

LESSON: A SOCIOMETRY OF OPPRESSIONS

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Grade Level **Grades 10-12**

Learning **Outcomes**

-to introduce the concept of privilege, oppression and its affects on all individuals

-to develop a better understanding of the complexity of individuals within our society

-to increase awareness and understanding of the meaning of power and control

-to gain a better understanding of how and why our culture maintains the status quo

-to develop empathy for others

Context

The basic premise for this experiential educational exercise came from Logan et al. (1996) who were educating social work students about heterosexual privilege. Although this educational tool still includes sexual orientation/identity, it has been expanded to include gender, race/ethnicity, age, class, occupation, ability and religion. It is expanded here to give a sense of the interconnections and complexity of identity within the multiple structures of oppression in a hierarchical, capitalist, patriarchal society. Although the activity is complex, students can gain a sense of these issues through role-play and assuming another identity.

Preparation

- ◆ Photocopy and cut identity cards (page 87). Adult identities and youth identities (to use with secondary students) are after the activities at the end of the lesson.
- ◆ Photocopy the Sociometry of Oppression Question sheet on page 91 to read out to the group.
- ◆ A fairly large open space is needed which often necessitates moving furniture, or using a gym or hall.
- ◆ A class of about 15-20 participants seem ideal, but it can be used with smaller or larger numbers.
- ◆ About half an hour is needed to complete the exercise although this will vary depending on the amount of time it takes for debriefing each participant.

Lesson

Explain that participants will be given an identity card and asked to move forward one step (or its equivalent if there are wheelchair participants) when answering affirmatively to a series of questions. It is helpful to explain that everyone will be taking the same amount of risk in playing the game. If it seems the students may be reluctant, try using a "fish bowl" technique, where some students do the activity and others watch. (All the students report on what they learned from the activity. It does not work as well, but is one way to adapt this for shy students.)

Hand out cards to each participant. Instruct them not to show their cards to other participants. You may need to help some participants individually if they have questions about their identity card. If you have a small number of participants try to pick identities so that you have a mix of sexual orientations, genders, ethnic origins, religious denominations and abilities.

Have participants line up against a wall. Start with all participants facing towards the wall. Ask those who can be open about their sexuality to turn around and face forward. As you read out the questions and the students move forward, those with their face to the wall will walk backwards to step ahead and those facing forward will walk forward.

Read out the questions regarding social and economic privileges which are worded so that those who can participate in the activity (e.g. take out a loan) can take a step forward. Those who would not be able to do that in our society must remain where they are. After reading out all the questions, and allowing participants to move forward to various degrees, have participants stay in their resulting positions of privilege when the questions are finished.

Ask each one in turn to read out their identity and discuss what the experience was like for him/her. You are actually debriefing each participant, but others will usually join in the discussion as this process continues. Be sure to have each and every student discuss what the experience was like for her/him, to ensure they can make sense of what they experienced. As in any experiential activity, be prepared for the possibility of someone's personal experiences being triggered so that further debriefing may be needed. Participants are asked to take on a pseudo-identity (a type of role-playing), so this usually does not trigger major personal revelations.

After each student has shared what it was like, discuss how privilege works and how those with it can be successful, while those without it find themselves falling behind in our society. Talk about "double and triple oppressions." This is when a person has a number of interconnecting factors holding them back (e.g. colour, gender and sexual orientation). Discuss the reason this happens in our society. Why are groups oppressed? What is the purpose of oppressing a group of people? Whose needs does it serve? Is it acceptable? Legal? Fair? Ethical? What can we do to change this?

How can we do it? Who is responsible for what is happening in our society? What did we learn from this discussion?

Activities

- 1) Have the students write a journal about any of the questions above that they are interested in.
- 2) Share with the students some historical examples of oppression, such as Apartheid, the Holocaust, Black slavery in the USA, Stonewall Riots and the continuing oppression of gays and lesbians. Have them research a group of people (or a specific person) and the oppression they have suffered. Have them present their findings to the class.

PSEUDO-IDENTITIES (Adult)

<p>18-year-old, white, single, heterosexual, female secretary, who is HIV+.</p>	<p>White, male, bisexual artist (not famous yet) with a male partner. He also has a criminal record for possession of illicit drugs in the past. Currently he is a practising Christian.</p>	<p>Asian-Canadian female nurse, who is bisexual and in a committed relationship with a woman. They are raising her partner's four Caucasian children.</p>
<p>Stay-at-home, heterosexual mother of three children, with "traditional values", whose husband has a six-figure income.</p>	<p>First Nations bisexual female factory worker in a relationship with a white man. She practices traditional native spirituality.</p>	<p>Male-to-Female transgendered truck driver in a relationship with a woman.</p>
<p>16-year-old high-school student who is lesbian and is deaf. She uses sign language to communicate and is a practising Christian.</p>	<p>20-year-old female Caucasian sex-trade worker who is heterosexual and in a polygamous relationship with a male pimp. She is addicted to heroin.</p>	<p>Separated single gay white male who has custody of his 10-year-old daughter and who works as an elementary school teacher.</p>
<p>White heterosexual Christian male who is the CEO of a multinational corporation. He is married with three children.</p>	<p>35-year-old white heterosexual female social worker who is married to a Jamaican-Canadian man. They have two children. She is a practicing Wiccan (witch).</p>	<p>Black heterosexual female lawyer who is the only woman and the only person of colour working in a prominent firm.</p>
<p>White single lesbian stay-at-home mother of 2 small children living on welfare.</p>	<p>White 60-year-old lesbian who is a general medical practitioner and suffers from epilepsy.</p>	<p>50-year-old divorced female teacher who has raised her children and hasn't worked for the past 15 years. Her husband has left and he hid their assets.</p>

<p>14-year-old Japanese-Canadian lesbian Buddhist high-school student.</p>	<p>Gay Chinese-Canadian man who is raising a disabled child with his partner.</p>	<p>Indo-Canadian male psychiatrist who is heterosexual and a practicing Sikh.</p>
<p>15-year-old Hispanic-Canadian gay male high-school student who is a practising Catholic.</p>	<p>17-year-old white heterosexual student, who is a sports jock and very popular in the school.</p>	<p>25-year-old black disabled female university student (uses a wheel chair) and is a practising Anglican.</p>
<p>Closeted gay male Jewish lawyer who is married with two children. He lives with his wife but has sex with his secret male lover of several years.</p>	<p>Catholic Italian mother of three children who is a recent immigrant to Canada and does not speak English. She is married and works in an Italian bakery.</p>	<p>Svend Robinson famous Canadian politician, white gay male, partnered, Unitarian</p>
<p>k.d. lang famous Canadian singer, lesbian, vegetarian, partnered, white</p>	<p>David Suzuki environmental activist heterosexual, married, Japanese-Canadian</p>	

PSEUDO-IDENTITIES (Youth)

<p>18-year-old, black disabled female, using a wheel chair and is a practicing Anglican.</p>	<p>14-year-old, Japanese Canadian lesbian high school student.</p>	<p>17-year-old white heterosexual student, who is a sports jock and very popular in the school.</p>
<p>16-year-old, high school student who is lesbian and deaf. She uses sign language to communicate.</p>	<p>16-year-old first nations female student going out with a white male. She practices traditional native spirituality.</p>	<p>16-year-old female who works at the bakery to help her immigrant family. She has been raised catholic. Her mom speaks very little English.</p>
<p>19-year-old white heterosexual female who is in a relationship with an older Jamaican-Canadian man.</p>	<p>16-year-old white male who lives with his mom. She has drug problems. He was recently beat up by her boyfriend.</p>	<p>16-year-old gay male who is in the closet. He dates girls and plays sports. He recently met a guy he likes.</p>
<p>17-year-old female with a one-year-old baby, living at home. She is trying to finish her last year at high school.</p>	<p>17-year-old Caucasian female who is living on the street. She is addicted to crack.</p>	<p>19-year-old lesbian female, who is a practicing Wiccan (witch).</p>
<p>15-year-old white male who skips school most days and hangs out at the mall. He is starting to do drugs.</p>	<p>17-year-old white lesbian stay at home mom of two small children living on welfare. She is studying by distance education.</p>	<p>19-year-old, vegetarian female rock musician, in lesbian relationship. Considers herself bisexual.</p>
<p>16-year-old straight male hippy that smokes dope openly and comes to school from an island. He was home-schooled.</p>	<p>Grade 12 student who is transgendered, M to F. Wants to wear dresses and make-up to school and use the female washroom.</p>	<p>Grade 10 female student who cares about the environment and hassles others about eating meat, etc.</p>

<p>Grade 12 student who is an out lesbian. Her friends are trying to find a sponsor teacher to start a GSA in their high school.</p>	<p>17-year-old white depressed female who is questioning her sexuality and has attempted suicide 4 times.</p>	<p>15-year-old white female student who is in a violent relationship with an older man. She is scared to tell anyone.</p>
<p>Gothic dressed white male student, who is in a relationship with a black female. His family deals with issues of poverty.</p>	<p>Grade 8 white male student, skateboarder. He has a close group of friends both male and female.</p>	<p>Grade 8 student with learning difficulties, thinking of dropping out of school. Parents don't really expect him to graduate.</p>
<p>17, White heterosexual female whose father is rich. She skies in Whistler and stays in their condo in Victoria on weekends.</p>	<p>16-year-old Cambodian female, ESL. Her family ignores her and she is behind at school by 2 years. She is always by herself and looks lonely.</p>	<p>Indo-Canadian female, who is dating a white male. Her family is against the relationship. She is thinking of getting pregnant.</p>
<p>19-year-old, gay male who has a girlfriend but has sex with guys secretly. His girlfriend thinks they should get married.</p>	<p>16-year-old white female, who had sex for the first time last year. She has just found out she is HIV+.</p>	<p>17-year-old First Nations female. She is talented in basketball and wants to play. Often late for practice as she has to look after her siblings.</p>

Sociometry of Oppression Questions

These questions are asked once individuals have their pseudo-identity card (which they are instructed not to show to others) and are lined up, facing a wall.

1. If you are free to be open about your sexuality with those close to you (example out of the closet in most situations) please turn around and face the center of the room?
2. Can you expect to speak openly and easily about your sexual orientation and or gender identity at school or at work without fear of harassment or negative consequences?
3. Do you feel safe walking alone on the streets after dark?
4. Do you expect to be treated fairly by the police?
5. Do you expect that you and your body will be treated with respect and dignity at school or work, without fear of harassment?
6. Can you go to the corner store on foot quickly and easily?
7. Can you walk by a group of teenagers without fear of insults or harassment?
8. Do you expect your children to attend school without discrimination or harassment?
9. Can you legally marry?
10. Do you expect to be financially well off and be able to travel during your retirement?
11. You are being considered for a promotion. Are you secure your personal life or identity will not hinder you?
12. You are in a new social situation and you are asked if you are married. Are you comfortable answering truthfully?
13. Are you comfortable bringing your partner to the school dance?
14. Do you expect to be able to get a large loan from the bank easily?
15. Would it be easy for you to introduce your partner to your family?

16. Do you think that your chances are good when you are interviewed by a social worker to adopt a child?
17. Are you comfortable holding hands with your partner in public?
18. If you became sick with AIDS, would some people say you were an innocent victim rather than you deserved it?
19. Can you expect to be a religious leader in your community?
20. Can you discuss your religious practices and holidays openly at work or school without fear of harassment?
21. Can you communicate easily with others you have just met?
22. If your partner died, would you be automatically recognized as the next-of-kin?

Credits

Diane, S. (1999). *Amazing Graces: A Qualitative Study of Lesbian Helping Professionals*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. The University of British Columbia, Canada.

Logan, J., Kershaw, S., Karban, K., Mills, S., Trotter, J., Sinclair, M. (1991). *Confronting Prejudice: Lesbian and Gay Issues in Social Work Education*. England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd. (pp. 77-78).

Youth Identities developed by GALE BC (2004)