

The “I ♥ Lesbian and Gay Rights” Pin: An Experiential Learning Exercise to Understand Anti-LGBT Stigma

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This study replicates and extends a teaching intervention study by Battle (2004) on the use of advocacy symbols to promote awareness of anti-LGBT stigma among university students. Seventy-one Filipino students in three university campuses taking an undergraduate course in LGBT psychology were given a task as a course requisite to wear an “I ♥ Lesbian and Gay Rights” pin across different settings. Analysis of students’ reflection papers revealed themes related to stigma consciousness, intergroup empathy, allyship sentiments, and transformative learning. Experiences of nonverbal and verbal microaggressions, especially in the private sphere, as well as microvalidations from LGBT people and heterosexual allies were also reported.

Keywords: stigma, teaching intervention, advocacy symbol, teaching

Anti-LGBT stigma refers to the socially constructed inferior and devalued status of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and of same-sex attractions, behaviors, relationships, and identities (Herek, 2007). Stigma operates in and is perpetuated by both individuals and institutions to legitimize the inferior status of

sexual minority groups. In school settings, for example, LGBT youth experience marginalization, discrimination, and stigma as early as kindergarten because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (Kjaran & Jóhannesson, 2013; McCabe, Dragowski & Rubinson, 2013; Murray, 2011). This stigma extends to other domains such as the workplace (e.g., employment discrimination and occupational harassment; Gates, 2014), to identity development and coming out (Bradford & Clark, 2011; Flowers & Buston, 2001), and even to developmental contexts such as aging and late adulthood (Hash & Rogers, 2013).

Since an important component of stigma occurs in social interaction (Bos, Pryor, Reeder & Stutterheim, 2013), understanding its operations may be a challenge for students who do not belong to the stigmatized group. Members of advantaged groups, such as heterosexual students, often tend not to identify with their group or indeed perceive themselves to be relatively advantaged – what has been termed *heterosexual privilege* (Case & Stewart, 2010; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002). In the study of Battle (2004), an experiential activity was the impetus of the investigation on promoting understanding of sexual diversity among college students. The class exercise required student participants to wear a lapel pin of varying designs exemplifying support for LGBT individuals. Within three days of wearing the lapel pin, the students were to record their feelings and thoughts about their experiences. The experiential technique provided an opportunity for students to increase their awareness on issues surrounding sexual diversity and publicly disclosing sexual orientation and gender identity. Through the study, an experiential learning approach provided students with the realities and challenges of heterosexism in the context of sexual minority identity disclosure. In this current study, we contribute to this area of research and teaching in LGBT psychology by replicating Battle’s teaching intervention to promote awareness of anti-LGBT stigma among heterosexual college students in the Philippine setting using experiential learning.

Experiential Learning and LGBT psychology

Effective approaches to learning allow students to integrate

thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving dimensions of an experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Experiential learning as an effective teaching tool has been demonstrated in facilitating critical awareness of a range of topics such as violence against women (Robinson-Keilig, Hamill, Gwin-Vinsant & Dashner, 2014), gendered violence (Hetzl-Riggin, 2014), and social justice (Glennon, 2004). Experiential activities have been found to be highly effective because learning occurs on a more personal, deeply felt level, with real-world connections for learners (Anderson-Hanley, 2010; Efratia, 2014; Hromek & Roffey, 2009).

One course where experiential learning can be easily applied is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender psychology (Hegarty, 2010; Manalastas, 2015). This course, typically an upper-division undergraduate elective, uses a psychological lens to understand the lived experiences of gender and sexual minority individuals, families, and communities in a positive, affirmative, non-stigmatizing way. As instructors of this course, one challenge we have faced is providing quality educational experiences that can engage students, majority of whom are neither gay, lesbian, bisexual, nor transgender. In particular, a key objective of the LGBT psychology class is to effectively impart critical knowledge about the experience of stigma experienced by LGBT people, which may not be directly accessible to otherwise heterosexual students.

To address this challenge, we utilized an experiential learning exercise originally developed by Battle (2004) to teach about heterosexism and the process of coming out in the context of an undergraduate seminar on gender and sexuality, wherein students wear lapel pins that express support for the LGBT community. In this paper, we report on the outcomes and reactions of Filipino students to this learning activity, based on a qualitative analysis of their reflection papers.

METHOD

Course Context

The special topics course LGBT Psychology is an upper-division elective offered in three campuses within the University of the

Philippines system (Diliman, Iloilo, and Tacloban) beginning 2010. Course topics include the history and scope of LGBT psychology, coming out and identity development, LGBT health and well-being, same-sex relationships and families, and anti-LGBT stigma.

The “I ♥ Lesbian and Gay Rights” Exercise

The exercise required students to wear a sticker or lapel pin (circular lapel pin sized as six centimeters or a three-inch square sticker) that says “I ♥ Lesbian and Gay Rights” on a white background for better readability. The students had to wear the sticker or lapel pin onto their shirt every day in public for five to seven days. Students were to record their thoughts and feelings about wearing the pin, as well as note social interactions related to wearing the advocacy symbol. We used this specific pin slogan because of its advocacy focus on supporting rights, rather than supporting lesbian and gay people generically; we also relied on the simpler phrasing “lesbian and gay rights” rather than “LGBT rights” for ease of understanding and sizing of the pin itself. The use of the heart symbol rather than the counterpart lexicon “love” was preferred because symbols are enactments of particular forms of social representation, whether values, attitudes, ideology or personality. Perceptual symbols are deemed more effective in activating and reactivating cognitive processes related to attention and experiences (Barsalou, 1999).

Students were briefed about potential risks, including possible discomfort or awkward interactions, as recommended by Battle (2004). Because the Philippines is a relatively less homonegative culture compared to other Southeast Asian countries (e.g., being gay or lesbian is not illegal in the Philippines, unlike in neighboring states like Malaysia or Singapore), we assessed the assignment to be relatively low-risk. Nonetheless, we also provided our classes the option of an alternative assignment without penalty; none of the students took this option. At the end of the exercise, students were asked to submit a short reflection paper, and to share their experiences in class. This post-activity discussion allowed for debriefing and feedback on the activity, following guidelines by Battle (2004).

Analysis of Student Reflections

After removing papers from self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students ($N=13$), a total of 58 reflection papers from three LGBT psychology classes were pooled and analyzed using an inductive procedure, specifically thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding and theme development were directed by the content of the student written narratives. We identified common themes from the students' accounts of their experience wearing the pin in different settings, including various social responses to their wearing the advocacy symbol as well as their insights on stigma in LGBT people's lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students wore the advocacy pins to a range of settings – to school, in class, in public transport, to church, to offices, in malls, and even online by changing their social media profile pictures and posting selfies. Initial emotions to the assignment were a mix of positive and negative, including excitement, anticipation, and mild anxiety. By the end of the assignment though, emotions were largely positive, due largely to affirmative responses from others and students' own realizations in the course of a few days of wearing the pin. Below we present students' accounts of developing stigma awareness in context, followed by themes from their reflections and insights into stigma and LGBT peoples stemming from the assignment.

Stigma Awareness Through the Advocacy Symbol

The opportunity to learn about anti-LGBT stigma took place in various circumstances through diverse reactions from people that students interacted with. On campus, students experienced verbal affirmations and nonverbal microvalidations from schoolmates and teachers. These microvalidations are subtle forms of recognition and affirmation towards the wearer of the pin which may be non-verbal (e.g. smile, nod) or indirect verbal responses about the pin (e.g. queries where to buy the pin, complements about the pin). For instance, some

students as they encountered other students in campus, they smiled at them upon seeing the pin, while others inquired where they could get a pin for themselves: "People were complimenting the sticker, even expressed their desire to have one; some asked what it is for and a few literally touched the sticker."

These affirmative encounters within campus were largely expected, owing to the university's reputation as a safe space for diversity, freedom of expression, and social activism. One student even noted a remark from a classmate who questioned that the pin was not inclusive enough: "A classmate asked, *'Uy bakit lesbians and gays lang?'* [Why only lesbians and gays?]' and asserted the absence or lack of space for bisexuals, trans, queer, and intersex people." Students shared how the pin also affirmed others' personal beliefs about LGBT rights. Self-identified lesbian and gay schoolmates would smile and hug them after seeing the pin, or simply say thank you. One student recounted that a schoolmate pointed at the pin and said, "That is cool. My brother's gay."

Not all campus-based responses were positive though. There were noteworthy negative encounters within the school sphere as well. One student experienced such a response from a teacher who in class, after seeing the advocacy symbol worn, asked her why she had to wear such "propaganda": "Our teacher noticed the pin I was wearing and she said, "You know what, hija, I honestly don't like these gay people. They just cause problems by destroying the order in the organization... they keep on saying that they are being oppressed or discriminated, when in fact, nobody is doing it to them but themselves." The teacher then went on to discuss why same-sex marriage should not be allowed and that the traditional family is still the only acceptable institution in society.

Stigma Awareness Beyond the School. Other spheres of experience where students wore the advocacy pin included public settings like transportation spaces, malls, and restaurants. These settings involved both negative and positive experiences for students. The most common nonverbal reactions from strangers were hostile stares, looking away, looking at them from head to toe, or eyebrow-raising after seeing the advocacy pin. Some students reported feeling scrutinized or being judged with hostility or even disappointment.

Students who were with a friend or another student of the same sex reported receiving looks and other reactions such as being laughed at. As one student wrote, “Riding the metro, this girl was staring at me and my friend in such a way that it was as if she was disgusted by the sight of us.”

Another student, also taking public transportation, reported being on the receiving end of avoidance and distancing: “A lady was preparing to sit down beside me, but when she saw my sticker, she decided to sit on the other end. I wasn’t sure if she changed her mind because of what my sticker says, but that treatment made me somehow sad.” Because of the subtlety and ambiguity of these nonverbal slights, they often left students uncertain and uncomfortable, with little option to confront them, as so-called microaggressions often do. Microaggressions are subtle forms of verbal or non-verbal discrimination that expresses negative, hostile or derogatory interactions with oppressed or minority groups (Nadal et al., 2016).

Direct verbal denigration was a less common, but also present, experience for some. These included remarks from strangers who expressed their personal opinions about the advocacy symbol and about lesbians and gay men, often in unsolicited ways. One student shared that while she was eating at a fast food restaurant, a waitress asked if she was a lesbian. According to the waitress, “It would be a waste if you are.” Another student was riding a jeepney with an older woman who asked him out of the blue: “Why not just say I love gays and lesbians? Why put rights?”. Some students narrated how strangers asked why would LGBT people need rights, or worse, told them LGBT individuals do not deserve any rights at all. In such cases, students were instructed to simply note reactions and walk away to avoid further confrontation with hostile strangers for their own safety.

Another common verbal reaction was being queried on one’s sexual orientation, often with incredulity or in a taunting way, with the implication that the possibility of being lesbian or gay was laughable, embarrassing, or shameful. One student was riding a boat to another city when male vessel attendants loudly asked her in a joking manner if she is a lesbian. When she answered them no, they still kept insisting otherwise, teasing her, “*Weh, di nga?*” (No, really?) and “*Tuod bala, ma’am*” (Seriously Ma’am, are you?). Another student narrated an

experience in her boarding house and how middle aged ladies living there reacted to her wearing the advocacy pin: "They exclaimed to me as to why I was wearing the button, that I should not be wearing those things. *Basta bawal yan* [that is not allowed], she said. Another woman said, '**Bakit mo suot yan? Lesbian ka ba?**' [Why are you wearing that? Are you a lesbian?]. The lady beside her laughed at the comment and blurted out to me, '*Ano yan? Sige ka magkakagusto yung mga gay at lesbian sa'yo*' [What's that? Be careful, the gays and lesbians will fall in love with you now]."

Interestingly, some students took the pin to church and other religious gatherings. These students consistently documented negative reactions, microaggressionss, and disapproving retorts. One student described how other churchgoers would look at her annoyingly while she was walking back to her seat from Holy Communion. She noted how people's facial expressions changed as they glanced and read the pin she was wearing. Another student shared her encounter with nuns while she was attending a religious youth encounter for her church: "In a church-based youth activity I joined, two sisters saw my pin and were so shocked and held my arm tightly. They started to be bitchy, throwing questions like 'Why are you wearing that?' and 'Are you okay?'" Those wearing the pin to religious community events heard queries about their sexual orientation and doubts about their faith, like this one student: "One youth member asked me, '*Lesbian kaw?*' [Are you a lesbian?]. Another youth member, after looking at the pin asked me, '*So pro ka sa same-sex marriage?*' [So do you support same-sex marriage?]. I said yes and he began to look annoyed."

Finally, the strongest negative reactions were documented by students to take place within the private sphere, with their families. These encounters were characterized as disagreement, disappointment, and disapproval. One student's experience exemplified this response: "Mom noticed the pin and asked me right away to remove it because it was 'bad'. When my dad saw it, his eyebrows scrunched up and bit his lip. He then gave me what seemed like a refresher of the Catholic doctrine. He accused me for putting my Catholic preschool to high school education to waste. He told me that if I supported a cause especially something like this, I should be silent about it. And that statements like that on the sticker has no room in the house."

Some students expressed how they felt unable to speak freely within the family, especially to their parents, about their personal beliefs about supporting the LGBT community. Instead they choose to explain the wearing of the pin as a course requirement. Some shared how family members would insist on the removal of the pin during family gatherings — because they believed that others would perceive them to be lesbian, gay, or “not normal,” or because they felt that the pin was offensive or that wearing a pin would lead students to become activists. One student was confronted by her brother, whom she had not seen in half a year: “When my brother saw the pin, I could tell by his expression that he was both disgusted and furious. He asked, “*Anura?*” [What is that?]. He said, “*Tinonto. Kabalo ka magbasa? Mga wala pulos*” [That is ridiculous. Do you know how to read? They are useless]. He told me to take the pin off and stay in my room.” Ironically, some family members said the pin should only be worn on campus and not in public, to avoid negative social judgment. And a few reported that their parents or siblings were okay with them wearing the pin — as long as the students do not “become” gay or lesbian themselves.

Stigma Awareness and Microvalidations. While most students documented various forms of microaggressions and subtle stigma, more positive social responses were also encountered. These “microvalidations”, both nonverbal and verbal, were especially common during interactions with schoolmates, friends, and even strangers who were lesbian or gay. Students reported receiving smiles, nods, and beams of affirmation in public settings. One student who was riding a boat home recounted a fellow passenger who saw the pin and asked her if he could have it. He then shared his struggles of being a gay man and other personal stories. Other examples of microvalidations evoked by wearing the pin are the following:

- “At my basketball training, the other players all smiled. Some even asked if I could lend them the pin. They remarked ‘O, nasan yung ganyan ko?’ [So, where’s my pin?] and ‘Gusto ko talaga yung sticker mo’ [I really like your pin]. As they approached and talked to me about the pin, I felt like a star.”
- “I sensed a feeling of *gaan* [lightness] from my gay and lesbian friends that someone was wearing a pin that says something about their rights. It’s as if I did a really huge thing for them.

It felt really nice.”

- “We visited the Metropolitan Community Church of Quezon City. The pastor read what my pin said in front of the members – and everyone clapped joyously. I felt elevated for supporting the rights of the community. It felt good.”

Aside from responses from LGBT people, encounters with heterosexual allies were also uplifting: “In a printing shop, the personnel asked me what does LGBT stand for as she scanned my pin. I answered her and she said ‘I support LGBT too!’” Though fewer in number compared to the more microaggressive reactions, these microvalidations served to sensitize students to the possibility of overcoming the stigma ascribed to being lesbian or gay, despite their otherwise negative experiences.

Insights on Anti-LGBT Stigma

We grouped student reflections and insights from the experiential learning exercise into four themes: stigma consciousness, intergroup empathy, allyship sentiments, and transformative learning.

Stigma consciousness. The students described how, through the exercise, they became particularly mindful of the realities of anti-LGBT stigma, disapproval, and various forms of microaggressions. In wearing the pin daily across various settings, they reported a sense of heightened consciousness about how they might come across to others and how others might treat them, especially negatively (Pinel, 1999). As one student described, “Through the task I somehow felt as if I were the target of stigma. Although I’m not gay, I somehow felt their plight through people’s reactions when I wore the sticker. Heterosexism is present and targets not just gay people but homosexuality in general, including everyone who fights for it.”

The experience of wearing the pin, especially on the first few days, led to a feeling of hypervigilance. “The first time I wore the pin, I felt uneasy,” wrote one student. “I felt like people were looking. I thought they were really staring and judging me. It didn’t feel good. I was so paranoid that people were observing every action I did.”

Other students recounted having an internal struggle about being

potentially labeled as lesbian or gay, which led to insights about anti-LGBT stigma and its complexities: “I realized I did not really want to wear the sticker. Not that I don’t support gay and lesbian rights, but because I didn’t want people to associate me with the LGBT community. I was afraid the stigma might transfer onto me. Acknowledging this helped me realize the stigma our society attaches to LGBT people. Although most people might believe they’re open, understanding and accepting, I think that most of us actually aren’t.”

Intergroup empathy. Being made aware of the presence of anti-LGBT stigma, even the threat of it, in everyday life also led students to become aware of how sexual minorities could be rejected, discriminated against, and stereotyped across different spheres of experience. A number of them expressed seeing parallel between their experience of being publicly visible as lesbian and gay rights supporters to what it means to come out as lesbian or gay — as well as the limits of such a parallel. As one student put it: “With this homework I realized I was going through stages of coming out. At first I was a bit confused. Then I was afraid to go out in public because I didn’t know what other people would think of me... But it was a relatively easy coming out. No confrontation. Friendships are the same, or even better. My coming out was only similar, not the same. We know LGBT people don’t just play the role of being gay for five days, but for a lifetime. So I salute everyone who has been brave enough to come out.” This feeling of intergroup empathy (Dovidio et al., 2010) with lesbian and gay people, elicited by the experiential learning exercise, led to more compassionate and even admiring views of sexual minorities, which in turn was related to the development of an identity as a straight ally.

Allyship sentiments. For some students, their interactions with others across spheres of experiences and contexts reinforced an aspiration for social justice and social change. These heterosexual students expressed a goal to take on more active steps to show support for sexual minority groups, to learn more about LGBT rights, and to engage others to advocate for social justice. One student shared that the advocacy pin helped him understand the importance of the process of advocacy in raising awareness, changing anti-LGBT attitudes and behaviors through education, and engaging in non-threatening discussions about social justice and human rights. Another, attributing

her perspective to the experiential learning activity, wrote, “There is still a lot of work to be done to achieve equal treatment for every person in this planet. Nonetheless, I am happy to say that even for a short period of time, I experienced being seen as an individual that is truly proud of pushing for the rights of the gays and lesbians.” Though not lesbian or gay themselves, these heterosexual students expressed allyship sentiments (Russell, 2011) and were hopeful that social change through anti-LGBT stigma elimination is possible through significant efforts of advocacy engagement and education. As one heterosexual male student wrote, “The hope is that one day we don’t even need to wear these pins. Because everyone will be supporting for the fight for LGBT rights.”

Transformative learning. Finally, majority of the students described that the experiential activity facilitated some degree of *transformative learning*. This particular concept of learning ideally captured the student narratives about learning from their experiences, and thus was appropriated as a theme. This learning concept is anchored on the original work of Jack Mezirow in the late 1970’s which explains the fundamental change in perspective or frame of reference of the learner in interpreting the world. The learner is transformed by his or her experiences and interactions with the world, facilitating a transformed view of oneself and a transformed meaning-making of experiences with others (Intolubbe-Chmil, Spreen & Swap, 2012). Students shared that the social responses brought about by wearing the advocacy symbol redefined their attitudes towards sexual minority groups and made them question their assumptions about themselves and about the situation of LGBT people in the Philippines: “Before the exercise, I thought I had fully accepted LGBT people for who they are. But from my experience of wearing the pin, I realized I have yet to become a person who would entirely put effort in making a difference for them and visibly taking part in putting LGBT rights forward.”

Experience as Learning: Caveats and Conclusions

Based on student accounts, this experiential learning exercise provided a venue for learners to develop awareness and insight into anti-LGBT stigma. Similar to results described by Battle (2004), our

students reported heightened awareness of heterosexist attitudes and negative stereotypes of sexual minority groups. These learning outcomes were cultivated by the opportunity to observe anti-LGBT stigma across various contexts. Learning that allows for students to construct meanings based on experience (Dustin, 1981), for abstract constructs to be made tangible in real-world contexts (Efstratia, 2014), and for self-reflection and discussion to take place (Melchiori & Mallett, 2015) is believed to lead to better educational outcomes. Students who take part in experiential learning exercises like the one outlined here are said to develop an appreciation and awareness of the concept in real-world settings. They are also more likely to engage in actions to support a cause, facilitating social-environmental change (Mittelstaedt, Sanker & VanderVeer, 1999).

The learning outcomes presented here are limited to those expressed by students in their reflection papers; future studies could take on a more structured approach and compare scores on stigma knowledge, heterosexist attitudes, and allyship sentiments before and after the activity. This can allow for a direct test of our hypotheses that heightened stigma consciousness and intergroup empathy serve as mediators that contribute to the effectiveness of the experiential learning activity. Finally, examining the experiences of LGBT students doing the activity is also worth looking into more thoroughly in future investigations, to complete the picture behind this teaching tool.

Stigma persists in the lives of LGBT people, especially in the Philippines (UNDP & USAID, 2014). Simple yet high-impact interventions like the “I ♥ Lesbian and Gay Rights” exercise can help learners, especially heterosexual students, learn more about anti-LGBT stigma in daily life and contribute to a richer, more inclusive teaching of LGBT psychology in the Philippines (Ofreneo, 2013).

AUTHORS NOTES

This research was made possible by the collaboration of the authors, as teachers of LGBT Psychology in the University of the Philippines, and was grounded on the narratives of the students of the LGBT Psychology course. We are grateful to them for sharing with us

their experiences, stories, and reflections.

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