

# Challenging Heterosexism: Six Suggestions for Social Work Practice

Contributed by Trevor Gates, MSW

Like most new MSW and BSW graduates, I was familiar with the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics. Advocating for the "dignity and worth of the person," and recognizing the "importance of human relationships" were now part of my repertoire of social work language. My social work professors taught me to challenge homophobia, "irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination" against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. However, my experience as an openly gay man unofficially taught me about a very different form of LGBT discrimination, one that was never really discussed in my social work program: heterosexism. In this article, I will briefly suggest several approaches for combatting heterosexism in our practice.

Heterosexism is defined as "discrimination in favor of heterosexual and against homosexual people," based on the assumption that heterosexuality is the only so-called normal, and preferred, way of living. Heterosexism is said to render our clients' "orientation, relationship, and life commitments invisible." We render our clients invisible when we fail to recognize the importance of LGBT relationships, by using assessment tools with outdated language (i.e. "What is your marital status?"), or by failing to recognize the importance of LGBT relationships through antiquated agency policies (i.e., "Family visitation hours are such and such"). Even more, we support a heterosexist standard within our agencies when we fail to use language of inclusiveness with our staff (i.e., "You're welcome to bring your husbands and wives to the agency holiday party").

Moreover, heterosexism is an overt form of homophobia, an often unconscious way of saying that heterosexuality is the only reality. While heterosexism does not usually take the form of gay bashing or openly prejudicial statements toward LGBT clients, heterosexism is equally hurtful and harmful. But as new social work graduates, we can challenge heterosexism in our agencies. Below are several, while not inclusive, suggestions for challenging heterosexist cultures in our agencies: Confront heterosexist agency policies.

For example, in an agency providing family therapy, the term "family" should be expanded to include significant others, including friends, intimate partners, and other informal forms of support. Advocate for LGBT clients.

Agencies wishing to support an atmosphere of inclusiveness may choose to make formal statements advocating for LGBT clients, which could include newspaper letters to the editor, or sending formal letters to policymakers considering LGBT interest legislation, such as constitutional amendments defining marriage as the union between one man and one woman. Use gender-free language.

If your agency uses assessment tools that are heterosexist in nature, advocate for gender-neutral language. Consider using the term "spouse" or "partner" to replace "husband" or "wife," regardless of the client's sexual orientation. You may choose to add "transgender" or an open blank to your traditional male/female gender fields, as well as add a sexual orientation field. Even more, assessment tools should refrain from using the term "marital status," with preference for "relationship status," which would include single, married, divorce, partnered, and perhaps an open blank. Display LGBT inclusive literature in the lobby.

The agency may consider subscribing to LGBT inclusive magazines, such as the news magazine *The Advocate* or *Out*. Further, the agency could display a small rainbow flag, which is a symbol of LGBT pride and would be an outward display of respect for the LGBT reality. Keep an open mind.

When speaking to your clients, remember to keep an open mind. Recognize that your LGBT clients may be assessing whether or not you're a "safe" party. As always, recognize that your client's reality may be very different from your own. Educate yourself.

There are many professional books and journals that address LGBT content, available at your local bookseller or library.

## References

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