



Deconstructing Heteronormativity in Educational Spaces

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Heteronormativity in Educational Spaces

To begin the discussion on heteronormativity, an important aspect to understand is that gender (e.g., woman/girl, man/boy) is defined socially by what is considered normal by people around you and that gender is fluid (Healey et al., 2019). The term sexual orientation refers to what gender(s) someone is attracted to while sexual identity is how they refer to themselves within sexuality. Heteronormativity is the expectation and representation of what is considered the norm for heterosexual individuals or couples (Habarth et al., 2019; Healey et al., 2019).

For men, the more another man is expressive, the less that individual conforms to heteronormativity (Habarth et al., 2019). Women on the other hand, tend to have lower heteronormativity depending on higher education status. A study among undergraduate students found that 42.7% of the students that identified as LGBTQ+ had been bullied along with 13.6% of students that identified as heterosexual but did not conform to gender norms (Duncan et al., 2019).

In efforts to help student retention, institutions are often asking students to conform to the cultural norm of the university which can constrict the full expression of queerness (Denton, 2020). This includes the intersectionality that can accompany a queer identity, such as post structural gender theories, disability studies, and race, among others. The importance of having

an environment that is welcoming of gender and sexual diversity includes queer teachers who live on a fine line of being authentic and (normative) exemplary educators (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). Meaning that no matter how wonderful the teacher is at their job, they risk their position by being themselves openly.

How to Address Heteronormativity

To create classrooms that expand beyond traditional heteronormative practices in a way that benefits queer students, educators must first ask themselves what kind of institutional environment they are seeking and understand this topic stretches beyond hetero- and homonormative ideals (Denton, 2020). To help address heteronormativity on a broader scale, universities can support students' path to learning how to navigate a society that is unwelcoming and continued resistance against the status quo. Representation of diverse communities within schools is key in changing the dominate narrative; however, the fact that teachers are unable to be their authentic selves, continues to silence the queer community (Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021). The intention is not to promote educators' only choice for the queer community visibility to be out, but instead to bring awareness to the importance and complexity of LGBTQ+ inclusion both in school setting and society.

Strategies for Implementation

To help implement studies that reduce heteronormative practices, careful consideration should be paid to the effects of individual and social predictors when combined (Habarth et al., 2019). Meaning, students do not live in an academic vacuum and have a dynamic background that is a mix of personal and societal experiences. To better retain queer students in postsecondary education, there needs to be an evaluation of where power resides on campus, specifically looking at "the promotion of the gender binary, heterosexual norms, and how

institutions act upon categories that frame modern formations of sexuality and gender identification” (Denton, 2020, 558).

Through interactive activities that require participants to engage in an imaginative scenario of life on an alien planet, people that may have negative views toward the LGBTQ+ community can discuss the complexities of choosing to assimilate or fighting for their right to live as humans (Ahuja et al., 2019). Participating in such an activity along with education on the community and, possibly the most important, engaging with someone in the community, as shown to have a positive result on empathy and attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community.

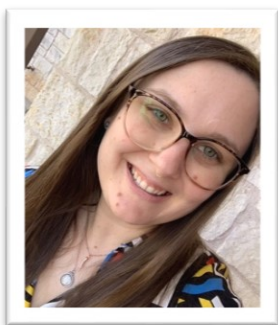
Reflection Questions

To continue the considering how, as an educator, you can better help to support students that identify as LGBTQ+, remember that this can be a slow and vulnerable process, and begin the discussion:

1. Imagine 2-3 challenges students that are non-gender confirming may face while trying to succeed in postsecondary education.
2. What binaries are present in your course and interactions with students and how might you expand on those?
3. How do you address your students (e.g., hey guys, ladies and gentlemen, etc.) and what are some alternative, non-gender conforming ways to speak with a group of students?

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BIOGRAPHY

ACE Kimmel (she/her) is an Ed.D. student in Developmental Education at Texas State University with a background in applied philosophy, ethics, and psychology. She teaches integrated reading and writing courses. Her practitioner and research interests include culturally sustaining pedagogy, language choice, and theory application.