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Overcoming Heterosexism In The Group

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Overcoming Heterosexism In The Group

- Oversexualization**
- Assuming that lesbians and gay men are only sexual beings rather than complex people who have, among other significant features, a homosexual orientation
 - Assuming that every same-sex interaction is sexual or potentially sexual for lesbians and gay men
 - Assuming that lesbians and gay men are probably interested in you sexually, regardless of your sexual orientation
 - Interpreting everything lesbians and gay men do in terms of their sexuality
 - Avoiding touching lesbians and gay men or being too close; in general being scared of them.

- Denying Significance Personally**
- The flip side of oversexualization is assuming that sexual orientation is never significant
 - Commenting that, "It doesn't matter to me that you're gay/lesbian" - a basic part of someone's identity and sense of self *should* matter; it just should not matter negatively.

- Denying Significance Politically**
- Criticizing lesbians and gay men for "making an issue" of their sexuality. For example, commenting "I don't care what they do in the privacy of their own bedrooms but don't tell me about it"
 - Not understanding that in our culture, which is alternately oblivious to gay men and lesbians or dangerous for them, sexuality is already a political issue
 - Not seeing that heterosexuality is politically enforced by giving legal, financial and emotional privilege to heterosexual relationships while legally denying lesbians and gays housing, jobs and child custody.

Labeling Homosexuality a Problem

- Diagnosing homosexuality, or talking about cures or even causes, assumes that it's not normal and fine. A lesbian or gay man may or may not need special support and/or counseling around issues of being homosexual in this culture, but the problem is heterosexism and not homosexuality.

Overasserting Your Own Heterosexuality

- Using heterosexism to keep people in line by labeling them "fag" "queer" or "dyke" when they stray from traditional sex roles.
- Avoiding behaviors or dress that might cause suspicion that you are not a "real man" or a "real woman."
- Participating in heterosexual loyalty tests - such as male bonding around oppressiveness to women, male locker room behavior, men making sexually explicit comments about women, female dressing room behavior, women bonding around talk of men, dates, or marriage.
- Avoiding touching or close friendships with people of the same sex.
- Excusing other heterosexual people's heterosexist jokes or comments.
- Telling gay men or lesbians they are overreacting when they get upset.

Not Seeing Homosexuality and Heterosexuality

- Assuming that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise.
- Always asking women about boyfriends, and men about girlfriends.
- Inviting people to bring a date without explicitly communicating that a same-sex date is fine.
- Assuming that marriage is everyone's goal.
- Keeping homosexuality invisible by not making it safe for people to be out or by excluding people who are out from positions where they might provide positive role models for younger gay men and lesbians.
- Assuming heterosexism doesn't exist because *you* can't see it (the invisibility is part of the problem).
- Considering heterosexism less significant than other oppressions.

Expecting to Be Taught

- Putting the burden of responsibility for educating and for working for change on the lesbian and gay man.
- Forcing lesbians and gay men always to take all of the initiative in coming out.
- Not making openings for people to come out by acknowledging in conversations the possibility of non-heterosexual orientations.
- Becoming upset if every gay or lesbian is not always patient about educating you.

Generalizing

- Denying lesbians' and gay men's uniqueness as individuals with differences, even though they may share some features in common.
- Assuming that one gay man or lesbian represents all of them.
- Conversely, completely separating one gay man or lesbian you know personally by stating, "You're OK, you're not like the rest of them."

Excluding

- Not including lesbians and gay men in your socializing, or choosing activities which are offensive such as going to heterosexual bars or seeing heterosexist movies.
- In the workplace, not passing along useful information or contacts, to lesbians and gay men.
- Not including lesbians and gay men in informal networks.
- Staying away from lesbians and gay men because of your own discomfort with homosexuality, or from fear of doing or saying something heterosexist.
- Trying so hard to avoid any of these disabling behaviors that you are afraid to open your mouth!

*Written in conjunction with the UMass Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Counselling Collective.