fit the boundaries of sex-gender categories of feminine or masculine or woman or man or define themselves as queer, you think/feel_____.

You are proud of your sexual identity and know that you are a survivor in the wake of oppression and discrimination against gay/lesbian/bisexual/two-spirit/transgendered people. However, you wish that the oppression of heterosexism wasn’t so insidious and hard to deal with on a daily basis. How would you change the world around you?

You have a sense of yourself as female/male/woman/man and what that means to you is_____. Your sexual identity is_____ and that means_____.

Imagine that in the next year or so you meet someone of the same sex-gender to whom you are attracted. What thoughts/feelings come to mind?

Imagine a world where people were free to love and express their gender and sexuality.

Credit note: I adapted this exercise from the guided journey designed by Marc Gunning, GAYNET
References


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