

Hand-Holding Exercise

This activity can be quite powerful. It's important that you follow the order of instructions as they unfold with a certain purpose in mind. I have given you my instructions, verbatim (in quotes), as they seem to work really well for college students. You may need to adjust, of course, to fit your particular audience. Also, I think this exercise is best when co-facilitated by both a male and female professional.

Make sure that you have some working groundrules in place before you start this activity. It will make it safer for students to participate. I'd recommend the following groundrules:

- partial or complete confidentiality
- allow people to finish speaking
- really listen to what others are saying (instead of constructing your response)
- believe that people's feelings and experiences are real for them, even if they are vastly different from your own
- that one person does not represent his or her "group's" experience, beliefs, or attitudes

"We are about to do an exercise that can make people uncomfortable, both physically and emotionally. What are things that happen to people, or that they do, when they are uncomfortable?"

Let them brainstorm a list that includes: sweating, laughing, turning red, feeling butterflies in the stomach, etc.

"Good. So since we know that these are normal human reactions to being uncomfortable, let's just accept that they will happen to many of us during this exercise. Let's just be OK with sweating, giggling, etc."

"Now, I want you to stand up and find someone to pair up with that: a) you do not know, and b) is your same gender. Take a moment to introduce yourselves."

"OK. Now what I want you to do is to hold that person's hand."

There will be lots of groaning and laughing at this point and you may need to nudge them. "Come on now. We said this might be uncomfortable so don't worry."

Give them a moment to settle down.

"Now, this is just the set up. We are going to do an activity that explores heterosexism and homophobia. Remember, to keep holding hands."

Next, you can either have the class guess the definitions of hetersexism and homophobia or you can simply supply them. Either way, make sure you end up with everyone knowing the following definitions.

A definition of Heterosexism:

"The systematic mistreatment of:

- people who identify as gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender, AS WELL AS
- people who are thought to be lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender, AS WELL AS
- people who do not fall within STEREOTYPICAL gender norms."

Definitions of Homophobia:

- 1) Fear of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people.
- 2) Fear of being thought to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.
- 3) Fear of same-sex closeness.

"Many are familiar with the 1st definition, and maybe the 2nd one. But, the 3rd one is rarely discussed and its impact is rarely acknowledged. We are going to do an exercise to learn more about the reality of this part of homophobia (Fear of Same Sex Closeness)."

"We are going to ask you to do an activity that may bring up some feelings and thoughts. It may even bring up some stress, which we have already talked about. It's an activity that gets at ALL of our socialization about same-sex closeness, especially within the United States context."

"As you do this activity, simultaneously be aware of what you're saying and doing to deal with any stress associated with the activity. We should all work hard not to JUDGE the reactions we or others are having. This is an activity designed TO unearth those reactions."

"So we are about to get started. You are going to hold hands with your partner for the next 30 minutes, and you will have three levels at which to participate. Each level requires more risk but also brings more insights. The one-star experience is staying in this room for 30 minutes. The two-star experience is to leave this room and walk around this building. And the five-star experience is to leave the building and walk to areas of campus where you will run into other folks, like the library, the student center, etc."

The reason to use this wording is that this exercise is most challenging to men, because of their social conditioning around gender norms. Without appealing to male competition, most male students do not leave the room. But inevitably, some men will go for the five-star experience, which overrides one social conditioning with another. However, you will want to honor anyone who chooses the one- and two-star experiences.

"Now, there are a couple of groundrules. You must hold your hands the entire time. You can change your grip or switch hands, but you must honor the focus of the activity. Second, no cheating by loudly talking about being heterosexual or your boy/girlfriend. You are supposed to be seeing what it feels like when others might not be sure. Any questions?"

“OK, synchronize your watches and be back here by _____”

You might want to follow the groups from a distance. When everyone arrives back, let them know that they can stop holding hands.

PROCESSING:

As people's reactions start to happen, it can be frightening for the GLBT people in the room. They might feel that they are being subjected to homophobic reactions from people. During the exercise or discussion, you may want to give GLBT folks extra time to talk about the fear that they live with on a day to day basis. You may need to remind the class that this fear is very real, based on real or potential heterosexism. At the same time, you WANT the class to unearth their uneasiness and fear of being thought to be gay.

Also, this exercise does not make any statement about the reality or goodness or anything about gayness. So, if anyone says, “I don't believe in homosexuality, so this exercise didn't apply.” You can respond: “Homosexuality's existence is not part of this exercise. We're trying to show how Homophobia exists.”

First, have three pairs sit together to create a group of six students (mixed genders) and give each person an opportunity to talk about what the exercise was like for him/her. This is when they should talk about the feelings, thoughts, and physical reactions they had doing this activity.

Come back to the larger group and ask several people to share the same information with the larger group. Then proceed with the following questions:
What did you notice in hearing all six students' reactions? What were the commonalities? What were the differences?

What came up when thinking about which of the three levels you could choose? Who stayed here? Why? What was that like?

Who went around the building? Why? What was that like?

Who went around campus? Why? What was that like?

For those of you who left the room, what did you see and hear?

How did people react to you? How did that make you feel?

Did you run in to anyone you know? What are implications for you about that?

Was this experience different for men and women? What do you think and why?

Do you think this campus is very accepting of same sex closeness? Why or why not?

This was a class activity and to some extent, you were protected by the sheer numbers of you who were participating. What do you think would happen if you truly just did this as a pair by yourselves?

Are there parts of campus or the surrounding community that would feel safer to you than others? Say more about that.

Comment:

“I want to be VERY clear that this is NOT an activity designed to ‘let you know what it’s like to be gay.’ For lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender people, there is a constant struggle to decide what kind of affection they will be able to display to their partners -- because there is a daily fear of being the object of heterosexist physical, verbal, economic, etc. attacks. Who remembers Matthew Shepard? (You can also mention any local or campus incidents of homophobia or hate crimes). The threat of attack is very real and it keeps many people from exhibiting same-sex closeness, whether or not they are in a glbt relationship or not.”

“When you were little, same-sex closeness was more accepted. How many of you held hands in elementary school? Did your teachers have you hold hands in large groups out on field trips? Do you remember hugging your friends when you were little? At some point, you began to be socialized that same-sex closeness is not acceptable. Who can remember when that happened? Does anyone want to share a memory of how this message was conveyed to you as a child? From whom did this message come?”

“I will contend that this fear of same-sex closeness is because we FEAR being the object of heterosexism—a very real, very observable oppression around us.

What are your thoughts about this?

If there is so much fear of same-sex closeness (homophobia), where does it come from?

What impact does homophobia have on your ability to be an ally? (For example, if you’re afraid of being the object of violence, will that keep you from speaking out against violence against queer people.)”

“Now, there is a strong possibility that some students in this classroom are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender. Research indicates that 10-15% of any population is and those statistics bear out on college campuses. But that also means that most of you are heterosexual. This heterosexism and homophobia are actually costing you a great deal. None of you can experience same-sex closeness, even when you are heterosexual, because of society’s views. This is not true in other cultures where same-sex closeness is not indicative of sexual orientation. How does this make you feel?”

If the group is ready, you can move to discussion of what being an ally means. You might review the Action Continuum for Oppression on p. 277 of the textbook.

Finally, close by stating the following:

“I first want to thank you all for being willing to take the risks that were asked of you tonight. That made all the difference for the benefit of this opportunity to explore these issues. Second (if this happened), I want to acknowledge that some of you came out tonight and that is a very courageous. I also want to state that the rest of us will hold that in complete confidence. That just because you felt safe enough to share that with us tonight, you have not given any of us permission to discuss it with others. Third, I want to encourage you to continue to notice and explore these topics on your own. Pay attention to how heterosexism and homophobia play out in your daily lives, and more importantly, what you do to participate in supporting its continuance in our society.”