

THE POWER OF WORDS

LESSON 9 NORMATIVE SEXUALITY

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TEACHING GOAL

Students will achieve an understanding of the concepts of heterosexual/heterosexuality and obligatory or compulsory heterosexuality.

LEARNING ACTIVITY SUMMARY

Students will begin to explore some of the effects of compulsory heterosexuality on various aspects of society.

TERMS/CONCEPTS ADDRESSED

Heterosexual/heterosexuality (from *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers*, p. 139-140; available from www.interculturalpress.com):

Heterosexual, a person whose main emotional or romantic and sexual attraction is to people of the other sex.

... In our society, heterosexuality is considered the rule, the preferred form of sex, while other orientations are commonly regarded as deviant. Boys at a fairly early age learn to see heterosexuality as basic to masculinity – it is associated with being “a real man” – while girls similarly learn to see heterosexuality as central to femininity. But it is not usually an identity in the way or degree to which homosexuality may be. Heterosexuality is not marked as is homosexuality, and most people we would call heterosexual give little thought to themselves in this role, and make little use of the term, unless they are confronted with homosexuals. The privileged status of heterosexuals frees them from having to deal with labeling, which is part of the privilege.

Compulsory or obligatory heterosexuality (*Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers*, p. 140): Compulsory heterosexuality (sometimes also obligatory heterosexuality) is a term used especially by some feminists to suggest society’s systematic and coercive production of a different-sex eros (Rich 1980).

... Abuse, such as the verbal attacks described in this dictionary, is only one way that society has of restricting options to heterosexuality. Implicit in institutions such as marriage and family, compulsive heterosexuality becomes a means of structuring gender relations ... and keeping women dependent sexually, emotionally, socially and economically. Its enforcement also serves to exclude homosexuality as an acceptable choice.

TYPE OF LEARNING ACTIVITY

What-if scenario • Brainstorming • Storytelling

MATERIALS NEEDED

- This lesson plan
- Pen and paper

TIME RANGE

1 class period

GROUP SIZE

Small to large (2 to 20+). Large groups may want to divide into smaller groups for discussion.

LEARNING ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

1. Consider the question: “What if homosexuality were the norm (standard)?”
2. Write for 20 minutes, describing some of the possible effects on:
 - marriage
 - insurance
 - family structure
 - procreation
 - media/TV
 - advertising
 - names & naming
 - education
 - inheritance practices
 - gender stereotypes
 - religion
 - medical research
 - gender-segregated places and activities, such as dormitory rooms, sports teams, locker rooms, sororities and fraternities, bathrooms, etc.
 - other aspects you can think of

DEBRIEF

Questions for debriefing:

- How would you feel if you were a heterosexual person living in a world of compulsory homosexuality?
- What would your life be like?
- Has this exercise helped you to feel compassion for homosexual people living in cultures where heterosexuality is compulsory? Why or why not?
- Has this exercise given you any new ideas? If so, what are they?
- Will you change any of your language or behavior as a result of doing this exercise? If so, how?

VARIATION

1. Collect clippings on societies in which heterosexuality is brutally enforced. As a starting place, see "A 'Witch Hunt' for Gays in Egypt" at www.tolerance.org/news/article_tol.jsp?id=749
2. Brainstorm ways in which heterosexuality is enforced through policies at your school or laws in your community and in our nation – through opposite-sex couples-only proms, through state bans on marriage protections for gay couples or through exemption of gay couples in social security benefits, for example.

The Power of Words curriculum is based on cultural anthropologist Philip Herbst's ground-breaking dictionaries, *The Color of Words: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Ethnic Bias in the United States* (ISBN# 1-877864-97-8, \$29.95) and *Wimmin, Wimps and Wallflowers: An Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation Bias in the United States* (ISBN# 1-877864-80-3, \$44.95). Both are available from:

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